

Out of all the billions of people God created, and out of all those he called to serve Him, he refers to Abram in one very special way—friend. As Abram's friendship with God grew, his trust grew too. With every difficult circumstance Abram faced, he became more and more comfortable sharing his heart with God. We read how God and Abram had a conversation. We read how God and Abram listened to each other. And as God's friend, Abram believed God and trusted what he said because that is what friends do.

Every one of us faces difficult circumstances, just as Abram did. Disappointments, heartbreaks, grief, and injustice come at us. That's life. What can we learn from Abram's story about handling difficult circumstances? How can we master them? How can we live so that they don't master us?

Abram faced difficult circumstances with a belief in God, and that is very good. But it hit me this week that there was more to it. When Abram faced his difficult circumstances, he didn't just believe in God; he believed God.

A person whose life is shaped by a general belief in God can look quite different from a person whose life is shaped by believing God in the middle of a difficult circumstance. In this message, we will look at an amazing friendship in Chapter 15. I hope each of us is challenged to seek out a life of believing God in the middle of every difficult circumstance we face.

For us to better understand chapter 15, it's important that we take a quick look back at chapter 14. In chapter 14, we can read that Abram led a heroic rescue operation. There were these four kings in Canaan who united together and went to war against five kings in Canaan. When we speak of kings in Abram's era, they were really like mayors of a city. They controlled a town. They would form coalitions and become nations.

So the four kings had been forcing the five kings to pay a tax. After a few years, the five kings didn't want to pay the tax anymore, so they fought against the four kings. The leader of the four-king coalition was a king named Kedorlaomer. The four kings routed the five kings and took hostages and all the spoils of war they could carry. Abram's nephew, Lot, who lived in Sodom, was caught in the crossfire of this battle and taken captive. Lot became a prisoner of war.

So what does Abram do? He took 318 men from his household and armed them with weapons, and said to them, "We are going to war, boys." Abram and his men raided the coalition of four

kings and defeated them. He rescued Lot and recovered all the spoils that the four kings had taken.

On his way back from the battle, Abram meets an unusual king named Melchizedek, who was the king of Salem. Melchizedek gives Abram bread and wine, and then Abram honors him by giving him money. If you do a deeper study about Melchizedek throughout the Bible, you see God wanted us to see him as a type or model of Christ.

Then Abram meets another king named Bera, who was the king of Sodom. King Bera wanted to give Abram money as a reward for winning the battle, which Abram declines. "I don't want it. I don't want anything from you." The reason he didn't take the reward is that Sodom, as we know, was a corrupt city, and Abram didn't want to get richer from a corrupt king. He was a smart guy. Abram knew that by taking the reward, he would then likely owe him later. So Abram meets Melchizedek, who was the king of righteousness, and then he meets Bera of Sodom, who we can call the king of rottenness. And that is so important as we begin chapter 15 with these words, "After this..."

"After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram" (15:1a). Why did God tell him not to be afraid? Because Abram was afraid. You don't walk up to someone and say, "Don't be afraid," if they are not afraid. God says all throughout Scripture to not be afraid. Genesis 15 is the first place he does this.

What is Abram afraid of? It's interesting, we hear stories of soldiers who mustered incredible courage and bravery in battle, and they came home changed. When the pressure of war is off, these brave soldiers become fearful and depressed, showing signs of PTSD. Maybe all the fighting and killing gave Abram a type of PTSD. But I think there is more to it.

When he refused the reward from the king of Sodom, he refused to make an alliance with Sodom. Alliances were formed to band together for protection against common enemies. So Abram had no earthly alliance, no earthly shield, and he took no earthly reward. But the Lord says...

I am your shield, your very great reward" (15:1b). God is saying, "I am the one who offers you protection, divine protection. You were right not to take dirty money from the corrupt king of Sodom. I am your reward. Your very great reward." So in a vision, God gives Abram a promise. And a conversation between friends begins. Abram answers God with a question.

But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.” vv. 2-3

“What are you going to give me?” Abram is asking God, “How can I have descendants? How can I be a great nation that you promised back in chapter 12 unless you let me be a father? I want kids! I want to celebrate Father’s Day! Lord, all this wealth and land is great, but how can I be this nation you promised me without kids? Really cool promises, Lord, but the clock is ticking. I’m 85 years old.” So God responds to Abram’s question with another promise.

God’s Promise to Abram Regarding His Descendants

Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” vv. 4-5

I don’t know about you, but when I am really down, I don’t find that a drawn-out explanation gives me hope. A promise from someone that I trust gives me hope. We live on promises, not explanations. And God knows what we need better than we do, so he gives Abram a promise.

Several years ago, when my youngest Holly was about eight, we were packing the minivan for a summer vacation to Yellowstone. Holly was in the backyard with some neighbor friends playing Helen Keller. She was running in the backyard with her eyes closed and smack, her face went right into the swing set post. So she’s crying, she’s bleeding, we thought teeth were loose, so we took her to the emergency room. Of course, she was afraid. So what did she need? She needed us to hold her, and tell her things were going to be okay. She didn’t need an explanation from the ER Doc like, “Okay Holly your lip is deeply split. See this needle here? I’m going to give you a shot and it will hurt but it will make it hurt a lot less when I stick this other needle into your lip several times to close the bloody wound. My little girl just didn’t need the blow by blow.

She didn’t need an explanation, she needed to believe us. She needed to trust us. She needed us to hold her and assure with a promise that everything was going to be okay. And she needed to never play Helen Keller while running again. And that is exactly what happened between God Abram in verses 4-5. God gives Abram a promise that everything is going to be okay.

God is loving and patient with Abram. He repeats the same promise he has been telling him for ten years. Isn’t it easy to forget the promise and stop trusting when circumstances come at you? God tells Abram that the promise will come from his own body. It reads like God is giving Abram a bit of the bird and the bees talk. “Abram, you will become a father and have a son

from your own seed.” Then he took him outside. And imagine a dark, clear middle eastern night with a sky full of stars. “Abram, check this out. See all those stars? So it will be with your kids. There will be so many that you won’t be able to count them.”

“Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness” (v.6). Read this verse again. It is one of the key verses in the entire Bible. Circle it. Underline it. Highlight it. Memorize it.

The word in Hebrew for believe is *Ah-Mein*. God made a promise, and the narrator says, “Abram declared *Ah-Mein*.” Abram said, “I believe that. I don’t just believe in God; I believe God.”

And this is so important because there is a result from Abram believing God. The result is that God counted Abram’s small act of faith as righteousness. We need to make a big deal out of this because the New Testament makes a big deal out of this. Three places in the New Testament—Romans 4, Galatians 3, and James 2—mention this conversation going on between God and His friend, Abram. Genesis 15:6 is the basis for one of our most important doctrines called Justification by Faith. The idea is that we are not able to be justified or made righteous by our works, our church attendance, or our sincerity. We are justified by faith alone. Look at what Paul says about this in Romans chapter 4.

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, discovered in this matter? If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about—but not before God. What does Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness. Rom. 4:1-3

Not just believe *in* God, but believed God

The word “credited” is an accounting term. The idea is that God credits our account to erase our sin debts. We are not able to erase our sin debt by racking up good works or because we are sincere. There just isn’t enough good in any of us to justify us before a holy God. And there just isn’t enough good in us to atone for our sins against God.

Do you know how a lot of people think they are saved? They see themselves like a frog trapped in a bowl of cream. The sides of the bowl are too slick to climb out to safety, so the frog paddles and kicks until he makes butter and climbs out to save himself. But that’s not the gospel. No one can paddle hard enough to make butter and save themselves. Salvation comes when we say, “Amen. I believe God.” I believe in Jesus Christ and put my faith in his righteousness to save me and lift me out of the bowl.

Imagine heaven full of people who think they are there because of their good works. Imagine the boasting. Now instead, imagine all of us in heaven glorifying God because we know that we are there because of God’s goodness, not our own. As Paul says later in Romans 10:13, *“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”*

To be a great nation, you need people and land. You need both. So we have seen God's promise to Abram regarding his descendants.

God's Promise to Abram Regarding the Land

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" (v. 7). Anytime God wants to underscore a point, He reminds us, "I am the Lord." It's like he grabs our face to get our attention. "Pay attention to who is talking to you. Pay attention to what I am saying to you." And then Abram asks another question.

"But Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" (v. 8). Sovereign Lord means Adonai Yahweh, master, and Lord. Abram's question of how can I know is a question all of us ask when our faith is wobbly. We know from verse 6 that Abram believes, but to ease Abram's wobbly faith, God formalizes his covenant. Look at what the writer of Hebrews tells us about this.

Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. Heb. 6:17-19a

If you want to keep a boat firm and secure in swift and dangerous currents, you drop anchor. But you can't just throw an anchor over and let it dangle. The anchor must drop all the way down and catch on the rocks at the bottom. The boat won't hold unless the anchor goes all the way down. What God is doing for Abram with this covenant is dropping the anchor of hope all the way down, so it attaches deeply in his soul.

Here in verse 9, we see God formalizing his covenant promise. It's elaborate and kind of bloody.

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. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. vv. 9-11

It's interesting that God didn't tell him what to do with the animals. Abram knew what to do. This was a well-known way two parties formed a serious agreement in Abram's day. Today, we type up a two-way contract and pull out pens and sign it.

In Abram's day, two parties slaughtered animals. The two parties would cut the animals in two and lay the parts across from each other like edges outlining a path between. The two parties would both walk through the split apart animals, and as they did, they would announce to each other the terms of their contract. The sacrifice of the animals and the shedding of blood would

remind them of the seriousness of the covenant. It would remind them that if one of them broke the covenant, their flesh would lay on the ground. Vultures would pick at their bodies. It was the normal way of making an oath in Abram's day. But Abram didn't figure on what was about to happen next.

So Abram waited for direction from God. He waited and waited. He was tired. It must be hard to cut cows in two. I'm sure that time dragged on. Maybe the meat started to smell. We hate waiting on God. We all have our preferred timetable. But we discover God has his own timetable. And sometimes, he lets it drag on and on until we are exhausted. After it is over, we look back and say, "Amazing! God's timing was so much better. If I would have had it my way, I would have really messed it up."

"As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him" (v. 12). A thick and dreadful darkness came over him. A darkness of heart and mind, overwhelming it just crushed him to the ground. It was horror, terror, almost in a trance because God was about to speak about dark things.

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." vv. 13-16

What happens next must have looked like a movie special effect. *"When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces" (v. 17).* As one commentator put it, "At that moment, suddenly a searing streak of lightning appeared and held its shape and spewed fire and smoke and sparks. It was the presence of God." And even more incredible, the presence of God passed through the pieces.

The same Hebrew word is used for both smoking and blazing. And the same word is used on the top of Mt. Sinai, where God came down on it, years later. His raw glory would sometimes look like a cloud and sometimes like fire.

Did you notice who didn't pass through the pieces? Abram. It wasn't Abram and God. It was God alone who passed through the pieces. This wasn't a two-way covenant. This is a one-way unilateral covenant.

So how might we apply this amazing story to our lives? When we struggle with our circumstances, we ask the same questions Abram asked; like Abram, we are called to believe God. Like Abram, we ask the same questions. Like Abram, we need the same hope as an anchor to our souls.

Our Questions to God

Lord, how can I know about you?

Do you hear what God is saying to you this morning? "I passed through the pieces. I promise to bless you. I promise to be your God and bring salvation to you. I promise to bring you the kind of hope that is an anchor for your soul no matter your circumstances. You have no reason not to believe me because of what I did for you. I don't lie. I don't make covenants I won't keep. If I fail to be your shield and great reward, may I be destroyed. May my body be ripped to pieces. May the vultures pick at my flesh."

Lord, how can I know about me?

"What if I let you down? What if I let myself down? I am afraid you will grow tired of me. I just know that you will ask me, "How many times will you let me down?" But here's the thing, Abram believed, and we need to believe too. God walked through the pieces alone. He did not ask Abram to do it. And he will not ask us to do it.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is a unilateral oneway covenant. God goes through the pieces alone. Our salvation in Christ is not a cooperative effort. It is not a partnership; it isn't God helping those who try to paddle cream into butter. God says I will take upon myself the curse of the covenant for both of us.

God is saying to us this morning, "I will bless you even if it means that I have to die." For God to keep his covenant, he did have to die. Jesus Christ died to break the curse of death and sin and to keep his covenant to make us his people so he could honor his promise to be our shield and great reward forever.

Lord, what are you doing?

The Lord is saying to us this morning, "You know that battle going on in your heart? Know that many of your problems come because you don't trust my promises. You don't let that anchor of hope go all the way down and attach to the rock of my promises."

Why are we worried? Because we don't trust his wisdom. Our anchor is not all the way down and attached to the rock of his promises. Why are we angry? Because we don't trust that God's justice will ultimately prevail. Our anchor is not all the way down and attached to the rock of his promises. Why do some of us feel so unworthy and unlovable? Because we don't trust that his love, grace, and forgiveness applies to us. Our anchor is not all the way down and attached to the rock of his promises.

Do you know why we disobey? Because we don't trust that God and his presence is better than anything we could possibly gain by disobeying. There is a fear of missing out. That if I trust God and take my anchor all the way down and attach to the rock of his promises, I will miss out on something the world promises to satisfy.

Go to God and ask, "How do I know?" Go to God and ask, "What are you doing?" God doesn't say, "How dare you question me." No. God responds to those who come with honest questions and doubts. In Mark 9, there was a man who went to Jesus because his son was sick and he was desperate. *The man cried out to Jesus, "I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!" (Mark 9:24).* And you know what? Jesus healed the man's son.

Folks, great faith starts by saying, "I don't have great faith right now in my circumstance." Tell him you don't have it. He won't club you. Cry out to Jesus if you are struggling to believe God and trust what he says. Cry out to Jesus if you don't trust yourself. Cry out to Jesus, and he will respond. Trust him because he walked through the pieces for you.

We have this hope that when we believe God, no matter our circumstances, our soul is anchored in the rock of God's covenant promises.

The chapter ends with these last four verses. Please indulge me as I end by reading these names. I spent time practicing to pronounce them right, so here goes.

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites." vv. 18-21

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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