

If you have your Bible, turn to Genesis 15. Today, I get to teach you from one of the most important passages in the entire Bible. This is one of the deepest, richest, most significant sections in all of Scripture. It is a passage that has shaped and encouraged me at profound levels.

The question at the heart of the tension in our passage today is, *“How can we know that God is good and that God will keep his promises?”* It is commonly assumed among many Christians that God is good and he keeps his promises. If I say the phrase, “God is good,” many of you know to say, “All the time.” Then if I say, “And all the time,” you know to say, “God is good.” Some of you who didn’t grow up going to church are thinking, “I didn’t know they used secret phrases!” The point is, we say all the time that God is good, but how can we *know* he is good? How can we know he will keep his promises?

How many of you have ever broken a promise? I have. Sometimes, when we want someone to prove they are going to keep a promise, we ask them to put it in writing, maybe even sign their name to it. That way, if things change in the future, we have something in print to refer to. “Look, these are the terms. This is what you said you would do. You signed your name and gave a guarantee.” I officiated a wedding for a young couple from this church a few weekends ago. They didn’t just take an oath in front of God and their family and friends; they signed their names to a paper and said they intended to enter this lifelong covenant. That’s how we show we are going to keep our promises, but how can we know if God is going to keep his promises?

That’s the tension in our passage today. Abraham, who we were introduced to last week in our study, went way out on a limb in following God’s voice. [View the online sermon to see the map from last week.] He heard God say, “Leave your father’s family. Leave your home country. Set out on a journey with camels and tents to a land I will show you.” God didn’t even tell Abraham where he was going! It was an enormous step of faith. Abraham trusted God and followed him, but things didn’t initially turn out the way Abraham had hoped. The doors he expected to fling wide open still appeared shut. Questions and doubts began to settle into Abraham’s heart and mind. “My life is still hard. It’s harder now that I’ve followed you than before! I’ve been living in tents for years now. I don’t have any children. Did I make a mistake? Is God good? Can he be trusted? Will he keep his promises?”

That’s the tension in Abraham’s life. That’s where many of us are today. You have a child with chronic pain. You have a spouse who is getting ready to go to hospice care. You have a marriage that is struggling. You have bills you can’t pay. You’ve tried your best to follow God with your life, and doors aren’t opening the way you expected or hoped. You want to believe in God—you do believe in God—but every once in a while, you have doubts—not doubts whether or not God is real, but whether or not he’s really involved in your life. Does he see, does he know, does he care, is he near, is he good, will he keep his promises? This interaction that God had with Abraham wasn’t only for Abraham and his faith; it’s for us and our faith, too! We’re going to see how God responded to Abraham’s fear, how he confirmed his promise, and how all of this points to Jesus.

“The word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward’” (Genesis 15:1). God began this conversation by getting right at the heart of Abraham’s concern. God’s first words were, “Do not be afraid.” Of all the commands in the Bible, this is the most frequently issued command. Over 100 times in Scripture, God spoke to his people and said,

“Don’t be afraid.” God knows that the default disposition of humanity is fear, anxiety, worry, and scarcity. This is the first time this command is given in Scripture.

Why did God tell Abraham not to be afraid? God didn’t say, “Don’t be afraid. Look inside yourself and be strong. You have all that it takes.” That’s pride. God didn’t say, “Don’t be afraid, because there is nothing to be afraid of.” That’s ignorance. God didn’t say, “Don’t be afraid, because it doesn’t matter anyway.” That’s cynicism. God gave Abraham two incredible reasons to not fear. Both reasons came from taking his eyes off himself and his circumstances and placing his eyes on God.

The first reason God gave Abraham not to fear was, “I am your shield.” Why might God say something like this? Flip back one page. Abraham had just been in a physical battle. Several local chieftains allied together to raze and plunder a nearby village and carry its people off as slaves. One of those victims carried off as a slave was Abraham’s nephew, Lot. Abraham chased down the chieftains, fought them off, and rescued his nephew. But by entering that fight, Abraham stuck his nose in a hornet’s nest. He was likely expecting retaliation at any moment. How can you sleep at night if you think your tent village is going to be ambushed by a thousand enemy soldiers hell bent on revenge? Abraham had a sense of fear, uncertainty, and anxiety, but God said, “Don’t be afraid. Sure, there are bad guys out there. There are people who want to harm you! But I am your shield. I am your stronghold. I will protect you. I will fight for you. No weapon or scheme formed against you will prosper.”

There is a time later in the Bible when the prophet Elisha and his servant were surrounded by an army.

When the servant of the man of God got up and went out early the next morning, an army with horses and chariots had surrounded the city. “Oh no, my lord! What shall we do?” the servant asked. “Don’t be afraid,” the prophet answered. “Those who are with us are more than those who are with them.” And Elisha prayed, “Open his eyes, Lord, so that he may see.” Then the Lord opened the servant’s eyes, and he looked and saw the hills full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha. (2 Kings 6:15–17)

Our eyes usually see like the prophet’s servant. But we need the eyes of faith to see like Elisha to realize that God is our shield, our protector, our defender, and *those who are with us are greater than those who are with them*.

God not only said he would be Abraham’s shield, but he also said, “I am your very great reward.” God gave Abraham a promise about the uncertainty facing him currently and gave him a word of promise about the uncertainty facing him in the future. When Abraham looked into his future, he saw so much uncertainty because he didn’t have any children to carry on his lineage. It brought him extreme anxiety and fear, and would eventually prompt him to make very unwise, destructive choices. But God spoke and said, “I am your reward. I hold your future in my hand. And my plans for you are better than you can possibly imagine!” It reminds me of what God told the people through Jeremiah, “‘I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future’” (Jeremiah 29:11). But it’s more than simply that God had a good future planned for Abraham. God didn’t say, “I have a good reward for you in the future.” He said, “I am your reward.” God himself is the treasure, the prize. CS Lewis says in *The Weight of Glory*, “He who has God and everything else has no more than he who has God only.”

God spoke these incredible promises over Abraham’s life, so you’d think Abraham would say, “Thank you God! That is so encouraging, so affirming. That is just what I needed to hear.” But instead, he told

God, “This is one of those times when words aren’t enough! I need something tangible, something concrete.” “Abram said, ‘Sovereign Lord, *what can you give me* since I remain childless...? You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir’” (Genesis 15:2). “God, I don’t need more promises; I need a child. You promised I would have children and I don’t have any. God, I left everything for you. Are you going to come through for me or not?” In response, God said, “I think it’s time for a little show and tell.” “The Lord 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’” (Genesis 15:5). God said, “You are up there in years, and so is your wife. But Abraham, trust me—that’s what your lineage is going to look like one day.” If you look at Abraham’s family tree, and all his physical descendants—not spiritual descendants (those who believe in the same God), but those who are biologically descended from him—it’s over 1 billion people! And his spiritual descendants are many times that.

God gave Abraham a physical, tangible signpost not only about lineage, but also about land, a permanent place to call home. God said, “Look around. I am going to give you this land. Everything you can see and more will be yours.” Again, Abraham wanted more than just words. “‘Sovereign Lord, *how can I know* that I will gain possession of it?’” (Genesis 15:8). This time, instead of God pointing to the stars in a show and tell, was far more personal, far more interactive, far more multi-sensory and participatory.

“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” (Genesis 15:9-10). Initially, this seems like a very strange and extreme thing to do, but in the Ancient Near East 4,000 years ago, this is how one entered into an official agreement. In our world, if we want to enter into an official agreement, we draw up a contract and both parties sign on the dotted line. If I want to buy your house, I write out a contract and present you with a formal offer. If we both sign on the dotted line, it’s official. Neither of us can get out of that contract without consequences. It’s formal and binding.

In the ancient world, instead of signing on the dotted line, they divided animals in two! The meaning was very clear. The animals would be cut down the middle. One part of the animal would be placed on this side and another part would be placed on that side and then the people making the covenant would walk through the cut animal. It wasn’t pretty—the blood, the guts, the smell. It was graphic and gruesome, but it was their way of saying to one another, “If I fail to keep my end of the agreement, if I fail to do what I have promised to do, may what has happened to these animals happen to me. If I don’t keep my word, may I be torn in two.” No loopholes. No buyout clauses. If you entered a covenant by walking through those animals, you were willing to back it up with your life. “Because you have broken the terms of our covenant, I will cut you apart just as you cut apart the calf when you walked between its halves to solemnize your vows” (Jeremiah 34:18). They took their covenants seriously.

We have dozens of ancient documents like this one in Jeremiah that describe a covenant with animals cut in two, symbolizing death and destruction if a promise is broken. But these covenants were never equal. They were never even. The person in the position of power sat on the sidelines as the person in the position of need walked through. The conquering king watched as the defeated king walked through, inviting punishment on himself if he was not loyal to or failed to pay taxes to his new overlord. Why would the person in a position of strength ever walk through? We have dozens of examples of these covenants being made; we have zero examples in all of history of the stronger

person walking through the torn in half animals—except this one! After Abraham cut the animals, “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’” (Genesis 15:17-18). With those animals torn in two, a smoking firepot and a blazing torch passed through the pieces. The words translated “smoking firepot” and “blazing torch” are used elsewhere in Scripture to describe God’s presence on Mount Sinai and God’s presence in the pillar that led the Israelites through the wilderness. These images represent God himself. God himself passed through the torn apart animals. The one in power is flipped the script, and he said to Abraham, “Do you want to have confidence that I am good? Do you want to know for sure that I will keep my promises? I’ll put it all on the line! If I don’t keep my promises, may what has happened to these animals happen to me. May my limitlessness as God suffer limitation; may my immortality as God suffer mortality. Though I hold the universe together, may I be undone; may I be torn apart at the seams.”

It’s incredible that God would make a promise like that, but notice: *God passed through the animals all by himself*. Usually, it would have been only Abraham; perhaps in a rare scenario, Abraham would pass through and God would pass through with him. But in this covenant that God made, he was the only one who passed through! The meaning is unmistakable! Not only did God say, “If I don’t keep my end of the covenant, I’m willing to be torn apart to make it right,” but God is also saying, “If you don’t keep your end of the covenant, I’m willing to be torn apart like these animals to make it right.” Every other covenant said, “You break it, you die.” With this covenant God said, “You break it, I die.” The all-powerful one was willing to become powerless, the infinite was willing to become finite, the God of all glory was willing to be torn apart, not only if he was unfaithful, but also if his people were unfaithful.

The question we began today with was, “How can we know that God is good and that God will keep his promises?” This is how we know. It’s not about being protected from the storms of life. It’s not about our bank account or our job or our friends. It’s about God, and how faithful he is to the promises he has made. We know that God is good because even when we fall short, even when we sin and deserve punishment, he pays the price. Romans 6:23 says, “The wages of sin is death.” Because of our rebellion, we deserve punishment. We deserve to be torn in two. But what happened for us on the cross? God showed us just how good he is, and the full extent to which he is willing to go to keep his promises. On the cross, Jesus incurred the punishment we deserved. We sinned; he paid the price. We fell short; he was tortured and killed. This is the gospel showing up all the way back in the book of Genesis. When Jesus’ body was torn apart on the cross, he was doing exactly what God promised Abraham that day—taking the curse of our unfaithfulness upon himself. The book of Hebrews describes what happened on the cross by saying, “Jesus appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (Hebrews 9:26). “For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (Hebrews 10:14).

If you ever wondered if God is good and will keep his promises, look to the cross! That’s what you deserve, but he walked through the animals for you. He went to the cross for you! You were faithless; he was faithful. That’s his goodness. That’s his love. Romans 8:32 says, “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” If God was faithful enough to go to the cross for you, what won’t he do for you!

Some of you are living right in the middle of Genesis 15. You’ve obeyed, you’ve trusted, and yet the land still feels barren. You’re waiting on a promise, wondering if God still sees you, if he is good, and

if he can be trusted. Hear him speak to you today: “Do not be afraid. I am your shield. I am your very great reward.” You can trust Him. He told Abraham to look to the stars and try to count them. Instead of just looking up into the heavens, God calls us to look to the cross and see the God who walked through death for us. When you can’t see the story he is writing, you can cling to his character. One day, when faith becomes sight, you’ll see that not one word he has spoken has ever failed.