

**“What is Asked is to Believe”**

Genesis 15:1–21

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Genesis 15:1–21 (NIV)

**1 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.”**

**2 But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?”**

**3 And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”**

**4 Then the word of the Lord came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.”**

**5 He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”**

**6 Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.**

**7 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.”**

**8 But Abram said, “Sovereign Lord, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?”**

**9 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.”**

**10 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.**

**11 Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.**

**12 As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.**

**13 Then the Lord said to him, “Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own and that they will be enslaved and mistreated there.**

**14 But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions.**

**15 You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age.**

**16 In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”**

**17 When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.**

**18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—  
19 the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites,  
20 Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites,  
21 Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”**

The words at the beginning of Genesis 15, “After this,” are pointing to the events that happened in chapter 14. If we briefly look back at what is written in chapter 14, the five kings, representing Sodom and Gomorrah in the land of Canaan where Abram was dwelling, were under the power of a country called Elam in the east. But at a certain point they turned in rebellion against Elam. Then Chedorlaomer, the king of Elam, led the surrounding nations of the east and formed a very powerful army. They advanced into the land of Canaan one after another, subduing every country, defeating Sodom and Gomorrah, and carrying away all the wealth and food. In this Sodom Abram’s nephew Lot was dwelling, and Lot’s household was also all taken as captives. When Abram heard that Lot had been taken captive, he led out his warriors, struck down the kings of the east, and gained victory. After such events, the word of God came to Abram in a vision.

**15:1 “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.’**

This word had very great meaning for Abram. The word “shield” that God spoke here uses the same original word as the blessing given by Melchizedek, the priest of God, in 14:20, who blessed Abram saying that God “delivered (your enemies) into your hand.” The word of blessing that Melchizedek had spoken, God Himself now speaks in the same way, promising that this is sure. What God means when He says here, “I am your shield,” is the promise that God Himself will protect Abram from his enemies, that like a shield He will guard Abram, turning back all the threats that would endanger him. And further, God continues, saying, “Your reward will be very great.” This word “reward” refers to “recompense” for some undertaking. What God is about to give Abram as recompense is exceedingly great.

I would like to think a little more about the significance of the words that God spoke to Abram at this time, but as I mentioned earlier, this should probably be considered in light of the words “after these events,” and in comparison with the content of chapter 14. In chapter 14, Abram, having defeated the kings of the eastern countries and achieved victory, has become a great conqueror who has subdued the whole land of Canaan, and he could be said to hold a status comparable to the king of Canaan. Human desire, as we know, is hidden in a person’s heart during days of adversity and comes to the surface at the time of success, surprising people, but when we see what Abraham did

when he became the victor and conqueror who had subdued the whole land of Canaan, we can see what kind of person he was and what he desired.

After his victory, Abram offered a tenth of everything to Melchizedek, the priest of God, and returned this victory to God, and moreover, he gave the glory of the victory to God. At the same time, the king of Sodom came to Abram, the victor, seeking to let him take a reward, but Abram firmly refused this and rejected becoming wealthy through the king of Sodom. From this, we can see that Abram desired to be enriched not by people, but by God.

Moreover, at that time Abram was living with the Amorites at Mamre, as is recorded in 14:13, and he had made a covenant with the Amorites. And as we can see in 14:24, when he went to rescue Lot, he went out with them, with whom he had a covenant relationship, and we can see that Abram did not borrow or owe anything with the Amorites, but settled things precisely. Abram does not seem to have sought protection under this covenant, nor does it appear that he was relying on this covenant for his own safety. What can be said from this is that although Abram lived wisely in the land of sojourners, where he had to live as a stranger, he did not live in a way that would force surrounding peoples to obey him as if that were the key to his protection.

The final passages of chapter 14 reveal that Abram's choices, decisions, and actions based on them speak of a clear and definite axis within him. That is: "At the fundamental level, the one who protects me is not the power of men, but God, and I have the assurance that God protects me," and "I seek to be enriched not by people, but by God."

After these events, the Lord said, "Abram, do not be afraid. I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." This is an event in which God clearly answered Abram's faithful attitude toward Him and his unwavering seeking, saying, "As you have sought, so I am indeed to you."

Then Abram spoke to God, verses 2–3:

**15:2 But Abram said, "Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"**

**15:3 And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."**

When we read this passage, it may seem that Abram is complaining to God. Indeed, in verses 2 and 3, we can catch a glimpse of Abram expressing emotions like, "God, what is this about?" However, I think this is not so much a complaint as showing that Abram was serious about God's promise. What Abram is saying to God concerns his offspring. God, in chapter 13, had promised to give this land of Canaan to Abram and his descendants. In Genesis 13, God promised to give the land of Canaan to Abram and his descendants. Yet the promise had not yet been fulfilled, nor did there seem any sign of it. Therefore, Abram earnestly clings to the promise. As seen in the words of verse

3, "You have given me no offspring," Abram stands on the point that God is the One who will give him offspring.

Furthermore, when we look at Abram's words in verses 2 and 3, we must consider the background that Abram was aware of the death of his own body. This can be inferred from Abram's words in verse 2: "I am going childless to die." That is, Abram speaks to God with the awareness that his body is no longer capable of bearing a child. Therefore, he names his servant Eliezer as heir, asking God, "Is it in this way that Your promise will be fulfilled?"

**15:4 Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir."**

God clearly and decisively speaks that what Abram had spoken is not in the way. He said that the one who comes forth from Abram himself shall be the one to succeed him. Here, the word translated as "yourself" literally means "the one coming forth from your loins." In other words, this is not about taking someone in or adopting, but God commanded that the one born through Abram shall be the successor.

And as it is written in verse 5, God took Abram outside and showed him the stars of the sky. God actually showed something visible to Abram, intending to give the promise as something certain. The sky Abram looked up at, unlike the environment we live in now, had no electric lights at night, and furthermore, the air was extremely clear, and countless stars were spread across the sky, as if they might fall. "Now, look at the heavens, and if you can count the stars, count them," He said, and Abram surely saw stars too many to count. To Abram, looking at these countless stars, God said, "So shall your offspring be."

**15:6 "Abram believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness."**

The Bible says that Abram believed in the promised God, the Lord. This is the first place in Scripture where the act of believing is recorded. The language used here for "believed" is the word "he'emin," from which the word "Amen," which we are familiar with, is derived. It means "it is so, I believe." Furthermore, in verse 6, it continues, "and He counted it to him as righteousness." When Abram believed the promised God, it was counted to him as righteousness. Who counted it? Of course, God counted it. That God counts a person as righteous means that the person is in a right relationship with God. In the relationship with God, it is God saying, "This is good, this is okay."

This is extremely important concerning human salvation. Since Adam and Eve rejected God in the Garden of Eden, humanity has lived in fallen condition, and the relationship between God and people was broken. However, in Genesis 15:6, it is recorded for the first time that God counted a human as righteous, and astonishingly, it is by faith. Therefore, Genesis 15:6 is a very important

verse in the Bible, and it is repeatedly quoted in the New Testament. The beginning of what the church has long held dear as “justification by faith” is here. Therefore, we must carefully consider this word and make it part of our own flesh and blood.

When we hear about faith in the Bible or in church, even now, we may sometimes try to stir ourselves up, saying, “I will believe, I will believe,” consciously striving to bring ourselves into that state. But when we look at today’s passage in Genesis, Abram seems not at all conscious that he is believing. If you look carefully at verse 6 again, you will see that it is not a word spoken by someone, but is narrated from a third-person perspective. Beside Abram, looking up at the sky and listening to God’s promise, it is described, “Abram believed the Lord, and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

In other words, Abram did not know at that time that he had believed, nor that it was counted to him as righteousness by God. Only God knew. God saw Abram, saw his heart, found faith there, and counted it as good. Faith, therefore, is not something we consciously declare or say, “I believe now,” but it is the response that appears in our heart toward God and His word, and God is the one who recognizes it as faith. God speaks to people, and watches their hearts to see how they respond to His words.

I would like to consider a little more the substance, the inner reality, of Abram’s faith in this verse 6. Of course, Abram believed in God’s promise, but what specifically did he believe? As we saw in verse 2, Abram was aware of the death of his own body, and he realized that physically he could no longer have a child from himself. Therefore, he spoke to God about making Eliezer his heir. But God commanded Abram, saying that the one coming forth from his loins must be his heir. And Abram believed God’s word. Here, we can see specifically what Abram believed: that “God is the One who can bring life out of death.” This is also clarified through Paul’s words in Romans 4:17–22.

#### **Romans 4:17–22 (NIV)**

**17 As it is written: “I have made you a father of many nations.” He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed—the God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that were not.**

**18 Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, “So shall your offspring be.”**

**19 Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah’s womb was also dead.**

**20 Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God,**

**21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.**

**22 This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness.”**

As it is written in verse 17, Abram believed in God who gives life to the dead and calls into being things that are not. And this faith, as it says in verse 18, was a faith that believed in hope against hope. That is to say, in an impossible situation, in a situation where it could not possibly be thought to be fulfilled, Abram was convinced that God's promise would come true. This was Abram's faith. God is the one who can bring forth life from death—in other words, Abram had a resurrection faith. And we must not forget that this resurrection faith later appeared as action and was fulfilled when he offered his only son Isaac on Mount Moriah.

The God who saw this faith of Abram then made a covenant with Abram. The whole account of this covenant is recorded in verses 7 through 21. While looking at the overall content of this covenant, I would like to consider it, but first what we must confirm is the content of this covenant. In verse 7, it is said, "I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it." And in verse 18, it is revealed, "To your descendants I give this land." In other words, God promises to give this land of Canaan to Abram and his descendants.

In verse 8, Abram asks God for a sign. Then in verse 9, God says, "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, but the birds he did not cut in two. This mysterious covenant ceremony that God commanded Abram has points in common with covenantal customs of the ancient Near East. In Hebrew, the word for "covenant" also has the meaning "to cut." At that time, they would cut animals in two and pass between them to make a covenant. This was a kind of oath ceremony, meaning that if one broke the covenant, he too would become like the cut animals. This is also recorded in Jeremiah 34:18.

However, while this understanding is not wrong, by itself it cannot explain all the characteristics of the ceremony that God commanded here. Especially in verse 9, there are five kinds of animals that God commanded Abram to prepare, but why these animals, the reason cannot be explained. In fact, the kinds of animals are the same as the animals that the people of Israel, after the Exodus, were to offer to God in the wilderness. Without going into detail, in Leviticus these sacrificial animals represent the very person who offers them. That is to say, the cut animals can be considered to represent the people of Israel themselves. And indeed, as we read further in chapter 15, God gives Abram a prophecy about the Exodus of his descendants, and the deep connection with this prophecy also shows that this is so.

In verse 11, birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away. This can be understood as indicating that although there would be threats that would afflict Abram's descendants in later days, they would be protected. When the preparations for the covenant

ceremony had been made, as it says in verse 12, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great and dreadful darkness came over him. The deep sleep that fell upon Abram points to his death, and the great and dreadful darkness that came over him points to the bitter slavery that would press upon his descendants in Egypt after his death. As for Abram's own death, it is spoken in verse 15: "You, however, will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age."

And in verses 13–16, God tells Abram that his descendants will be enslaved and oppressed in Egypt for four hundred years, but afterward God will judge Egypt and the people of Israel will come out with great possessions. That is to say, the event of the Exodus is revealed. Here God's magnificent plan is shown. It concerns not now, but far in the future, the fourth generation from Abram. It is the time when the sin of the Amorites has reached its full measure, when God judges Canaan and hands it over to Israel. At the same time, for four hundred years until then, it was a time of preparation in which God greatly multiplied Abram's descendants in Egypt.

**17 When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.**

**18 On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land.**

The "smoking firepot and the blazing torch" symbolize the presence of God. At the time of the Exodus, when God gave the Ten Commandments, it is written that He descended on Mount Sinai in fire, and the whole mountain was like the smoke of a furnace. As we confirmed earlier, if the animals that were cut in two represent Israel, then what is the meaning of God passing between these animals? It is a declaration that God Himself will walk together with the people of Israel, and it is a promise that God will surely do this. In fact, there is another point in this covenant that we must pay attention to. After the animals were cut and laid out in the ritual of the covenant, the one who passed between them was God alone. Originally, both parties who were making the covenant were supposed to pass between them. However, only God passed through. This is the sign that "this covenant will be carried out by God with His full responsibility." God alone took upon Himself all the responsibility for keeping the promise. Furthermore, this covenant does not have conditions like "if you do this, then I will do this." Covenants such as the Ten Commandments were based on the people keeping God's law, but the covenant with Abraham was not like that. It was God who unilaterally promised, "I will surely do this." It was a promise given purely by God's grace, apart from Abraham's actions, apart from his success or failure.

We have so far considered the Word of God in Genesis 15, but finally, I would like to confirm what we should learn from this Word today.

This chapter 15, as we have confirmed through the Word, speaks to us especially strongly about the God who makes promises, and about the importance of believing the Word of God. This is expressed in verse 6, where Abram's faith was credited to him as righteousness, but there is another point I would like us to pay attention to here. That is, why is Abram's faith written here for the first time, and indeed, why is it the first mention of believing in the whole Bible?

Was it really the case that Abram believed in the Lord for the first time here in chapter 15? Certainly not. Abram had already believed the Word of God when he came out from Haran in chapter 12. Not only that, but up until chapter 15 Abram's walk had been a walk of believing in God. In fact, the Hebrew verb *he'emin*, translated as "believed" in Genesis 15:6, is written in a form that expresses continuation and repetition. And more than that, the Bible as a whole, from beginning to end, presupposes the fact that human beings must believe in God. If that is the case, why then does chapter 15 record for the first time that Abram "believed"? I think it is to show Abram's faith as a model for later generations who would read this. In other words, Abram's faith is written as the example that all his descendants should follow, so that by this faith they may be counted as righteous by God. That is, we who read this Word today are being asked to believe now.

Abram's faith was that "God is the One who can bring forth life out of death," and it was the faith of hoping against hope. That is, in a situation where humanly speaking it was impossible, in a situation where fulfillment seemed utterly unthinkable, Abram was convinced that the promise of God would come to pass. How about us when we look at ourselves? Do we not believe when there is hope, but fail to believe when there is no hope? If that is the case, then our faith becomes a faith for the sake of surviving in this world. But it must not be so. The faith demanded of us today is not that kind. We live by faith. And even if we die, we will live. Through today's Word, God is asking you also to have this faith of Abram. Ultimately, the question is whether we have the conviction that if we follow God, even if we die, we shall live.

The Apostle Paul also states this in Romans 4:23–25:

**23 The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone,  
24 but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.  
25 He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.**



As Paul says, Genesis 15:6 was not written only for Abram but also for us, so that we too may be counted as righteous. This is the message of salvation directed to us. For us who live in the New Testament era, a unilateral covenant of grace through the cross and resurrection of Christ has been given, and it is promised that we too will be counted righteous when we believe this.

As I spend time with children as a pastor for children's education, I often become aware of many things. When I am with young children, I sometimes encounter the way they simply accept the Word of God written in the Bible, and I learn greatly from this. However, as we grow into adulthood, such a condition of heart fades away and changes. Our own thinking comes into conflict with the Word of God, and we can no longer believe God's Word. In general society this is called growth. But we must ask ourselves again: are all the kinds of growth we have acquired truly right?

I think that when modern people see Abram's faith, they may laugh at its childish logic. In fact, people who seriously believe the Word of God are ridiculed by society. It has always been this way. Yet I think that this is what faith truly is. Among those whom the world calls fools and idiots, there are those who have faith.

Have you ever seen such fools? Children who speak about God to their friends and are mocked. Boys and girls who, when they place worship above their club activities, are cursed by their teammates and excluded from the regular members. Those who, out of gratitude to the Lord, give offerings without calculating. Those who labored for the Lord even at the expense of their families. Those who literally devoted their time, health, and profit, setting them aside for the sake of the Lord. Martyrs who risked their lives for the purity of the church. The world calls such people fools. Yet we must not forget that even if they are not recognized by people, the great God sees the heart of each one of them and credits them as righteous. Furthermore, for us who gather as the church, do we also see in them their motives, their faith and love toward God? The fear of the great Creator who formed me in this world. The unending gratitude that although I am so sinful, God not only withheld the punishment I deserved, but even let His Son bear all my punishment and gave me forgiveness. The unwavering assurance of eternal life made certain through the resurrection. The great joy springing forth because the Spirit has come upon us. Whatever the circumstances, they believed God. And we too, now, are being asked for this faith. This is the most wonderful, the highest and greatest calling in our lives.

Let us pray.