

## Assurance for your Amen

Gen 15

**Main Thought:** As God called Abram to say amen to him and provided assurance through covenant, so God calls us and assures us through the cross.

**Call:** Ps 85:10-13 (ESV)

**Scripture:** Rom 4:1-5 (ESV)

### I. Introduction

#### A. Review

Today, we continue our studies in the life and times of Abraham and Sarah, the couple formerly known as Abram and Sarai. The last two weeks we have mostly dealt with Abram's nephew Lot and the consequences of his decisions. We'll come back to Lot in a few chapters when we have to deal with Sodom and Gomorrah. But, this week, we return to the main storyline of Abram and Sarai. God has called this couple into a fantastic adventure of trusting him, but only after Abram was in his mid-70s and Sarai was in her mid-60s. But God still chooses them and makes extraordinary promises to them. In our text today, we meet up with Abram when he is probably in his early 80s, with Sarai in her early 70s. It's probably been over five years since the promises were initially made, and they are still waiting for fulfillment.

#### B. Context for today

Our text today is a highly significant text in Scripture. For it is here where we will ask two all-important questions. One is how does a mere human being enter into a relationship with the living God? Secondly, how can I know that this God will honor that relationship? If someone were to ask you these questions, how would you answer them?

There are two scenes in our text today:

1. The Amen (1-6)
2. The Assurance (7-21)

Let's begin by reading verses 1-5.

### II. The Amen (1-6)

*1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." 2 But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." 4 And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." 5 And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (ESV)*

#### A. The Promise

Our text begins after "these things" happened. "These things" include the battle where Abram saved Lot, the interaction with the king of Sodom and the interaction with the mysterious figure of Melchizedek. And, one night after these things, Abram gets up to take a walk. As he is walking, he has time to think about some of the recent crises he's been in, the war that he just fought in and a possible revenge strike from the defeated kings, the strife with Lot's herdsmen, the famine, the run-in with the Pharaoh, the long travels from Ur. It seems like crisis after crisis after crisis. As he continues to ponder, he gets more and more anxious and agitated. He has changed his whole life to follow this God and it seems like it's been a total disaster. And, there has been no hint of a fulfillment of those grand promises, especially the promises of offspring and land. And, he isn't getting any younger.

And, then, in the middle of his rising anxiety, this loving, gracious God interrupts him. This is the first recorded dialogue between God and Abram. Abram hears this God say to him, “Do not be afraid Abram,” the most common exhortation in all of scripture. “Do not be afraid Abram! You have not been forgotten! Do not be afraid! I am your shield! Just like I have taken care of you through those many crises, I will be with you and continue to take care of you. Do not fear, I am your shield, your personal protector.” Another way to say it is, “Trust me Abram. I am the promise maker and the promise keeper. I won’t let you down. Just trust me, and I will protect you. And, by the way, you don’t need the spoils of that war where you saved Lot, because I am your greatest treasure. You only need me!”

Abram responds, like any of us would. In all honesty, he says, “I know God, you’ve made these grand promises about families and nations and blessings, but have you seen my life lately? It’s in shambles! Have you seen my nephew Lot? He’s a complete mess! Did you see where he moved? Sodom and Gomorrah, and I had to save him! Remember that? You saw that right? And, don’t you see that my wife is barren. She can’t have kids. You know this, right? So, I’m going to have a servant in my household be my heir.

Notice that Abram repeats this expectation. It’s as if he says it once, and gets no response from God, so he says it again. But why would Abram have this expectation that Eliezer of Damascus would be his heir, and not say, Lot? For you archaeologists, the discovery of the Nuzi tablets in the 1930s provides some helpful background. Adopting a household servant who could take care of child-less parents in old age was a common arrangement at that time. In the face of barrenness and old age, Abram is trying to manufacture an heir. In other words, his trust in the provision of offspring by this God is wavering. Essentially, he is saying, “God, I don’t know if I can trust you! When I look at my life, I don’t know if I can really throw my entire weight upon you!”

Have you ever said anything like that? Have you ever looked at your circumstances and said, “God, I just don’t know if I can trust you.” One thing we learn from Abraham’s story is that God’s delays are not always denials. As Terence Freitham says, “Abraham receives no immediate fixes, no instant gratification; the faithful often have to live with delay” (Freitham, 38). And, God’s delays are not necessarily denials.

Well, this loving, gracious God speaks again! And, he clarifies his promise saying, “Abram, your heir is not going to be Eliezer of Damascus. You are going to have a boy from your own body! Trust me!”

And then, Abram senses that God wants him to go outside and look up at the stars. So, Abram goes out and looks up. God says, “Go ahead and count them, if you can.” Of course Abram can’t count them, because there are too many! And, God speaks again. He clarifies his promise again. “Abram, I made all of those stars. You can trust me to give you a child, even many children.”

## **B. The Decision**

Now, at this point, Abram has at least three options. There are probably many more, but he has at least three options. This mysterious God has just clarified these ridiculous promises to Abram again. How will he respond? He could respond in three ways:

1. He could **ignore this God** entirely. He could walk the other way and live life without him, ignoring everything this God said. He could say to himself, “I must have eaten something rotten last night and didn’t sleep well, so I should just ignore this whole day in my life. I’m just going to move on with my life like this day never happened.”

2. He could **call this God a liar**. “There is no way this is going to happen. It’s been a long time and we are both really old. Plus, there is no way I can trust him. Look at my circumstances. Everything I see is that this God cannot actually do what he says he can do.”
3. He could **trust this mysterious God** completely and take Him at his word.

What does he do? And, here we get one of the most famous verses in all of scripture. [Genesis 15:6: Abram believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.](#)

### C. Believe and Righteousness

Abram chooses option three. This is one of the most important verses in the entire Bible, even to the point that Paul, the writer of much of the New Testament, bases much of his understanding of following Jesus on this verse alone.

There are two very important words in this verse, believe and righteousness.

Now, the word “believe” in Hebrew is the word “Emin.” Abram “emins” the Lord. It means to believe to be reliable. Bruce Waltke says this word is best translated as “trust” (Waltke, 242). Abram trusted the Lord. Abram threw his entire weight upon the Lord. And, what does “Emin” sound like? “Amen.” This is where we get the word “Amen” from. Abram says amen to God. Abram trusts God! Abram takes the Lord at his word & says amen to him. When we say amen in our prayers, we are saying that the one to whom we are praying is reliable and trustworthy.

Abram amens the Lord, and the Lord counts it to him as righteousness! The Lord evaluates Abram as being righteous. The Lord evaluates Abram as being in a right relationship with him because Abram trusts him. Abram does nothing else except take God at his word. Biblical scholar, Gerhard von Rad says it this way, “Above all, [Abram’s] righteousness is not the result of any accomplishments, whether of sacrifice or acts of obedience. Rather, it is stated programmatically that trust/belief alone has brought Abram into a proper relationship with God” (Von Rad, 180). Abram trusts God, and God says we’re friends! Abram throws his entire weight upon this God and his Words, and God says we’re friends! Abram does nothing else! How do we enter into a relationship with the living God? We trust him! Only one thing is required: trust him, say amen to him, throw your entire weight upon him. And, when you do, he says, we are friends!

### D. Can You Say Amen to Jesus?

Today, we live in light of Jesus. What is fascinating is that in the Gospels, Jesus uniquely uses the word “amen” a lot. Jesus begins important sayings with this word, sometimes even repeating it for emphasis. It’s a way of him saying, “This is reliable. What I’m about to say is rock-solid. You can trust it.” In modern translations, the amen is typically translated, “Truly,” as in “Truly, truly, I say to you.” But, the word in Greek is “amen.”

Can you say amen back to Jesus? I’m going to say five of his sayings, and have you say amen afterward.

- Jesus answered and said, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3). Can you say amen to him?
- Jesus said to them, “Amen I say to you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed... nothing will be impossible for you. (Matt 17:20). Can you say amen to him?
- Jesus said, “Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life.” (John 5:24). Can you say amen to him?
- Jesus answered them, “Amen, amen, I say to you, everyone who practices in sin is a slave to sin. ... But if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:34). Can you say amen to him?

- Jesus said to them, “Amen, amen, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58). Can you say amen to him?

How do we enter into a right relationship with the living God? Only one way. Only one way. Only one way. We say amen to him. We take him at his Word and trust him.

So, that sets the stage now for one of the strangest scenes in scripture, but also a very important one. Verse 7.

### III. The Assurance (7-21)

*7 And he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” 8 But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” 9 He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” 10 And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. 11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.*

*12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. 13 Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15 As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. 16 And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”*

*17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, 19 the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, 20 the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, 21 the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.” (ESV)*

#### A. The Covenant

I’m sure you’re thinking, what could we possibly learn from this bizarre scene 4000 years later, living today in Silicon Valley? It is a bizarre scene but does contain a valuable truth.

After focusing on offspring, the Lord now restates his promise of land to Abram. And, this time, in response to God’s promise, Abram asks, “How am I to know Lord?” In other words, “Lord, how can I know that history will work out to fulfill your promises?” The narrator has just evaluated Abram as trusting God, so this question does not arise out of distrust. He simply wants assurance for the promises, which is a totally acceptable desire at that time, because promises were secured and ensured through a legal ceremony.

Not unlike today when we sign documents. Our signature binds us to the transaction. It’s like when we use our credit card and sign our name. Our signature assures the store that we will pay the bill. When we were kids, we would secure our promises with a saying. Remember what it was? “Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.”

God accommodates Abram’s request by telling him to bring a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove and a pigeon. I’m not sure the significance of the animals, but that is what God wants. Abram brings them and cuts the large animals in two and lays them in rows. It’s a bloody ceremony.

God then puts Abram into a deep sleep, the same wording used of Adam when God takes part of him to fashion Eve. This mysterious God then speaks. He details when Abram’s offspring will go down to Egypt, and when they will come back to the land.

After God's speech, a mysterious smoking firepot and blazing torch passes between the pieces. What is that? In the Bible, smoke and fire always represent God's presence. For example, Moses and the Burning Bush. And, when the Israelites are in the wilderness, God appears with a cloud during the day and fire at night. At Pentecost, the Holy Spirit appears as tongues of fire. So, here, the smoking firepot and blazing torch represent God's presence. God passes through the pieces.

## **B. The Covenant Terms**

On that day, the Lord made, specifically cut, a covenant with Abram. A covenant is "a solemn commitment to undertake an obligation" (Waltke, *Theology*, 287). God and Abram enter into a solemn commitment. Covenants like this between a deity and a man occurs in no other religion or culture in the world.

But, what does it mean? What does this bloody ceremony mean? Well in those days, these sorts of bloody ceremonies were the standard way for securing and ensuring promises. The two parties would agree on the number of animals to cut in half. Then, they would lay them in rows, and each party would pass between the rows, thereby cutting the covenant.

And, there are two fundamental truths to these ceremonies:

- 1. The Blood:** The outcome of this covenant would be that the two parties would be in effect blood brothers. Just like siblings are forever connected through the same blood that flows through their veins, the two parties are connected and bound together until all promises are fulfilled.
- 2. The Walk:** Those that walk between the rows of cut carcasses are saying, "May it be done to me as has been done to these animals, if I do not keep my end of the bargain. As these animals have been cut, so shall it be done to me, if I transgress the promises of this covenant." In other words, these are the consequences if a walking party does not fulfill their obligations of the covenant. This is very serious stuff. It is so serious that there were very few covenants made in the ancient world.

So, Abram and God are bound together forever until the promises are fulfilled.

And, Abram and God walk through the carcasses, right? NO! Astonishingly, only God walks through the carcasses! What does that mean? It means that this mysterious God is responsible for the fulfillment of the covenant. God has just bound himself with Abram and his descendants until the promises are fulfilled. He has put his life on the line as a surety of his promises. This mysterious God has put his reputation on the line. How can Abram know? How can Abram be sure of God's promises? He can look to this bloody ceremony where this God says, "May it be done to me as has been done to these animals. I will cut myself in two, whatever that means for God, if I do not fulfill my promises!" This mysterious God is completely responsible for the fulfillment of the covenant. Abram doesn't need to do anything! The living God will do everything! Well, Abram *does* have to do one thing. He must say Amen. He must take God at his Word and trust him, nothing else. Everything is from God with no help from Abram!

Of course, this raises the question of what has God forever bound himself regarding this, the Abrahamic covenant? Specifically, what are the terms of the covenant regarding offspring and land? Well this is a thorny issue especially given that everyone fights over this land to this day. This topic requires much more time than I can give it this morning, but let me make a few comments here. First of all, the New Testament significantly alters both themes. In addition, Paul points out that all of God's promises made to Abram converge into one person, namely Jesus, the one that does indeed bless all the nations (Gal 3:16). In other words, both themes become "Christified" (Waltke, ??) Regarding offspring, Paul clearly states that those who are children of Abram are not the physical descendants of Abram, but are those who have the faith of Abram, who walk in his footsteps of his faith. This faith is faith in the living God as revealed through Jesus Christ. Similarly, regarding land, the physical aspect of land is dropped in favor of its spiritual significance. The land has become

“Christified.” In the New Testament, we enter into Christ to receive the blessings of the land from the Old Testament. It is in Christ where we find rest. It is in Christ where we find abundance. It is in Christ where we become holy. And, the New Testament points forward to the time when the whole earth will be given to Christ and his followers. I have to leave that there for now and refer you to Bernard’s forum on Israel and the Church in 2017 on our website (<https://pbcc.org/learning/archived-teachings/seminars/>).

Abram questions God. “How can I know God that you will fulfill your promises? What assurance can I have God?” And, God responds with this bloody ceremony.

### **C. The New Covenant**

Now, as we go through Scripture we find more covenants, but they do not change the terms of the Abrahamic Covenant until many years later, through the prophet Jeremiah, God promises to make a new covenant. This covenant would not replace or eliminate the Abrahamic Covenant, but would renew and draw out the deeper meaning for what God promised Abraham. God speaks to Jeremiah and says this:

*“This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,” declares the LORD. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. 34 No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the LORD. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” (Jer 31:33-34)*

What wonderful words! It comes to be known as the New Covenant. But, it is only words. There is no ceremony. There are no animals being cut in two for this new covenant. There is no blood to bind, no securing action, no assurance. And, for years and years, the people of God waited, and waited. And, the people begin to ask, “God, how can we know? When will the blood be spilled to seal this covenant?”

Then, in AD 33, a Jewish man is celebrating the Passover meal with his friends in Jerusalem. And, he suddenly stands up, takes his cup, and says, “This cup ... is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). There’s those words again, covenant and blood!! The next day, this man is hanging on a Roman cross, and his blood is spilling to the ground. Whose blood is it? It’s God’s blood. It turns out that the blood of those animals from that bizarre scene in Genesis prefigured another blood, God’s blood. God binds himself to us through his own blood. He assures his promises with us through his own blood. It’s a bond that cannot be broken!

*Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine  
O what a foretaste of glory divine  
Heir of salvation, purchase of God  
Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood*

So, when you ask, “God, how can I know?” I encourage you to look at the cross. God, how can I know that you will fulfill all your promises? Look at the cross. God, how can I know that you will be with me always to the end of the age? Look at the cross. God, how can I know that you are the light and can break through my darkness and ugliness and brokenness? Look at the cross. God, how can I know that you will forgive all my wickedness and remember my sins no more? Look at the cross. God, how can I know that you, as the good shepherd, will lead me home safe into your waiting arms? Look at the cross.

There is no greater assurance!!

Amen.

### **Benediction from Hebrews 13:20-21**

20 Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, 21 equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.

And, all God's people said, "Amen."

### **Resources**

Freitheim, Terence, *Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith*

Johnson, Darrell W. *Regent MP3 3690C,D* (Thanks to Darrell for his encouragement for this sermon!)

Von Rad, Gerhard. *Genesis (The Old Testament Library)*

Waltke, Bruce. *Genesis: A Commentary*

Waltke, Bruce. *An OT Theology*