



A COVENANT BY FAITH ALONE

Genesis 15-17

Too often we fail to rest in God’s promises. Fear creeps in and overcomes our faith. This is nothing new. Even Abraham, a man of great faith, faltered at times. Yet his failures gave rise to God’s assurances and reminders that God’s promises are as sure as He is faithful.

One of the great hymns of the church begins with these words:

*Standing on the promises of Christ my King,
Through eternal ages let His praises ring;
Glory in the highest, I will shout and sing,
Standing on the promises of God. ¹*

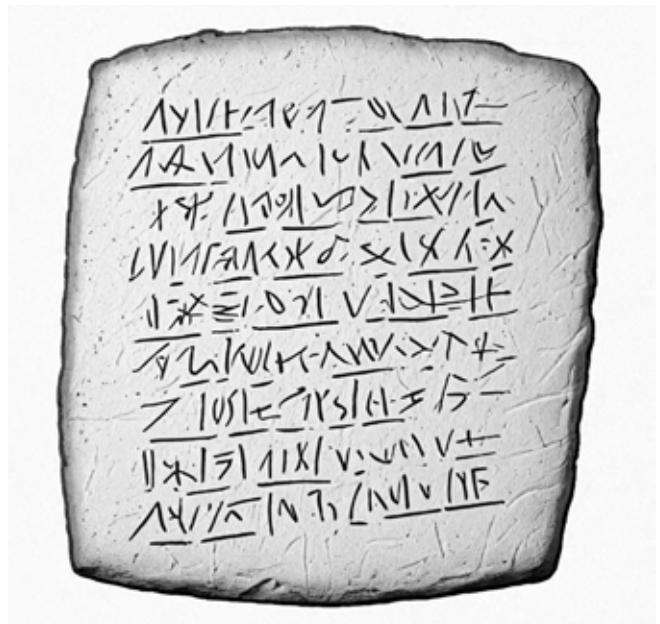
It’s one thing to sing that—it’s another thing to live it. And that’s the challenge facing Abram and Sarai in Genesis 15 through 17.

Abram is more fearful than faithful at this point, so the Lord reaffirms His promise. In verse 1 of chapter 15, God says to him: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.”

But Abram complains in verse 2, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless?”

Abram is saying, “We still don’t have that promised baby. I’m trying to stand on the promises of God, but my feet of faith keep slipping.” And Abram is now in his eighties—that’s not exactly the time you go out and buy a baby crib and a diaper pail.

The Lord tells Abram to go outside and look up at the sky:



Marriage contract from roughly the time of Abraham and Sarah

“Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them ... so shall your offspring be.” (verse 5)

And verse 6 tells us that Abram “believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”



God “counted it . . . as righteousness.” That means, God declared Abram to be righteous, or justified, *by faith*. Abram hasn’t done anything but believe the word of God. Being made righteous, or right, with God is always a matter of believing the word of God. And God says His free gift is eternal life if you believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior (Romans 6:23). He does all the work; we simply believe—by faith alone.

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Now in verse 7 the Lord repeats His promise of giving the land to Abram’s descendants, the Hebrew nation. This isn’t a figurative promise. God is talking about literal real estate. And by the way, this promise hasn’t changed. God will finally and completely give Israel the promised land in Christ’s literal future kingdom on earth. What we’ve seen so far in human history is only temporary and a partial fulfillment of this promise.

Abram asks the Lord in verse 8, “How am I to know that I shall possess it?” And the Lord responds by telling Abram to prepare for a covenant ceremony. This might seem strange to us because we’re used to signing contracts with lawyers in the room. But to Abram, a covenant ceremony would have been well known.

There were several kinds of covenants in the Old Testament. In a salt covenant, you gave the other party a pinch of salt. In a sandal covenant, you gave someone your sandal, signifying he could walk in your shoes. These covenants were binding unless you got your pinch of salt or your sandal back.

But a blood covenant was irreversible. Animals were

killed and divided in two. The parties to the covenant would walk between those pieces to ratify their agreement. You might get your sandal back, but you’re not gonna put that animal back together again.

God even brought a deep sleep upon Abram in verse 12, and then God alone moved between the animal pieces. The Lord’s presence is symbolized in verse 17 by a “smoking fire pot and a flaming torch”—much like that later pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night in Moses’ time. God is not going to depend on Abram or his descendants. This is a promise God is keeping all by Himself.

As Abram sleeps, the Lord gives him a prophetic dream about the future. He speaks to Abram in verse 13:

“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.”

And that’s exactly what happened, as the nation of Israel ended up in the land of Egypt for four hundred years.

Down in verse 18, God concludes His promise to Abram by saying, “To your offspring I give this land.” Literally translated, this says, “I *have given* this land.” It’s as good as done. Abram, you can stand on the promises of God.

But Abram ends up tripping over the promises, and we read in Genesis 16:1:

Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar.

Abram is now eighty-five years old, and they still don’t have a son. I have a hard time waiting on God for days; I can’t imagine waiting all these years.

The problem is, they decide to implement Plan B. Beloved, whenever you set aside God’s plans and imple-



ment your own, a trainload of trouble is going to follow.

Abram takes Sarai’s maidservant, Hagar, and lies with her, and she conceives. But verse 4 tells us that as soon as Hagar conceives, she despises Sarai. Sarai then retaliates by banishing her maid. We’re told in verse 7 that the angel of the Lord appears to Hagar in the wilderness, and He promises to bless her with a son and tells her to name her son Ishmael (verse 11), meaning “God hears.”

Instead of waiting for the miraculous birth of their son, Isaac, whose descendants will become the Jewish nation, Abram and Sarai’s Plan B results in the birth of Ishmael, who will grow up and father the Arab nations. And if you haven’t noticed, the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac are still fighting over the promised land to this day.

And by the way, the fighting isn’t going to stop permanently until Jesus descends to set up His kingdom on earth, with Jerusalem as His capital city. And all who believe in Him—Jewish and Arab believers, European and African believers, American and Asian believers—all the redeemed will one day rejoice together, united by faith in Christ.

Now the last verse of chapter 16 and the first verse of chapter 17 are separated by thirteen years. As Genesis 17 opens, we’re told that Abram is now ninety-nine years old. It is humanly impossible for Abram and Sarai to have a baby, which is why God introduces Himself to Abram in verse 1 by a new name, El Shaddai, “God Almighty.” It’s as if He’s saying that what’s impossible biologically is not impossible supernaturally.

Then God changes Abram’s name to Abraham in verse 5. Abram means “exalted father”; Abraham means “father of a multitude.” Talk about standing on the promises! Abraham’s very name will remind him of God’s promise that from this childless man will come a multitude.

God now informs Abraham in verses 9-14 about

the sign of this covenant—the sign of circumcision. The cutting away of the foreskin will distinguish the Jewish people from the surrounding nations. It will also remind them that God’s promises are not dependent on their flesh, which is symbolically cut away in circumcision; no, this covenant is dependent on the promises of God.

In verse 15, the Lord changes Sarai’s name to Sarah and promises her that *she* will deliver a son. The name Sarai refers to the princess of one family, while Sarah refers to the princess of many families.

God is stretching their faith! Abraham has a hard time believing it all, and he laughs and says to himself in verse 17:

“Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?”

“I’m one hundred, and my wife is ninety. Lord, You have to be kidding!” But God isn’t kidding.

And if I were God, I think I would have started over with somebody else—somebody more faithful! But thank God for His grace and patience with Abraham! And with Sarah. And with you and with me!

Despite the doubts and failures of His children, the Lord always keeps His promises. And beloved, we are in the best place possible when we trust Him—when we stand on the promises of God.

What fears sneak into your life at times? How does God’s Word address your fears?

Do you ever elevate your plans above God’s? Why does this happen, and how can it be avoided?

¹ R. Kelso Carter, “Standing on the Promises.”

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