

GENESIS

Chapter 15

God's Covenant With Abram

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” 2 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?” 3 And Abram said, “Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir.” 4 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.” 5 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.” 6 And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness. 7 And he said to him, “I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.” 8 But he said, “O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?” 9 He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” 10 And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. 11 And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. 12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. 13 Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15 As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. 16 And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” 17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give[c] this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, 19 the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, 20 the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, 21 the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”

15:1 *in a vision* – Earlier, the Lord “said to Abram” (12:1). After that, “He appeared to Abram” (12:7). Luther: (Abram not only heard the word; but the word was represented by a certain likeness of the Speaker” (AE 3:12). Cf Num. 12:6-8). (TLSB)

fear not – This is repeated in the Gospel in Luke 12:32. In Scripture, the opposite of faith is fear. We see this fear in even the greatest of God’s people, including Abram. Like us he needed God’s reassuring promises. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 5, Part 3)

I am your shield. Whether “shield” or “sovereign” is meant, the reference is to the Lord as Abram’s King. As elsewhere, “shield” stands for king (e.g., Dt 33:29; 2Sa 22:3; Ps 7:10; 84:9). (CSB)

Comforting word to calm Abram’s fears, for he will soon express his worries over remaining childless, without a proper heir (v. 2). Luther: “A Mighty Fortress is our God, A Trusty Shield and Weapon” (LSB 656:1). (TLSB)

In other parts of Scripture “shield” takes the meaning of king. A good king took care of all the needs of those who served and provided protection in time of trouble. God was not only a good king but the

perfect king and so he provided Abram as he does us with all that we need, especially the righteousness earned for us by Christ. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 5, Part 3)

your reward shall be very great. Though Abram was quite rich (13:2), God himself was Abram’s greatest treasure (cf. Dt 10:9). (CSB)

A reward is paid, not only because it is earned, but also because it is promised, and the Lord had promised Abram richly. (TLSB)

15:2 *what will you give me* – Abram did not respond with a passive acceptance of God’s promise to be his shield and reward. Rather, his questions betrays the anguish of his heart. (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 5, Part 3)

continue – Hebrew means “to go or walk,” and may carry the sense of departure, even death, as in Simeon’s song: “Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace” (Lk. 2:29). (TLSB)

my house – Used to broadly encompass Abram’s entire estate. (TLSB)

Eliezer of Damascus. A servant probably acquired by Abram on his journey southward from Haran (see 12:5). He may also be the unnamed “chief servant” of 24:2. (CSB)

A servant born and raised in Abram’s household (v. 3); may be the loyal servant in chapter 24. Despite his qualifications as someone Abram might adopt as heir, Eliezer is by no means preferable to the natural-born son God had promised. (Babylonian documents describe laws regulating adoption of heirs.) (TLSB)

15:3–4 Ancient documents uncovered at Nuzi near Kirkuk on a branch of the Tigris River, as well as at other places, demonstrate that a childless man could adopt one of his own male servants to be heir and guardian of his estate. Abram apparently contemplated doing this with Eliezer, or perhaps had already done so. (CSB)

15:3 *member* – Literally, a “son of the house,” a servant-born and raised in Abram’s household, but not of blood descent. (TLSB)

15:4 *very own son* – Literally, “out of your inward parts,” out of Abram’s body, his natural-born son. (TLSB)

15:5 *number the stars—if you are able.* See 22:17. More than 8,000 stars are clearly visible in the darkness of a Near Eastern night. (CSB)

That Abram is able to walk outside indicates this is a waking vision. (TLSB)

So shall your offspring be. The promise was initially fulfilled in Egypt (see Ex 1; see also Dt 1:10; Heb 11:12). Ultimately, all who belong to Christ are Abram’s offspring (see Gal 3:29). (CSB)

Hebrew is singular sometimes translated “seed.” Christ is ultimately the promised Seed (Gal. 3:16), who points to the abundance He produces by His death and resurrection (cf John 12:24). (TLSB)

God’s patience has a wonderful sustaining and strengthening power. In order to impress upon His servant the exact meaning of His promise, the Lord brought him outside and had him look closely at the starry heavens, whether he felt able to count the stars. So great, in brief, would be the number of his

descendants. This promise, in the last analysis, is Messianic. Through the one Seed, Christ, all nations on earth were to be blessed, and all men of all nations that have accepted the only salvation, that in Jesus Christ, are the descendants of Abraham in truth; they are the people of God, the spiritual Israel, Rom. 4, 18. (Kretzmann)

15:6† Abram is the “father of all who believe” (Ro 4:11), and this verse teaches that God graciously responds to a man’s faith by crediting righteousness to him (see Heb 11:7). (CSB)

believed – Hebrew ’aman, “to be faithful,” “to trust.” St. Bernard of Clairvaux: “(The elect) had... been set free by their faith in a future Deliverer, as of Abraham is written” (SLSB, p 285). (TLSB)

Abram placed his trust in the promise of the Lord with all it implied, and therefore the Lord accepted him into the covenant of His grace. That is the way of salvation for all sinners, the way of obtaining that true righteousness by which we are justified before God. Christ has earned blessing, salvation, righteousness for all men, and all that accept this promise in faith have these wonderful gifts, are pure, holy, and righteous before God, because the righteousness of Christ is imputed to them. (Kretzmann)

counted – To think, reckon, or account. Because God’s mercy and grace, for Jesus’ sake, He considers our sins forgiven. (TLSB)

righteousness – Luther: “Righteousness is nothing else than believing God when He makes a promise” (AE 3:20). “Abraham was justified before God through faith alone, for the sake of the Mediator, without the cooperation of his works. This was true not only when Abraham was first converted from idolatry and had no good works, but also afterward, when he had been renewed by the Holy Spirit and adorned with many excellent good works” (FC SD III 33). (TLSB)

15:7 *I am the LORD, who brought you out.* Ancient royal covenants often began with (1) the self-identification of the king and (2) a brief historical prologue, as here (see Ex 20:2). (CSB)

15:8 *how am to know ... ?* Cf. Lk 1:18. Abram believed God’s promise of a son, but he asked for a guarantee of the promise of the land. (CSB)

Faith is often fleeting and in need of shoring up. At times, even the saints asked for something to stand with God’s Word. For us, also, God has provided the Sacraments with His spoken Word. (TLSB)

15:9-10 A covenant was literally “cut.” The participants cut animals in half, then walked between them as a pledge that such a fate would befall the maker of the covenant should he breach it (cf Jer. 34:18). However, here the Lord alone walks between the halves! Abram is a passive and sleeping beneficiary of God’s promise (cf vv 12:21). (TLSB)

15:9 *three years old.* The prime age for most sacrificial animals (see 1Sa 1:24). (CSB)

15:10 *did not cut the birds in half.* Perhaps because they were too small (see Lev 1:17). (CSB)

15:12 *sun was going down* – As vv 1-6 took place at night, in vv 7-21 God has visited Abram a second time. (TLSB)

deep sleep – As God made Adam slumber when He drew forth the rib to make the woman, so God made Abram slumber as He passed through the several pieces of the sacrifice. Abram merely received what God had promised. (TLSB)

dreadful and great darkness – When sinners find themselves before great and holy revelations, fear and trepidation often fall upon them. Thus, Isaiah trembled (Is. 6:5), and Peter, James and John were afraid (Mt. 17:5-6). Further, what Abram saw in his dream was still remote. In his slumber, he saw darkly what would later be revealed fully. (TLSB)

15:13 *land that is not theirs*. Egypt (see 46:3–4). (CSB)

four hundred years. A round number. According to Ex 12:40 Israel spent 430 years in Egypt. (CSB)

A round figure indicating the time Israel would spend in Egypt, ultimately in subjugation. (They would stray from the Lord as hinted in Ex. 4:31; Josh. 24:14). (TLSB)

15:14 *possessions* – God would bring judgment on Egypt, delivering His people, Israel, who would plunder their Egyptians neighbors of their riches as they departed (Ex. 12:35-36). (TLSB)

15:15 The fulfillment is recorded in 25:8. (CSB)

Luther: “Since Abraham had been enlightened by the Holy Spirit, he realized that these words referred to the resurrection of the dead and to the life of the future world” (AE 3:38). (TLSB)

15:16 *In the fourth generation*. That is, after 400 years (see v. 13). A “generation” was the age of a man when his first son (from the legal standpoint) was born—in Abram’s case, 100 years (see 21:5). (CSB)

the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete. Just how sinful many Canaanite religious practices were is now known from archaeological artifacts and from their own epic literature, discovered at Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit) on the north Syrian coast beginning in 1929. Their “worship” was polytheistic and included child sacrifice, idolatry, religious prostitution and divination (cf. Dt 18:9–12). God was patient in judgment, even with the wicked Canaanites. (CSB)

Luther: “(A statement) to point out the patience of God” (AE 3:40). Chemnitz: “God does not cause wills to be evil nor does He produce evil in the hearts of the ungodly, but he only permits it...God determines the boundaries when He is going to give permission, as to when and where He will restrain the ungodly” (LTh 1:200). (TLSB)

15:17 *a smoking firepot with a flaming torch*. Symbolizing the presence of God (see Ex 3:2; 14:24; 19:18; 1Ki 18:38; Ac 2:3–4). (CSB)

By these emblems of God’s presence, He passed through the severed pieces of animals. It is God, not Abram, whom assumes the burden if the covenant is broken. Ultimately, it is God’s own Son who will assume the burden of our breaking God’s Law, being sacrificed on the cross to atone for our offenses. (TLSB)

passed between the pieces. Of the slaughtered animals (v. 10). In ancient times the parties solemnized a covenant by walking down an aisle flanked by the pieces of slaughtered animals (see Jer 34:18–19). The practice signified a self-maledictory oath: “May it be so done to me if I do not keep my oath and pledge.” Having credited Abram’s faith as righteousness, God now graciously ministered to his need for assurance concerning the land. He granted Abram a promissory covenant, as he had to Noah (see 9:9 and note; see also chart on “Major Covenants in the OT”). (CSB)

15:18 *made a covenant.* † Lit. “cut a covenant,” referring to the slaughtering of the animals (the same Hebrew verb is translated “made” and “cut” [i.e., “violated”] in Jer. 34:18). (CSB)

I give this land. The Lord initially fulfilled this covenant through Joshua (see Jos 1:2–9; 21:43; see also 1Ki 4:20–21). (CSB)

river of Egypt. Probably the modern Wadi el-Arish in northeastern Sinai. (CSB)

15:19–21 A similar list of ten peoples is found in 10:15–18 (see notes there). The number ten signifies completeness. (CSB)

Israel would not hold the land described here until the time of King David (2 Sam. 8:1-15). Not all of the tribes mentioned here are identifiable, but they were those who inhabited the land of Canaan prior to Israel’s conquest and reception of the Promised Land. (TLSB)

Ch 15 God credits righteousness to Abram simply on the basis of His covenant promise and faith. To the promise, He adds the visible sign of the slaughtered animals, the fire pot, and the torch by which God shows Abram that He is committed. Today, rest in God’s promises given to you in Jesus and delivered to you in His Word and Sacraments. They are enough, because Jesus was enough. • Dear Father, rescue us from our enemies by Your promise made sure in Your Son, who delivers our inheritance to us in the New Testament of His blood. In Jesus’ name. Amen. (TLSB)