

## Genesis Chapter 15

Genesis 15 is the great chapter of promise. It is the promise of God to Abraham that out of his own bowels, there would come a seed.

It follows on from the events of Gen 14, when Abraham has to lead his men in a battle against Chederlaomer. It was not a battle of Abram's choosing. It is not even a battle that he would ever have willingly sought to participate in. But he got involved in order to save Lot. The Old and the New Testaments paint very different pictures in their treatment of Lot. Peter tells us, not just once, but indeed three times of "just" or righteous Lot - "Just Lot", "that righteous man", and "his righteous soul". Lot is seen to be a good man, but he is in the wrong place, Sodom. He had set off as a pilgrim with Abram, but as we have seen in Gen 12 the call was to Abram only. Lot, like Terah, seems to have followed Abram out of Ur of the Chaldees. For a while, Lot maintained the same pilgrim character as Abram, as they herded their sheep and cattle. However, their wealth grows to such an extent that the land became too small for both their herds. Abram gave Lot the first choice. He says in effect - "If you go left, I'll go right and vice-versa". Abram could easily have pulled rank as it were. He was the uncle, Lot was the nephew. He had received the call of God, not Lot.

So Lot chose the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent towards Sodom. It was the wrong choice, for Gen 13: 13 says "The men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly. We don't know when the transition took place, but before long Lot becomes a city dweller - in Sodom. Having compromised his own position, Lot causes Abram to be brought into the situation. Abram has to rescue him, as recorded in Gen 14. One might have thought that having been rescued once, Lot would have steered well clear of Sodom, but he returns again, and has to be rescued a second time - this time by two angels. The history of Lot shows not only how we can stumble ourselves, but also how we can also involve others in our situation.

So, how does chapter 15 begin? "Fear not Abram, I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward". "Fear not". Was Abram in a state of fear when God thus spoke to him? He had just returned from a battle. With a force of a little over 300 men of his own household, he had launched a surprise night attack upon then king and all his confederates and managed to recover all the prisoners and the goods. Was Abram not perhaps now taking stock of his situation and wondering if there would be reprisals for his actions. After all who was he with a few servants to withstand the might of a king. Fear is usually the result of the unknown - not knowing what the future might hold. In Heb 2, there was those who "through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage". We know now of course that our Lord has the keys of death and of hell, and that one day, the dead in Christ will rise. So for us today, the fear of death has gone. In John 20, the disciples gathered behind closed doors, but they thought that at any moment the soldiers might come for them also. The future looked very insecure. Then the Lord appears and says to them, not once but twice, "Peace unto you".

So God says to Abram "Fear not. I am thy shield and thine exceeding great reward". According to the footnotes of my Bible, the word shield is elsewhere translated "believed". We know that in the New Testament, in Eph 6, part of the armour of God is the shield of faith. Heb 11 tells us that by faith Abram went out, by faith he sojourned, and by faith he offered up Isaac. Abram's foes were the men of earth, but Eph 6:12 says of us - "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places".

The Lord also adds in verse 1 of Gen 15 - "thy exceeding great reward". After the battle of the kings, the king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the persons and take the goods to thyself". But Abram declines the offer, save that which the young men had eaten, and the portion of the kings who went with him to battle. The reason for Abram's refusal is stated - "lest thou shouldest say, I have made Abram rich". By his refusal, Abram was not

however impoverished for the Lord now says, "I am thy exceeding great reward. "

For the Christian, there is great reward also promised from the Lord Jesus – but it is not reckoned in terms of this world. In II Corinthians 8, we read – "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus, how that, though he were rich, yet for your sakes he became poor that ye through His poverty might become rich". We must not think of the Lord only in material terms when it is said of Him that He became poor. It is true of course that He was a homeless stranger often with nowhere to lay His head. Many a night must have been spent sleeping rough on the Mount of Olives and elsewhere. In John's gospel, two-thirds of the chapters describe events in Jerusalem, but we never read of the Lord spending a night there. The nearest home that took Him in was the home of Martha, Mary, and Lazarus in Bethany. The Lord also had to say on one occasion "Show me a penny". Poverty was His portion as a man on earth, but today He is rich. "My God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." It was this wealth that the Lord left behind – "riches in glory": the wealth and treasures of heaven. He forsook that, so that we may become rich. Yet few of the Lord's people today are wealthy in terms of material gain, but we do have spiritual wealth as outlined for example in the epistle to the Ephesians. In chapter 1, we have the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace. We also have an inheritance in Christ, which will be realised when Christ reigns in glory in the millennial kingdom. In chapter 2, we have come to know a God who is rich in mercy, and in the ages to come, God will show to us the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness towards us in Christ Jesus. Then in chapter 3, we have the promise of the riches of his glory. As sinners we needed grace and we got that in chapter 1 when God showed His forgiveness. But in chapter 3, we are saints and God blesses us with the riches of His glory. In the book of Esther, the king made a great feast – "Esther's feast" – and to show his delight in his new wife, the king sent gifts throughout his empire. The gifts were "according to the state of the king" ie he was not niggardly in his giving. Neither is our God.

Returning again to Gen 15, we see that for Abram, the promise of wealth was no compensation for the lack of a child. He replies "Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus". Perhaps too many years have passed since the first promises of God to Abram regarding his seed.

1. Gen 12 :2 – "I will make of thee a great nation"
2. Gen 12 :7 - "Unto thy seed will I give this land"
3. Gen 13 : 15 "For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever.
4. Gen 13 : 16 "And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth, so that if you can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered"

So, on at least four occasions, God has spoken to Abram regarding a nation and a seed. It is easy for us to sit back and be critical, but God has given to us exceeding great and precious promises, yet so often we lack the faith to live from day to day.

Abram was therefore thinking at this time that Eliezer would have become his heir. This must have been the custom of the day. If there was no heir, the steward received the inheritance. It is lovely to see the devoted faithfulness of Eliezer as he is later sent off to find a wife for Isaac. He has no envy, no feeling of loss. The interests of his master, and his master's son, were all important.

The Lord replies to Abram in verse 4 – "He that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir". This is a further progression of divine revelation to Abram. The third and final revelation is given in Gen 17 : 19. "And God said, "Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed, and thou shall call his name Isaac, and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant".

There is such a thing in the New Testament also as progressive revelation. When Paul wrote in 1st Corinthians, the practice of Tongues was well established. In this epistle, Paul lays out certain rules regarding how Tongues were to be used and controlled. There would

be little value in someone speaking in an unknown tongue if there was no-one there to interpret. So Paul still says in this epistle – "Wherefore forbid not to speak with tongues". But also in 1st Corinthians, in chapter 13, Paul speaks of a time when tongues, knowledge, and prophecy would all cease. These were all means of divine communication used by God at that time. But they were imperfect and immature. Before long, "that which is perfect" would come, and I believe that is the revelation of the mystery that Paul speaks of in Eph Ch 3. In Colossians Ch1, he writes of that which is given unto me to complete the word of God, even the mystery. This was the mystery regarding Christ and His Church. Paul hints at this mystery in Romans Ch 16, but it was not till he wrote Ephesians and Colossians that the truth was revealed.

There is also progressive revelation towards Abraham in these chapters in Genesis, as far as the land was concerned. In Ch 12:7, the Lord says to Abram, "Unto thy seed will I give this land". The promise is a very general one. In Gen 13 :14, Abram is between Bethel and Hai when God speaks again concerning the land – "Look from the place where thou art, northward, southward, and eastward, and westward. For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed, for ever".

In Gen 15, 18-21, the borders of the land are finally defined – "From the river of Egypt unto the river Euphrates". They would inherit the land of all the peoples that follow in this section of the scripture.

In Gen 15, when God repeats the promise to Abram regarding his immediate seed, He is more specific – it shall be one born out of his own bowels. It will be a natural child of Abram. This for a while still left open the claim of Ishmael who was later born to Hagar, Sarai's maid. Another 15 years have to pass before Isaac is born to Sarai. By this time, Sarai has given up hope, and so too has Abram who says to the Lord in Gen 17: 18 – "Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee".

Apart from progressive revelation from the divine side, there are also of course the progressive steps that we make in understanding divine truth. This is personal progression and it is dependent upon our spiritual condition at the time. In Phil 3, Paul outlines his own personal ambitions. "That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection etc" He then adds the wish – "Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded : and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you". Paul was confident that those who were mature in the faith would have the same ambitions as himself, but even the less mature would soon reach this state for God would reveal it to them.

Our appreciation of divine things also depends upon our obedience. In Gen 12, Abram's obedience in leaving Haran led to further revelations from God. Obedience leads to divine revelation. But in the case of the Corinthians, they were still immature because of their carnal divisions. Paul also asked the Galatians "Who did hinder you that ye should not obey the truth". They were hindered as a result of being led back to Judaism. The Hebrews too were still in need of milk and not strong meat because they were being enticed back to keeping the law of Moses.

In Gen 15 :5, the Lord repeats the promise to Abram regarding his greater seed. "Look now toward heaven and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them, and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be." In Gen 13 :16 the promise was "I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth". So Abram will have an earthly seed, Israel, and a heavenly seed, mainly composed of Gentiles.

But now in verse 6, there follows one of the most remarkable verses in Genesis, if not in the Old Testament. "And he believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness". This is more than the writer presenting a simple narrative of a historical event, or a record of actual words that have been spoken. Much of what is in Genesis is simply a historical account, but of course written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. But here Moses is describing an event from the divine viewpoint. Only the Lord could look into the heart of Abraham and say, "He believed in the Lord". Only the Lord Himself could

go further and reckon it to Abraham for righteousness.

This verse is the basis of Paul's argument for justification by faith and it is quoted by the apostle in Romans 4 : 3. It is also quoted by him in Gal 3: 6 where the contrast is between faith in Christ and the law of Moses.

It is perhaps worthwhile considering Gen 15: 6 to discuss when this took place. God promises Abraham a son from his own bowels, and Abraham believed in the Lord. Heb Ch 11 gives us three examples of Abraham's faith but Gen 15:6 is not amongst them. In Heb 11 we read that "by faith he went out", "by faith he sojourned" and that "by faith he offered up Isaac". Why does not God reckon Abraham to be righteous on those three occasions ? The answer is that none of them would serve the purpose of Paul, and the purpose of the Spirit of God too, in both Romans and Galatians. It is almost as if God lays down a verse some 2000 years before Christ so that it might be used as an argument all these years later. The same could also be said of Habakkuk 2:4 - "The just shall live by faith". This verse is taken up no less than 3 times in the New Testament:-

Romans 1:17

Gal 3:11

Heb 10:38.

So, why would Abraham's call from Ur of the Chaldees not have been a suitable occasion for Paul to take up. Firstly, it might have been construed as justification by works. For Abraham obeyed the command of God and went out of Ur. Had he been reckoned righteous then, many would have said that his works were the basis of his being declared righteous.

Secondly, on this occasion, Abraham met the God of Glory. It was an amazing one-off, supernatural event. Many might have said later, "Because I have not had this type of experience, I cannot be made righteous like Abraham". I once corresponded with a brother, not in assembly fellowship, who was condemning "easy believism" – an expression used I understand by A W Pink, the author of "The Sovereignty of God". According to this brother who wrote to me, unless there was true repentance and heart searching, a genuine feeling of sin and guilt, then one was not saved at all. But what about the innocent faith of a child who could not have such feelings yet who would still rely on that experience as his moment of conversion. No, once we start to add certain feelings to conversion, then we are on very shaky ground and could undermine the faith of some.

So, what about "By faith he sojourned". This was the daily faith exercised by Abraham as he moved on for God. It would not have suited Paul's purpose either because he wishes to lay the basis of salvation as well as justification. Salvation is a one-off event, not something that we achieve after a lifetime of effort, So, "by faith he sojourned" did not suit Paul either.

And what about the last of the three "by faiths" of Heb 11. "By faith, he offered up Isaac". If Abraham had been reckoned righteous then, it would have been the wrong time for Paul's argument. In Romans 4 : 10, Paul asks "How was it then reckoned?. When he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision ? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision". This is Paul's argument in Rom 4: 9-12. ie that Abraham was declared righteous before he was circumcised, which event did not take place till Gen Ch 17. Therefore, Abraham's righteousness did not depend upon him being circumcised, as it preceded it. The offering up of Isaac would also not have suited Paul's argument as far as justification by faith was concerned. For again, many would have argued that Abraham had been justified by works, for the offering up of Isaac involved Abraham actually doing something.

So why is it that James also quotes Gen 15:6 in support of his argument in Jas 2:23. James, of course, is not at odds with Paul in this respect. The important word in Jas 2:24 is the last word in the verse "only". "ye see then how that by works a man is justified, and not by faith only". Abraham was declared righteous by his faith in Gen 15 : 6, but by

offering up Isaac the reality of that faith was put to the test. His works proved the reality of the faith which he already had.

The same comparison is made with Rahab the harlot in Heb 11:31 and Gal 2:25. Rahab had faith because we presume that she had already heard of a people coming through the Red Sea, being sustained by their God for 40 years in the wilderness, then being led on dry land through the Jordan. What was this city of Jericho that could hope to stand against such a people and such a God. Rahab therefore believed in the God of Israel. But Rahab's faith was proved later by her works when she hid the spies in her home then sent them away safely. Her works were the proof of her faith.

These two examples show that the works of faith are not the same thing as good works. Had Abraham been alive today, then he would have been arrested for attempted murder. Had Rahab been alive today, she would be condemned for being a traitor, a "fifth columnist".

No, the works of faith are those which men and women do in response to the commandments of God. They prove the reality of faith, but they are not the basis of faith.

So, if the three examples of Heb 11 were not used by Paul, why was Gen 15:6 so appropriate? The faith of Abraham was not the outcome of a process as in "by faith he sojourned". It is not dependent upon circumcision for he was not circumcised in Gen 15. It was not by works and not by a supernatural experience, It was by faith alone. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. He heard the word, and he believed it. He believed in the impossible. Rather he believed in the God of the impossible. Here he was approaching old age with a wife likewise – and not only so, a wife who was barren. Abraham believed and God reckoned it to him for righteousness. But what does righteousness mean? I like the definition which says – "It is the bestowal of a righteous state upon one who is a sinner". This could only be a work of God alone. The Jews went about to establish their own righteousness, the righteousness of the law. They hoped to achieve this by a process of obedience to the Law, whereas the righteousness of God which is by faith is bestowed immediately upon believing.

Righteousness is not a feeling – it is a state. A man who is declared righteous looks no different to what he was before. He does not feel any different. It is simply that he is now righteous in the sight of God.

In Romans chapters 3,4, and 5, there are no less than four things stated which are the basis of our righteousness. These are grace, His resurrection, our faith, and His blood. Each one of these things is necessary for us to be justified – there is not one we could do without.

Bildad, one of Job's so called comforters asked the question "How then can man be justified with God. Or, how can he be clean that is born of woman?". To Bildad, such a thing seems to be impossible. Solomon says the same thing in Eccles. 7:20 – "For there is not a just man upon earth". Paul also takes up the same thought in Romans 3:10 – "There is none righteous, no, not one". All men, as men in the flesh, are unrighteous. So, is it impossible for a man to be justified.

Well, the epistle to the Romans tells a different story. Romans 3:26 says – "To declare at this time his righteousness : that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus". So, a just God can therefore justify men. A just God who hates sin, of whom it is said in Psalm 7 – "God is angry with the wicked every day".

The first thing that Paul mentions in Romans regarding justification is grace. It is lovely to see where grace is mentioned. One of the best known gospel texts is surely Romans 3:23 – "For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God". There is universal condemnation – all have sinned without exception. "There is none righteous, no not one". But it is then that grace is mentioned in the very next verse, number 24. "Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" It could only be by grace – God could not save sinners otherwise. In Eph 2 Paul says – "by grace are ye

saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves – it is the gift of God". Even the faith is a gift. It is not just grace in Rom 3:24 – it "freely" given. Without works, without money, without price on our side. We have indeed been redeemed – the price has been paid – but not by us. It through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

While it comes last of our quartet, it is surely essential for us to mention next "his blood". Romans 5:9 says – "How much more, being justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him". A holy God could not act on grace alone. He had to deal with sin. Sin could not be ignored or forgotten. The wages of sin must be paid. We could not pay the price, but God has devised a means. We are justified by his blood. His blood means more than just the death of the Lord Jesus. We are reconciled by His death, but justified by His blood. The blood speaks of a life given as part of a sacrifice offered to God. Not the blood of bulls and goats which could cover but never take sins, but the blood of Jesus who offered one sacrifice for sin for ever.

But thirdly, Romans 4:25 says of the Lord – "who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification". What part does His resurrection play in our justification ?. We can understand that He died for our sins, but what if the Lord was still in the tomb ?. Might we not ask, He came under divine judgment for sins, but was that judgment fully met in Him ?. If still in the tomb, would the Lord not be under the dominion of the devil, who had the power of death ? (Heb 2). Paul also argues with the Corinthians – "If Christ be not raised, ye are yet in your sins. Your faith is vain." But in being raised, it proves that God is satisfied . Christ was raised by the glory of the Father. The devil's power has been broken, and it is the Lord who says in Rev Ch 1 – "I have the keys of death and of hell". By being raised and by being in the presence of God, where no sin can abide, He proves that He has indeed put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself. By being raised, He is a man in heaven and if God can so raise this Man, He can do it for all who believe in Him. "If we believe that Jesus died and rose again, then also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with Him".

But last of all, we are justified by faith. Romans 5:1 says – "Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ". So far, everything has come from the divine side. The grace is His, the blood is that of Jesus, the resurrection is also the Lord's. Does God need anything from us at all. Well God's grace goes out to all men. "The grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared unto all men". Christ has died and risen again. But all men are not thus saved. We have to believe. We are justified by faith. This was the great truth of the Reformation – justification by faith. Not by works, not by penance, not by religious observance, but by faith. The one who exercises such faith has peace with God.

So then Gen 15:6 is the perfect argument to support the apostle's case for justification by faith.

Gen 15:6 is also quoted by Paul in Gal 3:6 – "Even as Abraham believed God and it was accounted to him for righteousness". The Galatians were being beguiled by Judaizers who were telling them that they had to keep the law of Moses if they wanted to be saved. But what about Abraham in Gen 15 ?. He simply believed and was counted righteous. No work was involved, no keeping of commandments either. He believed and that was enough.

In the remainder of this chapter, the Lord makes a covenant with Abraham, a covenant to confirm the promise made by God concerning the seed and the land. In verse 7, the Lord first takes a backward look and reminds Abraham where he has come from – "I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it". Abraham has heard these promises before, but now he asks for a confirmation of them. "Whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it ?". Now from verses 9 to 17, the Lord makes a covenant between himself and Abraham by means of the various sacrifices which are offered. This is a covenant unlike any other in the Bible and the interpretation of it is open only to suggestion. It has been said that at this period of history, men often made a covenant by dividing animals in two, as here in verse 10, then both parties to the covenant passed between the pieces of the animals. Just as men would swear on the Bible

in court, so the two parties would swear on the basis of the death of the sacrifices, and would pass between to show their affirmation. Here however, in verse 17, we read only of a smoking furnace and a burning lamp that passed between the pieces. These are symbols of the divine presence, symbols of divine justice. Abraham did not pass, for this was a one-sided covenant ie it is a covenant made by God with Abraham and not vice-versa.

The Law of Moses was a two way covenant. God said "I will – if you will" He promised to bless if they kept the law. But in Gen 15, God is simply confirming what He has said already – "I will give you this land".

Other details are added in verses 11-16. In verse 11, the fowls came down upon the carcasses and Abraham drove them away. Perhaps it is not too far fetched to think of the birds as a picture of Satan or of those forces opposed to God, which came down to try and destroy the covenant. But Abraham drove them all away.

In verse 12, the sun was going down. A whole day had passed between verse 5 and verse 12. It was night time when the Lord said "look now toward heaven and tell the stars". What happened next was that a deep sleep fell upon Abraham. The first mention of a deep sleep is in Gen 2:21 – "The Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam". During this sleep, Eve was formed from the rib of Adam. Now in Gen 15, God uses the deep sleep of Abraham to give him a prophecy concerning his seed – the nation of Israel. It would not be pleasant for Abraham, hence a horror of great darkness fell upon him. Abraham is told that his seed would be strangers in a land that was not theirs. And that that nation would afflict them for 400 years. But that nation whom they served would be judged by God. In Exodus, we read of all the plagues that God brought to bear upon the Egyptians. In Exodus 12 : 36, the Lord's words to Abraham are fulfilled – "they spoiled the Egyptians". They came out with gold and silver, and with raiment, just as God had promised in Gen 15:14. – "They shall come out with great substance".

In verse 15, there is a brief word to Abraham personally. "Thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace. Thou shalt be buried in a good old age." Gen 25 :7 gives us the age of Abraham when he died – 175 years. If Abraham was about 85 years old at the time of Gen 15, then the greater part of his life was still before him. Indeed, after the death of Sarah, Abraham takes another wife – Keturah – who bears him 6 more children.

God returns to the subject of the seed in verse 16 – "But in the fourth generation, they shall come hither again, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. This latter phrase must have seemed strange to the ears of Abraham, for he was then living in the plain of Mamre, in the land of the Amorites, and he was confederate with them. But God was able to look forward to the days of Joshua, when the Amorites were one of the first peoples to oppose Joshua and the people when they entered the land.

In verses 18 to 21, God restates the promise to Abraham regarding the land. Even greater detail is added than on previous occasions. The borders of the land are now defined – "from the river of Egypt, unto the great river, the river Euphrates. Even at Israel's peak in the days of David and Solomon, they never possessed anything like this amount of land. We are speaking of an area that includes Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and Iraq. It will not be till the onset of the Millennial kingdom, as described by the prophet Ezekiel, that Israel will finally take up possession of the whole promised land.