

## *Special Series*

### ***the Call of God – Abraham (2)***

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### **Prayer**

Lord God Almighty, come upon the church with renewed power, to obliterate the darkness that attempts to engulf us and to open our eyes to Your vision of salvation for our fallen world. You alone have the programme, the message and the ability to heal Your people and deliver the Gospel to our complex world; so may we all have the humility to submit to Christ and the glorious work of His Kingdom in our midst today. We ask this in Jesus name: AMEN

### ***Prayer Suggestions***

#### **Prayer ideas**

*Look ahead for the next 24 hours and pray about whether the Lord has anything special for you to do*

#### **On-going prayers**

- ***Pray for persecuted Christians*** *Pray today for Christians persecuted in Muslim countries, and the many who live in fear of their lives*
- *Give thanks to God for the assurance we may have of eternal life*
- *Pray for young people at school thinking about 'what to do next'*

### ***Meditation***

Where have your feet travelled?  
Have they walked across the world?  
Or just the places where you work and live,  
and perhaps a few holiday destinations?

Where are you going, what is your journey?  
And do you walk for yourself, or with others?  
The difference lies not just in your enjoyment,  
but where you're heading; your ultimate destiny.

Walking by yourself may make for a soulless journey,  
but a shared path is a journey halved,  
and there is something deeply human  
about walking and talking. Jesus did a lot of that.

So go with Him to Jerusalem, and walk the pathway.  
For the burdens of life are heavy, and the deal is this;  
new life for old sin; and He will get there first,  
for we never bear His burden, He bears all for us.

Glory be! Salvation!  
Now that is real friendship on the journey of life.

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### **Bible passage – Genesis 15:1-6**

<sup>1</sup> After these things, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, 'do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield. Your reward will be amazingly large.'

<sup>2</sup> Abram replied, 'My Sovereign LORD, what will You do for me, since I will die without a child and my heir may well be Eliezer of Damascus?' <sup>3</sup> Abram continued, 'Look, you have not given me my own descendants, so someone of my household will inherit from me.'<sup>4</sup> Then the Word

of the LORD came to him; 'Such a one will not inherit from you; but a child of your very own will inherit from you.'

<sup>5</sup> Then God brought him outside and said, 'Look up at the sky and count the stars, if you can do this.' Then he said to him, 'Your descendants will be like this!' <sup>6</sup> Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted this as his righteousness.

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## Bible Study

### Review

Abram was at another turning point in his life. He had been called by God to enter Canaan and live there, but he had much to learn about God. The passage we have read today is well known because it describes the first occasion Abram demonstrated a faith that brought God's approval, so that '*the Lord counted this as his righteousness.*' (15:6). We will look further at this later on in the Bible study, but the acceptance of Abram's faith by God was a vital step in Abram's life, and also in God's plan for the salvation of humanity.

Abram had just experienced the personal satisfaction of seeing some fulfilment of God's promise to make his name 'great' (12:2). He had just secured a major military victory (14:1-16), and was now known throughout the region, because he had delivered a significant number of people from their enemies. Moreover, his name would have come to the attention of the powerful eastern states of Mesopotamia because he had just defeated one of their elite armies, leaving them without income from their extortion (14:14f.)! Yet nothing of this extended Abram's faith. In this passage today, it seems that what weighed on Abram's mind was God's promise, '*I will make of you a great nation ...*' (12:2). How could this be when he had no heir?

To resolve this, the Lord came to Abram at night in a vision (12:5), and the text is quite clear, this was a vision, not a dream. As with any report of a vision even today, its validity is measured by its effects and consequences, and in this case, God used this vision to draw faith out of Abram. The vision began with God reassuring Abram of His initial promises (15:1, ref. 12:2,3). Abram took the opportunity to tell God firmly that there was no earthly prospect of his becoming a great nation; he could not see how the Lord would be able to fulfil His promise. The strength of Abram's feelings is clear from the way he addresses the Lord twice, once each in verses 2 and 3, setting out the only options available to him and explaining his concerns in the strongest of terms.

Visions can be profoundly real experiences. Here, God did not try to justify what He had previously said. Rather, He refuted Abram's concern directly (12:4), and then we are told that the Lord's words '*came upon*' Abram (15:4). This describes a spiritual experience in which Abram became aware of God's words making an impact upon him, perhaps enveloping him. With this mysterious sense of God's presence, Abram was taken into the night sky, where the Lord showed him the stars, and asked him to count them. We hardly need to know any more, for point has been made in a deeply mystical moment almost too marvellous for comprehension; the Lord God would fulfil His promises in His way. Abram was dumfounded and said nothing, and God broke the silence by reaffirming his promise with words barely different from before; yet now, with Abram's silent yet obvious acceptance of the vision, it all meant so much more.

It is left to the writer of Genesis to tell us the meaning of this great vision (15:6), and it leaps out at us with the power of a truly awesome Word of God '*Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted this as his righteousness.*' Abram's questions were not answered by some obvious or logical reply, however, they were put in the perspective of God's greatness and power, and God knew what was going on in Abram's heart, and that His promise was now accepted, not doubted. Thus faith was born out of Abram's crisis of faith.

All this sounds paradoxical, but it is what happened, moreover, God accepted the unspoken faith of Abram's heart. The consequences of this are enormous, for it lays the foundations for the teaching about faith we find in the rest of the Bible, especially the New Testament.

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- The strange connection between this story and Abram's military victory
- Abram's distress, and the vision
- Prophecy
- Faith and righteousness

### Going Deeper

### ***The strange connection between this story and Abram's military victory***

Much of what happens in this incident relates strongly to Abram's previous military victory over the eastern kings (14:1-16). It is not easily seen within any English translation, but the writers chose words for this story which frequently play on those from the previous chapter, and therefore make a strong link between the two. An example of this is the word 'magar' (shield) in God's greeting to Abram 'I am your shield' (15:1). This is linguistically close to the word 'miggai' for 'deliver' used by Melchizedek when he blessed Abram (14:20). Such details as this are a common literary device in Hebrew. The two chapters (14 and 15) are connected in this way to highlight their connection to the two promises God made to Abram in Genesis 12:3. Chapter 14 deals with God's promise to make Abram famous, and chapter 15 deals with the promise about inheritance.

There is another connection to make if we are to understand this passage. There are two halves to chapter 15; verses 1-6 and then verses 7-21; and each half mirrors the other. In the first story, Abram sees a vision in which God appears to him to reassure him 'I am your shield' (15:1); Abram is apprehensive and tells God of problems (15:2-3); God then strongly reassures Abram (15:4) and then gives a dramatic sign together with a promise of fulfilment (15:5); finally, the story concludes with a very important statement of principle (15:6). When we read tomorrow's story (15:7-21) we will find almost the same pattern, but whereas the story today is about inheritance, the story tomorrow is about land. The two are connected of course, which is why God talked to Abram about possession of the land of Canaan shortly after his first promise to him of greatness and inheritance (12:2,3). This shows that these scriptures have been carefully organised to gradually show us the details and significance of God's great promises to Abram, and through him, to his descendants in lineage and in faith.

### ***Abram's distress, and the vision***

The appearance of God to Abram in this text is the remarkable first story of a vision in the Bible. It comes as God takes the initiative to deal with Abram's personal concerns about fulfilling God's purposes. Clearly, the whole issue of his inability to have children with Sarai played on Abram's mind, and God came to him in a vision firstly as a means of reassurance. It is typical of many visions throughout the Bible that the first words spoken by God (or angelic messenger) are 'do not be afraid' (see Ezekiel 2:6, Zechariah 8:13, Rev. 1:17 etc). Sometimes God speaks in this way to calm someone's fears simply because of the vision, but although this vision was a new experience for Abram, he was also used to God appearing to him (see 12:7, e.g.) and the words of comfort therefore concern his troubled thoughts. The words 'I am your shield' were a reminder to Abram of the faith he had placed in God when on the battlefield (14:14ff) and an invitation to maintain faithfulness.

Abram addressed God in the vision in a remarkably new way. The Hebrew reads literally as 'my Lord LORD', and is translated variously as 'my Sovereign Lord' or 'O Lord God'. I have used the first because there is a clear indication in the Hebrew that Abram was talking to God personally, and this gives the vision a distinct sense of reality and the feeling this is indeed a highly personal encounter. It is yet another example of how the Bible uses a variety of names for God, reminding us that we cannot tie God down with some kind of verbal definition.

As Abram spoke freely to God, he explained the complex situation he faced if he died without an heir. He spoke of the possibility of his estate going to a nominated heir, Eliezer (we do not know who this person is), as was the custom in such cases; and he then addressed God even more boldly (15:3) to remind him that this person would not be his descendant, but simply a member of his household. What was to become of God's promise of a nation?

### ***Prophecy***

Then something extraordinary happened, for verse 4 begins with words which, again, we have not as yet heard within scripture 'the Word of the Lord came to ...'. This is a formula used by the prophets, centuries later! Abram not only had the first vision in the Bible, but was the first to receive a prophetic word! The general promise of God to Abram that he would become a nation (12:2) was now replaced by this great prophetic 'Word of the Lord' which declared to Abram that he would have 'a child' of his own! We can only imagine what effect this prophecy may have had on Abram. As much as the sight of the stars in the sky which God led him to next, it could well explain his silence from this point in the vision onwards.

This specific prophetic word could well be at the heart of this story, for a man of Abram's standing would have been expected to have a considerable number of sons and daughters, and the high death rate amongst children of ancient times made it imperative that many children were born in order to safeguard the future of an extended family. Abram's complaint was that such a family, for him, did not exist. God's answer through this prophecy was of the birth of 'a child', that is, one son who would be Abram's own. For an elderly couple who had doubtless lived years in the hope that they would bear a child, this promise was wonderful and truly awesome; yet it was full of risk. It would take great faith in those days to believe that one child alone would survive to bear an inheritance.

As God led Abram out into the night sky and challenged him to count the stars to estimate the great number of his subsequent descendants, I wonder whether Abram was as much 'blown away' by the bright light of the promise of one son as the impossible task of counting the stars! No wonder he was speechless!

### ***Faith and Righteousness***

We have already commented above on the unspoken faith of Abram seen by God and accepted by him as 'righteousness' (15:6). What does righteousness really mean in the Old Testament? It has the general meaning of 'what is right in God's eyes', but is frequently associated with morality and behaviour, for example, Noah was described as 'righteous' before God (Gen 6:9) because of his goodness. Psalm 24:4 also describes a code of what is acceptable to God 'who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully' (see also Deut 10:12ff). These codes of 'righteousness' were required of people in order to be 'like' God, and therefore acceptable to Him.

Genesis 15:6 is distinct within the Old Testament because it goes behind mere behaviour to ascribe righteousness to Abram on the basis more of his silence than on his actions or words! What God saw in Abraham which made him acceptable, and therefore 'righteous', was a heart of faith which trusted God absolutely to fulfil his promises. It was not simply trust in God to do the impossible, but faith that God would achieve His purposes within his own life, even though it appeared to be impossible. Despite the long gap between Abram and the coming of Christ, Genesis 15:6 remains one of the best narrative descriptions of pure faith not just in the Old Testament, but the whole Bible.

This famous verse is used principally by Paul in Romans (1:17, 4:11) and in Galatians (3:7) to explain to the early Christian Church that God accepted people on the basis of their faith, rather than compliance with Mosaic Laws. His argument was that righteousness in God's eyes was based on Abram's faith long before Moses established the laws of Exodus which the people of Israel moulded into the religion of Judaism; therefore, faith that Jesus was the Messiah was the only 'righteousness' God required. We are now familiar with this theology, which lies at the heart of what is generally called the 'Evangelical Faith'.

## Application

Genesis 15:1-6 is relatively easy for us to read, because we are used to reading about faith in the Bible due to our general use of the New Testament. When we read this passage in its full Old Testament context, however, we are reminded that faith lies at the heart of Christian theology, and at the heart of our understanding of the work of God to bring salvation to the world. God accepted Abram totally on the basis of his unspoken heart of faith, and the trust he had in His promises. This is the kind of faith that now accepts Jesus as Lord, and it brings salvation to many more. Those who have this faith are the true descendants of Abram, as Paul argued in his famous letter to the Romans (see chapter 4).

This crucial story began with a man who was struggling in his own mind over the promises he believed God had made to him. Abram had been called and begun a journey of faith, but this incident seems to be an additional and crucial part of his development as a man who accepted the call of God on his life. At the beginning, Abram felt it was possible that God could or would deliver on his promises, and it kept him awake one night. As he turned this over in his mind, God came to him in a vision, reassured him, and gave him a prophecy that the promise would indeed come true. You could say it was only a dream, only a vision, only a word; but Abram believed God. One child would be born to fulfil God's purposes, and God accepted Abram's faith. This, in itself, is prophetic of God's whole remarkable plan of salvation through Jesus, and it is why Genesis 15 remains an important passage of scripture for all Christians.

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## Discipleship

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Share in your group any personal experiences you have in which a crisis of faith has turned into a true expression of faith.
2. Consider those things that you believe to be impossible for God. Which of these might be something the Lord wishes to do?
3. What are the features of faith that come out of this story which help us understand faith in Jesus Christ?

## **Topics covered by this text**

- *Faith and righteousness*
- *The promises of God*
- *Prophecy*
- *Visions*

## **Personal comments by author**

*This passage of scripture is famous and has been used to explain faith for centuries. However, the faith of Abram in this passage is a deeply personal thing, which impacts on the whole of his life. Abram would not be at this place before God unless he had travelled a long journey of obedience and learned important lessons along the way. I know that I have had to travel a long way to begin to feel that my faith has 'grown', because for too long, I thought that faith was just like one thing, I either had it or I didn't. To a certain extent this is true, but this idea can too often stop us accepting that faith starts and then grows as we apply it in real life.*

## **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *As a lifestyle challenge, consider evaluating your own faith according to the qualities of faith that scripture has so far revealed through Abraham. It might take a week or so of looking through some scriptures and thinking through where you stand with some issues, but it may well be something God can use to show you the way forward for your personal and practical faith.*
- *Pray for the church and pray that God's people will show faith throughout everything they do in worship and in service.*

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## **Final Prayer**

Bless me I pray, Lord God; and may I then be a blessing to others. Enable me to be consistent in my faith for the sake of those who depend on me, and help me to be focussed on You, the source of all good things. Thank You, Lord God, for the blessings You give me and all humanity through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
AMEN

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