

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver St.
Flagstaff, AZ 86001
www.fcfonline.org

ASSURANCE

Genesis 15:7-21

By

Steven J. Cole

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Genesis Lesson 32

Assurance
Genesis 15:7-21

A man and his wife went to a marriage counselor. When the counselor asked what the problem was, the woman sobbed, "My husband never tells me that he loves me." When the counselor looked over at the husband, he snarled, "I told her that 20 years ago, and I haven't changed my mind."

Even though we know we're loved, it's nice to hear it over and over again, isn't it? Life is uncertain and unsettling. We need to be assured time and again that we are loved so that we feel secure in our relationships. The same thing is true spiritually. We know that God loves us and that nothing can separate us from His love. But we need to hear it over and over. When things don't seem to be going as we had hoped, when our prayers don't seem to be answered, when trials hit, we need assurance that God is there, that He is for us, that His promises will be fulfilled.

We might think that a giant in faith would not need God's assurance, because his faith would never waver. But that is just not so. Even Abram, our father in the faith, needed to be assured concerning God's promises to him. By faith Abram had obeyed God's call to leave his home in Ur and go forth to the land which God would show him. God promised to give Abram a son and to make of him a great nation through which all families of the earth would be blessed. God promised to give the land of Canaan to Abram and his descendants. But a few years had gone by and Abram still had no son and the Canaanites, not Abram, possessed the land.

Also, Abram had some fears. He had surprised the armies of four eastern kings and rescued his wayward nephew, Lot. And he had given up his right to the spoils of battle, lest he be indebted to the king of Sodom rather than to God. But now he feared retaliation from the eastern kings and he worried about poverty as he lived in the barren land of Canaan. So the Lord told him, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; [I am] your very great reward" (Gen. 15:1).

But Abram was still concerned because he had no son. He expressed that concern to the Lord in a submissive spirit (“Adonai Yahweh,” = “Sovereign Lord,” 15:2) and the Lord graciously confirmed the promise of a son by taking Abram out into the night, showing him the stars, and promising him that his descendants would be as numerous as those stars (15:4-5). Abram “believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” (15:6). So verses 1-6 confirm God’s promise to Abram of a son.

But what about the land? In verse 7, the Lord reminded Abram that He is Yahweh, who brought Abram out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give him this land to possess it. But Abram needed assurance about this part of the promise also. The Canaanites possessed the land, and as far as Abram could tell, there wasn’t much progress being made toward his taking possession of it. And so he asked the Lord, submissively again (he again uses “Adonai Yahweh,” acknowledging God’s sovereignty as Lord), “How may I know that I shall possess it?” (15:8).

The Lord graciously adapted Himself to Abram’s culture by “cutting a covenant” with him. In that day, there were no written contracts. When two men wanted to make a contract, or covenant, they would take some sacrificial animals, split them in two, and the parties of the covenant would ratify it by walking between the split halves of the animals. There are different guesses as to what this symbolized. Some say that it meant to invoke that the same thing that happened to the animals might happen to the party who broke the covenant. Others say it pointed to the essential unity of the two parties, and that there is life and strength in unity, death in separation. Thus the two parties were solemnly signifying their commitment to the covenant.

God took that cultural convention and used it to assure Abram concerning God’s promise about the land. Abram prepared the animals, but then fell into a deep sleep. In this condition, he heard the Lord prophesy concerning the future of his descendants and he saw a smoking oven and flaming torch, symbolizing the Lord, pass between the animal pieces, thus ratifying the covenant. Abram himself did not pass between the animal pieces, because this was a unilateral covenant, dependent only on the Lord. The Lord went on to restate the promise concerning the land (15:18-21)

and even to expand it to include all the land from the Nile to the Euphrates River, boundaries which were approximated under the reign of Solomon (1 Kings 4:21), but which still await complete fulfillment. All this was God's gracious assurance to Abram concerning His promise about the land. These verses show us that ...

God wants believers to feel assured about His promises.

This is especially true about God's promise of eternal life to all who believe in Jesus Christ. If you have trusted in Christ as your sin-bearer, as Abram had done (15:6), then God wants you to be assured about your standing before Him. If you are continually plagued by doubts about whether God accepts you, you won't be able to grow in your walk with God or in your service for Him. We must be careful, since there is the danger of having false assurance, where you mistakenly think that things are right between you and God, but someday you will be shocked to hear Him say, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness" (Matt. 7:23). For sake of time, I cannot deal thoroughly with this. If you're interested in a good treatment, I recommend John MacArthur's book, *Saved Without a Doubt* [Victor Books, 1992]. But I want to explain the assurance which God here gave to Abram and apply it to us who know the Lord by faith in His provision in Christ.

1. Assurance rests on God's sure promise, not on our shaky performance.

It is clear in God's dealings with Abram that God was the one who initiated, sustained, and followed through. God reminds him of this in verse 7: "I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." Abram didn't dream up the idea of moving to Canaan and starting a new religion. He didn't map out a master strategy for taking the land. God did it. God was the one who promised; Abram just received what God promised.

Here God initiates a covenant with Abram. God didn't negotiate the terms; He announced them. So perhaps "promise" would be a better term. The promise was that God would give the land of Canaan to Abram and his descendants. The physical boundaries of the land are given to show that it was the literal land that was in view. You know the history of Abram's descendants, how they

never fully claimed and conquered the land God had promised them. They came close under David and Solomon. But then the nation was divided and they were finally taken into captivity. After a remnant returned, they were under the domination of the Greeks and then the Romans. Then, in A.D. 70, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Roman general Titus and the Jews were dispersed. God's promise to Abram went unfulfilled.

There are two main ways of dealing with this in terms of biblical interpretation. The *amillennialists* say that these promises concerning the land will never be fulfilled literally with Israel, but only spiritually in the church. (Some amillennialists say that this was fulfilled with Solomon, and thus there is no future fulfillment.) The *premillennialists* interpret these promises to Abram concerning the land in their normal sense. That is, God will yet do exactly as He said. Abram's physical descendants through Isaac and Jacob (the Jews) will inherit the land of Canaan to the borders described here. It will happen when Christ returns and literally reigns on the throne of David.

There are good men on both sides of the debate. It makes the most sense to me to take these promises in their normal sense. God promised a piece of land to Abram's descendants, and I think He is going to keep His word. It's easier for me to believe that, living since 1948, when the Jews were given part of the land again after 1,900 years, than for those who lived before then. But it's refreshing to read F. B. Meyer (born in 1847), who wrote, "Somehow the descendants of Abraham shall yet inherit their own land, secured to them by the covenant of God. Those rivers shall yet form their boundary lines: for 'the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it'" (*Abraham* [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 72). It's exciting to live in a day when we can see the first glimmer of the fulfillment of God's promise made to Abram 4,000 years ago. Verse 18 makes it clear that it's a done deal: God affirms, "I *have* given this land" to your descendants.

Abram saw a smoking oven and a flaming torch pass between the animal pieces (15:17), which are symbols of God. They would have reminded Moses' readers of the pillar of cloud and fire which had accompanied them in the wilderness. A similar manifestation of God occurred when Moses went up on the mountain to receive

the Ten Commandments. There were thunder and lightning flashes and a thick cloud upon the mountain (Exod. 19:16). These two symbols, the fire and the cloud, as Alexander Maclaren observes, point to the double aspect of God's nature, that "He can never be completely known; He is never completely hid." But also, "It speaks of that twofold aspect of the divine nature, by which to hearts that love He is gladsome light, and to unloving ones He is threatening darkness. As to the Israelites the pillar was light, and to the Egyptians darkness and terror; so the same God is joy to some, and dread to others" (*Expositions of Holy Scripture* [Baker], 1:109).

The significant thing about the vision is that God alone passed between the animal pieces. It was a unilateral covenant, dependent on God alone. All Abram could do was receive what God provided.

Just as God gave Abram a graphic picture of His covenant and its ratification to assure him, He has given us a graphic picture of the New Covenant He has made with us through Christ. In the symbols of the Lord's Supper, we have a visual reminder that God has entered into a covenant with us and that He will keep His promises. He initiated it by sending His Son to die for us. He chose us when we were dead in our sins. He sealed the covenant with Christ's blood. All we can do is receive what He has done. Our assurance of salvation doesn't depend on our shaky performance, but rather on God's sure promise. If our salvation rests on our choice of God, then you can never be sure of it. But if it rests on God's sovereign choice of us and on the finished work of Christ, we can be assured that "He who began a good work in [us] will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

There is a story told of Martin Luther, that one day the devil approached him and tried to get him to doubt his salvation by presenting the reformer with a long list of sins of which he was guilty. When he had finished, Luther said to him, "Think a little harder; you must have forgotten some." The devil did this and came up with more to add to the list. At the conclusion of this, Luther simply said, "That's fine. Now write across that list in red ink, 'The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanses us from all sin.'" There was nothing the devil could say to that. Assurance depends on God's sure promise, not on our shaky performance.

“But,” you ask, “isn’t there something we must do to have assurance?” Yes, with Abram, we must believe in God’s promise.

2. Assurance is for believers, not skeptics.

This assurance concerning the land follows the declaration that Abram believed in the Lord (15:6). As we’ve seen, this means that Abram believed God’s promise concerning his seed who would be the Savior. And yet, right after God verbally confirmed the promise of the land (15:7), Abram asked for more confirmation (15:8)! It sounds as if Abram was doubting God.

But we can know that Abram wasn’t doubting God by God’s response. God knows our motives. You will recall that when the angel appeared to Zecharias and told him of God’s promise to give him a son, John the Baptist, he replied, “How shall I know this?” He asked in unbelief and as a result was struck dumb until John’s birth (Luke 1:20). When the angel appeared to Mary, she said virtually the same words: “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” (Luke 1:34). And yet she was not punished. The angel explained things to her. What was the difference between Zecharias and Mary? He asked in unbelief, she in belief. How do we know? By God’s response. So here, we know that Abram asked in the spirit of, “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief,” not in doubt, because God confirmed Abram’s question.

Also, as I already said, Abram’s submission to the Lord is seen in his reverently addressing God as “Adonai Yahweh.” He wasn’t shaking his fist in God’s face, demanding an answer. He was submissively asking for the confirmation he needed, if it pleased the Sovereign Lord to give it.

Abram’s submissive spirit is further revealed in his obedient response to God’s command to bring these animals (15:9). Some see significance in the number and kind of animals, but I have trouble putting much trust in those interpretations. Apparently God also told Abram to divide the animals; at least in some way it was clear to him what he was supposed to do. He prepared the animals and waited. Nothing happened. Then the birds of prey began coming down to get the carcasses, and Abram drove them away (15:11). Many commentators see symbolism in this; for example, that it is a prophecy of the future enemies of the nation Is-

rael attacking her, or that it is Satan trying to get God's people. Maybe. I see it as an evidence of Abram's obedient faith in waiting on the Lord, even when the Lord delayed His answer. Others might have given up when there was no immediate response, and let the birds of prey distract them from meeting with God. But Abram wasn't about to be distracted. By faith he did what God told him to do. By faith he waited for the greater confirmation of faith for which he sought. God gives greater assurance to believers, not to skeptics.

God doesn't meet the skeptic's demand for proof, because the need of the skeptic isn't for evidence, but for repentance. But He does give assurance to those who have put their trust in the Savior if they come to Him with a submissive, obedient heart, and ask Him for the assurance they need to go on believing. As Jesus said, "For to everyone who has shall more be given, and he shall have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away" (Matt. 25:29).

"Well, then," you say, "how can I have the faith I need to get assurance? It sounds like when employers tell you that you need experience to be hired but nobody will hire you to give you the experience!" The answer is, we need to repent of our unbelief. Unbelief is not a condition which we are helpless to remedy. Unbelief is sin; we choose not to believe because we don't want to turn from our rebellion against God. But if we'll submit to Him as our Sovereign Lord and persevere in seeking Him in spite of things which would distract us, He will give us the assurance we need to go on believing, even though we never realize God's promises in our lifetime (as Abram did not). And so we must yield our will to God and cry out, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!" Assurance is for believers, not skeptics.

But what if, like Abram, we die not seeing the fulfillment of God's promises? How can we know God's assurance in the face of delays and trials?

3. Assurance is confirmed by God's prophetic word.

God here tells Abram that he can "know for certain" some things about the future (15:13-16). Knowledge about the future gives assurance in the present. Abram could go on trusting God

concerning His promises because he knew that God was working things out in His great timetable for history, which was far bigger than Abram's life span.

God reveals to Abram that his "descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years" (15:13). This is a prophecy of the Egyptian bondage, which lasted 430 years (here rounded off). Also, God reveals that He will judge the nation they will serve and that afterward they will come out with many possessions. This literally happened as the Israelites asked their Egyptian neighbors for things before they left, and thus plundered the Egyptians (Exod. 12:35-36). But Abram would die at a good old age. (By the way, verse 15 is an early promise of life after death. God is saying that Abram would be reunited with his ancestors.) Then, in the fourth generation (counting a generation as 100 years, which fit that age), Israel would return to Canaan.

Then the Lord adds a phrase which lets us peek into the mysteries of His eternal purpose: "for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete" (15:17). "Amorite" is here a general term for all the residents of Canaan. That phrase tells us that God has a predetermined limit to which He allows nations to go in their sin before He steps in and judges them. It shows us the awesome sovereignty of God, who knows in advance when the sins of a nation will be ripe for judgment.

It also shows us the great patience of the Lord, who "is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9). Even though it meant that His chosen people would endure 400 years of hardship, God would not let them invade the land and wipe out the wicked people there until those people had filled up their iniquity in His sight. What's the practical point of God's prophetic word to Abram here? It is that Abram could endure without seeing the fulfillment of God's promises in his lifetime, because he was assured by God's prophetic word. And Abram's descendants could endure 400 years of bondage in Egypt without doubting God, because they knew that God had predicted it and even ordained it, and that it was working into His sovereign purpose for the nations.

And that's the great value of biblical prophecy for us today. While God's timetable is not always to our liking, it is always on schedule. While it seems that the wicked are prospering, God is keeping tally of their sins. When His time comes, judgment will fall. He is working all things in history after the counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11)! Even if we as His people suffer persecution or trials, we can trust His sovereign plan and be assured that God will fulfill His promises to His covenant people. Whatever view you take of biblical prophecy, the bottom line is the same: *God's side is gonna win!* We can trust Him and be assured that our salvation is secure because His Word reveals His great plan for the future!

Conclusion

Adoniram Judson, the great 19th century missionary to Burma, lost two wives and several children to death in that difficult land. He saw very little fruit from his labors, and had many discouragements and setbacks. Then a war between England and Burma broke out and Judson, being a foreigner, was imprisoned in squalid conditions. There, sick with fever, he received a letter from a friend who asked, "Judson, how's the outlook?" Judson penned his classic reply, "The outlook is as bright as the promises of God!"

God wants you to have that same assurance of His promises to you. Perhaps you're in some difficult trial. Look to the sure promises of God's Word, not to your own shaky performance. Submit to Him as the Sovereign Lord and repent of any unbelief, because God's assurance is for believers, not skeptics. And know for certain that His prophetic word will be fulfilled exactly as He has revealed it in His Word. Jesus shall reign! Then, no matter what your circumstances, you can say, "The outlook is as bright as the promises of God!"

Discussion Questions

1. What causes you the most doubts in your walk with God?
2. When are we especially vulnerable to doubt and the attack of the devil? See 1 Pet. 5:8 and its context.
3. Is it contradictory to say that assurance depends on God's promise, not our performance and yet to say that we must believe to have assurance? Why/why not?
4. Can a person who does not believe in God's sovereign election to salvation have assurance of salvation? Why/why not?

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