

Lesson 33
Ratification of the Covenant

Genesis 15:1-21

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Genesis 15 is one of the key chapters in the whole Bible. In this section, God tells us about His official ratification of the Abrahamic Covenant, which is the basic covenant for all salvation and prophetic truths.

B. In this chapter, there are some definite firsts. This is the first time God is called Adonai Jehovah (Mighty Covenant-making God). The terms “believe” and “righteousness” first occur here, which lays the basis for the whole doctrine of justification by faith.

II. THE PROMISE OF GOD 15:1-7

A. The Divine Revelation (1:1). The Lord God appears to Abram in a vision. He told Abram not to fear for He was his shield and great reward. The “after these things” refers to what has happened in Abram’s life before this time.

1. Abram was not to fear his enemies. Abram and his small band of well-trained men had just routed Chedorlaomer and his armies. Perhaps Chedorlaomer would come again to attack Abram. God assures Abram that He is his shield and He would protect him.

2. Abram not to fear being childless. It had been about ten years since God made the promise to Abram that he would have a seed (son). Abram became worried for he was growing very old with no seed. But God promised Abram that He would be his reward, for the Bible often speaks of the coming of a child as a reward (Gen. 30:18; Psa. 127:3).

B. The Human Response (15:2-3). If God is to fulfill His Covenant, Abram must have a child. Abram believes God will reward him but he is becoming impatient and confused on how and when it will happen. Abram is somewhat discouraged and tries to give a human solution to a divine problem. Since he has no son, his best prospect at present is that his servant Eliezer will be his heir. Discoveries of customs in Abram’s day show that a childless couple could adopt a servant into the status of a son. He would qualify for the inheritance when the man died.

C. The Divine Assurance (15:4-5). God assures Abram that Eliezer is not the heir and the true heir of Abram will come out of his own body. Then God shows Abram the night sky and says that his seed shall be as the numberless stars of heaven. NOTE. God always keeps His promises.

D. The Human Reward for Faith (15:6). Abram believed in the Lord and His promise and Jehovah, on the basis of his faith, declared Abram positionally righteous before Him. Salvation is believing in God, who will carry out His promises, This is justification by faith (Rom. 3:24-25). Abram was not saved by works but by faith; yet he later proved the reality of his faith through his works (James 2:21-24). This section raises several theological problems:

1. How was Abram saved? Abram was saved by grace through faith in God who made him a promise. All believers of all time are saved by grace through faith on the basis of Christ’s death (Eph. 2:8-9 cf. Rom, 3:25). However, the object of faith changes due to the fact that New Testament believers have more revelation. Old Testament believers were saved by believing in God who would send His Son. New Testament believers are saved by believing in

the Son whom God has sent. NOTE: Surely the Abrahamic Covenant to “thy seed” included something greater than numerous descendants, for through “thy seed” all the families of the earth would be blessed (Gen. 12:3). The New Testament tells us that the Abrahamic Covenant is ultimately fulfilled through Christ (Gal. 3:16). While Abram did not understand all the details, he did grasp that the Abrahamic Covenant did include the promise of Messiah who would come. Old Testament saints were saved in God’s promise of Messiah who would come. New Testament saints are saved in the Messiah who has come. One looks forward to the cross, the other looks back to the cross.

2. When Abram saved? Was Abram a believer before this event took place in Genesis 15:6? Some have suggested that Abram was in a pre-salvation state before Genesis 15:6. He was in a condition similar to that of Cornelius before Peter preached to him (Acts 10). This view seems to be supported by James 2:21-24. The objection to this viewpoint is that Abram left Ur of the Chaldees by faith (Heb. 11:8). ANSWER: Abram was saved years before this time but Genesis 15 is the official enactment of the covenant and God wanted to drive home the concept of justification by faith to Abram. Also in Genesis 15 Abram’s faith is directly connected with God’s promise respecting his “seed” (15:18), which seed was Christ (Gal. 3:16). The faith, which was counted for righteousness, was the faith, which believed what God had said concerning the promised Seed. There is no justification apart from Christ (Acts 13:38-39).

E. The Divine Reassurance (15:7). God again reassures Abram that he and his seed will inherit the land (Gen. 12:1-3).

III. THE PERFORMANCE OF GOD 15:8-21

A. Desire for the Covenant (15:3). Abram asks God the question as to how he can be sure or certain that He would fulfill the Covenant. He believed but wanted confirmation for his belief. This is not an attitude of unbelief but one of “help thou mine unbelief.”

B. Preparation for the Covenant (15:9-12). God gives Abram confirmation by officially enacting the Covenant through a blood agreement. He has already initiated the Covenant with His servant (12:1-3), but He now formally ratifies it by an official-type ceremony as in some man-to-man agreements of that day. In a blood covenant, the contracting parties would agree on the terms of the covenant. After this, they would take an animal, slay it, divide the carcass down the backbone, and place the divided parts opposite each other on the ground so as to form a pathway between the pieces. The two would join hands, recite the terms of the contract, and walk together between the divided halves of the slain animal. It signified that they were bound in a contract until death, and if either violated the terms of the contract, his blood should be poured out as the blood of the animal had been poured out. Only death could break this covenant (Jer. 34:18-19). Abram took five clean animals, showing the importance of this covenant, divided them and placed them opposite each other. God was about to confirm His Covenant with Abram. At this point in the ritual, God caused a deep sleep to fall on Abram, so that he could not participate in the ritual personally.

C. Permanence of the Covenant (15:13-16). God assures Abram that He will surely bring his seed through to blessing even though there will be problems along the way. Here God makes a prophecy that Israel will be in bondage for 400 years in Egypt. This figure is a round number conception just as in Acts 7:4-6 and the 430 years in two other cases (Exo. 12:40-41; Gal. 3:17) is the precise total. God will judge Egypt and Israel will leave with great wealth. This prophecy had its fulfillment when Jacob took his family to Egypt around 1880 B.C. Abram is now told that he will not have a part in this return to the land but his seed will. Abram will die and go to be with his fathers (fathers of belief not physical fathers for they were pagans). But God assures him that in the fourth generation they will return. The Hebrew word “*dor*” can mean “century” as well “generation”; that is, after 400 years they would return to the land. The reason it would take 400 years is that the Amorites, who then possessed the land had to run their course of evil so they could be conquered.

D. Performance of the Covenant (15:17). In his sleep, Abram saw “a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces.” In the Old Testament the burning lamp or light signified the presence of the Shekinah Glory of God (Exo. 3:2-6; 13:21; 19:18). God Himself, without Abram, passed through the sacrifices. God, apart from Abram’s participation or promise, was binding Himself by a blood covenant to fulfill that which He had promised to Abram. God will perform every part of the Abrahamic Covenant.

E. Promise of the Covenant Reiterated (15:18-21): There are two major thoughts in this section: the seed and the land.

1. The Land. God now gives the boundaries of the land He promised to Abram and his seed. Scholars disagree as to the meaning of the “river of Egypt.” Some think it refers to the Nile River in Egypt or to the Wadi el-Arish, little seasonal river or wadi south of Canaan over by the Mediterranean seaboard. The boundaries of the land are clearly given. On the south, the Nile River or else Wadi el-Arish. On the east, the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia. On the west, the Mediterranean sea line. On the north, Syria and its area since it would fall within the scope of the eastern boundary. This raises the theological problem of the fulfillment of the land promise:

a. Fulfilled in Solomon’s time. Some say it was fulfilled in Solomon’s day and cite 1 Kings 4:21 and 8:65 to prove it. Solomon’s rule extended southward to the border of Egypt, though not all the way northward to the Euphrates. At best the conquered people in many areas simply paid tribute to Solomon. Besides Solomon never possessed the land forever.

b. Fulfilled in the Millennium. Ultimate fulfillment of the land promise has not been realized and will be realized in a future full possession by Israel in the Messianic Kingdom. The arguments for this position are:

- (1) The exact boundaries were not realized in Solomon’s day.
- (2) The prophets were still promising the land to Israel and Judah long after the death of Solomon and beyond the Babylonian Captivity (Amos 9:11-15); Ezek. 34:36-37; Jer. 32:40-41).
- (3) The prophets give other details that would require that Israel be active in the land of Palestine beyond the second advent of Christ (Zech. 14, nations going to worship at Jerusalem after Christ’s feet touch the Mount of Olives, v. 4, which is evidently the second advent, not the first).

2. The Seed. God says, “Unto seed have I given this land.” Abram’s seed would inherit the land forever. Abram most certainly understood this to be his physical seed, at least those of his physical seed who also believed God for the fulfillment of the Covenant. THEOLOGICAL PROBLEM: What relationship does a believing Gentile in the Church have to the Abrahamic Covenant? This was a problem in Galatia, for if a Gentile is justified by faith how is he related to the Abrahamic Covenant, which was primarily for the Jew? The Gentile is certainly related to the universal aspects of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gal. 3:13-14), where the whole world will be blessed through Messiah to come. In Galatians 3:16, Paul clearly states that the covenant was made to Abraham and his seed, and, by divine interpretation says this seed was Christ Himself. Christ is the one who will ultimately fulfill the Abrahamic Covenant and all who are related to Christ whether believing Jews or believing Gentiles will be blessed through Christ. Now notice in Galatians 3:29 it says, “And if (since) ye (believing Gentiles) be Christ’s then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise.” This says that believing Gentiles are a seed of Abraham. Gentiles are believing seed, not literal physical seed of Abraham. As believing seed in Christ, the Gentile partakes of the Abrahamic Covenant. We believe that he partakes of the universal aspects or the salvation aspects of the covenant. Believing Gentiles in the Church are citizens of Israel (Eph. 2:11), partakers of the covenants (Eph. 2:11 cf. Eph. 2:19-22), heirs together with Israel (Eph. 3:6), grafted into the covenants (Rom. 11:17), a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (1 Pet. 2:19) and part of the people of God (1 Pet. 2:10). NOTE. However, the believing Gentile may partake of more than just the salvation

blessings of the covenant In Gal. 3:16 the words “and his seed” are quotations from Gen. 13:15 and 15:15 in the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Old Testament). Paul quotes the Septuagint to retain the “and”. It is significant to note that in both of these verses in Genesis the promises are directly dealing with the land. The implication is that God promised the land to Abram and to Christ. God promises to give the land to Christ and indirectly to all who are His seed by faith. It seems as though the Church will in some way be related to the land promises of the Abrahamic Covenant, but they will be expanded to the whole world (Rom. 4:13).