

Genesis 15

This chapter is the most important chapter in Genesis in terms of the Abrahamic tradition. Though Abram has left his homeland based on the promises of God, the formal covenant between God and Abram has not yet been signed, sealed and delivered. This is what takes place in this pivotal account.

The story opens with God addressing Abram in a vision. God tells Abram not to be afraid for God is with him. This statement seems to be meaningless since Abram has no offspring and will have to give all that he has received from God, not to an heir, but to a slave. In other words, God has not fulfilled God's promises of land (it still belongs to others) and children (Abram has none). God's response is that the slave will not be Abram's heir, but Abram will have a child with Sarai. The proof of this promise comes when God invites Abram outside and asks him to look at the stars in the sky. God promises that Abram's descendants will be as many as the stars. Though this may seem an odd thing to promise (after all there are many stars), it is a reminder to Abram that if God can create that many stars, then God can create that many descendants. Abram's response this time is belief.

This belief is described in one of the great passages of scripture. *"Abraham believed, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness"* (vs. 6). This passage lies at the heart of both the Apostle Paul's theology and our Reformed tradition. That is, belief, and not ritual, is what puts us in right relationship with God (which is what righteousness is). This is a person's ability and willingness to trust in the gracious gifts of God, create a new and life-giving relationship. When Abram believes God, this creates a new reality in which life is seen not through the lens of what is, but through the lens of what can be because of the promises of God.

This new relationship is then sealed in a ritual ceremony of covenanting. The act of creating a covenant (perhaps see it as a contract) always includes a ritual component. One of the most ancient is based on the Hebrew language of covenant making, which is to "cut a covenant." This cutting of a covenant involves the literal cutting of animals in two, then having each side agree that if either of them violates the covenant, what happened to the animals will happen to them. We see this in Abram's cutting animals in two, and then in God, as represented by a flaming torch, passing between the pieces, as an act of promise making. This covenanting ceremony ends with God once again promising the Land.

The covenanting ceremony is separated by God's explanation of why it will take so long for Abram's offspring to inherit the land. It will take some time because his descendants will end up in Egypt as slaves for four-hundred years. They will be aliens in another land before they can return and inhabit the land of promise.

Reflection: As we have noted before, God is a covenant making God. God is not a capricious God who is kind or cruel depending on what side of the bed God gets up on. God is a God who has a plan for the restoration of humanity and works toward this restoration by making and keeping promises. The preferred response from human beings to these covenant promises is faith. We are to believe that God can and will do what God has promised to do. In so doing we enter a loving and trusting relationship with God. This relationship changes our perspective on life, from one of fear and doubt, to one of faith and hope. We can become those who are "not afraid."

Questions:

1. When did you first believe in God and the promises God made? What was that like?
2. What are some of the promises of God that you hold on to?
3. How has God been faithful to you in the face of tough times?