

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
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A Promise to Abraham

Genesis 15:1-6, 12-18

Key verse: “And [Abraham] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6).

“As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a deep and terrifying darkness descended upon him” (Gen. 15:12). Genesis 15 tells a wonderful story of God’s promises and His faithfulness in keeping them. But it is fitting to set this story in the context of “a deep and terrifying darkness.” For, as we see in this chapter, it is often in our dark night of doubt and struggle that our faith is tested and strengthened.

Abraham’s dark night came because it appeared to him that God would not keep His promise, at least not in the way Abraham expected. God had promised that Abraham’s descendants would be in number like the dust that covers the earth (Gen. 13:16). But Abraham remained childless, and he saw no other way for God’s promise to be fulfilled than to make his servant Eliezar his heir (Gen. 15:2-3).

Modern archaeological discoveries have shown that it was customary in Abraham’s time for a childless couple to “adopt” a slave to be their heir. The slave would have the responsibility to care for the couple in their old age and provide for a proper burial at their death. In return, the slave would inherit their property. In spite of God’s promise to Abraham, he had concluded that this practice would be the only way to deal with the absence of a child. But God had a better idea....

God told Abraham, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.’ He brought [Abraham] outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be’” (Gen. 15:4-5).

In this way, God reassured Abraham that His promises would be kept! But God wasn’t finished. In verses 12-18, God gave Abraham added assurance of His faithfulness. (I am glad that God is patient with my struggles to believe Him and trust Him. God is so gracious to reassure us in our dark nights of doubt!)

God’s assurance to Abraham came next as God revealed that Abraham’s descendants would be slaves in a foreign land. However, God assured Abraham that, following these 400 years of slavery, his descendants would return to the land God promised them (Gen. 15:13-16). This part of God’s promise would be fulfilled

by Israel's 400-plus years of slavery in Egypt and their return to the Promised Land under Moses and Joshua.

A third way of reassuring Abraham in his dark night of doubt is seen in verses 17-18. Here God renews His covenant with Abraham and reveals specific boundaries of the Promised Land.

In these verses, we see God using what was then a familiar practice of establishing an agreement between two parties. In this practice, animals were slain and the agreeing parties passed between the animal parts. (See Gen. 15:7-11.) The idea seems to be that the two parties making this covenant were saying, "May I be killed and partitioned in this way if I do not keep my part of this agreement."

With a conversation under the stars, a revelation of Egyptian slavery and freedom, and by the ancient practice of "cutting" covenant, God met Abraham in his dark night of doubt. God is faithful not only to keep His promises to us but also to assure and reassure us of His faithfulness!

One final word about Genesis 15: Verse 6 is one of the key statements of the Bible. It is said of Abraham, "And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness." In the New Testament, this verse is cited as support for the Christian doctrine of *justification by faith*. (See, for example, Romans 4:1-3 and Galatians 3:1-9.) Neither Abraham nor the writer of Genesis would have fully understood the New Testament doctrine of *justification by faith*. Yet, the Holy Spirit inspired the Bible to transcend both the understanding of the human writer and the limitations of the time period!

So, Genesis 15 provides a wonderful testimony of God's faithfulness, especially in our "dark nights" of doubt. This chapter also gives us evidence of the inspiration and unity of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

Thanks be to God.

(Contact Michael at msigler@fumcfwb.com.)