GOD'S COVENANT WITH ABRAM

Genesis 15:1-21 (Key verse: 15:6)

"So Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness."

Last week we learned of how Abram won a military victory against a powerful kingdom, this means he had now created enemies in his life. This is similar to a Christian life, in that we too have an enemy, our real enemy however, is not that lecturer, your wife or husband, or that person. The bible is clear that our fight is not against flesh and blood. Our real enemy is Satan, the devil. And just like in the garden of Eden, he comes and twist God’s word, at times convincing us of things astray. We end up living with fear, self doubt and anxieties in our hearts, doubting even the promises of God. We end up placing our hopes and trust in created things, man made things, money, reputation or recognition (people pleaser), Wits certificate. Things that do not last and because our subconsciously know they do not last, we are ever anxious and feeling all we do is meaningless. When we accepted Jesus as our lord and saviour, at that time we felt secured and joyful, however over the years we start to doubt and become slaves to be righteous through works and performance based religion. We lose our security and joy in the lord. Through this passage and life of Abram, is revealed, how we can become righteous before God’s eyes? Is revealed how we can live securely under God’s promises? Who is our God? Ultimately the faithfulness of God through His covenant**. Part I of the message is based on verse 1, I am your shield, your very great reward and Part II, God’s covenant with Abram.** It is my prayer that we may received one word of God and that this passage may be a blessing in your lives. Amen!

**Part I: I am your shield, your very great reward (1)**

In Chapter 14, we see Abram making a great sacrifice for the Lord name’s sake. On his return from the victories of his own version of Gulf War, Abram made more sacrifices. First he tithed. He gave the Lord a tenth of everything he acquired. Then he made another sacrifice: he rejected the offer made by the king of Sodom and Gomorrah. But by faith in the Lord God the Creator of heavens and earth, Abram rejected the offer. Moreover, Abram made a lot of enemies. Naturally Abram became afraid of his safety and the future because of the events of chapter 14. Chapter 15 begins with this context in mind. Let us see how the lord helped Abram.

Look at verse 1, “1After 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.” The lord came in a vision and firstly said, Do not be afraid Abram. I am your shield. This shows that Abram was afraid, given the events of chapter 14. The lord’s instruction to Abram, do not be afraid, did not come without a promise. God’s promise was, I am your shield. As we live in this world, we also are afraid of our safety. And there are all kinds of fears which tend to make us feel unsafe and insecure.

In the time of social media, people are afraid to lose followers. On University campuses students are afraid to lose friends and so they give into peer pressure, give themselves into dating, end up loosing their purity (virginity), secret abortions and secret mis-courage’s, addiction to drugs, alcohol abuse and so on. All as a result of fear or motivated by fear. As believers our real enemy is the devil and may manifest himself in different forms even in the form of people. When we take a stand for what we believe, to be a source of blessing for others like Abram, such as sharing the gospel with others, living a life of repentance and obedience to God’s word, the enemy will attack in all kinds of ways. And we can become afraid and be tempted to give in. Then we chicken out from the life of faith and obedience. The recent assassination of Charlie Kirk, whether you believed his views or not is immaterial, he took a stand for something and today he is dead in a so called democratic free speech country. This has now created some level of fear for anyone who dare take a stand on something. In Genesis 14, Abram took a stand for Lot. But now perhaps lying on a bed, he became like a chicken. He became a couch potato.

Some years ago Jesus also took a stand for you and me. Looking at Jesus life we can learn what it means to live by faith in God the Father who is Jesus’ shield. Because Jesus took a stand, he made a lot of enemies, particularly the religious leaders like the Pharisees or teachers of the law. But Jesus was not afraid of them. Why? Because Jesus believed that man’s life is in the hands of God. Until God says, “Your life is done”, he knew that his life was never going to be done. He knew that his enemies can do nothing to hurt him. The lord is saying, do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield. Let us put our own name in the place of Abram and read this passage again. “Do not be afraid, Lesedi. I am your shield.”

Let us look at the second promise to Abram, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your very great reward.” As we saw earlier, in order to live as a source of blessing for one person Lot, Abram sacrificed a lot of time, energy, and materials. In addition, after making one tenth offering of everything he earned, and particularly after rejecting the opportunity to become rich out of the plunders offered by the heathen king, a sense of loss might have crept into his heart. As we saw earlier, he did not make an offering or reject the material offer from the king of Sodom just for the sake of sacrificing. He did it to do what is right. He did it to let him know that there is a real king that is the Lord God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth.

But one problem is the sense of loss creeping into our heart. This is particularly true when we compare ourselves with people around. In case of Abram, he saw unbelieving people being blessed with a lot of blessings like many children. But when he thought about himself, he did not have even one son. It was not easy for Abram to remain childless for a prolonged period of time. Though there was apromise, God did not mention the time. We read in Genesis 12:2-3, which states, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." He was called to be a blessing not just a blessing, but a blessing for all peoples on earth. Yet how come he remained childless? When you think about Abram’s generation it was a really serious problem, because childlessness was considered a sign of curse as well.

When this kind of hardship hits you as Christian, and there are all kinds of hardships, health issues, marriage, certain course at Wits, financial, studies taking long to complete, and so on. It is not easy for you to continue to take a stand and live as a source of blessing for others. It is difficult for one to live by faith in the Lord continuously. We so easily say, “Look, others have this, or that, but I haven’t got anything from the Lord. Life is unfair.” Then you are tempted to drop everything and go back to the old life of unbelief. At this moment however, what did the Lord say to Abram? Look at verse 1b again. “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your very great reward.” Here, the Lord used two emphatic words: very and great. The Lord could have said, “I am your reward.” But he added two more words: very and great. So let us all say to one another: “The Lord says to you: “I am your very great reward.””

What is reward? Reward is something we get in return for our sacrifices makes us joyful. Let us then take note of two more words: “I” and “am.” The content of reward is the Lord himself. The word “am” refers to the present moment. And the Lord himself, in the present moment, a very great reward for Abram and for everyone who puts trust in Him. You may be repeating your course, at Wits for the seventh year, having health issues, been waiting for marriage, turned down for promotion applications or change of jobs, poor progress with work, not have world recognition, not living at the beach or anything like that.

Abram’s ten years of devotion yielded nothing. **Then the devil whispered into his ears: “You are a loser. You made a lousy life choices” But what does the Lord say to him? “I am your very great reward.”** Though this may sound great. The problem still remains, Abram remained childless. His tent remained empty! But the Lord says, “I am your very great reward!” However, as we shall see, the Lord’s word did not appeal to Abram. He did not get anything out of it. Mainly because he remained childless as we shall see later on. However, why couldn’t Abram receive God’s promise in his heart? In our circumstances too, why is it difficult to received God’s promise in our hearts? This is a question we need to confront. What is clear with God’s promise is that, firstly, the truly great reward must exist inside rather than outside of us. Secondly, it must be spiritual rather than physical. Third, it must be there for us to enjoy all the time, yesterday, today, and forever.

When we think about Jesus, we can better understand why the fellowship with the Lord God is very great reward for all who believe in the Lord. While walking on this planet earth Jesus enjoyed a perfect relationship with His Heavenly Father. His relationship with the Father was so close that he even said, “I and the Father are one.” John 10:30. It was out of this relationship that Jesus was able to live as a source of blessing for all people who were burdened and weary. Amazing thing is that he made this fellowship available for every Christian, for in John 14:20 we read, “On that day you will realize that I am in your Father and I am in you.” May the lord soften your heart and my heart, to receive and accept his promise in our hearts, “do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield and your very great reward,” Amen!

**Part II: God’s covenant with Abram (2-21)**

Let us now see how the lord helped Abram. Look at verse “2But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” 3And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.” The lord could have rebuked Abram, but did not, because this was Abram’s prayer or lament to the Lord. Not something he secretly complained about within his heart or to others. Alternatively, the lord could have also said, oh sorry Abram, worry no more next year, you will have a son through Sarai. The lord did not do that, what did the lord do rather? Let us see how the Lord helps Abram.

Look at verse 4-5, “4Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” 5He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars, if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” The stars of the sky are tangible, unforgettable picture of his countless descendants. God came down to Abram’s senses, using visible signs to strengthen his faith. To look at the stars was also a command to look beyond your circumstances. As if to say, there is something far greater than what you think you need. What was Abram’s response?

Let us all read verse6, “6Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” Abram instantly believe the Lord. And it was God who credited it to him as righteous. Which means he was made perfect before the eyes of God by faith alone. We do not achieve righteousness through performance or competition with one another. It is purely received through faith alone. This was the gift of God to Abram because he believed. Abram regained faith in the Lord. His relationship with the Lord was restored. James 1:17 says that every good and perfect give comes into our lives from God the Father. This indicates that God is the source of all that are good and perfect. Faith allows us to have a full access to the Lord who is the source of all the blessings we need for life. Abram is the model of faith, though he did not even have one child, he rested on God’s word, not his circumstances and believed. Like the nike slogan, just do it, just believe. [There is son…only believe…only believe…all things are possible…only believe].

God’s vision for Abram was bigger than what Abram could think of. For the lord had said to Abram in Genesis 12:2-3, "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing” and so in verses 7-8, the lord re-affirms that He will give the land but Abram ask for assurance, he said, “Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?” And so the Lord continued to help Abram have clear and absolute faith in his promises. The Lord God revealed his plan to bless the future generations through Abram’s walk of faith in the Lord.

Abram asked, "O Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" God answered this question in the covenant ceremony. Inverses 9-10, Abram brings the heifer, a goat and a ram, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other. This reflected an ancient Near Eastern covenant ritual (Jer. 34:18–19), two parties walked between the pieces of the animals, invoking death on themselves if they broke the covenant. God told Abram to prepare the animals. He did so, and then he worked hard the rest of the day to keep the vultures away from the rapidly deteriorating carcasses [10].

Based on verses 12-16, the covenant promises are stated in two parts. First, as the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep, trans-like sleep. God's word came to Abram to reveal to him just how God would make of his descendants a great nation. 400 years of slavery and oppression would be the price. In the furnace fires of Egypt Israel would become a great multitude. In God's time they would come out with great possessions. If Abram's family had remained in Canaan, it would have been impossible for them to grow into a multitude such as this. As children were born, they would leave one by one, as Lot had done, and would be assimilated into the Canaanite culture and be melted into Canaan. But living in Egypt, in the land of Goshen, they would share a common history of suffering and oppression, and a common history of deliverance. They would be moulded into a nation that would never lose its identity. They would come out of Egypt with great possessions, and would be used as God's instrument of judgment on the godless Amorite (Canaanite) people. Second, when the sun had set and darkness had fallen, God himself accepted and burned up the offering with a soldering firepot and a blazing torch. He sealed this blood covenant with fire.

God, represented by the firepot and the burning torch [(Exodus 13:21-22], He passed through the animal parts by Himself; as Abram watched, God showed this was a unilateral covenant. Abram never signed the covenant, because he passively watched while God signed it for both of them in the ritual. Therefore, the certainty of the covenant God made with Abram is based on who God is, not on who Abram is or what Abram would do. This covenant could not fail, because God cannot fail.

In our times this, we can see the picture of Christ Jesus. Our covenant was sealed through Jesus blood as we too watched him on the cross. The Father walked through the broken and bloody body of Jesus to establish His covenant with us, and God signed it for both of us. We merely enter into the covenant by faith; we don’t make the covenant with God. Only God passes through the pieces, showing the covenant is unconditional, based on God’s faithfulness, not Abram’s. Abram as promised by God will later die in peace. A sure promise we too receive through Jesus Christ, who promises eternal life. Heb 9:14-15, “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” Back to our question on, how can we receive and accept God as shield and great reward? It is by faith alone. Faith alone moulds us into conformity with the will of God, by faith alone God imputes the righteousness of Jesus over us. I pray that we may follow the model of Abram’s faith, so you and me may believe and be used as sources of blessing in this generation and generations to come. Amen!

**In conclusion,** Just as in the day of Abram so also as we look up at the sky, we see as numerous stars as the number of stars of Abram’s day. Then as we read the Bible and pray more the Lord who is the same yesterday, today and forever, will certainly broaden our vision. We can be convinced of the Lord’s glorious vision for each of us. Then we can bravely and manfully run with perseverance the spiritual race marked out for us. the father of faith shows that God welcomes doubting, imperfect people who simply cling to His word. He counts us righteous in Christ by faith alone.