

**2020: The Global Year of the Bible**  
**A Lamp and a Light, Part 2**  
 Gary Rebok  
 (Genesis 15:7-21)

This morning as we continue through the book of Genesis and readings from chapters 15 through 28, we continue to build on the trials of faith. As we will see in today's message, God is on a mission to use Abraham as a model for his people in the "way of the Lord," obeying his commands and reflecting God in human life. The narratives of Genesis generally reflect on faith within history not so much based on any one historical event, but the telling of a single family's roaming journey in a time and place that does not yet correspond to the religious customs of Mosaic worship or cultural practices. Whether you consider yourself a Christian reader, or just a novice and confused reader of the Old Testament, and specifically for today's message, we will find an exception in Abraham's call from the Lord who faced the crisis of faith and obedience in the shadow of God's blessing. God's covenanting with Abram focuses on the benefit of continuing education for future generations rather than the present hunger of Abraham, who attempts to take matters into his own hands instead of trusting in God. One thing I want to clarify; at this time, Abraham's name had not yet changed from Abram.

However, embedded in the reading of this week's biblical stories are many judgments condemning immorality. The harmful consequences of deceitful doings and deception committed in the outcome of sin commission a recurring realization of the forgiving grace of our Lord that first occurred in the Garden of Eden and continuing in the lives of the earliest saints. The apostle Paul would later comment on the moral failures committed by the descendants, writing, "Where sin increased, grace increased all the more" (Rom. 5:20). But today, we will dig deeper into God's Covenant with Abram in chapter 15 of Genesis, an unusual experience surrounding the covenant oath, but first, let's offer our thanks to God in prayer.

For many, the Old Testament appears challenging to understand. And for many, the Old Testament is discarded to the back of the reading list. As Meagan and I met this week, the gladdening of my heart jumped with joy as I heard of the chatter surrounding Monday's community meal regarding questions around the daily readings volleying back and forth between those involved. I've always felt this sense, and maybe more so these days that pastors and or seminarians like myself have all the answers to biblical texts. What I say to you is that in many ways, the Bible is complicated. I know that for myself and hopefully not speaking out of context for Meagan that we are always seeking answers just like yourselves. The education process guides us toward a basic understanding of the Bible, but also toward how to study, and where to look for clues to answer our questions. Ultimately, our goal is to lead you toward a better understanding of the Bible and how to live your life under the blessings of God and to continually seek Jesus in everything we read. So, let's dig into today's text.

Beginning in Genesis 15, the Scriptures give us a clearer picture of understanding what the Bible is all about; the covenant oath of God to be in an intimate and permanent relationship with his people. What is essential to know about biblical thought and God's presence in a covenantal relationship is first its uniqueness and secondly, the mystery behind it. God tells Abram that He will bless him, but Abram is doubtful and asks God; How do I know to be sure? Let's look at the story beginning at 15:7. "He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." "But Abram said, "Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" "So the LORD said to him, "Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon." "Abram brought

all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. <sup>12</sup>Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. <sup>13</sup>As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. <sup>14</sup>Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there. "But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward, they will come out with great possessions. "You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age. "In the fourth generation, your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." <sup>15</sup>When the sun had set, and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. <sup>16</sup>On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants, I give this land, from the Wadi<sup>u</sup> of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates— <sup>17</sup>the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, <sup>18</sup>Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, <sup>19</sup>Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites." Here ends the reading of God's Holy Word.

If we go back and find where Abram brought the birds and the animals, cut them in half, there could be confusion amongst us because the customs are distant and strange to us. But you see, Abram was not confused. In those days, when a lord wanted to make a covenant with a lesser servant, that's how the process took place. When the animals were slain and the pieces arranged, and when the servant took the oath of loyalty to the lord, the servant did so as he was walking between the halves, acting out the curse of the covenant. The servant was swearing loyalty, virtually saying if I do not keep my end of the promise, may I be cut into pieces like this. So Abram figured he was arranging for a covenant ceremony, thinking that God would ask him to walk through the halved pieces since a lord would never do so. So he waited and waited and as verse 17 says until incredible darkness came down.

In the Bible, the word "darkness" generally means judgment. So amid the "darkness" was God. Here God appears as a smoking fiery pillar just like He did at Mt. Sinai later on, and God passes through the pieces as He promised to bless Abram. Now Abram seemed a bit startled just as every commentator has tried to come to grips with Genesis 15 because God is promising to die if He doesn't bless him. God is promising to be torn to pieces if he doesn't bless Abram. The concept of God dying sounds mind-boggling, but that's not all. Abram had two shocks, the first that God went through the pieces, and the second shock was that God never called Abram to walk through the parts himself.

The ceremony ended and written in chapter 15, verse 18, "and therefore, God made a covenant with Abraham and said, 'To your descendants, I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates.'" It was unheard of for God to take the oath and not the servant. Do you know what that meant? Abram knew what it meant but he didn't see how it could be that God was making the promise for both of them, taking the curse on for both of them. It also meant that not only would God be torn to pieces if He did not keep the promise, but He would be torn to pieces if Abram did not follow the promise. God says to Abram, to us, and to the world, I will bless you no matter what, even if my immortality must become mortal. Also, if my glory must be drowned in darkness even if I become torn to pieces, and He was.

Centuries later, darkness came down at Mount Calvary. Amid the darkness was God in the person of Jesus Christ, literally being torn to pieces with nails, spears, and thorns. Why? He was taking the covenant curse. The apostle Paul said Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us. He redeemed us so that the blessing given to Abram could come to us all through Jesus Christ. Do you know what this means? It means the answer to all the riddles.

In Romans 4, Paul asked, "What then shall we say that Abraham our forefather discovered in this matter?" The answer; God is both just and justifier for those who believe and trust in Him. So I ask, are the blessings of God both conditional and unconditional? The answer is YES!!! Why? Because on the cross, Jesus Christ fulfilled the conditions of the law so that God could love you and me unconditionally. With his perfect life, Jesus Christ completely fulfilled the terms of the covenant and he earned the blessing. With a sacrificial death, Jesus fulfilled the curse of the covenant, and that leaves the blessing for you and me and anyone who lifts the empty hand of faith and asks for it. Jesus Christ fulfilled the conditions of the covenant so that we can be received unconditionally.

Years ago, and the first time learning Old Testament theology, the gospel became much clearer as the explanation of this text came into fuller light. Hopefully, prayerfully, today's reflection on this text will lead you to a greater understanding of the gospel and God's love. We all fail at one time or another, but the law of the covenant means there is no condemnation when we are in Christ Jesus because our obedience is a way to say thank you to God.

I love Pastor Tim Keller's analogy of a covenant relationship and quoting what he said, "When two people come together to get married, it's scary. Both people say 'I'm going to give everything to you. I'm going to sacrifice everything for you', but how do you know, and how do they know that to be true about you, and you're not sure you will follow through. It's scary to get married. But when Jesus Christ calls you into a covenant relationship, He is saying I want to marry you. I want you to come into a legally binding relationship and you don't have to be uncertain because I've already taken the plunge of love. I've already died for you."

So as we come close to the end of today's message, I want you to take hold of this. When we enter into a covenant relationship with God, accountability is not such a horrible thing. Throughout the Bible, people who have entered into a covenant relationship with God, and you find them in covenant relationship with other believers - and that's the beauty of coming together as the church. Hopefully, we do not come to church as a consumer, but as people who are serious about God, accountable to each other and give support in every situation. Covenant theology is real. The living God is a vast power and supposedly, you find Him, or maybe He sees you. You cannot put Him off, for when the real and present world fades away and the immediate becomes unavoidable, the foretaste of future blessedness will become real when the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven from God. Amen