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Sermon Notes

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God's Covenant in the Stars and in the Blood

Genesis 15:1-21

Introduction

- I. God's Promise of Present Protection and Eternal Reward (vs. 1)
- II. God's Promise in the Stars: Abram's Glorious Offspring (vs. 2-6)
- III. Abram's Justification by Faith Alone (vs. 6)
- IV. God's Covenant with Abram in Blood (vs. 7-21)
- V. Why God Made this Dramatic Covenant
- VI. Application

- I. God's Promise of Present Protection and Eternal Reward (vs. 1)

Genesis 15:1 After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."

- A. Context: Abram's Defeat of Kedorlaomer
- B. The "Word of the Lord Came"
- C. Abram's Need for Protection
- D. Abram's Desire for Reward

Abram would get the greatest reward imaginable... God Himself!!!

- II. God's Promise in the Stars: Abram's Glorious Offspring (vs. 2-6)
 - A. Abram's Turns His Sorrow Over to God

B. God's Promise Stated

vs. 4 *Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir."*

C. God's Promise Displayed and Restated

vs. 5 *He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars-- if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."*

God used the stars to display His promise to Abram

III. Abram's Justification by Faith Alone (vs. 6)

vs. 6 *Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*

A. Central Question of Our Existence: How Can I Be Saved?

B. Simple Statement in Genesis Text... Easily Missed

C. Justification By Faith

D. Paul's Main Point: Everyone Gets Saved the Same Way

Romans 4:1-5 What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? 2 If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about-- but not before God. 3 What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." 4 Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. 5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

E. Hadn't Abram Already Displayed Faith?

IV. God's Promise in the Blood: The Promised Land (vs. 7-21)

A. God's Second Promise Stated Again

vs. 7 *He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it."*

1. Two Great Promises Made to Abram: Many Descendants, Promised Land

2. God had already promised this once... Genesis 12:7

Genesis 12:7 The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

3. Here God links it to His covenant name, and to His original call of Abram from Ur of the Chaldeans
4. God uses our past dealings with us to give us certainty about future promises

B. Main Question: How Can I Know?????

vs. 8 But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"

1. Not faithless, for God does not rebuke Abram for asking it
- 2. Faith is a living thing... it needs food in order to live!!!**
3. The food of faith is the word of God and experience with God in establishing that word to us
4. You will not understand the somber covenant ceremony that follows if you forget Abram's question:

vs. 8 But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"

5. Verse 8-21 is God's answer to Abram: "You can know because of the covenant I have made with you supporting my word of promise to you. That should be enough."

C. The Biblical Significance of Covenants

1. A covenant is a binding agreement between two or more persons
2. Most common form of covenant today: marriage
3. Ancient people used covenants for many things
 - a. conquering kings would make covenants with the kings they conquered
 - b. neighboring tribes would make covenants with each other concerning wells and grazing rights
4. God used covenants at key moments throughout the Bible
 - God made a covenant with Noah to protect him and all that were with him on the Ark
 - After the flood, God made a covenant with the earth never again to destroy it with a flood, and the rainbow was the sign of God's faithfulness to His covenant promise
 - Here, in verse 18, this commitment the Lord makes to Abram concerning the land is called his covenant with Abram

- In Genesis 17, he will establish the covenant sign of circumcision for all the descendents of Abraham
- At Mount Sinai, he makes a covenant with Israel based on the Law of Moses
- Later, God will also make a covenant with David to place one of his descendent eternally on the throne

5. There are two types of covenants: conditional and unconditional...

- a. Sinai was a conditional covenant: if you obey me fully, I will bless you
- b. the rainbow after the flood was the sign of God's unconditional covenant with the earth... whether they obey or not, God will never again destroy the world by flood
- c. this covenant in Genesis 15 was an UNCONDITIONAL covenant... it is not tied in any way to Abram's obedience... God WILL give his descendents the land

6. Some theologians make God's covenants the center of their entire understanding of God's dealings with the human race...

Wayne Grudem: "A covenant is an unchangeable, divinely imposed legal agreement between God and man that stipulates the conditions of their relationship."

From the covenant of works between God and Adam, through the covenant with Noah and Abraham, through the covenant of Sinai and the covenant with David, ultimately to the new covenant of salvation written in the blood of Jesus Christ, the whole pattern of God's dealings with man has followed the pattern of a covenant

D. Why Does God Make Covenants?

So that we may KNOW and trust Him, and cling to His promises and obey His commands

E. The Mechanics of the Covenant (vs. 9-21)

1. The Sacrifice

vs. 9-11 So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon." 10 Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two

This covenant would be made at a price... the blood of the sacrifice

Here, like all other times of godly animal sacrifice in the Old Testament, the sacrifice represents Christ

God will have NOTHING to do with sinners like us apart from the sacrifice of blood as an atonement for sin

Hebrews 9:22 ... without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

The animals, however, are merely symbolic... representations of the true sacrifice of Jesus Christ

Hebrews 10:4 ... it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

So, this covenant will be paid for at a great cost over two thousand years later, when Christ shed his blood at Calvary

2. The Pieces Separated

and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. 11 Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

The separation of the pieces is done in order to make a pathway between them

Why? We will see more in a moment!

3. The Terror of the Lord

Genesis 15:12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. [NASB]

The Lord “arrives” to make the covenant with Abram, surrounded by darkness and terror

Darkness similar to Sinai

Deuteronomy 4:11 You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain while it blazed with fire to the very heavens, with black clouds and deep darkness.

Psalms 97:2-3 Clouds and thick darkness surround him; righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne. 3 Fire goes before him and consumes his foes on every side.

Terror because of God’s immense holiness and power... the immediate response of any man, no matter how righteous to the overwhelming holiness and power of God is sheer terror. God does this even to Abram, his friend, for the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom

Fear of the Lord promotes holiness

Exodus 20:18-20 When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance 19 and said to Moses, "Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die." 20 Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. God has come to test you, so that the fear of God will be with you to keep you from sinning." 21 The people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick darkness where God was.

4. The Covenant Promises Stated (note... no requirements!)

- a. first remarkable predictions about the next four hundred years, including Abram’s own future

vs. 13-16 Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. 14 But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. 15 You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. 16 In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here

Note amazing details of this prophecy

- 1) Your descendents will be strangers in a country not their own (fulfilled by their time in Egypt... although frankly they would not own the Promised Land until Joshua led them to the conquest)
- 2) They will be enslaved and mistreated
- 3) Four hundred years (also four generations... see verse 16, "In the fourth generation"... note that this was literally fulfilled as we simply look at the genealogy of Moses: Levi, Kohath, Amram, Moses)
- 4) I will punish the nation they serve as slaves (fulfilled in the plagues of the Exodus)
- 5) Afterward they will come out (amazing prophecy of the Exodus)
- 6) With great possessions (the plundering of Egypt, fulfilled in Exodus 11)
- 7) You will go to your fathers in peace, and be buried at a good old age

These details are essential to the reason for the covenant ceremony... it will be a **LONG ROAD** to fulfillment, and Abram himself would never see it happen

b. second, the reason given for the delay

, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."

God's patience means salvation for at least one Amorite: Rahab the Prostitute would come to believe

Note also the incredible patience of God in dealing with the wickedness of the Amorites; four hundred years of smelling the stench of their child sacrifices; AND four hundred years of watching His own people suffering in slavery in Egypt... all for His own strange inscrutable purposes

Romans 9:22 What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath-- prepared for destruction?

When Joshua slaughtered the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Amorites, and Jebusites, it was the final act of judgment on a people who had been wicked idolators and child-sacrificers for hundreds and hundreds of years

Note also the fearsome and quiet day of God's wrath... God has a measure of wickedness, and when at last it is full, the judgment falls

God owes not a single day more to wicked sinners like us, and He DOES NOT REVEAL His measure of when enough sin is enough

How terrifying for the unrepentant sinner, who presumes on God's patience day after day

Romans 2:4-6 *Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance? 5 But because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. 6 God "will give to each person according to what he has done."*

c. then clear boundaries for the promised land

vs. 18-21 *On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram: "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates-- 19 the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, 20 Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, 21 Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."*

5. The Covenant Warning Implied

vs. 17 *When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.*

Amazing, shocking symbolism... which adequately satisfies Abram's question

vs. 8 *But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"*

The symbolism is lost to us today, but Abram understood fully what was happening

More Biblical data comes from a statement in Jeremiah 34:18-20

Jeremiah 34:18-20 *The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces. 19 The leaders of Judah and Jerusalem, the court officials, the priests and all the people of the land who walked between the pieces of the calf, 20 I will hand over to their enemies who seek their lives. Their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.*

In ancient days, one did not "MAKE a covenant", one "CUT a covenant." It was related to the cutting up of a sacrificial animal and arranging the pieces apart from each other... those making the covenant would then pass between the pieces and in effect call down a curse on themselves:

"May what has happened to these animals happen to ME if I fail to keep this covenant!!"

The covenant-cutting ceremony was thus capped by the solemn walk of the covenant-cutting parties between the pieces of the sacrifice. If they failed to keep the terms, they were under a curse that their own bodies would be severed completely and destroyed

NOW SEE THE POWER OF WHAT GOD HAS DONE!!!

Abram asked,

vs. 8 But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"

God's answer is more than just, "Because I said so." For a God who cannot lie, who NEVER lies, "Because I said so," is enough. But God went beyond that, and gave Abram a symbol he would NEVER forget...

God called down a curse on Himself and in effect said, "May I cease to exist if I fail to keep this covenant."

The smoking firepot with a blazing torch represent God... just like the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire would later represent God himself in the Exodus

Note also that this symbolizes the cost of the covenant... God prefigures the death of His only begotten Son, who would die in order to accomplish this covenant

V. Why God Made this Dramatic Covenant

A. Why God Made This Solemn Promise

1. Why didn't God just answer Abram, "Because I said so?"
2. God never lies... His word ought to be enough
3. BUT God had His reasons for this solemn chapter... the look at the stars and the solemn covenant ceremony
4. God's reason: our faith, our hope, our courage... in short, our salvation

B. Providence Seems Contrary to Promises

1. Look again at the predictions God made about Abram's descendents
2. FOUR HUNDRED YEARS in great affliction and bondage
3. God's ways of getting to His purposes is sometimes the exact OPPOSITE of our ways

C. Salvation for Slaves

1. How is anyone saved? "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited to him as righteousness."
2. One MUST believe God's promises, or one will die in their sins
3. Imagine an Israelite, a descendent of Abraham, slaving under the broiling sun of Egypt making brick after brick

4. Imagine he was born 250 years after Jacob entered Egypt... there is still another 150 years until the Exodus under Moses
5. He was born in slavery like his father, and he will die in slavery as well
6. What is his ONLY HOPE? Some ancient promises... some ancient words made by God Almighty, to Father Abraham
7. The look at the stars has already been fulfilled... Abraham has descendents as numerous as the stars in a night sky. But the covenant also concern the PROMISED LAND
8. God made this solemn promise so that the slaves in Egypt could hear, believe, and be saved... they would believe the Lord, and He would credit it to them as righteousness

D. Encouragement Until the End of the Age

Hebrews 6:13-19 When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, 14 saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants." 15 And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. 16 Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. 17 Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. 18 God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. 19 We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

Hebrews tells us WHY God made this solemn oath... so that we who have trusted in Christ might also be greatly encouraged in our faith

Why is courage needed? Because the world, the flesh, and the devil fight our faith every day

Because God's providence so frequently seems to run contrary to His promises

Because we get worn out and weak, and discouraged pilgrims stop traveling, and discouraged soldiers stop fighting... and we must travel and we must fight in order to work out our salvation to the end

Because faith is alive and needs food to survive

THUS YOU CAN SEE HOW VITAL IS ENCOURAGEMENT IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE!!

God did this solemn ceremony so that countless ages of believers might be renewed again and again in their faith

VI. Application

- 1) Concerning the Nature of Rewards

"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."

2) God's Faithfulness to His Promises

God fulfilled BOTH of His promises to Abraham

BUT our promises are FAR GREATER than those made to Abraham

[He got promises of 1) many descendents and 2) land in Palestine... we get far greater things: full forgiveness of sins, indwelling Holy Spirit, security of salvation, life after death, resurrection bodies, eternity on God's presence]

3) God's Incredible Patience Toward Sinners

God waited for the sin of the Amorites for four hundred years

God is slow to anger, and abounding in mercy

God is also willing to make His loved ones suffer greatly to accomplish His purposes

4) The Solemn Warning Concerning the Measure of Sin

Don't presume on how long God will allow you to continue in sin

5) God's Amazing Knowledge of the Future

Be astonished at with what great detail God foretold the future of the Jews

God knows everything in detail before it happens

6) Be Greatly Encouraged

Hebrews 6:18-19 God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged. 19 We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.

7) Encourage Greatly

Notice how much God did to encourage weak believers to keep trusting in His promises

Hebrews 12:12 Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble

Hebrews 3:13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.

Hebrews 10:25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-- and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

