

Faith's Reassurance

The Life of Abraham: Genesis 12-22 Sermon 4

Genesis 15:1-6

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A sermon given by The Rev. Dr. Samuel D. Ferguson, The Falls Church Anglican

I came close to drowning once. It was in a wave pool in Disney World. I was young and not a strong swimmer and managed to get out into the deep end on a raft. The waves were huge (at least to me), and I ended up toppling off the raft. A lifeguard dove in to save me. She put a flotation device under my arms, then put her arms around me and told me to lay back and stay calm. She assured me she would get us to safety, and I'd be okay. But we were in the deep end, and you couldn't exit this wave pool from the sides. We had a long way to go and the waves kept coming. I had trouble calming down. So, she kept reassuring me. With every wave or so, words of reassurance: "You'll be okay. We're getting closer to the shore. Everything is going to be okay." She kept reassuring me.

Reassurance is a word that means "the action of removing someone's doubts or fears." Reassurance has as its root the Latin word for *secure*. You might say that to reassure someone is to *make them secure, again*. "You are going to be okay," she kept reassuring me.

It's not just children that need reassurance. Anyone venturing through life—undertaking a career, a season of school, a marriage, the rearing of a family—may begin with a moment of clarity and confidence. But doubts come. Fears come. There are so many times when we need reassurance: *You're on the right path. You haven't blown it. You're going to be okay.*

As I've been studying the life of Abraham, I've been struck by how often he, too, needs reassuring. Again, and again God needs to remind Abraham of the very same promises He'd made to him at the beginning of his call. *Why?* Because Abraham—having set out on the life of faith—needs to be made secure, again.

I think this theme comes to the fore in Genesis 15:1-6. In verses 1-6, God doesn't announce anything about the future that Abraham hasn't already been told. What God does do, is *reassure* Abraham.

This unfolds in a dialogue that is not without moments of great tension. I'll walk us through it, helping us understand both *why* Abraham's faith needs reassurance, and *how* that reassurance works. We'll notice the (1) Need for Reassurance, (2) The Word of Reassurance; and (3) the Rest of Reassurance.

II. The Need for Reassurance

Our passage begins by asking us to look back, "*After these things* the word of the Lord came to Abram...." (Genesis 15:1). "These things" refers to the battle recorded in chapter 14. It will be helpful if we take a moment to recount these events.

We spent several weeks in the first episode of Abraham's story—recorded in Genesis 12—where God calls him, and Abraham goes. Much has happened since then. Two things of note: In chapter 13, "strife" develops between "the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and Lot's" (Genesis 13:7) and,

Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen.... Separate yourself from me" (Genesis 13:7-9).

Since then, various tribes in the region have gone to war with each other. During the conflict Lot has been captured, which draws Abraham into the conflict:

When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, 318 of them.... And he divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them.... Then he brought back all the possessions, and also brought back his kinsman Lot.... (Genesis 14:14-16)

At the close of chapter 14, Abraham is offered the spoils of victory by the King of Sodom, but refuses them:

But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have lifted my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich'" (Genesis 14:22-23).

It is "after these things" that the word of the Lord comes to Abraham in Genesis 15:1. And this seems to be why God's word to Abraham stresses protection and reward:

Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great (Genesis 15:1).

But here is where our passage gets interesting. Abraham's response in vv. 2-3 reveals that something is amiss. Despite recent victory and despite God's assurance of physical protection and material reward, Abraham overflows with what borders on blasphemy:¹

But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." (Genesis 15:2-3).

There is a note of sarcasm here: to the God who just gave Abraham victory and promised to give protection, Abraham says with disbelief, "what will you give me" (v.2)? And with his trembling reference to childlessness—not, "I am childless," but "I *continue* childless"—we see through the chink in his armor to what's really going on.

Despite outward successes, there is an inward area of Abraham's life not going well. And where Abraham might be able to rely in part on his own growing strength to protect himself, he has no power and no control over this area. Abraham essentially says to God: *what good is a shield to protect my house, when there is no child within my walls?*

Abraham voices something all people of faith can relate to: I can trust you *there*, but not *here*; with *that*, but not with *this*—and *this*, is what finally matters.

And now we can understand more of faith's *need* for reassurance. It is not so much that Abraham needs reassurance in an area that's going well. What Abraham needs is for his faith to run deeper—touching upon the deepest longing, the greatest fear, the oldest wound.

If a man or woman's faith is to hold fast and be pleasing to God, it must *run all the way down*. And God is perfectly aware of Abraham's heart, and ours. He knows that despite what He's doing over *there*, that we have a down *here*. God knows that the people of faith are also the people of doubt. In this scene, He seems intentionally to expose this part of Abraham. *Why?* Because God wants Abraham not just to trust him *there*, but *here*; not just with that, but with this—with what matters most.

This is the first lesson about our need for reassurance. Reassurance is nothing unless it reaches down to what we are most worried about, most fearful of, and most hurt over. God wants you to trust Him with *this*.

With Abraham laid open like this, how does God then go about reassuring? We see this in verses 4-5, where we come to our second point: The Word of Reassurance.

II. The Word of Reassurance

The LORD responds in verses 4-5,

And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: “This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir.” And he brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” (Genesis 15:4-5).

The LORD directly addresses Abraham’s fears by reassuring him that “your very own son shall be your heir.” Two things to notice here: (1) the phrase “the word of the LORD” in verse 4, and (2) the extravagance with which God asks Abraham to hope in verse 5.

The Word of the LORD

This phrase appears twice in this passage, in verse 1 and verse 4. We might breeze past it, but in this form, it’s only used here in Genesis and once more in Genesis 24:51. It would have sufficed for the narrator to just write, “And behold, the Lord said to Abraham. But instead, he—Moses—writes, “The word of the Lord came to him.”

For an Israelite or Christian reading this later, we must see that it’s directing our faith towards the *clear articulation of God’s speech*, rather than a vague sense of hope or belief. Abraham must trust in *what God has said*, the Word of the LORD. And the specificity of that Word has already been set forth and is now reiterated:

“To *your offspring* I will give this land” (Genesis 12:7).

“I will make *your offspring* as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted” (Genesis 13:16).

And here,

“*Your very own offspring* shall be your heir” (Genesis 15:4).

God is giving Abraham something concrete to lean on: His Word.

How does this relate to our need for reassurance?

1. It cautions against faith put in human ingenuity or wishful thinking

With the mention of “Eliezer of Damascus” becoming an heir of Abraham’s house, it seems there were people thinking of human solutions to Abraham and Sarah’s childlessness. Perhaps we can trust halfway in God and halfway in human ingenuity. God rejects this as a sufficient foundation for faith.

There is another faulty foundation for faith, and that is faith in wishful thinking. Here, we mistake a human word for a word from God. This can be very easy to fall into, and very hard to discern. So let me give you an example of what I mean.

You are starting a business. You’ve prayed much about it and sought wise counsel. You’re a few years in and things are not going well. And friends in your faith community keep telling you, *be reassured, God has promised to love you and never leave you—surely this means He will prosper this business*. It is true that in Jesus God has promised you His love: “Nothing in all creation,” says Paul, “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). And it is true that Christ promises to never leave us: “behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:20). But it is also true that so many Christians who’ve trusted in these promises did not prosper in their worldly endeavors—some even died while hoping in them.

Even Abraham doesn’t receive every bit of God’s promises in this life—much of the fulfillment points to a time in the distant future.

It's crucial that our faith comes to rest on what the word of God actually says, not wishful thinking about it. And what it says is incredible, but it says it on God's terms, not ours.

- It is the case that Christ is always with the Christian; that God's love is always for you.
- It is true that in Christ, you will be okay, that God will take eternal care of you, and that one day God will wipe away every tear.
- It is true, as Paul says, "that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Romans 8:18). Or as one great writer paraphrases: "Everything sad is going to come untrue and it will somehow be greater for having once been broken and lost."²

These promises of God's Word are rock-solid. You can bank on them. But we cannot, in this life, understand neatly how it is they will unfold.

Faith is not reassured by resting on half-god and half-human ingenuity. And faith is not reassured by resting on wishful thinking with some "Christianize" flare draped around it. Faith is reassured when it hears with crystal clarity the promise of God in His Word and puts its trust in the God who has spoken—and who will do what He has said.

Is your faith resting in the Word of the LORD? Are there specific passages from Scripture that you can turn to, which reassure you?

2. No faith without faith in miracle

I also want us to notice what God does with Abraham after he's rearticulated his promise—he does something extravagant:

And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (Genesis 12:5).

This almost seems superfluous and unnecessary. But "God does not indulge in empty talk."³ Abraham is led outside and asked to gaze upon the stars, to try to count them, if you even can. *Why?* Can you

picture him there, staring up, under the middle eastern sky, at a star-dappled canopy? And after some time, the voice of the LORD saying, “*So shall your offspring be!*” (15:5).

There is no way Abraham could fathom how he and Sarah—old and barren—could one day have descendants that number in the millions. We might think God should have shown Abraham one star, a twinkling star, and said, “So shall your one son be.” But He doesn’t—He does something extravagant. And I think this reminds us that reassured faith is faith that once again believes in the God of miracle. The God for whom nothing is impossible.

Last fall I spent a day with a retired and seasoned pastor a few states away from here. He recounted seasons in ministry that were excruciatingly hard and others that were unimaginably wonderful. And I’ll never forget when he looked at me and said, “I can’t do Christianity without miracle.” What he meant was that I must also believe that God can show up—even in the hardest times. And I must believe that God is at work, even when it seems He is not.

God takes a man who can’t imagine he’ll have one child and tells him he’ll ultimately be the father of millions. *Why?* Because God doesn’t want us to expect less of Him—but more. God is *God*—He’s no mere mortal. And with God *nothing* is impossible. Faith is reassured, when it believes in God, as *God!*

We have a final verse to consider, verse 6. And here we will learn something about the *rest* of reassurance.

III. The Rest of Reassurance

In verse 6 neither Abraham nor God speaks, but the narrator gives us this summarizing statement about where things land:

And he [Abraham] believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness
(Genesis 15:6).

This verse becomes a lodestar in the New Testament. Is either echoed or directly cited no less than five times (Romans 4:4, 9, 22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23). And no one is a better interpreter of it than Paul.

Paul picks up right at the end of verse 5, where God says, “So shall your offspring be” (Romans 4:18; Genesis 12:5). But Paul then gives us a window into how Abraham’s heart changed during this starry night. Rather than doubt growing, faith grows:

He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No unbelief made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. That is why his faith was “counted to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:19-22).

But listen to what Paul goes on to say next—it applies to us:

But the words “it was counted to him” were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Romans 4:23-25).

What the first Christians realized about Genesis 15:6 was that in this verse was buried—like a seed—the heart of the Good News. The fulfillment of God’s promises would not depend on Abraham’s performance—as though he had to earn a son from God.

Can you imagine if along with Abraham’s fears that God might not come through for him, he added to this the worry that perhaps his childlessness was his own fault? Maybe he just hadn’t been good enough. After all, it must be the case that the coming to fruition of God’s promises depends on our earning them.

The Gospel turns this on its head:

God’s promises are based on grace, not merit. We receive them—not by meriting them through performance—but by trusting in the God who freely gives.

Abraham simply would go on trusting that God would do what God had said: and it was counted to him as Righteousness (15:6).

What is Righteousness?

Righteousness is a weighty concept. It essentially means “rightness” in relation to morality and justice. God is righteous, and for a human being to be counted righteous, it means they’ve been found acceptable by God.

As we read in Deuteronomy 6, righteousness would require keeping God’s laws: “And it will be *righteousness* for us, if we are careful to do all this commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us.’ (Deuteronomy 6:25).

The great tension in the Bible becomes man’s inability to live up to the standard of righteousness. And humankind then stands under judgement.

As God reiterates again and again to Israel, “Know, therefore, that the LORD your God is not giving you this good land to possess because of your righteousness, for you are a stubborn people” (Deuteronomy 9:6).

When a person isn’t trying to follow God or any particular moral standard, they often have a hard time understanding the Bible’s insistence that no one can be righteous by their own moral efforts. But, as C. S. Lewis so aptly notes, “No man knows how bad he is till he has tried very hard to be good.”⁴ If a man actually tries to live out the Ten Commandments, or to love God and neighbor with all their heart, soul, strength and mind, they will find out rather quickly just how impossible it is to *be righteous according to your own works*.

All this trying and failing is really meant to bring us to the vital moment when we understand now why Genesis 15:6 is such an important truth: To believe in God is to say, “You must do it. I can’t.”⁵ It’s when we cry out: *Lord, I am a wretched man, please save me*. And when we look to God’s Son, Jesus Christ, and realize that this is precisely what God has done for us. And we believe in Christ, we trust the God who raised him from the dead, and this is counted to us as righteousness.

How is this reassuring? How does righteousness by faith rather than moral performance gives us a particular *rest of reassurance*?

It does so because it tells those of us prone to fear and doubt, that the coming true of all of God's good promises relies—not on me—but on Him. Our role is not to earn, but to trust: What God has said, He will do. Rest reassured of that.

Endnotes

1. Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*, 183, writes of Abraham's response, "His despondent skepticism in the face of the assurance of divine protection and the exceptionally great divine gift borders on blasphemy."
2. See <https://twitter.com/timkellernyc/status/461143119170646018?lang=en>; and <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/everything-sad-will-come-untrue/>
3. *Luther's Works*. Vol 3, Genesis 15-20, p. 17
4. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 142.
5. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 143.