

Genesis 15 — Doubt

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If you are new, thank you for joining us at CrossWinds for worship. If you have a pulse, it will only be a matter of time until your life falls apart. Things will go completely sideways. There is nothing you can do to stop it. It doesn't matter how much money you have. It doesn't matter how protected you are. I am sorry to break it to you. Life falls apart, even for Christians.

When life falls apart, as Christians, we rely on God's Word. Sometimes God's words don't feel true. God says he will never leave us or forsake us, but there will be times we feel totally alone. God says he will protect us, but there are times in life where we are getting killed. God says he will work everything out in our lives for our good and his glory, but at times we can't see any possible good from the tragedies we face. Has anyone been there?

Life can be hard. Some of those hard times are long and deep. When life is falling apart and it seems like it is going on forever, in those times it is easy to start doubting God's Word, his goodness and his plans. It feels like God forgot about us, or maybe he isn't even there. This morning we are going to learn about how to make it through these tough times of doubt.

As a church, we are teaching through the book of Genesis. We recently came to the life of Abram in Genesis.

Last week Abram was on a mountain high. After his nephew Lot was captured by four powerful kings, Abram took his 318-member personal army and his yahoo neighbors and they rode to the rescue. They personally defeated a far

superior fighting force of four powerful kings that ruled the ancient kingdoms of Iraq, Syria, Iran and Turkey. Abram destroyed ISIT. Too bad he is not around today. Our country could use him. Abram became the instant hero in that part of the world.

This morning we pick up Abram's life in Genesis 15. The Bible doesn't tell us but I think Abram was dealing with a mixture of fear and exhaustion and maybe a little Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) after the battle. While Abram was famous in the Transjordanian Valley, in the four countries he defeated, he was considered the most-wanted man in the ancient world. The kings of Iraq, Syria, Iran and Turkey were not thrilled about losing the riches of Sodom. You can be assured Abram's face was on the most-wanted poster in every post office of that part of the world. Knowing you are a marked man ruins your sleep every night. That was Abram. That is where we pick up his story.

What do I need to remember when I am fearful of the future?

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." Genesis 15:1 (ESV)

After these things refers to what happened after Abram spanked the foreign kings of Iran, Syria, Iraq and Turkey. God showed up and said to him, "Fear not!" Why did he start with those words? It may simply be that God is awesome and when he showed up to Abram in a vision, that struck fear into his life. It could also be that God was calming Abram's fears about the future because that was the next thing God did.

God told Abram he would be his shield and his very great reward. Abram was fearing reprisal and God told him to take a chill pill. God would be his

protection. Just as God was the source of his victory last week over those ISIT kings that vastly outnumbered him, God promised to be the source of his protection in the future. God was described numerous times in the Psalms as not just Abram's shield but as our shield and our protection.

But you, O Lord, are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head.
Psalm 3:3 (ESV)

In addition you see this in Psalm 18:2, 28:7, 84:9, 84:11, 91:4.

Abram could sleep well at night because God promised to protect him. This is also true for us. Nobody can touch us and nothing can happen to us without going through God's hands first. Some of you are so worried about the future. You are worried about your job, your house payment and your medical bills. All I can tell you is if you know Jesus, you have a shield. God will protect you. If he chooses to let something into your life, like he did with Job, nothing more can happen to you than God allows. If God chooses to end your time on this earth, you go home to see the face of Jesus, which is far better. We get a promotion in death, not a demotion. That is why the Scripture says that for Christians in death we grieve but we don't grieve without hope. God is our shield. Commit your way to the Lord and sleep well.

Second, God also promised Abram his reward will be great. Last week, after destroying the invading armies, Abram gave away all the reward of the battle. That is like the guy winning the Power Ball lottery for \$384 million dollars and tearing up the check. "Are you nuts? Abram, did you go off your medication? That is too weird." God promised Abram the financial blessing he gave away.

This brings up a problem. God just made two powerful promises to Abram, protection and blessing. Abram had questions. He wondered if God would keep those promises because there were other promises God made earlier in his life that it appeared God forgot to keep. God promised Abram a son and the Promised Land but more than 10 years into this journey neither were fulfilled. The rest of the chapter is God telling Abram how those promises would be fulfilled. It was God helping Abram as he wrestled with doubt.

Why did Abram struggle with doubt?

He didn't understand how God would give him a son.

But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." Genesis 15:2-3 (ESV)

Three times God promised Abram land and descendants, in Genesis 12:2, 12:7, 13:14-16. The problem was Abram was now 85 years old. Sarai may have been a hottie but she looked about as old as creation itself. Abram and Sarai struggled with infertility their entire lives and it seemed God forgot to fix the problem.

Abram didn't even care about more riches or rewards. He just wanted a son. He was concerned that if nothing happened, Eliezer, his chief of staff, the vice president of operations, would become his legal heir.

Abram struggled with doubt, just like we talked about earlier. He didn't see how God could possibly keep his promises or come to the rescue on this one. Anybody else been there? Before we look at doubt, we need to distinguish two terms.

What is the difference between doubt and unbelief?

Doubt — Doubt is trusting God's words are true but you have no idea how God could ever possibly keep those words. That is biblical doubt. There are flaky biblical teachers out there that tell you the Christian faith has no room for doubt. They will tell you that if you find yourself doubting God in hard times your faith is defective. Abram believed God but he had doubts. He had questions. Many famous biblical characters had faith but at times struggled at times with doubt.

Does anybody remember one of the 12 disciples named Thomas? What was his nickname? Doubting Thomas? He had faith but he doubted Jesus rose from the dead until he actually saw Jesus' sides and touched his hands. Jesus could have chastised Thomas for his doubt. He could have torched him. He didn't. Jesus helped him with a faith that had doubts because rising from the dead isn't something that happens every day.

Another example is Mary, the mother of Jesus. When the angels told her she would become pregnant and she would bear the son of God, she didn't disbelieve but she couldn't figure out how it was possible. She said, "How is this going to happen since I am a virgin?" She had faith but she had doubts. Her faith was looking for help to believe. That is the same situation as Thomas. That is the same situation as Abram. These people have faith but the odds are so stacked against God's Word being true that they ask for help to believe. Notice that each time someone with sincere faith is struggling with doubt God comes along and helps. That is what happened with Abram in Genesis 15.

Unbelief — Unbelief is different. Unbelief is where you get to a point of frustration because God brings us to situations that look impossible. Rather than going to God, you walk away from God. You call God a liar and say his promises aren't true. In biblical doubt you go to God with your questions asking for help and strength to believe. In unbelief, you walk away.

Some of you are facing tough circumstances right now in your life. You are wondering where God is. You are wondering why God hasn't rescued you. You are wondering why you are still single but your friends are married. You are wondering why you can't seem to get ahead financially. Some of you are wondering why God just won't give you some peace in your life. Your faith is rocking. That is OK. That is where Abram was.

My word to you is, don't walk away from God. Like Abram, go to God and pour out your heart asking for help. Wrestle with God all night in prayer if you need to. Read God's Word and ask God to let it speak to you. God will help. Don't walk away.

Let's continue the story.

And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Genesis 15:4–5 (ESV)

God responded to Abram. "Eliezer will not be your heir. Your very own son will be your heir." In the Hebrew, it is emphatic. God said, "Eliezer will absolutely not be your heir! You are going to have a child the old-fashioned way. You are going to be a father. A son will come from your own body."

Then God gave him a great visual aide. I love visual aides. God took Abram outside and told him to look at the stars in the heaven. “You are looking for one child. Look at the stars of the heavens. That is what is coming for you. That is how many descendants you will have. Your vision is much too small.” When you are out driving around on a clear night, look at the sky and try to count the stars and imagine the impact of that moment. Some of you know I love kids. I love big families. I hope Abram loved big families because he was going to have one, just not all in his lifetime.

Respond to my doubts with faith in God.

And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness. Genesis 15:6 (ESV)

This verse is probably the most important verse in Genesis. It is one of the most important verses in the Old Testament. Some consider it one of the most important verses in the Bible. In the midst of Abram’s doubts over a son, God spoke to Abam and assured him he would have a son and numerous descendants. Abram responded by taking God at his word even though he didn’t know how it would work out, he decided to trust God against the odds, even though it was beyond his understanding on how God would keep his word. It was counted as righteousness.

In the New Testament Genesis 15:6 is quoted three times. This verse shows us how Abram ended up in a right relationship with God, by faith. It is the only way we can have a right relationship with God. If you are a newbie, this is where you pay attention and take good notes. If you don’t get this, you are sunk.

Romans 4:20-24

(Speaking about Abram) Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.” The words “it was credited to him” were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. Romans 4:20–24 (NIV)

Paul argued that Abram was made right with God not by observing the law. The law was not given for another 430 years. Abram was not made right with God because he was a Jew. Abram was a pagan Babylonian. Circumcision didn't happen for another 14 years. Abram was made right with God because he trusted in God to keep his promise that he would have a son even though he didn't know how God would do it. Abram was willing to trust God's word. Abram was looking forward to Jesus, who would ultimately come and take care of his sin and make him right. We look back by faith on Jesus having come and taken care of our sin. Just as we are saved by faith looking back on Jesus, Abram was saved by the same faith that looked forward to Jesus.

Nobody was saved or is saved by perfectly obeying the law. God's law is not a ladder up which we climb to God. It is a mirror that shows us how far we are from God. We are not saved by our works. We are saved by Jesus' work and we trust it by faith.

Galatians 3:6-9

...just as Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness”? Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. Galatians 3:6–9 (ESV)

Paul's point was that God's plans were to save not just the Jewish people but the Gentiles. Abram was a crazy Babylonian that was saved by faith. The Jews sometimes got it wrong. They were not saved by the law. They were saved by faith in God looking forward to Jesus. Today all the world is blessed by Abram because we can be saved, just like Abram was, by looking back to Jesus in faith and believing he died in our place for our sin. Is it hard to believe? At times we can have doubts like Abram, but that is OK. We are seeking answers. We believe even if we don't understand how God did it, just as when it came to a son, Abram had no idea how it was humanly possible for God to do it.

James 2:22-24

You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness"—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. James 2:22–24 (ESV)

James, who was the half-brother of Jesus, makes this point. We are saved by faith alone but our faith is not alone. It is a faith that works. His point is that our faith, if it is like Abram's, will result in a changed life, not a perfect life but a changed life with different affections and desires in our hearts. We will grieve sin like we never have before. James' point was simple. Our faith in Jesus is what saves us but that faith is not alone. If we have saving faith it will result in changed living in our lives.

He didn't understand how God would give him land.

And he said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over

against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. Genesis 15:7–11 (ESV)

God gave him a promise of having a child but the other part of God's promise to Abram that was left unfulfilled was the promise of the land. At this point Abram owned nothing. He was like a rich gypsy in a VW hippie van that didn't pay property taxes.

I love how God reassured his doubt. He told Abram to get some animals and cut them in half then lay them on the ground. Why did he want Abram to be a butcher? In our culture, when we make a binding promise we sign a document and have it notarized so people know our word is reliable. In the ancient world, people didn't sign things. The way they typically took a solemn oath was to gather the community around them to be witnesses. Then they cut animals in half and walked between the pieces. This was the way you signed a blood oath. It was a way of saying, "I promise to keep my word under penalty of death. If I don't keep my word, may I be dead meat like the animals I am walking between." Everybody who witnessed it held you to your word.

God had Abram set up the stage for an irrevocable blood-oath and then Abram sat down and waited around for instructions. As he was waiting he drifted into a deep sleep. God proceeded to give Abram the roadmap of the future on how he would fulfill the promise of the land. It is not what Abram would expect or we would expect.

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with

great possessions. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” Genesis 15:12–16 (ESV)

Abram’s offspring would be sojourners in a land that was not theirs and they would be mistreated there for 400 years. God would judge the nation and send them out with great possessions. Does anybody know when this happened? This is the time Israel spent in Egypt and the Exodus from Egypt. We get to the end of Genesis and Abram’s descendants are in Egypt for 430 years according to Exodus 12:40. Why does one say 430 and the other 400? God was speaking with round numbers.

Abram would go to his grave in peace and be buried at a good old age. God would protect Abram. He would be his shield. Abram would get to be an old man in a nursing home with a remote control in his hand and a Dixie cup of ice cream on his tray. Life would be good. He would be happy. God would take care of him.

In the fourth generation Abram’s descendants would come back. If you trace that out, that is exactly what happened. It went from Jacob to Levi, Levi to Kohath, Kohath to Amram and Amram was the father of Moses who led the people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. Now I ask you, was history out of control? Absolutely not. God was sovereign over all of history. Nothing would jeopardize God’s plan to give the Promised Land to Abram’s descendants.

Sometimes God’s plan involves long delays.

This 430-year detour in Egypt was not a wrinkle in God’s plans. It did not derail what God was doing. It simply meant God would keep his promise to Abram but it was on a much longer time scale than Abram realized. We grew up

in the microwave generation where we think God keeps his word in a week or months. God's plans are not always microwavable. Sometimes God will keep his word but he will do it over multiple generations.

When it seems God has forgotten you, he hasn't. Sometimes his promises and words take a long time to be answered and that is not a mistake. It is based on God's wisdom and will. Life is not out of control.

Sometimes God's plan involves suffering.

In addition, we need to notice that sometimes God's will involves suffering. I know some of you are freaking out on this one. You thought suffering meant you were out of God's will. The Israelites suffered for a portion of the 430 years they were in captivity and in their suffering they were in the center of God's will. Jesus suffered and he was in the center of God's will. The book of 1 Peter tells us that as Christians we will experience suffering in life before we experience glory.

Sometimes God's good plans for our lives involves suffering. Some of you wonder how God can be good and allow suffering in our lives. Think about it. If we never suffered we would all be a bunch of stuck up, egotistical snots. Suffering humbles us. It teaches us to depend on God. It softens our character. Suffering also gives God the opportunity to create a great rescue and write a great story with our lives. If Abram's descendants didn't suffer, we wouldn't have the story of their rescue. The same is true for each one of us.

Sometimes God's plan involves lots of patience before judgment for sin.

The iniquity of the Amorites was not complete. The Amorites were a people group in the Promised Land. God was being patient and giving them ample opportunities to repent. God waited more than 400 years for them to repent before their sin crested.

The three principle goddesses of the Canaanite religion were Astarte, Anat and Ashram. They were all about sex and war but sex was their primary function. These guys were a bunch of sexual perverts. God waited for them to repent. In Leviticus 18, which speaks to the Israelites about sexual ethics and how God's people were to be different than the Canaanites, it lists 12 different kinds of incest that were part of the Canaanite lifestyle. It is bad when a group has 12 varieties of incest. Their lifestyle also included adultery, child sacrifice and bestiality. Many people don't understand why God had Joshua conquer the Promised Land and wipe out the people of the land. They were executing God's judgment. God was already compassionate. He waited more than 400 years for them to repent before sending judgment.

My friends, too many of us get frustrated with God for not judging sin. Instead of being angry at God's slowness, be thankful for God's patience. If God instantly gave all of us what we deserved, this would be an empty room. Thank you God for your patience toward us and giving us the chance to repent. This was the same thing that happened in the generation of Noah. The world was a wicked place and God patiently waited, but nothing happened. Noah built the ark and for 120 years he was bi-vocational. He built the ark and he called people to

repentance. After 120 years of Noah calling people to repentance and nobody in his church, God shut the door and sent the rain.

My friends, God is patient toward us with our sin. That patience will not last forever. The only way to face God's wrath is through the ark of Jesus.

God is the original promise keeper.

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites." Genesis 15:17–21 (ESV)

This is my favorite part. After making all these promises, a smoking fire pot appeared and went back and forth between the pieces of the animal. What did that mean?

God's presence is consistently represented by fire. There was Moses and the burning bush, where God was represented by fire. There was Mt. Sinai, where God was represented by fire. In Leviticus, God showed up by starting the fire on the altar by shooting it out of the holy of holies. This was God's presence in the form of fire. I want you to notice something. God walked back and forth between the animals alone. He didn't ask Abram to walk back and forth with him between the animals. This was a one-way blood covenant from God to Abram; no matter what Abram did, God promised to make good on his promise. He promised to come through. This was God giving a rock solid guarantee that he would keep his word.

It doesn't matter if it takes multiple generations. It can't be derailed by suffering. It can't be derailed the the sin of other nations. Nothing will distract

God from keeping his promises to you and me. That is a guarantee we can rely on. God swore a blood oath that his word can be trusted and is true.

Conclusion

It is time for us to respond. Just as Abram looked forward to Christ's first coming, we need to respond in faith by looking forward to Christ's second coming.

If you are a believer that is struggling with doubt and wondering if God has forgotten you I ask you to give those doubts to God like Abram did and wrestle them through so your faith would grow and that you might trust more deeply in Jesus.

If your life is one of unbelief, this is a good day for you to repent of your sin and to trust in Jesus. I pray you would trust God, trust his word and that you would see God is alive, good, gracious, kind and loving. God is not against you. He is for you. He send Jesus. He loves you. We have a real enemy and God sent us a shield. His name is Jesus.



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