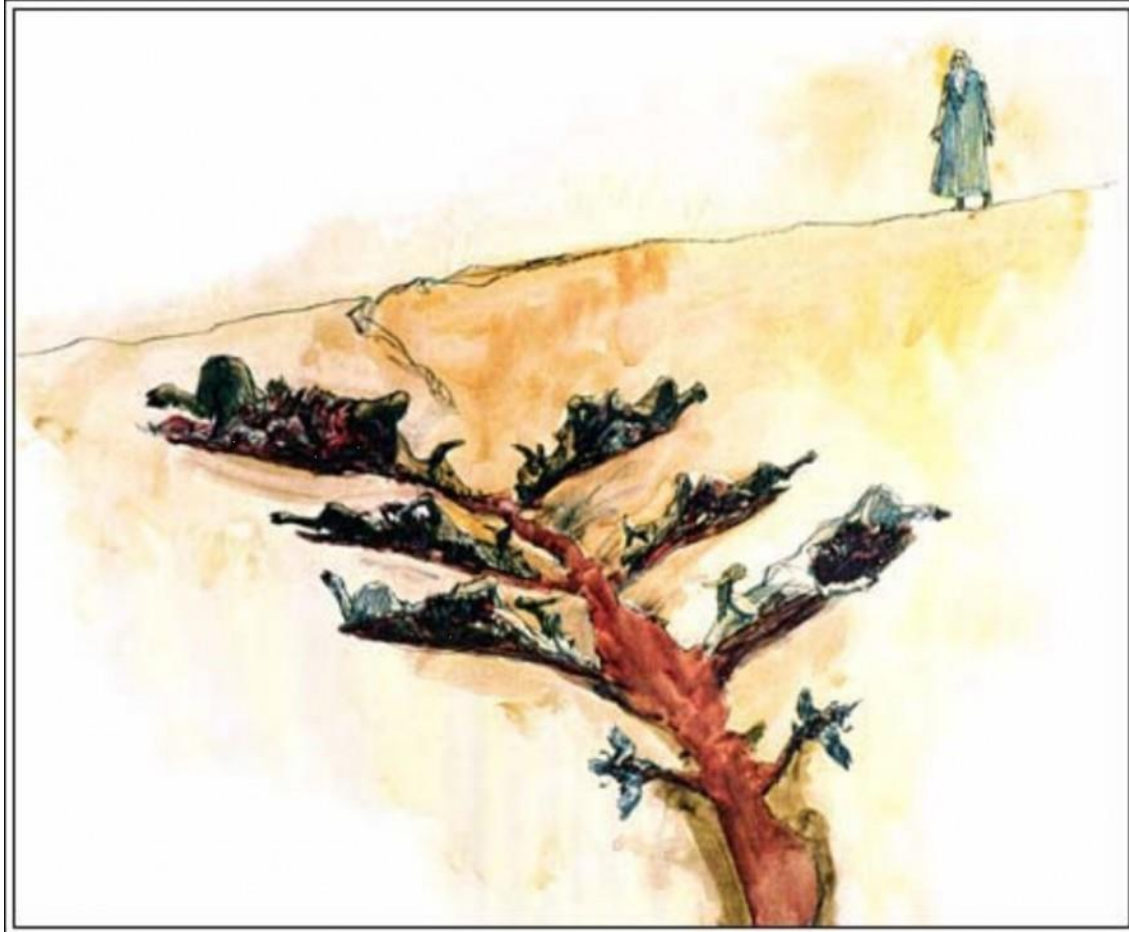


Genesis 15 – The True Promise Keeper

By Jeremy Myers

Genesis 15 may well be one of the most important chapters in the entire Old Testament. And since the Old Testament is foundational to the New Testament, since you cannot fully understand the New Testament without understanding the Old Testament, Genesis 15 is one of the most important chapters in the entire Bible.



1. A Promise Given (Genesis 15:1-3)

2. A Promise Believed (Genesis 15:4-6)

3. A Promise Guaranteed (Genesis 15:7-21)

1. A Promise Given (Genesis 15:1-3)

Genesis 15:1. After 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.”

In Genesis 14, Abram went to a lot of work to save Lot from being carried off into captivity. And since Abram defeated the four Eastern kings, all of the plunder taken from that battle legally belonged to Abram. But the King of Sodom came along, and through some sly maneuvering, was able to wrest it away from Abram.

Abram could have held on to his rights according to the Hammurabi Code, but Abram had something more valuable than the law on his side. He had the promises of God. So Abram chose to give up his rights to the riches, and return them to the King of Sodom so that nobody could ever say they had made Abram rich. If and when Abram received the promises of God, Abram wanted God alone to get the glory. That is how Genesis 14 ended.

God now comes to Abram in Genesis 15:1 and says, “Abram, I saw what you did, and I am pleased. I know that was a difficult decision for you to make, but it was the right decision. Though your wife might think you did something foolish in risking your life, and then not receiving any payment for it, I saw what you did, and I am pleased.”

In this world, making a decision to trust in God is not easy. Don't let anyone ever tell you that following God, and trusting in Him alone is easy. It isn't. Sometimes, following God where He wants you to go, doing what God wants you to do, giving up your rights so that you can do what is right, is downright terrifying. Sometimes, it's even foolish. At least, the world calls it foolish. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul explains how the wisdom of this world is foolishness to God, and the wisdom of God seems foolish to the world.

“You're going to build an ark, Noah? That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard.”

“You're going to march around Jericho? That's some way to fight a war, Joshua.”

“You're going to abandon your fishing practice, and wander around the countryside, Peter? How are you going to eat?”

“You're going to do nothing but preach the Word? That's not what people want. You won't attract a crowd that way.”

God has chosen the foolish things of this world to shame the wise, and the weak things of this world to shame the things which are strong.

But that never means that such choices are easy. No, it is often terrifying to follow God into the great unknown. It was scary for Abram to leave Ur and go to Haran. Then it was sad for him to leave his father in Haran. Then it was hard for him to give up his rights to the land and offer some to Lot. Then it was difficult for him to surrender his rights to the plunder and give the people and possessions back to Sodom.

And so now God comes to Abram and says, “Do not be afraid, Abram.” And do you know what I love about God? When He tells us to not be afraid, He gives us reasons why. Whenever God says “Do not fear” He then tells us why we should not fear.

In John 14, after Jesus has given some very hard teachings to his disciples, He says to them, “Do not be afraid. Let not your heart be troubled. Why not? First, because you're going to heaven to spend eternity with me. Second, you know what the father is like because I have shown Him to you. You don't have anything to fear from Him. Third, I always hear and answer your prayers. Fourth, I am going to send another Comforter to you who will be with you and in you and will teach you all things, and give you peace. So do not be troubled.”

That's what Jesus says to his troubled disciples in John 14. Look what God says to Abram in Genesis 15. “Do not be afraid, Abram.” Why not? “I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”

God gives Abram two reasons not to fear. The first is that God Himself will be Abram's shield. God will protect Abram. Maybe Abram is scared that the armies he has just defeated will regroup and then return

for revenge. With God as a shield, Abram has nothing to fear. Down in Genesis 15:15, we see that God promises Abram that he will live to a “good old age.” God will protect Abram and be his shield. This same idea is found in Psalm 3:3 where the Psalmist sings, “You, Oh Lord, are a shield about me, You’re my glory, You’re the lifter of my head.”

But it is the second reason that bowls me over. Not only will God be Abram’s shield, God will also be Abram’s reward. Not just any reward, but an exceedingly great reward. There is no greater reward than this. There is no greater reward than God. Compared to God, all the plunder Abram just gave back to the King of Sodom is as nothing. All the gold and diamonds of the world are less valuable than a grain of dust in comparison to having God as a reward.

But what does it mean to have God as a reward? How can God be a reward? We belong to Him; He does not belong to us. God makes a very perplexing statement to Abram. How can the God of heavens and earth, the Creator of the universe, give Himself as a reward to humans, let alone a single individual? Abram, was a bit confused by this as well.

Maybe in his own mind, Abram tried to tone down this audacious promise by God. “God can’t mean that He will give Himself to me. He must mean He will just work on my behalf. He will work to protect me and provide for me. That must be what God means.” But that is not what God means. God means that He Himself is what Abram is seeking. God Himself is what Abram wants and what Abram needs. God Himself is the missing piece of Abram’s life. God Himself is Abram’s exceedingly great reward.

It is this way for us as well. I have encouraged you before, and I will encourage you again, to listen to your prayers. What do you pray for. I think that if you were to categorize your prayer requests, you would find that you generally pray for seven basic things. You pray for your physical needs like food and finances. Secondly, you pray for wisdom to make good decisions for your future. Third, if you love God, you pray to understand God more and understand His ways more. Sometimes, the things God says and does are just downright confusing, and so I often find myself praying, “God, what are you doing? Why are doing this? How can I understand and love you if I don’t even understand what is going on here?” That’s the third thing.

Fourth, we often pray for encouragement and support in times of trial and suffering. We pray for protection from those who are out to destroy us. Fifth, we pray for healing and life and health. Sixth, we pray for truth. None of us want to believe error and falsehood, and so we pray for truth and insight into the way of God and the life He wants us to live. Finally, we pray for fruitfulness in our Christian life. None of us want to be unproductive and barren. We want to see God working in and through us to do great things for Him. Those are the things we pray for. And all are good things to pray for. We pray for bread, we pray for light, we pray for a knowledge of God, we pray for care, we pray for life, we pray for truth, and we pray for fruitfulness. Everything we pray for falls into one of these seven categories.

Now, in Genesis 15:2, Abram had needs. Abram had requests. Abram had worries and cares and concerns. But God says to Him, “I know your needs, but I am going to give myself to you instead. In me, all your needs will be met.”

And so I find it very amazing when we take those seven categories of things we pray for, and we see that God offers Himself to Abram in verse 2, and then we turn over to the Gospel of John and as we read through the Gospel, we find seven “I Am” statements throughout the book.

We pray for bread, and Jesus says, “I am the bread” (John 6:35). We pray for light and wisdom, and Jesus says, “I Am the Light” (8:12). We pray for an understanding of God, and Jesus says, “Before Abraham was, I Am” (8:58). In other words, if you want to understand the Father, look at me. We pray for tender care and compassion, protection and provision, and Jesus says, “I Am the Good Shepherd” (10:11). We pray for health and healing and life, and Jesus says, “I Am the Resurrection and the Life” (11:25). We pray for truth and the way God wants us to live, and Jesus says, “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (14:6). We pray for fruitfulness and effectiveness in our Christian life, and Jesus says, “I Am the True Vine” (15:1) He who abides in Jesus will produce much fruit.

Jesus is our possession. We are in Him. He is in us. Everything we ask or imagine, everything we need or want is found in Him alone. We all want something from the Lord, but God wants us to want Him. We want some answer to prayer, but God just wants to give us Himself. It is in Him, that all these other things are found. He will be for us all that we need or want. When Jesus Christ is our All in All, we can go through times without food, we can wonder what direction our life will go next, we can be uncertain about how that bill will get paid, we can have health problems and family crises and in it all, have a peace that passes understanding because Christ is ours. Our minds are so earthly focused, it is hard to understand how just by loving Christ, and enjoying His presence, and how not trying to be like Him, but just liking Him, just by loving Jesus, we can have the contentment, joy, peace, and happiness that would never be ours otherwise – even were God to grant us all the things we prayed for.

This is so hard to grasp and understand. It is so hard to fix our eyes on Jesus Christ alone. We want to focus on the things that come through Him and from Him, rather than focus on Him. That's why I am so thankful for what Abram says in verse 2.

Genesis 15:2a. But Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me?”

Isn't that you and I often pray? Oh, Lord, thanks for everything, but what will You give me? Jesus is nice. The Holy Spirit is nice. Your precious promises are nice. But what will You give me? Abram goes on to tell God exactly what he wants from God.

Genesis 15:2b-3. Abram said, “Lord GOD, what will You give me seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” Then Abram said, “Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!”

Abram says to God, “God, thanks for being my shield, and giving Yourself to me as a reward – whatever that means – but what does it all matter if I don't have a son? Sure, you're going to protect me from my enemies. That's great. Sure, you're going to give me Yourself. That's wonderful. But I want a son.”

Do you ever do that to God? How often do your prayers sound like this: “God, thanks for salvation through Jesus Christ, thanks for heaven, thanks for the Holy Spirit, thanks for everything. But I really need my house to sell. (I'm talking about my own recent prayer life here). And I really need this ache in my toe to go away. And my sister's dog is having surgery next week. I pray that goes well.” Maybe, like Abram's prayers, our requests are a little more pressing than dogs and big toes. Maybe we have serious financial trouble. Maybe we have serious health concerns. Maybe our marriage is falling apart. Maybe we just want to get married. Maybe we are married, but we want a child. Maybe we have a child, and now we are not so sure we want one. Maybe we want a job where people respect us.

God loves to hear all our needs, and all our wishes, and all our desires. And He loves to meet those needs. But sometimes, our prayers are weak because we focus on the dust and dirt of this world rather than the glorious riches God has already given to us. If you want your prayers to be powerful, focus not on what you don't have, but on what you already have in Jesus Christ as promised by God the Father. And don't just focus on what you have in Christ, focus on Christ. Your marriage will go through rocky times. But Jesus will never leave you. You children might rebel. But Jesus will never change. You may feel lonely and discouraged. Let Jesus tenderly comfort you. Whenever you face some need, the answer is not some gift, or some answer to prayer. The answer is Him.

God gives Himself to Abram just as Jesus gives Himself to us. Abram kind of pushes God aside and says “Yeah, but what about my son?” just as we sometimes push Jesus aside and say, “Yeah, but what about my health?” And thankfully, even in this, God is tender and loving. Full of compassion and mercy, abounding in love. In verses 4 and 5, God tells Abram that He has not forgotten about that promise, but will certainly bring it to pass. When God seems slow in keeping His promises, it is not because He has forgotten, but because we are impatient. Abram reminds God of the promise for a son, and God reminds Abram that this promise will be fulfilled. In verses 4-5, God doesn't berate Abram for brushing aside God's great promise of verse 1. Instead, God encourages Abram and said, “Yes, I haven't forgotten. I will keep that promise too.”

2. A Promise Believed (Genesis 15:4-6)

Genesis 15:4. And 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.”

In Genesis 15:3, Abram expressed his concern that someone other than his son would be his heir. According to the Hammurabi Code, if a man died without a natural heir, his possessions would go to the chief servant of his house, in this case, Eliezer of Damascus. Though Eliezer was probably a very good man, he was not a son. Abram wanted a son. And remember, God had previously promised Abram an heir, a descendant. So God says to Abram in verse 4 that Eliezer is not the heir God has in mind. The heir will come from Abram’s own body. And so Abram knows that He means it, God takes Abram outside and shows him the stars.

Genesis 15:5. Then 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.”

I have said it before, but I am a firm believer in reminders. While God does not forget His promises, we often do, and so it is a good practice to set up reminders for ourselves about the promises God has made to us, and we have made to Him. As we read through the Old Testament, we see the people of God setting up altars all over the place as reminders to future generations what God did at that place.

Often, as you read about these altars in Scripture, the text says that they can still be seen to this day. That means that when that portion of Scripture was being written, you could still go to that location, and see the altar still standing. But now, thousands of years later, those altars are no longer standing. Through neglect and the people of Israel being carried off into captivity, and then being scattered among the nations, the altars were torn down and worn away. But in verses 4-5, God sets up reminder for Abram and all future generations of a promise that God has made and will not renounce. God did this with Noah and the rainbow, but now God does it with Abram and the stars. God makes an altar of remembrance out of the stars.

I am not an astronomer. I can point out the Big Dipper and Orion’s Belt, and sometimes I can find the Little Dipper, but that is the extent of my knowledge. But every single time I look at the stars, the first thing that pops into my mind is God’s promise to Abram. I don’t know hardly anything about the stars, but in them I see God’s signature to Abram. The stars are a reminder, an altar, telling Abram and us that God keeps His promises.

Verse 5 is a promise that Abram’s descendants will be as numerous as the stars. Previously, God reminded Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the grains of sand. Scientists estimate that there are 2000 billion-billion grains of sand on the earth, and probably twenty five times as many stars. Obviously, since there haven’t been this many people alive on planet earth since the beginning, God is using a figure of speech to say that Abram’s descendants will be too numerous to count. And of course, according to Galatians 3:29, Abram not only has physical descendants according to blood, who are the Jews, but spiritual descendants according to faith, who are all believers. Together, these descendants are an astronomical number, and God says that the stars will remind us, will be a celestial reminder of this promise. Abram responds to God’s promise in Genesis 15:6.

Genesis 15:6. And he believed in the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

If Genesis 15 is one of the most important chapters in the Bible, Genesis 15:6 is the most important verse in this chapter, which makes it one of the most important verses in the Bible; definitely the most important verse in the Old Testament. Genesis 15:6 teaches that Abram was justified, he was declared righteous by God simply because he believed what God had said. Abram believed God, and God credited Abram with righteousness. Romans 4 makes it clear that this is when Abram was saved. Genesis 15:6 is Abram’s conversion. Prior to this, Abram was unsaved. It is here that he believed God, and God accounted it to him for righteousness.

This means that everything Abram did in Genesis 12, 13 and 14 was done as an unsaved person. What did Abram do? He took a step of faith by leaving Ur. He followed God in great obedience by leaving Haran and coming to Canaan. He worshiped God by building altars. Yes, there was that incident where he went to Egypt and lied about his wife, but even there, God protected and blessed Abram.

He stepped out in faith to recapture his nephew Lot. He worshiped God by tithing to Melchizedek. He was victorious over the temptation sent his way by the King of Sodom. He even talks and fellowship with God in the first part of chapter 15. But it is not until verse 6 that Abram believes God, and God credits Abram with righteousness. This means that as an unsaved person, Abram followed God, obeyed God, walked with God, talked with God, worshiped God, and tithed to God. Abram took great steps of faith. But he was unsaved. If it weren't for Romans 4 and Galatians 3, I would have assumed that Abram was saved back in Genesis 12, but both of those chapters very clearly indicate that he was justified when he believed God in Genesis 15:6.

Do not ever believe that a person is a Christian just because they look like a Christian, and talk like a Christian, and act like a Christian. It doesn't necessarily mean that a person is saved just because they quote Scripture, attend church, tithe, and raise their hands when singing praises to God, attend a Bible study, prays for an hour every day, teaches a Sunday school class and volunteers at the food bank. It is so easy to assume that such people are saved because they look saved. But Scripture is clear. We are not saved by works, no matter how wonderful and numerous they are. A person is saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

Now some people say, "Yes, but Abram didn't believe in Jesus for eternal life. He believed in God for numerous descendants." But when we search the Scriptures, we discover something else entirely. First of all, we do not fully know all the Abram knew and understood. He most likely knew the story of Adam and Eve and the fall into the sin. Ur, where he came from, was in the very region where it happened. He most likely knew about the Promised Seed who would crush the serpent's head.

Beyond even this, God promises Abram in chapter 12 that all the people of earth would be blessed through him. This can only be one thing – the Messiah would come through Abram. Maybe here in chapter 15 when Abram asks for a son, he is asking for the Messiah. We don't know that, but it is a possibility. So far, we do not have anything firm.

But when we take Romans 4 and Galatians 3 where Paul says that this is when he believed, we can be certain that this is when he believed, rather than some earlier time. But the real key to understanding what exactly Abram believed in John 8:56 where Jesus says, "Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." Bob Bryant writes, "Two thousand years before Jesus came, Abraham looked ahead in time and believed in the coming Christ for eternal life. Therefore, he was saved by faith alone in Christ alone."

What did Abram believe? Yes, he believed God's Word, but what specific truth from God did he believe? He believed in the coming Messiah, the Messiah that would come through him, for eternal life. It is at this point that God credited him with righteousness. Abram had lots of good works before he believed, and he will have more after. But you will notice in chapter 16 that one of Abram's greatest mistakes comes after he is justified. So just as works do not prove that a person is saved, so also big mistakes do not prove that a person is not saved. How is a person saved? By grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. This is a key truth throughout the entire Bible.

When you believe God's Word, specifically when you believe what it says about Jesus, that God gives eternal life to everyone who believes in Jesus for it, like Abram, you are declared righteousness by God. There is no other way to receive eternal life. Abram believed the promise, and so was justified. Of all the ways that God gives Himself to us, this is the greatest. Through our faith, His nature is given to us. His alien righteousness is imputed to us. God told Abram in verse 1, "I will be your great reward" and now Abram has received God's righteousness as part of that reward. No matter what happens in life, if we have Jesus, if we have God as our reward, we have everything – and more – than we need.

Julian of Norwich wrote this in the 15th Century:

*God, of your goodness give me Yourself;
For You are sufficient for me.
I cannot properly ask anything less,
To be worthy of you.
If I were to ask less,
I should always be in want.
In you alone do I have all.*

There has been a promise given, and promise believed, and now in verses 7-21, there is a promise guaranteed.

3. A Promise Guaranteed (Genesis 15:7-21)

Genesis 15:7. 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.”

God has made this promise to Abram before, but now He is repeating it a third time (12:7; 13:15-17). It is always nice to be reminded of God’s promises to us. This is one of the reasons why it is so important to be on a Bible study and Bible reading plan that allows the whole counsel of God to come before our eyes and entering our thoughts on a regular basis. It is encouraging to be reminded about God’s promises and blessings to us.

And though all God’s promises are important, and though not a single promise of God will ever be broken, we know that promises He repeats two or three times are the really important promises. This promise He gives to Abram is one of the most important promises in all of Scripture. Possibly because God has emphasized this promise over and over, Abram must sense the importance of this promise, and so in Genesis 15:8, Abram asks God why nothing is being done to keep this promise.

Genesis 15:8. And he said, “Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?”

Abram kind of says, “OK, God, you’re going to give me this land. But where’s the proof? Where’s the evidence? How might I know with certainty that I will inherit it?” A lot of people say that all we have to do is trust in the promises, and not expect God to give us answers. But I have found that God often loves to provide the answers as well. Amos 3:7 says that God does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His prophets. God is never offended when we ask “Why?” or “How can I know this is true?” He loves to give us the answers we seek.

God is a reasonable God, and He even invites us to come reason with Him. He has not given us in inconsistent, incoherent, contradictory set of beliefs. No, it is very logical, and can be thought through and defended by those willing to take the time to study and learn. Abram has been given this promise, and now he wants some evidence. I love what God does in verses 9-21.

Genesis 15:9. So 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.”

As soon as God began describing to Abram the animals Abram was supposed to gather, Abram knew what was going to happen. In that day, when you wanted to make a treaty, or make a binding oath with another person, you would gather the animals listed here, cut them in two, and then walk through the divided animals together. By doing so, you were saying that if either of you go back on your word, may you become like these animals. This was how they made binding agreements back then. A covenant made in such a way was deadly serious.

If Abram was living today, God would have said, “Get your lawyer, we’re going to divide him in two.” No, He would have said, “Get your lawyer, and a permanent pen, two witnesses, and meet me down at the

courthouse where they have a public notary.” This is how we make a public document binding today. We get witnesses. We get lawyers. We sign a document. It is sealed by a notary. This is what God tells Abram to prepare. So that is what Abram does.

Genesis 15:10. Then 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.

Once this was done, all Abram had to do was wait. How do I know Abram waited? Because of Genesis 15:11.

Genesis 15:11. And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

There are several things to recognize about this verse. First of all, Genesis 15:11 is telling us is that Abram had to wait a long time for God. Generally, it takes a vulture at least twenty-four hours to find a dead carcass because many of them rely on the smell of the gases that a decaying carcass produces. Most vultures, especially those of the Mid-East, will almost never eat a fresh carcass. Because their beaks are so soft, they must wait until the carcass begins to decompose. This probably wouldn't take too long under the scorching sun of the Middle East, but at least several hours. We know it was not more than a day because of what we read later.

So Abram gets everything ready just as God commanded. Then he waits. He twiddled his thumbs. He checked his watch. He stood up. He sat down. He paced around. He had done his part, but where was God? Had God stood Him up? Had God lied to Abram all along? These are probably the thoughts that ran through Abram's mind as he waited and waited upon God.

And so Genesis 15:11 is understood primarily in a physical sense, I think that spiritually, vultures were also raiding Abram's mind. It's like we read in Luke 8 and 13 about the birds of the air doing Satan's work. Here, the vultures are gathering, not only around the animals, but spiritually around Abram's trust in God. I know this has happened to you as it has happened to me. God tells us to do something, and so we do it, and then — nothing happens. We wait. We watch. We twiddle our thumbs. Doubts begin to creep in. “Maybe I misunderstood. Maybe I angered God somehow. Maybe God decided not to show up.” Watch out for these vultures of the mind. You must, like Abram, drive them away. You must, like Abram know enough about God, and His faithfulness to His promises to say, “I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded, that He is able, to keep that which I have committed unto Him against that day” (2 Tim. 1:12).

The final significant thing about verse 11 is that in it, many see a prophecy about God's promise to Abram. In Scripture, as I have already indicated, birds are often a symbol for God's enemies. And so some see in Genesis 15:11 a prophecy that many of God's enemies will try to snatch away the land that has been promised to Abram, and will try to keep God's promise from coming true.

Egypt did this by trying to keep the people of Israel from the land. Then the birds of Canaan tried to keep the people from entering the land. Then the birds of Assyria, Greece and Rome carried off the people from the land. The birds of Islam have cawed against the Jews, and today, the Arabs oppose their possession of Palestine. I think it is even interesting in this most recent agreement between the new Palestinian President Abbas and Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, the agreement is to give some of the land back to the Palestinian people. A bird of prey has landed again. For 4000 years now, the birds of prey have been landing. The descendants of Abram are weary from trying to fend them off. God has still not given them their land. He still, in their thinking, has not shown up.

But what we see in verse 12 is that when God shows up, Abram falls asleep; a troubled sleep. A deep, yet fitful, sleep.

Genesis 15:12. Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him.

This terminology is similar to what God did with Adam in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis 2:21, God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam so that God could take a rib from Adam's side and fashion a woman from it. There, God provided for Adam without Adam's help. Here, a similar thing is about to happen. Though Abram has prepared the animals for the covenant making ceremony, God causes Abram to fall into a deep sleep. What God is about to do, He is going to do by Himself, without any help from Abram.

The main thing that is different between this account at Genesis 2 is the horror and great darkness that falls upon Abram. I think this is what happened to the Jewish people. Jesus Christ showed up, and they were asleep, but it has been a fitful, horror-filled sleep. The prophets are full of prophecies about the terror and horrors that will come upon Jerusalem and Judea when their enemies gather around them to carry them off and steal their land. This is the kind of terror and horror comes upon Abram here. He is horrified that God might not show up to keep His promise.

The horror Abram goes through also reminds me of Christ. Matthew 27:45 says that as Christ hung on the cross, the sky was filled with darkness, and then the sin of the world was laid upon His shoulders. He who knew no sin, became sin for us. Can you imagine the horror Christ felt at that time? We are used to the feeling of sin. We are born with it. But Christ had never felt it. Never experienced it. The rot. The decay. The putrid filth of sin. And when it comes upon Him, He cries out, "My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?"

That is horror. Jesus and God the Father had an intimate connection, they were both persons of the Trinity. And now, Jesus has been forsaken by God because of sin. Darkness and horror. There is a wonderful picture of salvation in this passage. Abram believed God in verse 6. And then, he tried to make a covenant with God, but he wore himself out trying to keep the birds of prey at bay. But now, God has delayed too long, so that Abram can see that this is not a covenant between two parties. This is a promise from God to Abram.

But God has delayed in order to show Abram, and show the Israelite people, that it is not by their effort and their watchfulness that His covenant will be fulfilled. It is by His effort and His faithfulness alone that He will fulfill His promises to them. God explains all of this to Abram in verses 13-21. God first tells Abram that the birds of prey will take Abram's descendants away, but when the time is right, the people will come back into the land. This is what Genesis 15:13-16 are about.

Genesis 15:13-16. 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. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

This is a prophecy about the future. God tells Abram that his descendants will go to a land that is not theirs, and will be servants there for 400 years. When that time is up, the nation they serve will be judged. Abram's descendants will then come out of the land with great possessions. Before all of this happens, Abram will die in peace. Why is God telling Abram all of this? Because the promise of the land will not be fulfilled in Abram's time. Abram may be getting impatient to get some of the land that God has offered to him, but God says that the promise of the land will only be fulfilled with Abram's descendants, long after Abram is dead. Back up in verse 8, Abram was basically asking when he was going to get the land. God is now telling Abram that he won't get it – his descendants will. The reason for this is because the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. The Amorites is a generic term for all the people listed in verses 18-21.

A lot of people often make accusations against God and Israel when they enter into the land in the book of Joshua for killing the people who lived there. But as God reveals here, those who lived in the land were becoming more and more wicked every year. The destruction God brings upon them is just judgment for their sin. When Joshua and the Israelites enter the land, it is not filled with a bunch of innocent nations, but with sinful and wicked nations, full of idolatry and wickedness.

I do not think we can imagine how sinful and wicked they were. They were involved in orgies to worship Ashtaroah, and frying their babies in the red hot arms of Molech. When Joshua and the Israelites entered the land of Canaan, they weren't destroying innocent people, they were putting wicked people out of their misery. God gave them 400 years to turn away from their sin, but they only got worse. They were killing themselves and polluting the world, therefore God told Israel to destroy them.

But they have not become that wicked yet, and so God informs Abram that the promise of the land will be delayed and will only be fulfilled with Abram's descendants. Now, having explained this, God still hasn't answered Abram's question from verse 8, nor has God ratified a covenant with Abram by walking through the animal carcasses. But this is what He does in verse 17.

Genesis 15:17. 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.

The smoking oven and the burning torch symbolize God passing between the pieces. The most important thing to realize is that God walks through alone. Normally, both parties of the covenant would walk through together, showing that they both had responsibilities to keep in order to maintain the covenant. But when God walks through alone, He shows Abram that there is absolutely nothing Abram or his descendants have to do in order for God to keep this covenant.

It is a one sided covenant. God takes all the responsibility for fulfilling it upon Himself. No matter what Abram does or doesn't do from this point on, God will keep His promise. No matter what Israel has or has not done in history, God will keep His promise. There are many who say that God has abandoned Israel and His promises to her, and have transferred those promises to the church. But if this has happened, Genesis 15:17 is a lie, and God is a covenant breaker. He makes this covenant alone, and no matter how much sin Abram commits, no matter how rebellious Abram's descendants become, God will not, cannot, break this covenant with them.

One of the reasons I love this passage is because this is the way our salvation is in Jesus Christ. It is a one sided covenant. God asked Abram to bring the animals, which Abram did. But God walked through them alone. Similarly, God asks us to believe in Jesus Christ for eternal life. But God paid the penalty, bought salvation, and guarantees it all by Himself. He does not ask anything of us. He does not demand anything of us. Eternal salvation is an eternal, one-sided covenant which cannot be broken, or it makes God a liar and a covenant breaker.

Furthermore, not that there can be degrees of promises with God, but this promise He makes with Abram is based on the blood of bulls and goats, whereas the covenant God makes with us about salvation is based on the blood of Jesus Christ. Up to this point, the covenant with Abram, I believe, was conditional upon his obedience. But now that Abram has believed God, and God credited him with righteousness, the covenant is made unconditional and God guarantees its fulfillment.

So that Abram fully understands this, God tells Abram in verses 18-21 what He has just done.

Genesis 15:18-21. On the same day the Lord made 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, the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”

God explains to Abram the Eastern and Western boundaries of the promised land and reminds Abram once again that this land will be given to Abram's descendants. The boundaries are from the Nile to the Euphrates, a total of 300,000 square miles. At the peak of Israel's kingdom, during Solomon's reign, they only had 30,000 square miles, one tenth of what God promised them. People often ask what our view is on the situation in the West Bank. Well, the West Bank of the Jordan unquestionably belongs to Israel, but that isn't the problem. Biblically, the West Bank of the Euphrates belongs to Israel also, which is in

Iraq and Iran. So Israel isn't occupying Palestinian land. The people of Egypt, Palestine, Jordan, Iran and Iraq are occupying Israel's land.

And a time is coming, very soon I believe, when God will give all that land back to them. In fact, Jesus says in Matthew that the generation which sees the budding of the fig tree will see the end. Israel, the fig tree, budded in 1948. In Scripture, a generation is somewhere between 40 and 100 years. If we have understood prophecy correctly, we are close. God has promised it. It will come to pass.

God does it all. This chapter is about God doing it all. God does not meet us half way. God doesn't even meet us most of the way. God does it all. We do nothing. I hear a lot today, and in recent years, about making commitments to God. In men's groups, we hear a lot about being promise keepers, and promise makers. In evangelistic programs, we are instructed to tell people to commit their lives to Jesus, to give themselves to Him. In discipleship programs, we hear about making commitments and covenants with God.

But this passage reveals something else entirely. We aren't the promise keepers. God is. He makes the promises to us, and He keeps them all by Himself. We don't give ourselves to God. He has already given Himself fully and completely to us. We don't make covenants with Him. He makes covenants with us, and there is only one name to sign on the bottom – His.

Jesus says in Matthew 11, "Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest." There is no labor, no hard work, no effort involved. Paul writes similarly in Philippians 1 that He who began the good work will carry it on to completion. Philippians 2 says that it is God who works in you both to will and to do His good pleasure. God does it all in us and through us.

Are you still trying to keep the buzzards at bay? Just wait upon the Lord. Listen to the Lord. Trust in the Lord. Trust in His unconditional promises to you. Anything else will just wear you out and bring darkness and horror. Don't try to meet God half way. Let Him do it all in you and through you for His good pleasure.