

## **“A BOUT WITH DOUBT”** **(Genesis 15:1-20)**

Today as we continue our study of the life of Abraham, I want to talk to you about “A Bout with Doubt.” The story is told of an old Navajo Indian in Arizona who owned a small piece of land on which he raised sheep and cattle. In the course of time oil was discovered on his land and the old man became very wealthy. He put all of his money into a local bank and over the years it continued to pile up. Although he was fabulously wealthy, the old Indian continued living as he always had – farming and ranching and living off the land – but every now and then he would travel into town and visit his bank.

His banker would smile as he walked in because he knew what he was going to say. The Indian would say, “Money all gone, sheep all dead, cattle all stolen, and fences all down. Everything bad.” The banker knew just what to do. He’d take the old man into the bank vault, sit him down at a table and place before him several bags of silver dollars, “All of this is yours.” After looking at all his money and counting it, the Navajo would come out and say, “Sheep all well, cattle all back, fences all up. Everything good.” Reviewing the vast resources that belonged to him eased his mind about his present troubles.

There are many times in life when, like the old Indian, we need reassurance that everything is going to be okay because so often things do not seem okay. Life is hard, and on any given day we struggle with grief, with worry, with strained relationships, with physical pain, and concern about where the world is headed. These are the times when we most need God to show up in our lives, and yet He seems strangely silent. We begin to wonder: Is God even real? “Of course, He is,” we quickly tell ourselves, but still we wonder. Can I trust Him, and is He trustworthy?

If you’ve had any of these thoughts and feelings, you’re in good company because every hero in the Bible, at one time or another, had bouts of doubt about God and whether they could trust Him. The very fact that we walk by faith, and not by sight, means that there is going to be some measure of doubt. If we could see everything God is doing, we wouldn’t need faith, and God has so designed that we walk by faith.

No one in the Bible had faith like Abraham – he is called the father of all those who walk by faith. He is the pioneer of faith, and as we study his life, we learn how to be better faith walkers. We come today to Genesis 15 which records the first time Abraham speaks to God. One commentator noted that throughout Abraham’s life, when he speaks, he has questions that appear to raise doubt, but when he is silent his actions always exhibit faith. It like that. What’s important is not the doubts we feel, but what we do with our doubts.

Chapter 15 poses two questions: Can Abraham trust God, and is God trustworthy? These are the same questions we must wrestle with in our walk of faith: Can I trust God with my life, and if I place my trust in Him, is He trustworthy?

Abraham’s walk of faith begins in chapter 12 God when calls Abraham to leave his home and family and go to a land God would show him. God promised Abraham three things: a land, descendants, and blessing. God would give him a land to call his own, make of him a great nation with numerous descendants, and use him to be a conduit of blessing to the whole world. God promises all these things, but He doesn’t tell Abraham when they will be fulfilled. Abraham’s life can largely be summarized by *waiting*. Being human, Abraham wasn’t always good and waiting, and though he trusted God there were times when his faith wavered and he needed reassurance – and chapter 15 is one of those times.

Verse one says, “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.’” We’re not told exactly what Abraham is afraid of, but it’s probably the cumulative effect of just having come home from battle and the stress of living with the constant threat of enemies. He’s also worried that while God has promised him a child and a land to possess, he still has neither.

God speaks to Abraham in a vision and says, “Do not be afraid.” The phrase “Do not be afraid” is used over 300 times in the Bible, and is pretty self-explanatory: Don’t be afraid. For believers fear is never an option. We may initially react with fear to a situation – because we’re human – but that fear should quickly turn to faith. Faith and fear cannot coexist. If you have fear you can’t have faith, and if you have faith, you can’t have fear. You must choose faith over fear.

“Do not be afraid,” God says, “I am your shield, your very great reward. You can be assured that I will protect you and provide for you.” God’s promise of protection doesn’t mean that we won’t be attacked or harmed in this life, but no matter what happens to us God will see us through to heaven. That’s what Jesus meant in Matthew 10:28 when He said, “Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” No matter what happens to us on earth, nothing can touch our soul.

God has a different plan for each of us – some missionaries are killed spreading the gospel, and some live long lives – but God promises to be our shield and protect us until our time on earth is done – and reward us with eternal life. Being assured of God’s protection and provision gives us confidence to live life boldly and not worry about what happens to us – we’re safe in His hands for all eternity.

Abraham hears the Lord promise His protection and provision, yet he raises a logical question to God in verses 2 and 3... “But 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?’ And Abram said, ‘You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.’”

One of the mysteries for Abraham is how God will fulfill His promise of making from him a great nation with many descendants if his wife Sarah is barren and can’t have children... “I hear your promise, Lord, but all I have is your promise... I don’t see any tangible evidence to back up it up.” Abraham is reverent – He calls God the “Sovereign Lord,” but he’s unsure of how God’s promise of an heir will come about.

Abraham probably considered his nephew Lot to be his heir, but Lot had gone his own way and settled in Sodom. In the customs of that day, when there was no direct heir, you would adopt a trusted servant to receive your inheritance, and Abraham’s chief servant was Eliezer, who probably joined Abraham when he was passing through Damascus on his way to the Promised Land.

Verses 4-5, “Then 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.’ He 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.’”

From the time God called Abraham in chapter 12, God promised that Abraham’s own flesh and blood – his own offspring – would inherit his blessings. When you do the math, Abraham was 75 years old when God first made His promise – he’s not young – and now he’s 85. Ten years have gone by, and he’s been waiting and waiting and waiting. Can I tell you something about the walk of faith? It involves a lot of waiting. As the say in the military, “Hurry up and wait.” We’re not good at waiting – we don’t like to wait 30 seconds for the microwave to finish, much less wait ten years.

Waiting can cause us to grow weary and discouraged, and to lose hope. In Luke 18:8 Jesus asked, “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?” In the last days the Bible warns that there will be hard times – much like the hard times we’re in right now. How will people respond? Will they hang in there and cling to God, or will they grow discouraged and abandon their faith?

A good part of life is simply waiting, and wondering when your ship is going to come in, when things will come together, and when will things be normal. I think these are all the emotions that Abraham feels, and he honestly comes to the Lord wondering when His promise of a child will finally be fulfilled.

Waiting exposes the depth of our faith and dependence on God. It strips us of our pride and self-dependence, and develops within us a character that we would never have without waiting. Paul Tripp says, “Waiting is not just about what I get at the end of the wait, but about who I become as I wait.” We learn things through waiting that we would otherwise never learn. Our job is to hang in there and trust. The Psalmist says, “Wait for the Lord; be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord.” Do not grow weary in waiting, but use it as an opportunity to become more like Christ.

In response to Abraham’s question, God says, “Let’s go outside.” You can imagine a dark Middle Eastern night with the sky lit up with stars, and God says, “Look up and count the stars, if you can count them.” The point is that he can’t. They say that one a clear night, when you’re far away from city lights, you can see between 2000 and 3000 stars. Beyond what we can see, there are billions and billions of stars in the universe.

God says, “Your offspring will be as numerous as the stars – far beyond what you can count.” This is the same effect as the banker showing the old Indian what he has in the bank – this is how many descendants will come from him. The broader implication of this is that Abraham’s descendants will not only include the Jewish race, but all those who come to faith in Abraham’s ultimate descendant, Jesus. We are called the sons of Abraham, and through Christ we share in the blessings given to Abraham.

In verse 6 we come to one of the most important verses in the Bible – a verse that is repeated three different places in the New Testament... “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” Despite not having a child, and seeing no earthly way to conceive a child, Abraham believed God’s promise. “The same God who made the starry host in the sky can make it possible for me to have a child. I believe.”

The word “believe” means to “lean your whole weight upon.” If you walk up to a rickety-looking chair, you’re going to be a little unsure about sitting down on it – you don’t trust it to hold you up. But if the chair is solid and sturdy – and you’ve seen other people sit on it – you won’t hesitate to put your full weight on it. Trust is only as good as the object in which that trust is placed. The idea here is that Abraham believes and trusts God and therefore trust the promises God makes. He says, “I believe, despite all the odds, that you will give me a child and many descendants because I trust you.”

The New Testament says that Abraham is a prototype or model of the kind of faith that saves. Although Abraham lived 2000 years before the cross, he looked forward to the coming of Christ – his direct descendant – who would save the world from sin. Jesus said in John 8:56, “Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad.” Abraham believed that one of his descendants would be the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promise and reverse the curse of sin and death.

Because Abraham believed, God credited it to him as righteousness. The word “credit” is a financial term which means to place into one’s account. Righteousness means to be morally acceptable to God. Picture God keeping a record of the entire human race, and having a one-page ledger for each person. On the left side of the divine ledger, He writes down the sins you commit. This is the debt column. On the right side, He writes down the good things you do. Most people hope that by the time they die, the good will outweigh the bad and God will allow them into heaven on that basis. But the Bible says that if you have but one bad deed you will not make it to heaven.

The only way we can be made righteous before God is to have our debt column erased and to have our credit column filled by Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” Our salvation, then, is not based on anything we do, but on what Christ has done for us. We are made righteous in God’s eyes by trusting Christ – leaning our whole weight upon Him for salvation – and through faith we are credited with righteousness. Abraham is the pace-setter, the forerunner, of all who believe in faith.

Abraham believes God promise of a child, but what about God’s promise of a land upon which he will build a great nation? In verse 7 God reassures him that the land is his, “I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.” This is the fourth time God has repeated His promise of land, but Abraham has yet to take possession of it. He looks around and sees Canaanites living in the land alongside him. He’s still living in tents and doesn’t own an acre of land.

In verse 8 he raises another logical question... “Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?” Lord, can you give me some assurance that somehow, someday I will possess the Promised Land?

What happens next is part scary, part gory, and part awesome. Verse 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.’ Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.”

To us this all seems very strange, but in Abraham’s culture this was the way people made a covenant or agreement. Today we make contracts by shaking hands or signing a document, but in Abraham’s day they would cut animals in two and the two parties making the agreement would walk between the split halves of the animals. It was a way of saying, “If you or I break the terms of the agreement, may what happened to these animals happen to us.” That’s the idea. Their agreement was deadly serious.

Abraham does exactly what God instructs him to do, and then he waits. He’s used to that. Hours go by and nothing happens. As he waits, birds begin to prey on the carcasses, and Abraham shoos them away. “I’m ready anytime, Lord.” More hours go by and it starts to get dark. Verse 12 says, “As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.” He’s exhausted. He’s been waiting on God and shoos birds away, and finally succumbs to sleep.

God’s got him right where He wants him to be – resting – to demonstrate that what happens next is all God’s doing – done by God’s power and sovereignty alone. As Abraham is sleeping a thick and dreadful darkness comes over him. God is about to give him some dark and troubling news – before things get better and God fulfills His promise, things will get worse.

Verses 13-16... “Then the Lord said to him, ‘Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.’”

God says, “I will give you the land, Abraham, but you won’t live to see it. In fact, another 400 years will go by before your descendants own the land.” When you’re expecting to possess the land at any moment, to hear that it will take 400 years is disheartening. Not only that, but these 400 years will be filled with pain and suffering in a foreign land.

Why doesn’t God just give Abraham the land? Why the wait? God always has a reason. One reason is that “the sin of the Amorites had not reached its full measure.” The Amorites were the largest of the Canaanite tribes, and represented all the Canaanite people living in the Promised Land. The Canaanites were as wicked and perverse as a people as you can get – including sacrificing children – and God could easily have judged them right then and there, but holds off judgment for 400 years.

This follows a pattern we see throughout scripture of God extending long periods of grace to sinners and giving them every chance to repent. But there comes a day when sin reaches its full measure, and God opens the floodgates of judgment. We’re living in a day of grace right now, but that day will end when Christ returns and pours His judgment out on the earth. The judgment of the Canaanites would come 400 years later when Joshua conquered them and took possession of the land.

Another pattern we see in the Bible is that *suffering comes before glory*. Abraham’s descendants must suffer 400 years before they inherit the Promised Land. This pattern is true for every believer – God promises us great glory when our life on earth is done, but in this world Jesus says we will experience tribulation – don’t be surprised when trials and hardships come – expect them. This pattern was true of Jesus, who told His disciples that He must suffer many things, and be rejected and killed before He returned to His glory in heaven. The cross comes before the crown – pain comes before gain. Knowing this helps us keep life in perspective – we know that no matter what happens to us now, a better life awaits us in eternity – our best life is not now, but is yet to come.

The story gets even more interesting in verses 17-21... “When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, ‘To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.’”

Imagine the scene – it’s dark, and out of the darkness suddenly appears a pot with smoke coming out of it and a blazing torch. What’s this all about? The words “smoke” and “blaze” are the same words used to describe the presence of God coming down on Mt. Sinai, and they are the same words used to describe God’s presence in the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night that led the people of Israel in the wilderness. The smoke and the blazing fire are symbols of God’s holy presence.

The smoking pot and blazing torch then proceed to walk through the animal pieces. Do you know what God is saying? He’s saying, “I have promised to bless you Abraham, to give you many descendants, and a land – all the way from Egypt to the Euphrates River – and if I don’t do this, may I be torn apart like these animals.” God condescends to the culture of Abraham’s world and says, “My word is my bond – I will do everything that I have promised.”

But this isn't all. In covenant agreements like this, both parties passed through the pieces – each vowing to keep their end of deal – but in this case, God walks through the pieces alone. Abraham does nothing but sleep. This is a powerful picture of the gospel. God says, “I'm going to go through for the both of us. You just sleep – you just rest – you just trust in my promises – and I will bring it about.”

Every religion says that there is something you and I must do to earn righteousness with God – we must build up our credit so that the good outweighs the bad. But Christianity teaches the gospel – the good news – that says there is nothing you or I can do to be saved – no amount of good works or deeds can make us holy in God's sight – we must depend solely on Christ's work on the cross.

On the cross Jesus suffered alone – He walked the lonesome valley of death by Himself – and took upon Himself the full penalty of our sin. All He asks us you to do is believe and trust Him as your Savior. When you do, He promises to give you eternal life.

When you have a bout of doubt, what do you do? You go to the bank and see all that you possess. You go to God's Word over and over to review all of God's promises, and you keep trusting Him. You trust Him because He is trustworthy. You keep walking by faith, knowing that many of God's promises await us at the end of life. You rest in God, you relax, you wait, and you realize your expectations for how this life should go. God's got it all figured out – your job is simply to trust.