

NOON BIBLE STUDY: GENESIS 15

GENESIS 14 SEEMED TO BE AN INTERRUPTION OF THE STORY OF ABRAM AND HIS FAITH. IN FACT, ABRAM'S ACTIONS IN GENESIS 14 (SAVING LOT, DEFEATING FOREIGN KINGS, HONORING GOD WITH MELCHIZEDEK, ETC.) SHOWED US A LOT ABOUT ABRAM AND HIS FAITH. HE'S A MAN OF COURAGE, A MAN OF KINDNESS. AND GOD IS WITH HIM! GENESIS 15 RETURNS US TO THE MORE FAMILIAR EXCHANGES BETWEEN ABRAM AND GOD MOST HIGH. AS WE READ ON, REMEMBER THAT GENESIS 14 ENDED WITH ABRAM REJECTING THE OFFER OF A REWARD FROM THE KING OF SODOM. AS A RESULT OF ABRAM'S HONORABLE CHOICES, THE LORD IS GOING TO REWARD HIM WITH SOMETHING MUCH GREATER.

GENESIS 15:1-6 - THE LORD SPEAKS, ABRAM RESPONDS IN FAITH.

THE LORD VISITS ABRAM AGAIN AND DECLARES "I AM A SHIELD TO YOU", MEANING GOD IS ABRAM'S DEFENDER AND PROTECTOR (AS ABRAM CERTAINLY MUST HAVE UNDERSTOOD BASED ON THE EVENTS OF GENESIS 14).

THE LORD TOLD ABRAM: "YOUR REWARD SHALL BE VERY GREAT" AND ABRAM, CERTAINLY GRATEFUL, IS ALSO UNSURE. HE REPLIES "WHAT WILL YOU GIVE ME, SINCE I AM CHILDLESS." ABRAM SEEKS CLARITY TO THE BLESSING OF GOD. ABRAM IS PROCESSING ALL OF THE INFORMATION HE HAS SO FAR AND IS UNABLE TO COME TO AN EXACT CONCLUSION. THE LORD SAID I WOULD BECOME A GREAT NATION (GENESIS 12:2) AND HAVE DESCENDANTS AS THE DUST OF THE EARTH (GENESIS 13:16). YET, HE ASKS "WHAT WILL YOU GIVE ME SINCE I AM CHILDLESS." THAT'S A GREAT QUESTION!

AS A RESULT OF ABRAM'S QUESTION, THE LORD RESPONDS WITH MORE INFORMATION:

GENESIS 15:4-5 (NLT) - THEN THE LORD SAID TO HIM, "NO, YOUR SERVANT WILL NOT BE YOUR HEIR, FOR YOU WILL HAVE A SON OF YOUR OWN WHO WILL BE YOUR HEIR." 5 THEN THE LORD TOOK ABRAM OUTSIDE AND SAID TO HIM, "LOOK UP INTO THE SKY AND COUNT THE STARS IF YOU CAN. THAT'S HOW MANY DESCENDANTS YOU WILL HAVE!"

THIS ALL SEEMS TO HAPPEN EARLY IN THE MORNING AS ABRAM IS TOLD TO LOOK UP AND COUNT THE STARS. GOD'S PROMISE IS REITERATED TO ABRAM - I PROMISED YOU WILL HAVE DESCENDANTS (BIOLOGICAL, NOT JUST LEGAL) AND YOU WILL! AS MANY AS THE STARS IN THE SKY!! ONE WOULD IMAGINE ABRAM WON'T LOOK AT THE NIGHT SKY THE SAME AFTER THIS DAY.

BEFORE WE MOVE ON, LET'S TAKE A LOOK AT GENESIS 15:6 AGAIN, WHICH IS A PRETTY IMPORTANT VERSE. IT SAYS "THEN HE (ABRAM) BELIEVED IN THE LORD; AND HE (THE LORD) RECKONED IT TO HIM (ABRAM) AS RIGHTEOUSNESS. THIS "BELIEVED IN" IS MUCH MORE THAN JUST MENTALLY AGREEING THAT SOMEONE "IS". ABRAM CLEARLY BELIEVED IN GOD'S EXISTENCE. BUT THIS VERSE TELLS US THAT ABRAM "BELIEVED IN" WHAT THE LORD HAD SAID. ESV, CSB, NLT, NIV AND MORE ALL TRANSLATE THIS "ABRAM BELIEVED THE LORD".

ABRAM BELIEVED THE LORD AND AS A RESULT, THE LORD "RECKONED" OR CONSIDERED ABRAM RIGHTEOUS.

"RIGHTEOUSNESS" IS THE FUNDAMENTAL OT VIRTUE CHARACTERIZED BY A GODLY LIFE LIVED IN CONFORMITY WITH THE LAW. IT IS THE RIGHTEOUS WHO ENJOY GOD'S FAVOR. HERE THE NARRATOR UNDERLINES THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FAITH, IN

THAT BEFORE ABRAM HAS PROVED HIMSELF RIGHTEOUS BY HIS DEEDS, HE IS COUNTED (THAT IS, REGARDED) AS RIGHTEOUS BECAUSE OF HIS FAITH. (ESV STUDY BIBLE, GENESIS 15:6).

IF YOU THINK OF THIS IN LIGHT OF BANKER'S TERMS, IT IS RIGHTEOUSNESS THAT IS IN HIS ACCOUNT, RATHER THAN SIN, EVIL OR UNRIGHTEOUSNESS. ABRAM'S FAITH CAUSES THE LORD TO REMOVE THE DEBT FROM ABRAM'S ACCOUNT AND DEPOSIT RIGHTEOUSNESS IN ITS PLACE. ONE WOULD THINK THAT PILING UP GOOD DEEDS AND PENANCE IS THE WAY TO EXCHANGE UNRIGHTEOUSNESS FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS, BUT GOD REMOVES ALL UNRIGHTEOUSNESS FROM THE ROLLS WHEN ABRAM HAS FAITH (BELIEVES). ABRAM DOES PRACTICE GOOD DEEDS (GENESIS 14 IS FILLED WITH THEM) BUT HE ALSO HAS HAD PLENTY OF BAD ONES THAT HE HAS DEPOSITED (REMEMBER THAT WHOLE GIVING HIS WIFE TO PHARAOH EPISODE IN GENESIS 12?). BUT AS A RESULT OF ABRAM'S FAITH, GOD REMOVES THE UNRIGHTEOUSNESS AND COUNTS ABRAM AS RIGHTEOUS BEFORE HIM!

THIS VERSE, AND THIS STANDARD OF BEING MADE "RIGHT" WITH GOD WILL BE QUOTED 4 TIMES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT (ROMANS 4:3, 22; GALATIANS 3:6 AND JAMES 2:23). FOR ABRAM IT WAS FAITH IN GOD'S PROMISE THAT MADE HIM RIGHTEOUS, FOR US IT IS FAITH IN GOD'S PROMISED ONE (JESUS CHRIST) THAT MAKES US RIGHTEOUS.

GENESIS 15:7-11 - MORE QUESTIONS AND A STRANGE PRACTICE

JUST LIKE IN THE PREVIOUS VERSES REGARDING DESCENDANTS, ABRAM INQUIRES OF THE LORD REGARDING HIS PROMISE OF THE LAND. GOD SAYS "I AM THE LORD, I BROUGHT YOU OUT OF YOUR LAND TO GIVE YOU POSSESSION OF THIS LAND". ABRAM RESPONDS "HOW WILL I KNOW THAT I WILL POSSESS IT?" GOOD QUESTION FROM ABRAM, AS NOT ONLY IS HE CHILDLESS AS WE DISCUSSED ABOVE - HE'S ALSO LIVING IN A TENT AS A SOJOURNER IN THE LAND HE'S SUPPOSED TO INHERIT.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT IS A BIT PECULIAR FOR OUR CULTURAL CONTEXT BUT WOULD HAVE MADE A LOT OF SENSE TO ABRAM. SCHOLARS ARE IN AGREEMENT THAT PRACTICE THAT FOLLOWS WAS LIKELY A COMMON RITUAL FOR ABRAM'S DAY WHEN MAKING A COVENANT BETWEEN TWO PARTIES. ABRAM WAS TO COLLECT 5 ANIMALS: A HEIFER, FEMALE GOAT, RAM, EACH 3 YEARS OLD AS WELL AS A TURTLEDOVE, AND YOUNG PIGEON. ABRAM CUT THE ANIMALS IN TWO. THIS ALL TOOK SOME TIME, AND ABRAM EVEN HAD TO SHOO AWAY THE BIRDS OF PREY (SOMETHING LIKE A CROW OR VULTURE?) WHICH WERE TRYING TO EAT THE ANIMALS LYING ON THE GROUND. IT'S NOW APPROACHING EVENING AGAIN. WE WILL LEARN THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PRACTICE AS WE READ ON.

GENESIS 15:12-16 - ABRAM'S DREAM

BEFORE THE RITUAL IS EXPLAINED, ABRAM FALLS ASLEEP. IT'S BEEN A LONG DAY. HE WAS UP EARLY LOOKING AT THE STARS. HE'S BEEN COLLECTING ANIMALS AND PREPARING SACRIFICES SINCE THEN AND NOW, "WHEN THE SUN WAS GOING DOWN" (15:12) ABRAM FALLS INTO A "DEEP SLEEP." DURING THIS SLEEP ABRAM HAS A DREAM WHERE THE LORD SPEAKS TO HIM AGAIN.

IN THE DREAM THE LORD TELLS ABRAM THAT HIS DESCENDANTS WILL BE ENSLAVED AND OPPRESSED FOR 400 YEARS. GOD ALSO TELLS ABRAM HE WILL DIE AT AN OLD AGE AND THEN AFTER THAT TIME, (IN THE 4TH GENERATION), ABRAM'S PROMISED DESCENDANTS WILL RETURN "HERE" (THE LAND OF CANAAN).

"THE TIME HAD NOT YET COME FOR HIM TO OCCUPY THE LAND. HE HAD NOT THE MILITARY STRENGTH NEEDED TO OVERCOME THE INHABITANTS, NOR COULD HE ADEQUATELY OCCUPY IT: IN ANY CASE THE TIME HAD NOT YET COME FOR JUDGMENT TO FALL ON THE LAND "FOR THE INIQUITY OF THE AMORITES IS NOT YET COMPLETE" (JOYCE BALDWIN, "THE MESSAGE OF GENESIS 12-50", PAGE 54)

"GOD'S COMMENT IMPLIES THAT THE AMORITES WILL BE DISPOSSESSED OF THEIR LAND AS AN ACT OF DIVINE PUNISHMENT. AT THAT TIME, THEIR ACCUMULATED INIQUITY WILL BE SO GREAT THAT GOD WILL NO LONGER TOLERATE THEIR PRESENCE IN THE LAND" (ESV STUDY BIBLE, GENESIS 15:13-16)

DO YOU SEE THE IRONY ABOUT THIS DIFFICULT DREAM? THE DREAM IS ULTIMATELY POINTING TO WHEN THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL ARE ENSLAVED IN EGYPT (THE MAJOR THEME OF EXODUS). WHATEVER ABRAM SAW WAS TERRIFYING! HOWEVER, THE CONTENT OF THE DREAM IS THAT ABRAM'S DESCENDANTS WILL HAVE TROUBLE (STRANGERS AND SLAVES, V. 13) AND BE RESCUED BY GOD (V. 14). THE IRONY IS THAT THE FACT THAT CHILDLESS ABRAM IS TALKING WITH GOD ABOUT HOW HIS DESCENDANTS ARE THE FOCUS OF THIS DREAM! THIS PROMISE FROM GOD IS SO SURE THAT HE'S CONVERSING WITH ABRAM AS IF IT'S ALREADY A REALITY! I LOVE THAT.

ABRAM'S QUESTION TO THE LORD WAS "HOW MAY I KNOW..." (15:8) AND THE LORD RESPONDS WITH "KNOW FOR CERTAIN" (15:13). JOYCE BALDWIN OBSERVES THAT "ABRAM DOES NOT RECEIVE A DIRECT ANSWER TO HIS QUESTION; INSTEAD HE IS GIVEN AN OUTLINE OF THE EVENTS THAT MUST TAKE PLACE BEFORE HIS DESCENDANTS INHERIT THE LAND." ("THE MESSAGE OF GENESIS 12-50", PAGE 54). GOD IS *WORKING WITH* ABRAM TO BUILD HIS FAITH IN THE PROMISES.

GENESIS 15:17-21 - A COVENANT IS MADE

AT THE END OF ABRAM'S DREAM, A "SMOKING OVEN AND FLAMING TORCH" APPEARED AND PASSED IN BETWEEN THE TWO PIECES OF THE DIVIDED ANIMALS. THIS BRINGS US TO THE INTERPRETATION OF THIS ANCIENT RITUAL." THE PRESENCE OF FIRE IS SYMBOLICALLY REPRESENTATIVE OF GOD'S PRESENCE. MOSES WILL MEET GOD AT A BURNING BUSH. ISRAEL WILL MEET GOD AT A BURNING MOUNT HOREB. AND HERE WITH ABRAM FIRE SHOWS UP AND PASSES IN BETWEEN THE TWO PIECES OF ANIMAL.

ACCORDING TO THE TRADITION, WHEN TWO RULERS MADE AN AGREEMENT, THEY WOULD CUT ANIMALS IN HALF, LAY THEM DOWN AND WALK IN BETWEEN THEM. THIS WALK WOULD SYMBOLIZE THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE TWO PARTIES TO KEEP THEIR PROMISE, TO FULFILL THEIR WORD. IN SOME CULTURES, THIS WOULD STRESS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE PROMISES MADE AND THEY WOULD CALL DOWN A CURSE UPON THEMSELVES IF THEY FAILED TO DO WHAT THEY SAID. AND YET IN THIS CASE, IT IS ONLY GOD'S PRESENCE THAT WALKS BETWEEN THE ANIMALS.

"ABRAM WOULD BE AWARE THAT, IF THIS HAD BEEN A TREATY MADE BY A HUMAN KING, BOTH PARTIES TO IT WOULD HAVE PASSED BETWEEN THE PIECES OF SACRIFICE. AS IT WAS ABRAM WAS MERELY THE PASSIVE OBSERVER, WHILE THE LORD, SYMBOLIZED BY THE FIRE, WALKED BETWEEN THE SACRIFICIAL OFFERINGS, SO TAKING UPON HIMSELF IMPLICIT IN THE RITUAL: "THUS BE IT DONE TO ME" IF THE TERMS OF THE COVENANT ARE BROKEN...THE LORD "CUT" A COVENANT WITH ABRAM THAT DAY, USING THE MOST SOLEMN FORM OF OATH, TO ENSURE THE CERTAINTY OF THE FULFILLMENT OF HIS WORD. (IBID, PAGE 55).

GENESIS 15:8 IS THE FIRST USAGE OF THE WORD "COVENANT" RELATED TO THE PROMISE OF GOD TO ABRAM. WE HAVE ASSUMED UP TO THIS POINT THAT A "COVENANT" WAS THE AGREEMENT BETWEEN ABRAM AND THE LORD BUT NOW WE SEE IT IN WRITING.

UP TO THIS POINT THAT LAND-SPECIFIC ELEMENTS TO THIS PROMISE WERE BASED ON THE LAND ABRAM COULD SEE, THE LAND HE COULD WALK TO INSPECT, AND THE LAND OF CANAAN. NOW THE LORD AGAIN EXPANDS THIS PROMISE AND COMMITS TO GIVE ABRAM THE LAND FROM THE BORDER OF EGYPT (V. 18: "THE RIVER OF EGYPT") TO THE EUPHRATES RIVER! HE ALSO LISTS THE LANDS INHABITED IN CANAAN BY VARIOUS OTHER PEOPLES. MORE INFORMATION AND DETAILS MEANS A BIGGER PROMISE.

THERE ARE MANY THINGS WE CAN TAKE AWAY FROM THIS PACKED CHAPTER. GOD IS FAITHFUL AND IS SERIOUS ABOUT KEEPING HIS WORD. GOD LOVES ABRAM AND IS REWARDING HIS FAITH, AND HIS FAITHFULNESS WITH ADDITIONAL BLESSINGS. GOD IS SOVEREIGN, WORKING WITH ABRAM WHILE AT THE SAME TIME WATCHING THE AMORITES.

YET, I THINK THE MOST RELEVANT LESSON FOR US IS ABOUT ABRAM'S REAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. IN GENESIS 15 WE SEE A MAN IN ABRAM WHO HAD REAL CONCERNS ABOUT WHAT WAS GOING ON IN HIS LIFE IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE THINGS GOD HAD PROMISED. HE QUESTIONS GOD ABOUT THE DETAILS OF THE PROMISES. "WHAT WILL YOU GIVE ME, SINCE I AM CHILDLESS (15:2)" AND "HOW MAY I KNOW THAT I WILL POSSESS (THE LAND) (15:8).

ABRAM HAS REAL QUESTIONS, AND SOME REASONABLE DOUBTS - HOWEVER, THAT DID NOT MEAN HE DID NOT HAVE FAITH. **THIS CHAPTER TEACHES US THAT TO HAVE FAITH ISN'T THE SAME AS THE ABSENCE OF DOUBT, BUT RATHER IT'S TO TRUST AND HAVE CONFIDENCE IN GOD AND HIS PROMISES IN SPITE OF NOT HAVING EVERYTHING FIGURED OUT.**

THE EXCHANGE WE SEE HERE IS AN EXCELLENT EXAMPLE OF A MAN WHO HAD A *REAL* RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS GOD. GOD COMES TO ABRAM AND TELLS HIM "I'M WITH YOU!" ABRAM SAYS "THANK YOU GOD, BUT CAN YOU HELP ME UNDERSTAND SOMETHING?" AND THEN GOD RESPONDS WITH MORE INFORMATION AND ALSO SOME COMFORT. ABRAM RESPONDS WITH WORSHIP (SACRIFICE) AND FAITH. ABRAM NEVER DISHONORS GOD BUT COMES TO GOD WITH HIS CONCERNS. WHEN ABRAM IS UNCERTAIN ABOUT SOMETHING, HE GOES DIRECTLY TO GOD. WHEN HE DOESN'T UNDERSTAND SOMETHING, HE GOES DIRECTLY TO GOD.

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN THINGS IN YOUR LIFE DON'T MAKE SENSE? WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND THINGS THAT ARE HAPPENING IN THE WORLD AROUND YOU? WHERE DO YOU GO WHEN LIFE SEEMS TO BE UNSURE?

WE NEED TO GO TO GOD WITH THESE THINGS. CAN THE POSSESSOR OF HEAVEN AND EARTH, THE ONE WHO LOVES YOU DEARLY, NOT HANDLE YOUR QUESTIONS? INSTEAD OF GETTING FRUSTRATED, LOSING FAITH OR QUITTING WHEN THINGS ARE UNCLEAR, GO TO GOD WITH YOUR WORRIES, DOUBTS AND FEARS. THAT'S WHAT IT MEANS TO HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH SOMEONE.

IT SEEMS FOOLISH FOR A HUSBAND OR WIFE MOVE OUT OF THE HOUSE IF THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND SOMETHING THEIR SPOUSE IS DOING ONE AFTERNOON. YET WE ARE QUICK TO RUN TO OTHER THINGS WHEN LIFE DOESN'T GO AS PLANNED OR WE DON'T UNDERSTAND WHY THERE IS DELAY.

THERE WERE LEGITIMATE THINGS ABRAM DIDN'T UNDERSTAND ABOUT THE PROMISES GOD HAD MADE. AND SO IN THOSE MOMENTS, HE ASKED GOD FOR HELP AND WISDOM AND CLARITY. GOD GAVE HIM SOME SPECIFIC ANSWERS RIGHT AWAY, AND SOME THINGS REMAINED FOGGY. HOWEVER, ABRAM WALKS AWAY FROM GENESIS 15 **CONFIDENT** IN THE GOD WHO MADE THE PROMISES AND **TRUSTING** EVEN WHEN HE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND EVERYTHING.

THIS IS WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A MAN OR WOMAN OF FAITH. IT IS NOT THAT WE WON'T HAVE QUESTIONS, DOUBTS OR FEARS - BUT THAT WE GO TO THE GOD WHO OUR FAITH IS ROOTED IN WHEN THOSE QUESTIONS, DOUBTS OR FEARS ARISE. WHEN YOU'RE UNSURE ABOUT WHAT'S GOING ON, DON'T STAY SILENT, DON'T STOP PURSUING, AND DON'T STOP PRAYING. ASK AND IT SHALL BE GIVEN, SEEK AND YOU WILL FIND, KNOCK AND IT WILL BE OPENED.

RICH MULLENS WROTE:

*SOMETIMES I THINK OF ABRAHAM, HOW ONE STAR HE SAW HAD BEEN LIT FOR ME
HE WAS A STRANGER IN THIS LAND, AND I AM THAT NO LESS THAN HE
AND ON THIS ROAD TO RIGHTEOUSNESS, SOMETIMES THE CLIMB CAN BE SO STEEP
I MAY FALTER IN MY STEPS, BUT I'M NEVER BEYOND YOUR REACH.*