

September 25, 2011

Sermon Overview:

Genesis 15 is a pivotal chapter in Abraham’s journey. The passage presents a sharp exchange in which Abraham stands face to face with God in search of clarity and confidence. The text contains two movements. On Abraham’s part, there is the movement from *protest* to *belief*. On God’s part, there is the movement from the *commitment* to fulfill his promise to a ceremony *confirming* that commitment.

Abraham’s Protest: The text opens with the words of a king to a hero after battle: “*Fear not, Abraham, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.*” While most would find these words encouraging, for Abraham they must have felt more like picking a scab. How “great” could this reward be when he remained childless and the only possibility for an heir was an adopted slave? Everyday Abraham’s faith was mocked by the reality of his aging body. Little by little his grim circumstances began to chip away at the persuasive power of God’s word. Out of this tension comes Abraham’s protest.

Abraham’s Faith: Genesis 15:6 has been a key text from Paul to Luther: *And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.* Here we find the evaluation that Abraham believed God, and that God designated him to be righteous, on account of that belief. Genesis 15:6 is foundational to the Christian truth that humans are acceptable before God on the basis of faith and not on the basis of what they do or who they are. Of note is that his faith is a hard-fought and deeply argued conviction, not a peaceful and passive acceptance of God’s word that turns a blind eye to real-life experiences.

God’s Commitment: Abraham’s faith was not reinforced by a renewed understanding of his circumstances, but by a renewed understanding of God. In response to Abraham’s protest, God clarifies his commitment (v4) and ensures him that his offspring will be comparable to the stars (v5). The stars provide a sign that the one who speaks these promises is the creator of the universe. Abraham trusts that God could bring about a future that is not contingent on Abraham and Sarah’s present barrenness.

God’s Confirmation: The text closes with a covenant ceremony which solidifies God’s relationship with Abraham. God walks through a set of animals that have been cut in two. The significance of such a ritual was that covenant partners would keep an agreement or undergo the same fate as the animals. Normally, both partners “walk the line”. Astoundingly, Abraham does not pass between the parts. God goes through twice, insinuating that God would remain faithful to his covenant, despite the failings of his covenant partners. God unconditionally obligates himself to fulfill an immutable covenant, even when it means going to death for his partner’s infidelity. God provides Abraham with a dramatic affirmation to guarantee the promise. God made good on this commitment in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Questions for Preparation and Discussion Note that some questions are designated for preparation (P) and some for group discussion (D). Study based on the English Standard Version

Getting to Know Each Other:

1. Have you ever been disappointed with praise or reward? What were the circumstances? [D]

Looking at the Bible:

1. Read Jeremiah 34:17–22: How does this passage help us understand the ceremony found in Genesis 15:7–21? [P/D]
 - a. What might have been going through Abraham’s mind when God told him to get the animals for the covenant ceremony (v9)? [D]
 - b. Why does this ceremony come in response to Abraham’s question: “*O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it*”(v8)? [D]
2. Genesis 15:6 reads: Abraham believed God and God counted it to him as righteousness. Read Romans 4:1–8; 16–25.
 - a. From these passages, describe the faith that makes us acceptable before God? [P]
 - b. What in Gen 15 would cause Paul to say that Abraham believed in the God “*who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist* (Rom 4:19)?” [P]
3. Abraham’s faith is a hard-fought and deeply argued conviction. He has to wrestle with the tension that is created when his experience seems to conflict with God’s word.
 - a. What does this tell us about the nature of Christian faith? [D]
 - b. What resources does this text give us for dealing with obstacles to our faith? [D]

Looking at Our Hearts

1. In what ways have you felt a tension between what you know from experience and what God’s word tells you? [D]
 - a. From your experience, is it true that Christians often give the appearance that faith means denying the hard-facts of science and the cold-realities of suffering? If so, what do you think that is the case? [D]
 - b. What are some healthy and unhealthy ways to deal with barriers to your faith? [D]
2. In the sermon, Kyle suggested that our lives manifest a perpetual quest to justify our existence.
 - a. Do you find this to be the case in your experience? [D]
 - b. How might your ambitions and anxieties manifest a desire to answer the question: Will my life be enough? [D]
 - c. How might this text provide you with rest from the need to justify your existence? [D]

Praying for Each Other

(Use these suggestions alone or with other prayer requests to help focus your time in prayer together).

- Pray for specific ways in which members of your group are wrestling with the tension between God’s word and experiences that seem to contradict God’s word.
- Pray that the acceptance that God has provided in Jesus would free members from the anxieties, insecurities, and burdens that come from seeking to justify our existence.