

Foundations: Passing Between the Pieces
By Jason Huff
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Romans 3:19-26; John 10:11-15; Genesis 15

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Genesis 15. May God bless the reading of His holy, sacred, and perfect Word. "After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram said, "O 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." Then the word of the LORD came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars -- if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness. 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." But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" 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. As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. 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 fathers 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." When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates -- the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.""

Have you ever gotten the chance to go behind the scenes? It really changes your perspective on all sorts of things. A hobby I don't talk about much is pinball. I absolutely love pinball, and when we travel, I like to look up if there's a pinball arcade nearby to play. It's exciting when there's a new machine you've never seen before or an old classic you've never gotten to play. I've even considered what it might be to buy a machine or two to put in my den. But when you go behind the scenes, you realize just how much work it is to maintain a pinball machine properly. Unlike video games, there are lots of moving parts and pieces, with glass you have to protect from shattering, coils and springs and rubber bands galore, hard to clean spots, all of which make a difference in how well a pinball machine plays. The more I've watched behind the scenes videos about maintaining a pinball machine, the more appreciation I have for the guys who design, build, and repair pinball tables – and the less likely I am to buy one myself.

I say all of this because this passage is a favorite of mine. It's one of the first passages of Scripture where truly understanding what is going on requires you to go behind the scenes, and it's one of the first where I found out there was so much going on in Scripture beyond my first reading of the literal words. It is incredibly easy to miss one of the most important ideas in the passage – in fact, without going behind the scenes, without knowing a little bit about the culture of the ancient Near East, I think it might be impossible to spot. But once you know it, you grasp a huge insight into God, who He is and what He does and how He acts. It's my hope that when we go behind the scenes together, we'll all respond in adoration of our great God.

You might remember that the last time we saw Abram, he was rescuing his nephew Lot from a coalition of kings who had raided the city of Sodom. He gave back everything he recaptured to Sodom, not wanting to stain his hands with the wickedness of that city. But he also met Melchizedek, king of the future Jerusalem, who worshiped God Most High and was God's priest. He blessed both Abram and God. It was a confirmation that the Lord was with Abram. Abram didn't fight off this force and rescue Lot by his own hand but through the Lord's power and grace.

But now time has passed. The years are ticking by. Abram has a vision of the Lord. And I love the Lord's words to Abram. "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." God has promised the land to Abram and to Abram's descendants. But they aren't the top prize. Land – good. Descendants – good. They are what any man of the time was striving to have. But there's something far, far better for Abram. God says, "I am your very great reward." The chief honor Abram receives is God's own presence; that God is his – not in the sense that God belongs to Abram, but that Abram's reward is God, both now and forever.

And that's something we can hold on to: *we who believe have God as our reward*. Whatever we might want or hope for, whatever our dreams might be, the result of genuine faith is to belong to God, to be near to Him, to know His peace and presence and joy. We know that our faith has begun to mature when we want more of God in our lives. We appreciate the material things He can provide; we enjoy when He brings us through difficulties; we are grateful when He saves us from a disease. But none of those is as important to us as God Himself. That's when we know the Holy Spirit has been at work – when we care less about ourselves and more about the work God is doing in our world, bringing His Kingdom to light among us.

We want to see more of Him around us, bringing wholeness, bringing healing, bringing mercy. We desire Him. And this is God's promise to Abram and to us, Abram's spiritual children. It's a wonderful promise because we don't have any reason to expect it. There is nothing in us that can put God in our debt or expect that we would be with Him forever. But God promises it. What a blessing!

Now I kinda love Abram here. So honest with God. He's a real person, not perfect or shiny but real. He's traveled well over a thousand miles from home; he's had to take up arms to save his nephew from a life of slavery. He's become wealthy, which is fine, but he has no land and he has no heir to pass his wealth on to. He's old and his wife, while younger, is past child-bearing age. "What can you give me?" Abram asks. "My friend Eliezar is going to wind up with everything I have because you haven't given me a son." Abram longs for a legacy.

And God honors that. “You’ll have an heir – a son of your own. And not only that, but your descendants from that son will be as numerous as the stars in the sky.” This is the first time that God specifically and directly tells Abram that he will not just be a spiritual father of some sort but a literal father of a literal nation. Now at this point, God hasn’t actually done anything. God shows Abram the stars, perhaps still in the vision?, God tells him what will happen, but nothing more.

Then comes the moment that is repeated throughout Scripture, one that is the lynchpin of Christianity first word to last – “Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.” This is a verse that every Christian should commit to memory, one of the first. You might think, what about John 3:16? What about the 23rd Psalm? What about, and there’s any number of passages you can mention. It’s good to memorize Scripture. But this one’s short, and it comes early in Scripture, and it confirms a lot of what comes in the New Testament.

The reason we should memorize it is because of this truth it speaks of: *we are saved by faith that God counts as righteousness*. Abram was not considered righteous because of all his good deeds. In our study of him, he’s already sinned against his wife, passing her off as his sister to save his own skin. He’s going to wrong his wife again, as we’ll see in the future. He trusts in his own schemes too much and it costs him when he doesn’t fully rely on God. But when God makes Abram a promise, he believes God, and God says it is the same as righteousness. It goes down on his account as righteousness. While Abram does noble things, he worships the Lord, those don’t get his account right with God. It’s his faith that does.

In the New Testament, we find out the fullness of how that works. We learn that through Jesus’ perfect life and atoning death, God’s justice is fulfilled. Because of Jesus, the Father no longer looks at us and says, “Guilty.” The Father sees that we belong to Jesus by our faith, by trusting in Him and His promise of salvation, and He says, “Righteous.” From Abram on down the line, anyone who trusts in God and His Word will have everlasting life.

None of us here today is perfectly righteous, not anywhere near close. I recently watched an old R. C. Sproul message where he was talking about our righteousness, and he took one of his grandsons up on stage and said, “You be Jesus.” And he took and put him far to his left. And then he took one of the teaching fellows at Ligonier Ministries, the ministry he started, and he said, “You be Hitler.” And he put his Hitler stand-in far on his right. And then he took a third man from the audience and said to him, “You be the apostle Paul – the most righteous man who ever lived, as far as I’m concerned.” And he had his fill-in for the Apostle Paul stand right next to his Hitler. His point was, the most righteous human being to ever live on this earth has more in common with Hitler than with the absolutely perfect righteousness of Jesus. We can’t compare and can’t compete. The best of us is so far away from righteousness that it would seem like a bad joke to say that we are.

Yet that’s what God does. That’s why we love God; that’s why we even have faith. He takes us in our misery and sin, with all our faults, all our wrong thoughts, all our wrong actions, all our disobedience and treachery towards God, and He gives us faith, and then He looks at that faith and says, “You are justified before me. Enter into my Kingdom, my daughter, my son.” Abram trusted God, and despite his sin, God called him righteous. That’s our story too.

Now we get to the really fun part, the part behind the scenes, where we need just a little bit more information to understand just what we are seeing. God again speaks to Abram, promising that He is the God who will give Abram this land. Abram questions God, “How can I know I’ll receive possession of it?” I want to stop here for just a moment because Abram seems to be in a weird place here...he believes, and he questions. Many of us have sometimes thought that true believers don’t question God. That’s just flat out wrong.

There’s a huge difference between doubting God, believing that God won’t do something He has promised, and asking God how something will come about or how something works in God’s plan. Jesus’ mother Mary was flabbergasted when she was given the news that she would bear the Messiah. She welcomed it; she had faith. Yet she asked, “How can this be?” Because the plan would have to be miraculous. Faith and questions are not at odds. Have faith and read Scripture and question what it means – don’t doubt God, but ask your questions. Abram wanted to at least have a sign, something to hold on to. John Calvin, the great theologian, said that questioning with God is a proof of faith rather than a sign of doubt. It shows you’re believing and want to know more. Be like Abram – where you’re struggling, go to God and ask.

God’s answer is bizarre to us. We don’t quite understand what’s going on. First, God tells Abram to bring Him a sacrifice, and that’s what Abram does. He keeps the carrion from attacking them as he waits for God’s response. Then Abram falls asleep outside where he’s made the sacrifice, and God gives him a deep, dark dream. God tells Abram about events that won’t come to their conclusion for over five hundred years. He tells Abram about the enslavement of his descendants, and how they would eventually come out of slavery wealthy, and they would lay claim to the land at the proper time. Those are stunning promises, because even when Moses wrote this down, they hadn’t yet all come true. God lays out half a millennia before Abram in this strange, beautiful, terrifying dream.

And then we have an even stranger moment, something that doesn’t actually appear to be part of the dream at all, something that genuinely happens in space and time. In the darkness, a smoking firepot and a blazing torch appear and pass between the pieces of the sacrifice. And in this moment, God makes a covenant with Abram, telling him exactly what lands would belong to his descendants. God is specific and direct. On this night, the future of Abram’s people is laid out before him.

But what’s so puzzling and strange are the elements we simply cannot understand. We can understand the idea of an offering given to God, certainly. But why is there a firepot and a torch, and why are they passing between the pieces of the sacrifice? At first, I’m sure it was terrifying to Abram, flame and fire carried by nothing but the wind, no start, no source. And that fire going between the pieces of a bloody sacrifice. What is this?

What we can know from ancient history is that God was following a pattern that Abram would have known in the ancient world, with a special, incredibly important twist. In that part of the world at that time, you had to make treaties with your neighbors and especially your enemies. Tribal wars were common, everyone wanting the best pieces of land, the best places to farm and to feed livestock, they’d fight over it. And the way to keep wars at bay was to make treaties.

In that era, a greater king or chieftain would have dominance. A lesser king or tribal leader without as much land or status or goods was known as his vassal. When they would make an agreement, they would do what we would translate literally as “cutting a covenant.” There would be a series of terms and agreements, what the king would do for the vassal and what the vassal would do for the king. There was a literal cutting – the sacrificing of animals to seal the agreement. And the lesser party, the vassal, had to pass between the pieces of the sacrifice. The whole idea was, if the lesser party broke the covenant, they were cursed to become like the pieces of the sacrifice. It was a gruesome reminder that the king held all the power. He didn’t have to pass through the sacrifice; it was by his mercy alone that the covenant was cut in the first place. It was the lesser party, the vassal, that had to walk through the sacrifice, promising that he’d keep his word or else wind up like the animals he’d just killed.

What is so wild about this, what is so topsy-turvy upside down just like God, is that the smoking pot and blazing torch are God’s representations of Himself. The fire stands for God’s utter purity – we might remember throughout Scripture of the Holy Spirit appearing like fire. We think of the burning bush appearing to Moses and how God cleanses the lips of the prophet Isaiah with a burning coal to make him able to witness what he sees in the throne room of God. Fire burns away impurity and leaves only the pure precious metal behind. Purification by fire is a well-represented idea in Scripture. So God comes to cut the covenant with Abram, and He does so through this representation of Himself as the pure, holy, true God.

But what’s even wilder is that *God passes through the pieces for you and me*. No one would ever pass through the pieces of a sacrifice willingly; it obligated you. The greater party would never go through, only the weaker, the lesser. But instead of forcing Abram to go through the ceremony as everyone would expect, God gives Abram the deep, disturbing dream about history to come. When it comes time for the ceremony’s closing, God goes through. God obligates Himself. God says, in essence, “I am responsible for this covenant, not you. When this covenant is broken in any way, while I will always fulfill it, I will bear the burden of covenant breaking by those who come after you. When this agreement is violated by your descendants, when they walk away from me, it is I who will bear the penalty.”

This is who God is, friends. God makes promises to us. He covenants with us. He fulfills His word to us. And when we are unfaithful, when we break our promises, when we do not fulfill God’s perfect law, when we sin, He takes upon Himself the punishment truly due us. If we don’t see a kind and loving God throughout Old Testament history, we’re just not looking closely enough, or we don’t understand what’s going on behind the scenes. God’s promise is not conditional on Abram. He makes it out of His love. He fulfills His promises utterly. And throughout the Old Testament era, God forgives the waywardness of His people over and over and over. God bears with them. He had every right to abandon the people that abandoned Him, yet He does not, because it isn’t in His nature.

And in the fullness of time, Jesus comes, God from God, light from light, the Son of the Father, in His perfect nature as God perfecting humanity in Himself, taking on the due penalty for every broken promise, every wayward step, every disobedience and wrongdoing. Jesus' taking the burden off of us is promised in the covenant God makes with Abram as the fire passes through the pieces of the sacrifice. And all we must do to claim that covenant is to believe, just as Abram did. Believe God's Word, that He will do as He said, live as Jesus' followers, and the promises are ours. The Kingdom is ours. Adoption into the family of God is ours.

Friends, remember that behind the scenes, God has been working out His rescue plan for us generation after generation. Trust in Him, believe upon Jesus for salvation, and live as citizens of God's Kingdom. For God is good, and His faithfulness endures forever, from Abram to us today and far beyond until the end of human time.