

## Genesis 15

Genesis is the “book of beginnings,” and we are not finished with “firsts.” In this chapter, we have the first *dialogue* between God and man after Cain killed Abel. Up to this point, God has spoken and man has obeyed. Now, God re-enters into a relationship with man, Abram, such that they carry on a conversation. This is also the first time the word “peace” is found in Scripture (15:15). God renews His promise to Abram (cf. 12:1-3) about having children and inheriting the land of Canaan. In this chapter, God enters into a covenant with Abram just as He had done with Noah (6:18; 9:1-7).

### TRANSLATION - 15:1-9:

**1** After these things, there was a word of Jehovah to Abram in a vision saying, "Do not fear, Abram. I, myself, [am] a shield to you. Your reward [is] to increase greatly." **2** Abram said, "Lord Jehovah, what will you give to me? Even I, myself, am walking childless and a son of an inheritance of my house he is of Damascus, Eliezer." **3** Abram also said, "Behold, to me you have not given seed and behold the son of my house, he will inherit from me."

**4** Behold, the word of Jehovah [came] to him, saying, "This one will not inherit from you. Only who will go out from with you, that one will inherit from you." **5** He brought him outside and said, "Gaze, please at the heavens and count the stars if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So will be your seed."

**6** So he believed in Jehovah and He considered him righteous.

**7** And He said to him, "I [am] Jehovah who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give to you this land [for] you to possess it."

**8** And he said, "Lord Jehovah, How will I know that I will inherit it?"

**9** Then He said to him, "Take to yourself a heifer, three years old, and a she-goat, three years old, and a ram, three years old, and a dove and a pigeon."

### WORDS:

“Vision” (verse 1) is not used often (here, Num. 24:2, 16; Ezekiel 13:7). It comes from the word family dealing with prophets and seers. “Shield” is used 60 times. In a historical context which includes frequent battles, we would expect to find its frequent use, but there are passages (see below) which refer to God as His followers’ “shield.” The word “reward” (28 times; the verb, 20 times) can refer to a soldier’s plunder (Ezek. 29:19), a wage or fee.

“Lord” (verse 2), used with “Jehovah”, is only found here (vs 2, 8) in Genesis. Most often it is “Jehovah God.” “Childless” comes from the verb meaning “to be stripped bare” or “naked.” In the context of this passage it means to be stripped of children, which is how it is used also in Lev. 20:20-21 and Jer. 22:30. It was generally considered a judgment from God to not have children.

“Son of inheritance” is not found elsewhere. There is a play on the sounds of “inheritance” (*meshec*) and “Damascus” (*Damesec*). “Inherit” (verse 3, 4, 8) is not found much outside of this context in Genesis (21:10; 22:17; 24:60; 28:4) but very frequently in Deuteronomy. In all, the verb is found 232 times and the noun, “inheritance,” is found 14 times. “Gaze” (verse 5; 70 times) can suggest a brief glance or a constant stare. “Count” is used 107 times. “Stars” (37 times) was found back at the creation. “Believed” (verse 6) is the first occurrence of this eminently biblical word. The verb (97 times) can mean “to be reliable, trustworthy, or faithful, to believe, have trust in.” The abstract noun “faith” can be found 127 times. The abstract noun “faithfulness” can be found 49 times and the exclamation “amen” can be found 30 times. It is seen, therefore, that “amen” is related to the verb “I believe.” “Considered” (124 times) means to “think, devise, plan, value, esteem, or reckon.” “Righteous” was first seen in the account of Noah; it means to be “right” in the eyes of God. That implicitly denotes the forgiveness of sins. The whole word family is found a total of 529 times. “Possess” (verse 7) is the verb to “inherit” used earlier.

### ARCHAEOLOGY:

Abram had been in the area of Damascus in the previous chapter, but we do not know where Abram obtained this servant or his family. For “Ur of the Chaldeans,” see comments on 11:28, 31.

### COMMENTS:

The “word of the Lord came” is a frequent phrase (102 times) to denote God revealing His will to a prophet and Abram is considered a prophet in 20:7. The phrase is used in Genesis only in this context (verses 1, 4). God has not spoken since 13:14-17. We do not know how much time has elapsed since then. This word for vision is not found frequently in the Pentateuch (Num. 24:4, 16; cf. Ezek. 13:7), but the concept is also associated with God’s revelation to a prophet. We are not sure if the entire chapter falls under the category of “vision” or if only the first few verses, perhaps through verse 4 or 6, are the “vision.”

God commands Abram not to be afraid (cf. Isaac in 26:24 and Jacob in 46:3). There are several contextual reasons why Abram could be afraid, such as having just fought a war, or having turned down the king of Sodom’s gifts. In verse 12, terror will fall on Abram as a part of this covenant ceremony and, perhaps, God is preparing Abram for this experience. Otherwise, the likely reason is because he is still childless and he fears dying childless (cf. Num. 27:4). God tells Abram that He is Abram’s “shield” (a related word with “deliver” in 14:20). God will protect Abram and give Abram a “great reward.”

Abram’s hesitancy comes through as he brings up his childlessness and his statement in verses 2-3 is one of exasperation. The one who is currently in line to receive Abram’s wealth is the servant from Damascus, Eliezer. He is referred to as “son” only in the sense of belonging, if not affection. Clearly he was a servant, not a physical son. There are several men named Eliezer in the Bible, but this is the only reference to this individual. Having an “adopted” servant to inherit one’s estate reflects the culture of the Middle Bronze Age, according to the Nuzi tablets.

God assures Abram that one will come from Abram’s own seed who will inherit the promise. Count the number of times “seed” occurs in this context. That was encouraging, no doubt, even if it heightened Abram’s questions. Jehovah God takes Abram outside, whether literally or in the vision, and shows him the stars in the sky. God had already promised Abram that his seed would be as numerous as the dust of the earth (13:16; cf. 28:14). Now he says the seed will be as numerous as the stars in the sky (cf. 22:17; 26:4). He will also use the sand of the seashore as a simile (22:17; 32:12). Jehovah God challenges Abram that if he could not count the stars, so he would not be able to count his seed! Another encouraging statement, to be sure!

Then the fundamental message of the Bible when it comes to man’s response to God’s promises is found in 15:6: Abram believed God and God considered Abram “righteous” on that account. In fact, this is the first use of the verb “to believe” or even the word family (such as “faith”). The verb is only used twice more in Genesis (42:20; 45:26). Abram has already shown himself to be an obedient servant. Now, when it comes to having children, despite his advanced age and the advanced age of his wife, Abram trusts God’s message. Based on that faithful walk, God considered Abram right in His eyes.

Jehovah God reminds Abram that He was also going to give him the land; that’s the reason God brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans. Abram wishes to know more assuredly that God would fulfill His promise. So in verse 9, God prepares Abram to make a covenant with him. These animals, based on the later Law of Moses, were clean animals and, at three years old, mature animals.

### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - Remember, Abram came out of a pagan environment (cf. Josh. 24:2) and was 75 years old when God first spoke to Him. This whole “relationship with God” thing is new to Abram. God promised him years ago that he would have a family but, he

does not. And, up to now, he has no permanent home either. Abram has been doing what God tells him to do, but so far, God has not given what He has promised.

*Contemporaries in Moses' day* - Moses will often remind Israel of the promise of land which God gave to Abram (Exo. 6:4, 8; 13:5, 11; 33:1; Num. 10:29; 11:12; 14:23; 32:11; Deut. 1:11; 10:22; 28:62). Moses will also remind Israel that God promised the nation would be numerous (Exo. 32:13). Moses refers to God as the shield of Israel's help in Deut. 33:29.

*Later Hebrew writers* - Speaking of God as a "shield" is also used in 2 Samuel 22:3, 31 and in the book of Psalms to illustrate God's ability to defend His people (3:3; 28:7; 33:20; 84:9-11; Prov. 30:5). Israel's numbers being as many as the stars of heaven is referred to in Neh. 9:23; as many as the sand of the sea in Jer. 33:22; 1 Chron. 27:23. David will reflect Genesis 15:6 in Psalm 32:2, praising God for not "counting" his iniquity against him.

*NT writers* - The promise of land given to Abram sets the tone for Stephen's review of Israel's history in Acts 7:2-4. Abram's faith in Jehovah God is a paradigm for Christians' faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 4:3, 9, 22). "Seed" could be collective or an individual. Paul will show in Galatians 3:16 that the "seed," ultimately, is an individual: Jesus Christ. As in Romans 4:3, in Gal. 3:6, Paul will quote Gen. 15:6 as the paradigm for faith in Christ. Also, as with Abram, faith in God is linked to obedience to God's commands (James 2:20-24).

#### TRANSLATION - 15:10-16:

**10** So he took with him all these, and he cut them in half and gave each his cut, to meet another and the birds he did not cut. **11** The bird of prey came down on the carcasses and Abram sent them away. **12** And it happened the sun to set and a deep sleep fell on Abram and behold, terror [and] great darkness was falling on him.

**13** And He said to Abram, "Knowing, you will know that a stranger will be your seed in a land not theirs and they will serve them and they will oppress them four hundred years. **14** But even the people whom they serve, I, myself, am judging and afterward, they will go out with great possession. **15** But you, yourself, will come to your fathers in peace. You will be buried in a good old age. **16** And the fourth generation will return here because not complete the wickedness of the Amorites until now."

#### WORDS:

"Each" (verse 10) is literally "man." "Stranger" (verse 13) is found 92 times. Moses' wife, Zipporah, named their son "Gershom," because she was a sojourner ("stranger") in a foreign land. "Oppress" (79 times) can mean "be humbled, afflicted, or even violated" (see Gen. 34:2). "Peace" (verse 15; 237 times) means more than peace as we commonly think of it. It also carries the ideas of security, satisfaction, and fulfillment. The verb means to "be complete, made whole." "Buried" is used 133 times. "Old age" (19 times) is actually one word. "Here" (verse 16) and "now" are the same word; the first is used in a spatial sense, the latter, in a temporal sense. "Wickedness" (23 times) is one of the synonyms for sin. It was first met in the account of Cain (4:13; see comments there). The concept suggests something that is crooked, twisted, or perverted.

#### GRAMMAR:

"Knowing you will know" (verse 13) translates the Hebrew emphatic grammar, which is an infinitive absolute followed by the same verb in the imperfect tense.

#### ARCHAEOLOGY:

The "Amorite" is used as a figure of speech to include all the nations which inhabit the land which God is going to give to Abram's family; see 15:18-21.

#### COMMENTS:

As a part of this covenant ceremony, Abram cut the animals in half, except the birds (cf. Lev. 1:6, 14-17). We learn from ANE texts and Jeremiah (34:18-20) that in this process, each

person in the covenant would walk between the two halves of the animals, apparently symbolizing that what had been done to the animals would be done to them if they were to break the covenant. Here, apparently, it is only God who moves between the animals, promising Himself to fulfill His word to Abram. Driving the birds away, whether literally or in the vision, could refer to driving away danger or enemies who might try to inhibit the covenant's fulfillment. We cannot be sure about the significance of the action. We should note that this act is not a sacrifice; it is not an act of worship. It is a covenant ceremony.

The deep sleep that fell on Abram is similar to what happened to Adam (2:21) and the fear is similar to the emotions others have felt in the presence of God (3:10; 28:17; Exo. 3:6; 20:18).

In this state of mind, God predicts Abram's family will be slaves in a foreign land for four hundred years, a rounded number (cf. Exo. 12:40), or four generations. But, God would not allow that nation to escape His divine judgment. When the "iniquity" of the Amorites was complete, which would happen in the days of Joshua, then God will judge those nations. Let us emphasize here that the death of the Amorites, Canaanites, and all the other nations exterminated by Joshua and the Israelites was judgment by God for their sin (Lev. 18:1-30; 20:1-26; Deut. 9:4-5; 18:9-14; Amos 2:9). They were guilty of idolatry, child sacrifice, religious prostitution, and other wickedness. All nations deserve to be judged for their sins. The fact that Israel was not exterminated was simply an act of grace on God's part (Deut. 9:6-7), since He had a promise to fulfill and a Son to send to earth.

The four generations could be numbered from Levi, through Kohath and Amram, to Moses (Exo. 6:16, 18, 20). Indeed, when the fourth generation came along, God brought Abram's family out of slavery, just as He promised here! God is the "God of the 4th generation!"

Yet God also promises Abram that he will die in peace at a good, old age. Abram never fights another battle and will live to be 175 years old with at least eight children (Gen. 25:2, 7).

#### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - God shares with Abram information about his future and the future of his family, his nation. We do not know if this paragraph happened in reality or if it was in a vision, but Abram is fearful of what is happening, as we could understand if he had never had such a vision of Jehovah God before! Despite the fact that his family will be slaves for four hundred years, or four generations, before they dwell in the promised land, Abram himself will die in peace, at an old age. This was all intended to encourage Abram to keep trusting God as he waits for Sarah to become pregnant.

*Contemporaries in Moses' day* - This passage provided the theological foundation for Joshua and Israel's conquest of the land of Canaan. It was an act of judgment on a sinful group of people because, by that time, their iniquity was complete. In contrast to people like Rahab (Josh. 2:10-11), the rest of the nations did not fear God's work in Israel and refused to repent of their idolatry and sin. They deserved punishment from the holy God. By the same principle (cf. Deut. 29:22-28), Israel will be driven out of its land, into the arms of the Assyrians (in 722 B. C.) and of the Babylonians (in 586 B. C.).

*Later Hebrew writers* - Observe, relative to the dispossession of the land from the Canaanites, that Israel eventually succumbs to the same sins as those Canaanites: 2 Kings 21:1-11; Ezekiel 16:35-52; Dan. 9:1-14. During the return from exile, Nehemiah (9:7-8) reminds Israel that the land was given to them based on God's promise to Abram. The actions of Phineas in Numbers 25:6-13 will also grant him a state of righteousness in the eyes of God (cf. Psa. 106:30-31).

*NT writers* - Abram and Sarah are praised in Hebrews 11:8-16 for obeying when God commanded, not knowing where they were going, and stayed faithful to the end, even when they had not received the land. James will point out (2:22) that there are clearly two sides to "faith:" trust and obedience. Jesus will talk about the Pharisees "filling up" the sins of their fathers (Matt. 23:32).

### TRANSLATION - 15:17-21:

**17** Then the sun was setting and darkness was and behold the oven of smoke and the torch of fire which crossed between these pieces. **18** In that day, Jehovah cut with Abram a covenant, saying, "To your seed I give this land from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the Euphrates River: **19** The Kenites and Chenizzites and the Chadmonites, **20** The Hittites, and Perizzites, and Rephaim, **21** the Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites."

### WORDS:

Again, "setting" (verse 17) is the verb "to come." "Oven" (15 times; of smoke - 25 times) would probably have been a dome-shaped structure, maybe 2-3 feet in diameter. "Torch (14 times) of fire" (376 times) translates two words, the first meaning "torch" or "lightning" (see Exo. 20:18), the second simply means "fire." "Cut" (verse 18) is a verb sometimes used with the word "covenant" (for this word, see comments on 6:18; 9:9-17), which pictures the ceremony seen here, of cutting animals in two.

### ARCHAEOLOGY:

The river of Egypt as far as the Euphrates River (verse 18) will become the boundary of Israel at its greatest extent under David and Solomon but, because of disobedience to God, Israel will not be able to hold the land. Among the groups of peoples are the Kenites (12 times; Num. 32:12; Josh. 14:6, 14), Chenizzites (4 times; same texts as Kenites), and Chadmonites (10 times; verse 19), Hittites (46 times), Perizzites (23 times), and Rephaim (19 times; Deut. 2:10-11, 20), Amorites (87 times), Canaanites (73 times), Girgashites (7 times), and Jebusites (41 times; verse 21; who built Jerusalem, Joshua 15:8). These are all the inhabitants of the land of Canaan. There are twenty-seven such lists in the OT with the number of people groups ranging from two to twelve. This is the only list that contains ten names and the only one which mentions the Kenites, Kenizzites, and Kadmonites.

### COMMENTS:

The oven of smoke and torch of fire appear to have been provided by God as He "passes" between the pieces of animals. This seems to suggest that God is obligating Himself to this covenant with Abram. The four elements ("oven, smoke, torch, and fire") are brought together again when God reveals Himself to Israel at Mount Sinai (Exo. 19:18; 20:18). This whole covenant ceremony was instigated when Abram asked how he would know that he would inherit that land (verse 8). God is promising, on oath, that He will fulfill that promise. Remember, neither Abram nor anyone else living at that time had much experience or relationship with Jehovah God.

So Jehovah God "cut a covenant" with Abram and promised the land where he was, referring to its geographical boundaries and the land which was currently inhabited by other nations. The boundaries would be from the "river of Egypt," not the Nile but the Wadi el-Arish to the Euphrates River (Num. 34:5; Joshua 15:4). These were the greatest extents of the land of Israel, controlled by Kings David and Solomon (1 Kings 4:21; Joshua 21:43-45; 23:14; 24:11). Israel would not inhabit the entire land for her entire existence because Israel had trouble following in the faithful obedience of Abram, their father.

### APPLICATION:

*Contemporaries in the text* - Since God wants to test Abram's faith, the most He can do is engage in a covenant ceremony and obligate Himself in the cultural terms Abram would recognize. God has been as explicit with Abram as He could be, explaining the boundaries of the land Abram's family would receive once that four hundred year period is finished.

*Contemporaries in Moses' day* - The Israelites in Moses' and Joshua's day know that God had promised Abram the land which He is now commanding their generation to conquer. Their sins have brought this judgment and God has explicitly named the nations which were to

be driven out. If they were to follow in Abram's footsteps, then by faith they would obey God's commands. They were God's instruments in the judgment of the Canaanites.

*Later Hebrew writers* - Due to unfaithfulness, Israel did not drive out all the inhabitants, but Solomon makes them servants (2 Chron. 8:7-8).

*NT writers* - Since Canaan, the Promised Land, served no further purpose once Jesus came to earth, it has no place in Christian teaching or NT doctrine.