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Standing on the Promises: Genesis 15:1-6

PAUL WATSON

Families live by their stories. When families get together—at Thanksgiving or Christmas, on vacations, at weddings or after funerals—what do we do? We tell stories.

Sometimes our stories are about major family decisions, or crises, or achievements. Sometimes our stories are about seemingly insignificant events that, nevertheless, have had a profound effect on us. Sometimes our stories are uplifting. Sometimes they are simply amusing, or even embarrassing. Sometimes our stories are wistful or sad. But all our stories are important to us, because they do so much more than entertain us or inform us. They also *form* us, shape us, remind us of who we are.

In the same way, these stories of the first four generations of God's family in Genesis 12–50 have shaped the lives of all subsequent generations of that family, and they continue to shape our lives today. As Bill Moyers said in introducing his PBS special on Genesis,

Deep in the night—wrestling as an adult with my own fantasies, disillusionments, and failures—I recognize myself in these flawed characters [who were] contending with God. Their stories retain their hold on us because they ring so true. They tell us about the struggles of real men and women to know what it means to be the people of God.

GENESIS 15:1–6: TEXT AND CONTEXT

The story in Gen 15:1–6 begins with a voice in the night: “Do not be afraid, Abraham.”¹ (When I hear such sounds in the night, I am afraid—until my wife checks things out and assures me that everything is all right.) “Do not be afraid, Abraham. I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” It was the voice of God, breaking into Abraham's life—not for the first time—not to *frighten* him but to *reassure* him.

Now every biblical text has a context, and Gen 15:1–6 is no exception. The immediate context of this inbreaking word from God is Genesis 14, where Abraham rescued his nephew Lot, along with others, from a band of raiders. Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem, had blessed Abraham, saying, “God has *delivered*

your enemies into your hands” (Gen 14:20). God now uses another form of this word, “delivered,” to say to Abraham, “I will be your *deliverer*, your protection, your shield.”

Abraham, in turn, had given Melchizedek one-tenth of the goods that he had recovered. Abraham later compensated his men with some of those same spoils. But, as for himself, Abraham said, “I would not take a thread or a sandal-thong or anything that is yours, so that you might not say, ‘I have made Abraham rich’” (Gen 14:23). Nevertheless, says God, “I will enrich you—greatly.



The larger context for our story takes us back to Genesis 12, where, without preamble or explanation, God first interrupted Abraham's life to promise him a family, a land, protection, and the privilege of becoming a blessing to all other families, all peoples. God had reaffirmed his promise at the end of Genesis 13, after Abraham magnanimously offered Lot first pick of the land. And now—in the middle of the night—God reaffirms his promise once more.

The largest context for our story is scripture itself, for God's first word to his people is always a word of blessing, a word of promise. Whether it is the promise of a child, of daily bread, of protection from enemies, of forgiveness of sin, the God of Scripture is a God who loves to bless his people, and who is forever promising to do so.

ABRAHAM'S RESPONSE TO GOD

To these words from God in the night, Abraham responds:

“O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abraham said, “You have given me no offspring, and so a slave born in my house is to be my heir.” (Gen 15:2-3)

This is Abraham's first recorded conversation with God, his first occasion to speak directly to God. And, frankly, it's a bit hard to know what to make of it. The response is not an outright rejection of God's offer; neither is it a response of acceptance and delight. Instead, what we hear is the honest, candid reply of a man who (a) has come to accept the harsh realities of life—*his* life—and (b) has adjusted his life accordingly.

Whatever God might have said about the future, the dominant fact of Abraham's existence at that point was *barrenness*. Material resources he had—“Now Abraham was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold” (Gen 13:2). What Abraham did not have was a son. Sara's womb was closed. Their life was empty as well.

Even today, we know about the emptiness, the barrenness of life, don't we? For some of us it is that same emptiness of cradle and crib. For a dozen years my son Mark and his wife, Cindy, tried to have a child. They went through all the tests, counseling, hormone shots, in vitro procedures. Nothing worked. And any number of wanna-be aunts, uncles, and grandparents cried with them.

Some of us know the emptiness of broken relationships. During the recent NBA basketball playoffs there was a story in the *Los Angeles Times* about Kobe Bryant, star player for the L.A. Lakers, rich beyond words. The story was not about basketball, however, but about the broken relationship between Kobe and his father. It seems that the father had not spoken to his son in more than two years, apparently in disagreement over the young Latina woman that Kobe had chosen to marry.

We know that sick-to-the-stomach feeling that comes from personal rejection, whether by parents or by children, whether by siblings or by spouse. We know the hurt that comes when a friend abandons us, the loneliness that sets in when a longed-for relationship never quite materializes. Barrenness.

Some of us know the emptiness of unsatisfying jobs and meaningless work. Of vocational plans that never pan out. Of vocational dreams that turn into nightmares. Some of us once embraced the call of God to serve him in full-time ministry. Yet, today—for all sorts of reasons—we feel unappreciated, rejected, impotent, empty. Oh, yes—we can identify with Abraham's cry of barrenness: “What can you give me? I continue to be childless.”

Faith is not the intellectual acceptance of abstract doctrines. Faith is relational commitment to another person.

But we can also identify with Abraham's practical response to the harsh realities of life. Just in case God had not noticed, Abraham informs him, "You don't need to worry; I've taken care of things. I have 'adopted' a slave as my 'child' [in accordance with the customs of the day]. He will bury me and become the executor of my estate. Everything is all taken care of."

Now that's the kind of pragmatic realism that we Americans really appreciate. It is what Dr. Phil, Dr. Joy, Dr. Laura are forever encouraging us to do: "Get a grip. Deal with it. Get on with your life." That's what Abraham had done—rather well, in fact—first, by letting go the unfulfilled, unrealistic promises of God, then by finding an alternative solution to the barrenness of his life.

Abraham coped. Abraham managed. Abraham rearranged his life to fit the facts. Just as my son and daughter-in-law did some two years ago, when they became the proud adoptive parents of a beautiful baby boy. Just as they did last summer when they reapplied for a second adoption. This past December they got the call: "We will have another baby for you in about six weeks."

GOD'S RESPONSE TO ABRAHAM'S RESPONSE

And Abraham said, "You have given me no offspring, so a slave born in my house is to be my heir." But the word of the Lord came to him . . ."

Despite those final-sounding words from Abraham, the conversation is not over. God has something else to say—in fact, three things to say—the first of which is "no."

This man shall not be your heir. (Gen 15:4a)

Abraham had a right to his opinion. God had allowed him to express that opinion. But God had a right to *his* opinion, too. Can you guess which opinion will ultimately prevail?

Abraham may have described his present situation accurately, but God could see the larger picture. God is the one who can see around the curves and over the horizon. And God was determined to fulfill his promise to Abraham—not only for Abraham's sake but also for the sake of all the world. So, first, a "no."

And then a "yes."

No one but your very own issue shall be your heir. (Gen 15:4b)

Isn't it amazing what God will do for us, in spite of ourselves? If we deserved God's "great and precious promises," that would be one thing. But for God to cling to his promises when we have already abandoned them—now that is something else altogether. I believe that the word for it is "grace."

God's third word to Abraham is, "come, look."

God brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." (Gen 15:5b-6)

It was show-and-tell time for Abraham. What God showed Abraham was not proof but a sign—a visual illustration of the scope of the promise. "Come, look," said God to Abraham. "We're not talking a measly handful of descendants. We're talking multitudes—googles—of heirs."

That's the way it is with God's promises: extravagant, mind-boggling, well beyond our limited expectations. As Paul reminded the Corinthians, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9).

ABRAHAM'S FINAL REPLY

In response to Abraham's response, God says, "No. Yes. Come, look." Then God says no more but awaits Abraham's response. How long, do you suppose, did God have to wait? An hour? A few minutes? A heartbeat? The story doesn't say.

And what was Abraham thinking, what was he feeling, as he heard God's "No. Yes. Come, look."? Again, the story does not say. What the story *does* say, in magnificent simplicity, is that "he [Abraham] believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6).

But what did it mean—what *does* it mean—to "believe the Lord"? We could speculate endlessly about the answer to that question, but, fortunately, we don't have to do so. For this verse—Gen 15:6—is one of the most frequently quoted Old Testament verses in the New Testament. In particular, three New Testament writers elaborate its meaning in three distinct but complementary ways.

First, the apostle Paul, who, in Romans, makes it clear that God—in Christ—has extended membership in his family to include the entire human race. Further, that membership is gained in exactly the same way that Abraham received God's approval—through *faith*.

What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness. (Rom 4:1-5)

Divine approval—family membership—is granted by God to "the one . . . who *trusts* him." To believe God is to trust God. To believe God is to rely on him.

Faith is not the intellectual acceptance of abstract doctrines. Faith is relational commitment to another person. When Abraham "believed" God, Abraham fixed his heart on God. He believed God was who he said he was. He believed God would do what he said he would do. After the publication of Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, a reporter interviewing Mrs. Einstein asked her if she understood her husband's theory. "Oh, no," she said; "but I trust Albert."

A second New Testament writer who quotes Abraham's reply to God is James:

Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' (James 2:21-23)

James helps us see that to "believe" in God means to comply with God's requests—in other words, to *obey* him. True faith, James reminds us, is faith that is not only professed but is also lived out, behaviorally, day by day.

Such daily compliance with God's directions is not the same thing as rule-keeping. It is not legalism. I can comply with all sorts of rules and regulations without having any relationship whatsoever with a state trooper or an auditor from the IRS. Don't have one; don't want one. Indeed, simply "keeping the rules" can be a way to *avoid* having a relationship—which may be why legalism is so attractive to us.

But I cannot pretend to "believe" in God, to have a good relationship with God, while simply ignoring his wishes, his instructions. James says it so clearly, doesn't he? Faith was activated—faith was brought to completion—by Abraham in what he did and how he lived.

The preacher whose sermon we call Hebrews gives us a third perspective on faith. “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the convictions of things not seen” (Heb 11:1) says the preacher, who then cites a number of Old Testament individuals who lived by such faith, including Abraham:

By faith he [Abraham] received power of procreation, even though he was too old—and Sarah herself was barren—because he considered him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one person, and this one as good as dead, descendants were born, “as many as the stars of heaven and as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore.” (Heb 11:11-12)

If *trust* is the inner core of faith, and *obedience* is the outward expression of faith, then *hope* is the future dimension of faith. Hope points to the open-endedness of our relationship with God. Hope sustains us in that relationship, even as it sustained Abraham and Sarah. God had promised them a land. The only piece of property they ever actually owned in Canaan was Sarah’s cemetery plot. God had promised them multiple descendants. They had only the one son. But Abraham and Sarah lived by faith to the very end of their days because they lived in hope.

I have not shared with you the rest of the story of my son and daughter-in-law, Mark and Cindy. Two years ago they adopted a son, Luke. They kept trying to have a child, unsuccessfully, even as they applied for a second adoption. This past December they were told that they had been cleared for that second adoption. And then, a week later, their doctor called: “Congratulations. You’re pregnant.” The whole family is looking forward to this blessed event. The *twins* are due the first of August. Will all go well? We hope so. We hope so.²

GOD’S VALIDATION OF ABRAHAM

“And he [Abraham] believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness” (Gen 15: 6). That was God’s final response to Abraham, a response that was sealed by the strange covenant-making ceremony described in the last half of Genesis 15. Scholars are divided on whether “reckoned” means “credited,” in a bookkeeping sense, or “accepted,” in a cultic sense, as when a priest declared a worshipper’s sacrifice appropriate. Either way, we get the picture. God said of Abraham’s belief, “that’s right; that’s good.”

Righteousness here, and throughout Scripture, does not mean sinless perfection—read the next chapter in Abraham’s life to see that demonstrated! Righteousness is not an ideal, an absolute norm, but a right relationship. Righteousness is relational fidelity—behaving rightly toward those with whom we live.

Having expressed his doubts about God’s promises, and having acted upon those doubts by adopting a slave-child, Abraham nevertheless listened to God’s renewed promise—listened, and believed. And God said, “That’s right. That’s right.” And, as a result, Abraham came to be known as the friend of God, and as the father of the faithful, including all of us today who share his faith.

A PART OF ABRAHAM’S FAMILY

In light of the faith of Father Abraham, we do well to reflect upon our own relationship with God and our place in Abraham’s family. To think about what it means to be a son or daughter of Abraham and Sarah, to share their faith in God, to be their heirs. Some clear, quiet night we might stand outdoors ourselves, look up to the sky, and imagine that Father Abraham is standing there beside us, with his arm around our shoulder, saying,

You and I know what it is like to be barren and empty. You and I know how we try to plug those holes in our lives—with good intentions, but without good results. Child, let go of your doubts and your determination to fix all the broken places in your life by yourself. Instead, believe in God. Trust him. Follow him. Keep on hoping in him. Now try to count all those stars in the sky. I could not count them; I’ll bet you won’t

be able to count them either. But remember: one of them has your name on it, because you're part of my family. Together, we belong to God."

As another Family member once wrote,

Just as Abraham "believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness," so, you see, those who believe are descendants of Abraham. . . . for in Christ you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise. (Gal 3:6-7, 26-29)

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Although "Abram" is not renamed "Abraham" until Gen 17:5, I have consistently used the more familiar name throughout.
- 2 Katherine Ann "Kate" and Amelia Claire "Amy" Watson were born on July 18. Kate weighed in at 4 pounds, 7 ounces, and Amy at 7 pounds, 1 ounce. Mother, father, older brother, and babies are all doing well—praise be to God.

