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MAKING GOD'S PROMISES YOURS

Genesis 15:1-6

By

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Genesis Lesson 30

Making God's Promises Yours Genesis 15:1-6

Have you ever had the experience of doing something brave or of making a bold decision which later came back to haunt you? At the time you did it, you were strong. You thought you were acting in faith. But in the aftermath, you were gripped by fear as you thought about the possible repercussions. Sometimes I have taken a strong stand or spoken out boldly on some issue. But later, when criticism hits, I begin to worry and to second-guess my earlier boldness.

Maybe you've gone through something similar. You were challenged to step out in faith and trust God for something. You gave up a choice financial or career opportunity because you wanted to serve the Lord. You gave a large sum of money to the Lord's work. But then a financial crisis hit. You said no to that date with a good-looking non-Christian guy, only to sit home for weeks without any other dates. You started wondering, "Did I do the right thing?"

That's where Abram was after the events of Genesis 14. His wayward nephew Lot, living in Sodom, was taken captive by four kings from the east. In a bold move, Abram led his trained men against these kings and staged a surprise attack by night, routing the army and recovering all the people and spoil. When he returned, he offered a tenth of the spoils to Melchizedek, the king of Salem, but refused to take his rightful share from the king of Sodom, lest that worldly man could boast that he had made Abram rich. Abram had given up fabulous wealth on the principle that God, who had promised to bless him, would meet his needs.

Then fear came knocking. One night as Abram lay awake in his tent, he was thinking about the fact that those kings from the east weren't the sort of guys to take a humiliating defeat passively. Surely, they'd come looking for that puny shepherd who had taken them by surprise, and when they found him, they'd wipe him out. He shouldn't have rescued Lot. Now he couldn't shake his fear.

And not only that, but Abram wondered whether he had done the right thing to refuse the spoils of Sodom. Sarai was complaining that they never had any spending money and she could use a new coat. Besides, that no good nephew Lot got all of his things back, things which rightly could have been Abram's now. Abram lay there in the dark, wondering whether he should have taken the spoil of Sodom for himself, thinking, "I risked everything for that ungrateful, selfish nephew of mine, and what do I have to show for it? Nothing!" Fear and worry!

You've been there, haven't you? You did the right thing, but you didn't prosper. Another person did the wrong thing, and he's having a great time. Meanwhile, you're wondering whether you might get wiped out because you did what was right.

What do you need at a time like that? The answer is, *you need to trust in the Lord*. The Lord has promised His blessings to those who trust in Him. God's blessings don't always come to us the moment we think they should. Some are delayed for months or years. Some don't even come to us in this life. But He wants us to go on trusting Him. He is faithful to His promises in His time.

You make God's promised blessings yours
by trusting Him.

One night as Abram was wrestling with his fears, the word of the Lord came to him in a vision. We don't know exactly what that vision entailed. Perhaps as Abram thought of the shields of the warriors and of the spoils of the battle, God spoke to him and said, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your very great reward" (NASB margin).

No doubt Abram was comforted by these words, and yet there remained a void in his heart. God had previously promised to give him a son and to multiply his descendants as the dust of the earth. But he had been in the land nearly ten years now (16:3), but he still had no son. Sarai wasn't getting any younger. And so out of confusion, not in defiance, Abram asks God about His promise of a son: "O Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?... Since You have given no seed [lit.] to me, one born in my house is my heir." These two verses repeat themselves, but they show realistically the words

of a man who is confused about God's delay in fulfilling His promises.

The Lord graciously clarifies the previous promises by stating that Abram's servant would not be his heir, but, rather, one who came forth from his body. The Lord made the lesson vivid by taking Abram outside, showing him the stars, and saying, "So shall your descendants be." Abram's response was to believe "in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness" (15:6). This crucial verse shows us that even at this early time, justification (right standing with God) was by faith. The apostle Paul expounded on this verse twice (Romans 4 & Galatians 3), to argue that we are saved by faith apart from any works. It shows us that trusting in the Lord is the means of obtaining His promised blessings.

Trusting in the Lord has gotten terrible press in Christian circles in the last few years. We've bought into the view that when a person is hurting or fearful or depressed or guilty, the most useless thing you can tell him is, "Trust in the Lord." Instead we try to help him get in tune with his feelings and accept himself. We try not to be judgmental or offer any advice, but rather to empathize with him. But tell him to trust in the Lord? You've got to be kidding! How impractical!

I'd like to get radical and suggest that when you're experiencing distressing emotions, the most practical thing you can do is to trust in the Lord. How we ever got away from this is beyond me. From cover to cover the Bible proclaims the blessings that come to the person who trusts in the Lord. It is *the* solution to our problems. Rather than shrugging it off as useless advice, we need to learn what it means to trust the Lord in all the distressing ups and downs of life.

1. Trust must be in the Lord.

Abram "believed in the Lord." There's a phony kind of faith in faith itself, where faith is given some magical power in and of itself, apart from its object: "I believe for every drop of rain that falls, a flower grows...." The false teachers of the "health and wealth gospel" tell us, "Just speak the word of faith and whatever you speak will be accomplished." But that's presumption, not faith.

Biblical faith is always *in God* who has revealed Himself in His Word. It is not vague; it is specific, based on His Word.

And biblical faith is not an uncertain wish that says, "I sure hope it's true, so I'm going to take a blind leap in the dark." The essence of the Hebrew word (used here for the first time in the Bible) is firmness or certainty. In another Hebrew verb stem (roughly like our verb tense), the word has the idea of the strong arms of a parent supporting an infant. In Genesis 15:6, it means that Abram relied on the Lord and His word as true and certain.

This trust must be both personal and propositional. That is, it must be both in the personal God and in His Word.

A. Trust personally in the personal God.

Abram trusted in the Lord, in Yahweh, the personal, covenant God. In verse 2 (and v. 8), Abram addresses God as Adonai Yahweh. This is the first recorded time Abram speaks to God. Apart from here, the title occurs only two other times in the Pentateuch (Deut. 3:24; 9:26; see also, Exod. 23:17; 34:23). Adonai means Lord, Master, or Sovereign. It points to God's absolute right to rule. So even though Abram is confused and asking God to clear up matters for him, he is asking submissively, not defiantly.

There are two ways you can ask God for things. You can ask defiantly, shaking your fist in God's face, demanding, "Why are You letting this trial happen to me?" You're challenging God's authority to deal with you as He pleases. That kind of asking is always wrong. I'm greatly bothered when I hear of Christian psychologists telling their counselees to get out their rage at God. You don't rage at the Sovereign Lord of the universe! You submit to Him!

But you can come to God as Abram did here, submissive, but confused. In this approach, you're saying, "Lord, I don't understand why things are going as they are. If You would reveal Your purposes to me so that I could more fully obey You, I would be thankful. But if not, I'll trust You, even though I don't understand." Often the Lord will grant the wisdom we need to endure the trial, if we ask with that kind of submissive spirit (James 1:2-5). We can't trust God if we aren't submitting to Him as our Sovereign Lord.

There's a very personal flavor to these verses, as God comes to Abram in his time of fear, assures him, and then in response to Abram's confusion, takes him out into the night to look at the stars to give further confirmation of His promise. You'll recall that when Abram was left with the dusty, famine-stricken land of Canaan after Lot chose the lush land near Sodom, the Lord told Abram that his descendants would be as the dust of the ground. Here, as Abram is afraid of retaliation in the night, God takes him out into the night and reassures him with the stars. God was personally tailoring this experience to meet Abram at his point of need. Abram's response was to believe God.

Do you have that kind of personal trust in the personal God who created the universe? Even though He spoke into existence the billions of galaxies each with billions of stars, He cares about you to the extent that the very hairs of your head are numbered. When you're fearful or anxious you can go personally to Him and tell Him your problems and know that He cares for you. It is personal trust in the personal God.

B. Trust personally in the personal God's promises.

God has revealed Himself propositionally, that is, in the words of Scripture. While God spoke verbally to Abram, He has revealed Himself to us in the inspired words of the Bible. This is the first time in the Bible the phrase, "the word of the Lord came to" someone occurs (15:1, 4). It occurs often after this, especially with the prophets. We have the word of the Lord preserved in the Bible. Trust involves not only believing in the Lord, but also in the things He has revealed in His Word. In other words, trust isn't a subjective feeling; it is a cognitive reliance on the objective promises of God as revealed in His Word.

The question comes up, What did Abram believe on this occasion? We know that he had believed God previously, when he left Ur and set out for Canaan (Heb. 11:8). Thus Abram was already what we would call a saved man before this experience. So why does Moses mention here that Abram believed God and that God reckoned it to him as righteousness?

Martin Luther said that Abram was justified by faith long before this time, but that it is first recorded in this context in a con-

nection where the Savior is definitely involved in order that none might venture to dissociate justification from the Savior (cited in H. C. Leupold, *Exposition of Genesis* [Baker], 1:479). John Calvin thought that it is mentioned here, long after Abram was first justified, to prove that justification does not just begin by faith, only to be perfected later by works. Rather, justification is by faith alone, apart from works, from start to finish (*Calvin's Commentaries* [Baker], 1:408-409).

What Abram believed on this occasion is the specific word of the Lord concerning a son (seed) which would come forth from his body. Abram knew that through this seed, blessing would come to all the families of the earth (12:3). As Paul argues in Galatians, the word seed is singular, not plural, thus pointing not to all of Abram's descendants, but to the one descendant of Abram, Christ (Gal. 3:16). So when Abram believed in the Lord, what he believed specifically was the promise that a Savior for the world would come forth from his descendants.

You may wonder, how much did Abram know about Jesus Christ, who would be born 2,000 years later? He knew more than we may assume! Jesus Himself said, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56). Paul said that the gospel was preached beforehand to Abram when God promised, "All the nations shall be blessed in you" (Gal. 3:8). Though he didn't know Jesus' name and he had no visible evidence other than God's verbal promise, Abram looked forward in faith to God's Redeemer and thus it is recorded here that God reckoned it to him as righteousness.

It's that kind of personal trust in His promises about the Savior that God wants from you and me. The Christian life is not using God to obtain happiness and good feelings in this life; it is trusting God and His promises concerning the life to come. It concerns the question, "How can a sinful person like me be right with a holy God?" When we settle that question by trusting God's Word concerning Christ, He graciously provides many other promises which help us in this present life. But you must begin by trusting in Jesus as your only hope for right standing with God. Our trust must be in God and His Word. What do we get when we join Abram in trusting in the Lord?

2. Trust obtains God's promised blessings.

Trust is the channel through which God pours out His blessings on His people. There are two types of blessings which Abram realized, which we also will realize as we trust in the Lord.

A. God gives us Himself to calm us in life's storms.

I prefer the translation of the NASB margin, which reads, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your very great reward." That is, God Himself was Abram's shield and reward. F. B. Meyer wrote, "To have God is to have all, though bereft of everything. To be destitute of God is to be bereft of everything, though having all" (*Abraham* [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 63).

Isn't that true! You can gain everything this world offers, but if you don't have God, you don't have anything. This very night He can say to you, "Your soul is required of you," and then where is all that you've gained? Or you can be a nobody by this world's standards, but if you've got Christ, as Paul said, you possess all things (2 Cor. 6:10).

It's significant that God revealed Himself to Abram at times of crisis. When he left his home and set out for the uncertainties of Canaan, God promised to bless him and make him a great nation (12:1-3). When Abram got to Canaan and we read that threatening parenthesis, "Now the Canaanite was then in the land," the very next verse tells us that the Lord appeared to Abram and promised to give him that land (12:6-7). After Lot selfishly took the best land and left Abram in famine-stricken Canaan, God renewed and expanded on His promise to give Abram the land and to multiply his offspring (13:14--17). And so now, as Abram wrestled with the fear of retaliation, God said, "I am a shield to you." As he worried about poverty after refusing the spoils of Sodom, God reassuringly said, "I am your very great reward." You never lose anything when you give up something to follow the Lord.

Donald Barnhouse observes, "God's method of supplying our need is to give us fresh knowledge of Himself, for every need can be met by seeing Him" (*Genesis* [Zondervan], 1:105). If you're facing a crisis in your life, look in God's Word for a fresh insight into who He is. Abram didn't know God as his shield until he was afraid of retaliation from his enemies. He didn't know God as his

very great reward until he was worried about his financial condition.

Are you lonely? Look to Christ as your Bridegroom, Lover, and Friend! Are you depressed? Come to know the Lord as your joy! Are you fearful and anxious? He is your refuge and peace! Are you confused and need direction? He is your wisdom and guide! One reason He allows trials into our lives is so that as we trust Him, we will come to know more of His sufficiency for our every need. Contrary to being a useless thing, trusting in the Lord is the means by which His precious and magnificent promises become ours in experience (2 Pet. 1:3-5). He graciously reveals more of Himself to us as we trust Him in our trials. But there's more:

B. God gives us His righteousness to qualify us for heaven.

When Abram believed God, God credited it to him as righteousness. Abram was justified or made right before God. This is one of the most important doctrines in the Bible, that God declares righteous the guilty sinner who trusts in Christ. It is the very core of the gospel. I plan to devote an entire message to this verse, but for now I can only be brief.

As Paul spells out in Romans 3 & 4, this verse means that God declares righteous the guilty sinner when that sinner does not trust in his own good works, but rather when he trusts the perfect obedience and the substitutionary death of the Lord Jesus Christ on his behalf. "Now to the one who works, his wage is not reckoned as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Rom. 4:4-5).

A commanding officer of a military base issued an order that no one could come on base who was not in uniform. The next morning, a general in civilian clothes drove up to the main gate, but the sentry stopped him from entering. "What's the reason for this?" he bellowed. "Let me in. Don't you know who I am?" "I certainly do, sir," the guard replied, "but I must follow orders. I have been told not to let *anyone* pass who is not in uniform."

If you think you will be admitted to heaven because of anything in yourself, you are in for a rude awakening. The only uniform that will gain entrance to heaven is the robe of the perfect

righteousness of Jesus Christ, credited to your account. God is pleased to give this blessing apart from any human merit when a guilty sinner believes in Christ.

Conclusion

During World War II the King of England ordered an evacuation of children from the bomb-torn areas in London. Since many of the children had never been away from home before, they were quite nervous and upset. A mother and father had just put their young son and daughter aboard a crowded train and said good-by. No sooner had it left the station than the little girl began to cry. She told her brother she was scared because she didn't know where they were going. Brushing his own tears away, he put his arm around his sister to comfort her. "I don't know where we're going either," he said, "but the King knows, so don't worry!" ("Our Daily Bread," 8/77.)

Perhaps you're fearful or worried about some problem you're facing. God is not just Abram's shield and great reward; He will be that to you also. You may not know where you're going, but God knows. Trusting in Him is the means of bringing His promised blessings down into your daily problems. It is the most practical thing you can do, because it links you with the all-sufficient Sovereign Lord.

Discussion Questions

1. Is "trusting in the Lord" impractical advice when it comes to dealing with tough problems? Why/why not?
2. How can a person learn practically to trust in the Lord?
3. How can we know whether particular promises of God apply to us today so that we can rightfully claim them by faith?
4. What's the difference between "using God" for personal happiness and trusting God's promises in the proper sense?

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