

Genesis 15-16 Chapter Study

INTRODUCTION

The connection between ch. 14 & 15 is crucial.

In ch. 14 we read how Abram armed his 318 trained servants and went in pursuit of a vastly superior force.

This force was an alliance of 4 Mesopotamian kings who had laid the Jordan Valley under tribute.

When the 5 kings of the Jordan Valley rebelled and refused to send any more tribute, the 4 kings mobilized and swept through the area, defeating the rebels and sacking their cities.

Among the spoils they gathered were captives, and among these was Abram's nephew, Lot.

When Abram heard Lot had been taken captive, he set out to free him and chased after them as they returned home.

As we saw last week, Abram and his allies probably used guerilla tactics to harass the Mesopotamians until they dropped the loot, turned loose the captives and high-tailed it back home.

That brings us to ch. 15 -

CHAPTER 15

¹After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I *am* your shield, your exceedingly great reward."

God never wastes His words. So if he says to Abram, "Do not be afraid," what do you suppose we can conclude? *Abram was afraid!*

Why would he be fearful – what might be the cause of his anxiety? Ancient traditions of warfare and ideas of honor demanded that if you suffered defeat, you had to recoup and counterattack.

As Abram has just defeated the Mesopotamian alliance, he knows they've gone home to plan their revenge.

And this time, he will be facing a very different situation because they will be attacking him!

So God comes to affirm his faith and settle his heart.

"Do not be afraid, Abram. I *am* your shield, . . .

I will protect you!

. . . your exceedingly great reward.”

On the way home from the victory, Abram had been met by the king of Sodom who'd come out to tell him he could keep the goods, just give him back the people.

But Abram had made a vow to the Lord that he would not take of the spoils lest the king or any man say that Abram had gotten rich off their generosity.

He wanted his blessing & prosperity to be credited to God alone and would allow no one else an opportunity to eclipse that testimony to the faithfulness of the Lord.

God affirms that commitment and tells Abram that He will be Abram's treasure!

This is going to be my text for this coming Sunday so we'll leave further comment till then.

²But Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house *is* Eliezer of Damascus?” ³Then Abram said, “Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!”

We expect the man of faith to express his *deep appreciation* to the Lord for the incredible promise of v. 1.

But Abram comes off here as ungrateful or maybe even kind of “pushy” with God.

It's unfortunate that it appears that way because Abram's response *really is* a mark of his faith.

You see, in his mind and heart, all the prosperity and blessing in the world is pointless unless there's a child to pass it on to; a son to carry on the family heritage and name.

God's original promise to Abram in ch. 12:2 and then repeated in 13:15-16 was many descendants.

But Abram hasn't even one child! And he's not getting any younger.

With each year that passed, the chances of having a child were getting slimmer and slimmer.

He's already in his 80's and Sarai, is in her 70's.

You can almost hear the desperation in Abram's words here. Eliezer was a Syrian who'd become Abram's chief steward, his administrator.

The way it would come down is that if Abram had no child, Eliezer and his family would be the one his goods would go to when he died.

4And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir." 5Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

God told Abram to go outside and look at the night sky; count the stars.

His descendants, sure to come from his own body, would be as plentiful as that.

If you've ever been out in the desert or mountains, far from the city where the light pollution tends to blur the sky, you know that the sky is filled with stars.

The idea of numbering them seems ridiculous – there's too many! That's the idea – his descendants would be *too many* to count.

6And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

It's a good idea that all of us memorize this verse – Gen. 15:6.

This is the first time "*believe*" is used in the Bible.

It's also the first time "*righteousness*" is used in the Bible.

It's the gospel in the Old Testament, quoted 4 times in the New Testament. (Rom. 4 & Gal. 3)

This simple statement contains the heart and root of the Bible's whole idea of salvation by grace through faith.

It turns all of man-made works-based religion up-side-down.

God delivered a promise to Abram.

Abram believed the promise and the Promise maker – "He believed **IN** the LORD."

And God thus credited Abram with righteousness.

It's crucial we understand that even in the OT, salvation was not based on performance, not on keeping the law, but on faith. Righteousness has never been something someone attains by their works.

It is accounted BY GOD to us by virtue of our faith in Him! Now, such faith in God *will* prove itself by *practical righteousness*, by our living obediently before the Lord – but it's crucial we understand that God never changed the way people could stand and be right before Him = It's always been about faith!

This is now the *third time* God has promised descendants to Abram.

While once ought to have been enough for Abram, God knows that faith is something *we learn*.

Growing in faith is a *process* in which *we come to realize* God is trustworthy and that once *ought* to be enough for us.

It took Abram hearing the promise three times before it became a firmly settled reality he rested in.

And even then, it would be *years* before the son of promise would come.

God will come to him again to reaffirm the promise – supporting and strengthening Abram's faith.

Friends - God knows faith is something we grow in.

He *is* worthy of our absolute trust, but our *learning to live* that out in the business of daily life is a *process* that comes over time and trial.

This is why faith and patience go together.

We see this is the life of Abram – the promise came, but it was years until its fulfillment.

God didn't delay the fulfillment of the promise *just to torment* Abram.

The delay was essential because it was crucial the son be a *miracle*.

God was waiting until Abram and Sarai were too old to have children through their own strength and ability.

That son had to be a manifestation of God's power and blessing – so the years came and went.

Hebrews 6:12 says –

. . . imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

God is trustworthy – not only to fulfill His promises, but to fulfill them at precisely the perfect moment.

What are you praying for and believing God to do? What promise are you claiming?

Is it the salvation of a loved one?

The healing of a troubled marriage?

Deliverance from some physical affliction, pain, conditions, syndrome?

God delays are all a part of His work in molding and shaping us into His image.

While you pray and wait for the salvation of that loved one – God is building perseverance and patience into you!

While you pray and wait for the healing of your marriage, God is at work to make YOU into the husband or wife YOU need to be.

While you pray and wait for healing, God is sharpening your hunger for Him and closing the doors on all other sources of relief so that when your healing comes you'll know with certainty it was God and not chance, not medicine, not skilled medical help.

You see, what happened here with Abram has to happen with each of us.

We need to come to the place where the promise of God becomes our reality.

Not a nice idea, not a “Wouldn't that be wonderful.”

But a settled reality we live in, even though we don't see it yet.

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

How many of you have ordered something online or through mail order?

Once you place your order, do you sweat getting it? Are you anxious about it being delivered?

For the first couple times – yeah, but not after that.

You know that you place the order and a few days later, it arrives. God is far more dependable than mail order! He ALWAYS delivers!

7 Then He said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to

inherit it.”

8And he said, “Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?”

We need to understand Abram’s words in light of v. 6 which shows us his settled faith in God.

You see, you and I have God’s Word, His promises, in the form of the Bible and the inner witness of the Holy Spirit.

Abram didn’t enjoy these privileges!

What he’s asking for here is a *record*, a *testimony*, something *tangible* he can carry as memorial to God’s promise.

God answers him by using the form of *covenant* in practice at that time.

9So He said to him, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” 10Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. 11And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

Okay – this seems just plain bizarre to us.

Abram’s asked for a sign of God’s promise – and God told him to go get some animals; what’s up?

Let me retell this story in *modern terms* and you’ll get the idea.

God promised to give Abram the land of Canaan and many descendants to fill it.

Abram asked for something tangible, and God said, “Go get the land deed forms & escrow papers.”

So Abram went and picked them up and set them on the desk.

Then he sat down and waited for God to arrive so they could sit down together and sign them.

You see, in the ancient world, they entered into serious agreements, not by signing papers, but by this routine of gathering animals.

They would cut them in two and make an aisle between the halves, then the two parties would walk side by side along the aisle, pause in the middle and each recite their side of the covenant.

This was more than a contract; it was a covenant – because it

meant a new *relationship* between the parties.

Whereas up to this point they had been separated – symbolized by the cut animals, now they would be united, symbolized by their bridging the gap between the pieces.

There was also a warning conveyed by the cut up animals – if you break your promise, what’s happened to these animals will happen to you and yours.

It’s from this ancient practice we get our phrase – “Let’s cut a deal.”

So when God told Abram to go get these animals, he knew God meant the most binding and solemn form of covenant making at use in that day.

Abram got the animals, prepared them according to tradition, and then sat down to wait.

He waited, and waited – and looking up saw some buzzards gathering in lazy circles overhead.

They flew lower and lower and after a while landed not far from away.

He had to chase them off as they began to approach the carcasses. This means Abram waited for quite a while.

12 Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. 13 Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land *that is* not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. 14 And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15 Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. 16 But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites *is* not yet complete.”

Dusk eventually came, and Abram, tired from a long day of cutting up animals (quite a chore) and then driving of the vultures, is exhausted.

He nods off and falls into a deep slumber.

Then, apparently in a dream, he’s overwhelmed by a terrible

nightmare in which it's all darkness and terror. God then spoke to Abram and told him that his descendants would find themselves in a strange lands where they would not be welcome.

They would be oppressed for 400 years, but then God would judge their oppressors and bring Abram's descendants out from that place with great riches.

Abram would not live to see this; he would live a long, full life and be buried.

But in the 4th generation after his death, his descendants would come back to take possession of Canaan.

When they did come back, they would serve as God's form of judgment on the wicked Amorites who by that time would be beyond hope of reclamation as a people and culture.

All of this was of course prophetic of Jacob's family going to Egypt where they were eventually enslaved and then some 400 years later came out in the Exodus as a mighty nation with vast wealth and took possession of the Promised Land.

17 And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. ¹⁸On the same day the LORD made [literally – “cut”] a covenant with Abram, saying:

“To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates—¹⁹the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

Abram awakened from his nightmare to find God, represented by what looked like a smoking oven and burning torch passing through the animal pieces.

It's a bit difficult for us to picture these emblems of God's presence; is this one or two things he saw?

It's probably best to see it as one thing that looked like both a brightly lit torch and an oven.

But don't picture a Maytag – their ovens were small brick affairs

that cooked by smoking their food.

Abram saw a shape that was on fire and surrounded by smoke. This description reminds us of the pillar of smoke that led Israel in the wilderness by day and the pillar of fire that led them by night.

The smoke was the cloud of God's glory, while the fire represented His holiness, purity and power.

The important point here is that Abram had waited all day for the Lord to come so they could walk *together* through the pieces. But God delayed – symbolizing that the fulfillment of the promise would come after many years.

Then **God walked through the pieces BY HIMSELF!**

God is making a *unilateral covenant* – He is making the promise in and of Himself; it's unconditional.

All Abram & his descendants can do is *take & enjoy it*.

It's interesting that the land God promised Abram stretches from the Nile to the Euphrates!

Even under Solomon when the borders of Israel achieved their maximum extension, they never appropriated territory this extensive.

Both Solomon & Jeroboam II exercised *influence* over a region this vast but only held it for a small time. (1 Kings 8:65; 2 Kings 14:25)

These are borders Israel will only ultimately secure during the Millennium.

There's a wonderful & powerful truth for us to glean from this story. Abram fully expected to walk at God's side down the covenant aisle.

God would make His promise, and Abram would make his; the deal would be sealed.

God waited till Abram was out of the picture then made a unilateral, unfulfilling and sure promise TO Abram that had nothing whatsoever to do with Abram's performance or promise – all Abram needed to do was take & enjoy the promise!

There's a well-known Men's Movement called *Promise Keepers*. They've had tremendous success at mobilizing men to fill their role as the spiritual leaders of their homes.

Overall, they've done a good & solid job of encouraging men to seek the Lord.

Many men have been led to faith through *Promise Keepers*; wonderful!

They're usually stadium events in which several speakers give fiery and motivating messages.

And often they reflect the title of the movement – *Promise Keepers*.

A speaker will call for men to make a commitment – to forge a promise to God.

The event often ends with a call for men to stand and pledge themselves to their role as the spiritual leader of their home and a renewed focus on keeping their promises to their wife and children.

What's interesting about this is that as we look to scripture, God seems to consistently downplay His people making vows and promises.

He doesn't *forbid* them, but He seems to *discourage* them.

Jesus certainly does in the Sermon on the Mount.

It isn't that God doesn't want our obedience or for us to keep our word.

It's more that He doesn't want us focusing on Our vow, Our promise, Our effort!

He knows that that is the way of failure and discouragement.

He wants us to focus on His promise, His strength, Him!

He doesn't want us to be *Promise Keepers* so much as *Promise Seekers*.

Not *Promise Makers*, but *Promise Takers*!

By living in His promise rather than on the strength of mine, I'm free because life is no longer limited to my resources – it's empowered by His; and His are endless!

CHAPTER 16

¹Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no *children*. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar.

Oh-oh! This doesn't sound good. Right off the bat we wonder where

this is going!

I'll tell you where – this is a major detour on the Highway of Faith Abram's been traveling.

It's a detour, a side road they take, not because the main road is out, but because it seemed interesting at the time.

Note that the main agent or subject of the story now is – who? – *Sarai*; who will later be named “Sarah.”

²So Sarai said to Abram, “See now, the LORD has restrained me from bearing *children*. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.” And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai. ³Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan.

Abram's now 85, Sarai is 75 and their barrenness has become a trial she feels she can no longer endure.

So she proposes the solution of *surrogacy*; her maidservant Hagar who they picked up while in Egypt can serve as Sarai's substitute.

In the ancient world, any child Hagar would have would be considered Abram & Sarai's in this kind of arrangement.

According to some Jewish commentaries on this passage, Abram & Sarai had thought that maybe they were barren because they had failed to go to Canaan but had stopped in Haran until Terah, Abram's father died.

They thought that as soon as they arrived in Canaan, God would give them children.

But 10 years have passed and they are still childless, so Sarai is desperate.

Her biological hourglass is just about out of sand so she starts scheming.

Sarai's intentions are good, apparently; she's willing to share her husband with another woman all so that they can have a child.

This is a pretty drastic sacrifice she's making and reveals her desperation.

But of course, Abram, being the spiritual giant and leader he is, well, he's going to tenderly correct his wife, right?

He's going to carefully rebuke her lack of faith.
Or at least he's going to suggest they take their plan to the Lord
and get His approval.

If only . . .

4So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived.

What?!?!?!?!? Abram, what are you doing?

It's obvious – he's listened to and taken counsel from someone who
doesn't share his faith.

Oh sure, Sarai believed in God, but we never read that the promise
of God had been spoken to her – it had come to Abram.

Here we find Sarai telling Abram *how to follow God*.

But the revelation hadn't come to her.

She was applying human wisdom to the life of faith. And Abram
foolishly listened to her.

Sarai was a proponent of the concept; "God helps those who help
themselves."

It's crucial we exercise care in who we listen to and take counsel
from.

There are some highly successful people who may give us
excellent advice, from the world's perspective, but who will, in
reality, short-circuit what God intends for us.

Following their advice may result in complications and trouble
that lasts for years, as it did here with Sarai, Abram & Hagar.

What ought they have done? WAITED on the Lord!

Yes it's been 10 years and that's a long time.

It will be another 13 years after this till the promise is fulfilled –
but IT WILL BE FULFILLED because God is faithful.

Here's how it works – He promises, we believe; and wait for Him to
do what He's said He'll do.

4So he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress became despised in her eyes.

And so the trouble begins.

Up to this point no one knew where the barrenness lay, with Sarai
or Abram.

But now all doubt is removed – Sarai's womb was closed.

When Hagar turns up pregnant, she immediately becomes haughty and starts treating Sarai poorly.

The great man Abram will now show some attention and affection to Hagar as the mother of his only child.

This is just too much for Sarai and she goes ballistic!

5Then Sarai said to Abram, “My wrong be upon you! I gave my maid into your embrace; and when she saw that she had conceived, I became despised in her eyes. The LORD judge between you and me.”

Hold on! Sarai’s blaming Abram when it had been her idea from the get-go.

Fact is – she’s devastated as she starts to see the implications of her and Abram’s actions.

Sin is already beginning to bear its bitter fruit.

Really, Sarai has a cause to complain! Abram ought to have taken the spiritual lead and declined the surrogacy arrangement his wife cooked up.

When a man defers to his wife’s counsel, he still stands responsible for the outcome.

6So Abram said to Sarai, “Indeed your maid *is* in your hand; do to her as you please.” And when Sarai dealt harshly with her, she fled from her presence.

Abram was right at this point to put the relationship with his wife *before* the relationship with Hagar or their child.

But Abram did have an obligation and duty to the child that he ought to have covered.

He didn’t do that; he left the fate of both Hagar and her child solely in Sarai’s hands.

Sarai treated Hagar so poorly, she ran away.

7Now the Angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸And He said, “Hagar, Sarai’s maid, where have you come from, and where are you going?” -- She said, “I am fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarai.”

This is the first time we meet this interesting OT character, “the

Angel of the Lord.”

At other times we read of *generic* angels and “*an angel from the Lord.*”

But ***THE Angel of the Lord*** refers to a specific person who identifies Himself as God.

This is an appearance of Jesus Christ in the OT – known as a *Christophany*.

9The Angel of the LORD said to her, “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand.”

The problems seem to have stemmed from Hagar’s haughtiness toward Sarai.

The Angel of the Lord comes to her with the message that she’s to return to Sarai and submit herself to her.

10Then the Angel of the LORD said to her, “I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude.” **11And the Angel of the LORD said to her: “Behold, you are with child, And you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, Because the LORD has heard your affliction.**

Ishmael means “God hears.”

12He shall be a wild man; His hand shall be against every man, And every man’s hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren.”

Ishmael became the father of the Arabian tribes.

They populated the entire Middle East, finding little places to settle down and grow all through the regions and ethnic groups of that area.

Though they lived in the midst of many other people groups, they maintained their own culture which often came into conflict with their neighbors.

In fact, the Arabic tribes were known for their constant warfare against each other.

To this day, the different Arabic tribes fight and vie with one another for control of that region.

This is one of the major factors that led to the success and spread

of Islam among the Arabs – they were so war-weary and brutalized from the generations of fighting one another they saw in Mohammed’s religion a unifying force that would bring an end to their internecine conflicts and give them a larger goal – world conquest.

Make no mistake – Islam aims at nothing less than world domination and turning the cultures of the world back to 7th century Arabia.

As Muslims have stepped up their plans over the last few years, we’ll see a stronger and stronger reaction on the part of the world in response.

And it all began right here, with Abram’s attempt to help God out in the power of the flesh.

We never know how far reaching the effects of our sin may be.

13Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, [El Roi] You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, “Have I also here seen Him who sees me?” **14**Therefore the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; observe, *it is* between Kadesh and Bered.

15So Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. **16**Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

It seems Hagar did as the Lord told her – she returned in submission to Sarai.

She told Abram & Sarai about her encounter with the Angel of the Lord, and when her child was born, Abram named him as the Lord has instructed – Ishmael.