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# SERMON NOTES

## Genesis #17 Genesis 15:1-21

Abram had been living in faith for many years now. True, he had never been perfect, but he had some pretty big faith victories. God told him to leave his family and country, and go to Canaan. He left them, and went. He screwed up not long after arriving in Canaan, and fled to Egypt in time of famine. But since then he trusted God enough to take care of him in times of scarcity; he trusted God to defeat a major army for him; he trusted God to give him the land of Canaan in God's own time and way; he trusted God enough to refuse easy money and instead to give away 10% of his own wealth for God's work through the priest Melchizedek.

Even so, Abram was a man, and he had his moments of doubt to go along with his moments of faith. In Genesis chapter 15, God comes to him. It's almost a tender scene – God is just kind of loving on him, saying “Don't worry. Everything is fine. I am your shield and your reward.” Now, what if God came to you through a dream or vision and said something like that? Wouldn't you be thrilled? Wouldn't your heart be filled with comfort? Not Abram. Instead, it almost seems to disturb him. His response is really a complaint.

Now, before we tackle what happens next, I want to say that God *has* come to you, like he came to Abram. He *has* said to you: “Don't worry about anything. In all your prayers, keep asking God for what you need, always asking thankfully. And the peace of God which is beyond understanding will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.” You see Abram didn't have a Bible. He had to wait for God to come to him in visions and dreams. God still speaks in visions and dreams, but he has also given us the Bible, so we can return again and again to what he has said to us. The Bible really is for us. It truly is God's word to us. And through it God says “Come to me all who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.” He says, “don't worry about what you will eat or drink or wear. I know you need those things. Seek me and my kingdom first, and I'll take care of all that stuff.” The Lord says “God is for you, who can be against you?” He says, “there is no condemnation if you have trusted Jesus.” He says, “you are my dearly beloved child.” He says he loves us, will guide us, provide for us, take to be with him in heaven. He says “don't worry, don't fret, trust, and be still.” He tells us he'll work for us and through us and bless others because of us. He tells us there is a plan for our lives and good work that he has prepared in advance for us to do. He says we are significant, we are part of the body, we are indispensable.

Now, I am not just throwing around words here. See the footnote for a very small sampling of the verses which tell us all these things.<sup>1</sup> But here's the thing. Abram heard the wonderful, comforting voice of God. So do we. But Abram sometimes complained and doubted anyway. So do we.

Abram responds to God not with “thank you, I love you!” but rather a complaint: “What can you do for me? I don't have anyone to inherit all you've promised. My heir is going to be one of my servants.” By the way, that was a common custom in those days. If a powerful man was childless, he often left everything to his chief and most trusted servant. Now, I can understand Abram's response. At this point in time, he has been living in Canaan for at least ten years. God promised him all this stuff ten years ago. Now it is true that God has done a lot for Abram. He has blessed him, as he promised. He has blessed others through him, as he said he would. He has made his name great. But he hasn't yet given Abram any children. So Abram questions God about this.

God does not get angry. That is one of the reasons I love this little scene in scripture. **You see, it is a regular part of the life of faith to have some “give and take” between a believer and the Lord.** Moses argued with God. So did Jeremiah. The disciples misunderstood Jesus, and doubted him at times. It is a normal part of the life of faith to have a dialogue with God, and sometimes that dialogue is going to include questions, doubts and fears. God understands that – he even expects it. **He is not surprised or angry when you don't understand, or when you're worn out, or doubtful, or scared.**

Now, God responds to Abram's doubts. Basically, he just repeats the promise: “You will have your own son, and more descendants than you could possibly imagine.” This might seem like a simple and unsatisfying answer. But God is offering Abram a chance once more to trust him. He isn't mad at Abram's doubts. But he is encouraging Abram to give up his doubts, and continue on in faith. That is exactly what Abram does. “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited to him as righteousness.” Faith pleases God. It is as simple as that. Abram's

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1 Philippians 4:6-8; Matt 11:28; Matt 6:25-33; Romans 8:28-38; Romans 8:1; 1 John 3:1; John 14; Psalm 37; Psalm 46; Ephesians 2:8-10; 1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 4:11-16 and many, many more...

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faith did more for his relationship with God than all the good works he could possibly have done in his long life.

The conversation continues. God makes another promise, about the land. Abram again questions God. God's next response is absolutely mind-blowing. Keep in mind, the context for this is a conversation of faith, wherein Abram is trusting God, and yet at the same time expressing doubts and fears.

God instructs Abram to get certain animals, kill them, and cut them in half lengthwise and lay them out on the ground, one half of each animal on the left, the other on the right, separated from each other by a yard or so of space. Picture the halves of the animals forming the borders of a short path. You could walk down the little path with half of each animal on your right and the other half on your left.

Now, when God told Abram to do this, Abram knew what was going on. In our day and age we may not, so let me explain. What God was doing was setting up a very specific and well known type of agreement ceremony. It has been called the Suzerain-Vassal Treaty by historians. The Suzerain in this Treaty ceremony was the chief, or king, the head honcho, the one with all the power and holding all the cards. The Vassal was a person who had come to pledge loyalty and servitude to the Suzerain. In this ceremony, they laid out all the terms of the treaty or agreement. The agreement always favored the Suzerain and put the hard burden on the Vassal. The Vassal had to fulfill all his obligations to the Suzerain. Once the treaty was finalized, the Vassal cut up certain animals (almost exactly as God made Abram do). The Suzerain stood at one end of the path between the halves of the animals, while the Vassal walked (or crawled) between the animal pieces toward the Suzerain. What it meant was that if the Vassal failed to meet all his obligations to the Suzerain, then he was pledging that the Suzerain could do to his own body what had been done to those animals. The Vassal was saying in effect "If this agreement between you and me does not work out, then it is my fault, and you may do to me what I have done to these animals. You have my very life as a pledge."

So, as Abram questions God, God tells Abram to set up a Suzerain-Vassal ceremony. There is absolutely no question here that God is the Suzerain, and Abram is the Vassal. It looks, in fact, like God is getting sick of Abram's questions, and is going to set Abram in his rightful, humble place. So Abram prepares the animal carcasses and guards them from scavengers. Then God causes him to fall asleep and comes to him in a vision. The terms of the agreement are laid out (by the way, the word "covenant" is sort of a fancy way of saying "solemn agreement"). But something about the ceremony is a bit strange. The agreement is all about what God will do for Abram – not vice versa. This treaty is going to favor the Vassal – Abram – not God, the Suzerain. God reiterates that Abram will have descendants, promises Abram a peaceful death and promises that his descendants will inherit the land. And then the most amazing thing of all happens. Instead of making Abram pass through the pieces of the animals – God does it himself. The smoking pot and flaming torch are symbolic of the presence of God. [In fact, they correspond to the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night that led the people of Israel in the desert, centuries later.] The point is, *this* Suzerain-Vassal treaty is setting everything backwards. The Suzerain is promising the Vassal what he will do. And the Suzerain is promising to take the punishment, if things don't work out. God is saying, "Here's what I will do for you Abram. Here will be the agreement (covenant) between me and you, and me and your descendants. And if things don't work out between us, *I* am the one who will give my life to satisfy the terms of this agreement. *I* am the one who will be punished."

Brothers and sisters, this is nothing less than a promise and prediction of the sacrifice God would make when he came into the world as Jesus Christ. God said this to Abram, and through Abram, to all who would come after him (remember we are Abram's faith-children). God says: "Here is what I will do for you. I will love you and make you a blessing and bless you too. And if things don't work out – if you don't uphold your end of the bargain – *I* am the one who will suffer the consequences. My own life will be given to satisfy the terms of this covenant."

Do you understand God's incredible grace yet? We are the Vassals, he is the Suzerain. We owe him allegiance and obedience. We deserve to lose our lives when we fail to give it. But even as we question and doubt, he comes to us and reiterates his promises, encouraging us to receive them in faith. And he says, "If you can't live this life perfectly, I will take the condemnation that you should have. I will suffer in your place. Nothing can stop me from giving you the grace I want you to have." Our part, brothers and sisters, is like Abram's, simply to receive it in faith.