

Prayer

Open our hearts Lord God, to the people we meet and with whom we work. Give us graciousness in our speech, love in our hearts, generosity in our praise, compassion in our attitudes and honesty in our dealings with all who we meet. In this Gospel way, may we make a difference to our world. Thank You Lord God. AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: World Politics

Pray for Australia and New Zealand and their distinct heritage which is highly independent, yet sensitive to its role in that part of the world. Pray for its political and cultural leaders.

On-going prayers

- *Pray for journalists working in dangerous places of the world*
- *Pray for those who are disadvantaged because of sickness*
- *Pray for solutions in Zimbabwe*

Meditation

Lord Jesus, You are God,
and all things are made according to Your great plan.

You have authority over us;
yet You choose to allow us to live however we please.

You know our past;
yet You allow us to make mistakes and learn from them.

You know our present;
Yet You treat us with love and compassion, whatever happens.

You know the future;
yet You do not prevent us from exploring what lies ahead.

Lord Jesus, You are God;
and Your love never ends. May we have the courage to love You.

Bible Study - Genesis 15:1-6

¹ *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.'*

² *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?'* ³ *Abram continued, 'Look, you have not given me my own descendants, so someone of my household will inherit from me.'* ⁴ *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.'*

⁵ *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!'* ⁶ *Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted this as his righteousness.*

Review

Abram was at a turning point in his life. It was of particular significance for him, because it was a test of his faith in the promises God had given to him when he first set out for

Canaan (12:2,3). He had just experienced the acclamation of victory in battle (14:17-24) and with it the personal satisfaction of seeing some fulfilment of the second half of God's promise to him to make him known among the nations (12:3). It did not take much faith in God for him to realise that he was now known in the entire region because of his military victories. He had delivered the local people from their enemies, the powerful eastern states of Mesopotamia, by sending one of their elite armies packing and leaving them with no income from their extortion! (14:1-16). This much would have been obvious to him, but it was the first half of God's promise which was still a mystery to him; did God really say 'I will make of you a great nation ...' (12:2)? How could this be when he had no children?

In what has become one of the most famous passages of scripture in the Old Testament, the Lord came to Abram at night (15:5) in a vision. The text is quite clear; this was a vision, not a mere dream, and as with any report of a vision even to this day, the test is the way God uses what was revealed, and what Abraham saw has been powerfully used. The vision began with God presenting Himself to Abram with reassurance (5:1). Abram took the opportunity to complain to God in a sharp manner that there was no prospect of him becoming a great nation, and thus fulfilling the Lord's promise. The strength of Abram's feelings was clear from the way he addressed the Lord twice, setting out the options for his own inheritance and explaining his worry in the strongest terms (15:2,3).

One of the powerful things about visions is that they are profoundly real experiences. In Abram's vision, God did not argue or try to justify what He had previously said; He refuted Abram's concern directly (15:4), telling him that his concerns had been noted and that he would indeed have a son of his own who would bear his inheritance and therefore give meaning to the Covenant promise (12:2,3). Then God led him outside into the night sky, showing him the stars, which he asked Abraham to count. In this way, God made his point to Abram in a deeply mystical way. It was a moment of a kind we all experience when looking at something too incredible or marvellous for comprehension. Abram's response to the Lord's request that he count the stars is not recorded, except that he must have inwardly seen the point the Lord was making to him. God, as creator of the whole world was capable of anything. The silence was broken by the Lord's confirmation of his promise with words which were hardly different from before (15:5), yet in the context of the vision, they meant so much more.

It is left to the narrator 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 great Word of God 'Abram believed the Lord, and the Lord counted this as his righteousness'. Abram's questions were not answered, they were put in the perspective of God's greatness and power, and God knew that Abram accepted his Word in his heart. Thus faith was born out of Abram's crisis of faith. It sounds paradoxical, but this is what happened, moreover, God totally accepted this unspoken faith of Abram's heart. We will look at the details of this later on in the main Bible study, but the total acceptance by God of Abram's genuine faith was to lie at the heart of God's plan for the salvation of humanity.

Going Deeper

The story here seems simple enough, but there are some surprises. The story connects strongly with the previous chapter 14, and the vision which Abram experiences is the first of its kind in the Bible. In addition, a word comes to Abram of a prophetic nature which is quite remarkable for the time, centuries before the prophets! There is much more for us to discover in this text!

Notes on the text and translation

V2 *'My Sovereign Lord' 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.*

V4 *'the Word of the Lord'* This Hebrew phrase is one which is used throughout scripture to begin a prophetic announcement or a specific prophecy (Is 1:10; Jer 1:2f, Hosea 1:1, Amos 7:16 etc). It is quite out of place here and appears nowhere else in Genesis. The inclusion of these word is one reason why Jewish tradition counts Abraham as a 'prophet' (along with the words of Abimelech in Gen 20:7)

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 an 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' just 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 linked in this way to highlight their connection with two of the promises God made to Abram in Genesis 12:2,3. Chapter 14 deals with God's promise to make Abram great and 'famous', and chapter 15 deals with the promise of inheritance by which Abram would become a 'large' nation.

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. When we read tomorrow's story (7-21) we will find almost the same pattern as we have found in our passage today (see above), but whereas the story today is about Abram's 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 show us the details and significance of God's great promises to Abram, and through him, to his descendants in lineage and in faith.

The vision, and Abram's distress

The appearance of God to Abram in this text is the first story in the Bible about a vision. 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 recorded in the Bible that the first words spoken by God (or His angelic messengers) 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 God had spoken to Abram before (12:7f.), so he knew something of what to expect, but nevertheless, the words of comfort were for his benefit. 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 they invited him to maintain his faithfulness.

Abram addressed God in the vision in a remarkably new way. In the notes above we saw the peculiar words Abram used to address the Lord as 'my Sovereign Lord' which indicate 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, which reminds us that we cannot tie God down by some means using a verbal definition!

As Abram spoke freely to God, he explained the complex situation he faced if he died without an heir. In the culture of his day, if he died without a child, his estate would go to a nominated heir, someone called Eliezer (we do not know who this person was). So Abram 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, so how could God's promise be fulfilled? It was a perfectly logical question to ask. 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! This word explained to Abraham how he would become a nation, by having 'a child' of his own! The promise of God was explained by a prophecy of God, both received by Abraham. We can only imagine what effect this prophecy may have had on Abram. Together with the sight of the stars in the sky to which God led him next, it could well explain his silence from this point in the chapter.

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 relatively 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 had a genuine complaint that God had withheld from him a family. Yet God's answer through this prophecy was that Abram would have just one son to receive his inheritance and pass it on; but he would not have many children, only one son. Though for an elderly couple who had doubtless lived for years with the hope that they would bear a child, this promise was wonderful and truly awesome; even though it was full of risk. In those days it would take great faith to believe that one child alone would survive to bear a large 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 a 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 it 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 or righteous 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). In the old Testament, 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 practice manner and 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 understand, 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 it lies at the heart of our understanding of the work of God to bring salvation to the world which is in fact the subject of the whole Bible. God accepted Abram completely on the basis of his unspoken heart of faith, and the trust he had in His promises. This is the kind of faith which is now expected of us when we accept Jesus as Lord, and it brings salvation to large numbers of people who are now the true descendants of Abram, through faith; a great 'nation' of people, fulfilling the promise of Genesis 12:2,3.

This crucial story began with a man who was struggling in his own mind over the promises he believed God had made to him. It seemed impossible to him 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 the God whom he met that night. One child would be born to fulfil God's purposes, and God accepted Abram's faith. That, 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.

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?

Discipleship

Personal comment:

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 journey to reach the place where I am today and I thank God for it. The challenge to believe God never stops, for the Lord keeps facing me with what seem impossible situations, and I know that I have to have the same faith as Abram and I thank him for his story and its inspiration.

Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Have you had any experiences in which you have met with the Lord in strange circumstances and He has given you promises or challenged you? Treasure such experiences and remember them. It is surprising how many people forget the things that have happened to them!*
- *Go for a long walk and look at the grandeur of nature and the greatness of God's creation. Does this inspire you as it did Abraham? Wait for the Lord to speak to you whilst you spend time with Him.*

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