

Title: The Gospel in Genesis: The End of Abraham

Text: Genesis 15:12-20

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Introduction

The desert sun finally disappeared over the western horizon, another day of wandering in the Eastern Desert in the books. Yitzhak took in the view from the doorway of his tent. For all of his 37 years, Yitzhak ben Yehudah had been traveling, drifting seemingly nowhere, through the Zin and Paran deserts with two million other refugees from Egypt. Canaan, the Land of Promise, was almost within reach now. Since the Great Disobedience at Kadesh Barnea almost 40 years ago, the newly constituted nation of Israel had been adrift in the sea of sand, and an entire generation, including his parents, had perished in judgment. But now, the land was nearly in sight. Land within reach... he'd have his own inheritance, in fact someplace not far off being from the tribe of Reuben. Yitzhak looked down at the desert floor beneath his feet. Land... an inheritance promised to Abraham more than 500 years before.

As Yitzhak ben Yehudah stepped away from his tent and began a stroll into the desert night, he cast a glance at the orange translucent glow off in the distance. Its radiance had replaced that of the sun. His mind immediately began mulling over the events earlier that day. He had been to the tent of meeting to make a burnt offering of atonement¹. There, at the entrance of the tabernacle, just as he had been instructed, he laid his hands on the bull's head, then flayed it and cut it into pieces in front of the priests. The cut pieces of the bull were then burned on the fire. Such a bloody ordeal it was. But his offering of the cut pieces of the bull was necessary because the law had been transgressed. The covenant had been broken. Atonement must be made. Again. And again. And again. How many times had he been to the tent of meeting in the past year? Yitzhak was always grateful to hear the reassuring words of the priests that the atonement sacrifice was indeed a pleasing aroma to the Lord.

As he again gazed more intently at the orange translucent glow off in the distance where that offering by fire had been made, another image was brought to his mind, an image from a story long ago that not only explained much of what had transpired in the past day, but also held out much promise to Yitzhak who was on the cusp of obtaining his land inheritance. An intriguing story. A bizarre story. A story he'd first heard as a child, now written down as part of the sacred writings in the book of the covenant from the prophet Moses. As Yitzhak plays the story over again in his mind, he kneels on the cooling desert floor and thanks God for his gracious provision in the bull, and the aroma, and the pillar of fire and tent of meeting, and the coming inheritance of land that will soon be his.

A long time ago...

One of the most important events in Abraham's life, the event impacting Yitzhak's life in a direct way hundreds of years later, is found in our book of Genesis chapter 15....Beginning with verse 1...

This is what God's word proclaims to us.

God's Covenant with Abram

¹ Leviticus 1

15 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 yourself, 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 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.”

Abram, father of the world

Abram is a Chaldean who left all that he knew at the age of 75 to go to a land that was not his own on a promise that was not yet his. For the first time since Babel, God resumes his direct intervention in the affairs of men and begins to separate for himself a people. He chooses a man in a small town called Haran, a man named Abram. Abram leaves his relatives and heads south and east to a land that would be known as Canaan. Abram leaves Ur simply on the promise of God that he would make Abraham a great nation, a great name, and give him great blessing and fruitful land. Even more preposterous... Abram’s posterity would be as the sand of the sea and all of the families on earth would be blessed.

The Abrahamic Covenant

These promises occur in what we know as the Abrahamic Covenant, a Covenant between God and Abraham that isn’t revealed all at once, but the promises and the details are divulged along with a series of events throughout Abraham’s life, beginning with God bringing him out of his homeland in chapter 12, again in chapter 13 in dividing the land

with Lot, here in chapter 15, again in chapter 17 (changing his name to Abraham and connecting the covenant to the sign of circumcision), and again in chapter 22 with the sacrifice of Isaac. Through this covenant Abraham doesn't simply become the forefather of a nation, but of the world... in Abraham all of the families on earth will be blessed... so much so that his offspring, like the sand of the sea, will cover the earth as dust, and will be impossible to count.

The passage we have read is among the series of events that make up the Abrahamic Covenant. As we leave chapter 14 and come to chapter 15, Abram is fresh off of rescuing Lot from a bunch of bandit-kings and receiving a blessing from a unique priest-king named Melchizedek. Abram, the nomad with no land, becomes defender of Lot and Canaan. As the hero who saves the day, Abram is given the chance to join the ranks of those entitled to worldly honor and position. But Abram, the aging king-like warrior, declines the reward, preferring instead to be satisfied in honor that is not of this world.

The first “I am statement”

And indeed, in the wake of his humble refusal, the One in whom Abram has entrusted his future, declares that He is Abram's warrior shield, ready to bestow on him great reward that is not of a material but heavenly nature. The “word of the Lord” comes to Abram as if he were a prophet in the form of a miraculous vision. The “word of the Lord” in vision form speaks to the nature of the declaration and the event that is about to take place. You see, this isn't simply an aloof God covenanting with Abram. This is the divine taking personal interest in Abram's affairs.

You see, this “I am your shield” is the first of two declarative “I am” statements in this passage. These two “I am” statements are the first of their kind in the Bible. The first great “I am” statement of the scriptures posits God as Abram's protector and provider, both shield and rewarder. As he has done in the past, the Great I AM who has no beginning or end will continue to intervene in time and space on Abram's behalf.

This passage is filled with firsts. Not only is this the first occurrence of the great “I am”, but it's also the first time that Abram speaks to God. Up to this point, God speaks, and if there is any response from Abram, it is simply doing what God had said to do. But now, Abram is no longer silent. One begins to wonder if Abram is beginning to waiver in the faith that has removed him from his original homeland.

Abram's first question

Abram responds with the first of two questions, each asked in the wake of the two “I am” statements. Both “I am” statements and both questions run right to the heart of the covenant God has already begun to unpack with Abram. The two main categories of covenantal blessings that have been promised to this point: offspring and land. These two categories continue to be intertwined in the unfolding covenant with Abram. In the first statement, the “I am” protector promises great reward, and Abram rightly interprets the statement to be that of posterity. He responds with the question, “what will you give me?” and then elaborates on why he asks “what will you give me?” Just as God's statement of being a shield and providing reward is set against the backdrop of Abram's in faith to accept the princely honor of men, so too “what will you give me?” is set over against the

mercenary bounty he has refused from the earthly kings. Abram the man who would not be king wants to know from the true king what the nature of his covenantal offspring will be, given he has no heir.

Abram's choice of words is not accidental. Abram doesn't simply use the word "offspring". He doesn't use the word "son". Twice Abram mentions "heir". Abram has been promised offspring and he has been promised land. He is childless. But even beyond the fact that he is childless, there is no one to pass on this grand "to the ends of the earth" inheritance he has been promised. Abram has been promised nationhood. Abram has been promised impossibly great posterity. Abram has been promised what Adam had forfeited... the filling of the earth with divine image-bearers. But the blessing he cannot see with his eyes is becoming increasingly dim because that which he can see is advancing years and the lack of an heir to all that he materially owns. What he can touch has begun to crowd out that which cannot be touched. So much so, that the thought of fixing the problem himself, that of giving an inheritance that can be touched to an heir who is not offspring, but yet qualified, is at least in Abram's mind.

God's promise

The One who is Abram's Protector and Rewarder now speaks with even more covenantal clarity. Not only is his promise to reward Abram beyond anything Abram can see, he will indeed reward Abram with an heir, an heir who is of the same DNA as Abram. God will reward Abram with an heir provided outside of Abram's control. If Abram's conquest of the kings as a nomad warrior gave him any thoughts of being able to provide for himself an heir, God puts it to rest. There will be a *son*, a *son* that is not of Abram's own doing, but a *son* who is a reward... the firstfruits of an earth full of *sons of Abraham*.

Not only does God speak his promise, but he also provides a sign of his promise. The One whom Melchizedek had proclaimed as "possessor of heaven and earth" now has Abram cast his gaze to the heavens. Count the stars if you can. Again, this is no accident. The "Possessor of heaven and earth" will provide Abram with an earthly heir, but an heir that points him back to the heavens. The nature of the one, and indeed any offspring, who has the right to all the birthright that is Abram's by faith is of heavenly orientation.

Abram's response to the promise

The author of Genesis, Moses, then records for us Abram's response to what God has graciously promised to provide. The response becomes one of the most quoted verses in the Scriptures. It speaks to Abram's cognizance that there is more going on here than simply a conversation between a generous benefactor and beneficiary. The appearance of the great "I am" who isn't simply going to protect and reward, but reward with a biological *son* who will be heir not just of Abram's earthly possessions, but all that the heavens will rain down on the earth in filling the earth with *sons of Abram*. A *son*, a *son* from the "Possessor of heaven and earth" who will fill the heavens and the earth with God's glory.

Abram is brought to the end of himself. He is beyond child granting years. His wife is beyond child-bearing years. What is being promised, he cannot provide himself. The heir who will eventually fill the earth with offspring as dust cannot be earned. It cannot be paid for. It cannot be worked for. This kind of salvation for the earth must come from outside of himself. His only response can be one of faith. Abram believes, and it is placed on his

account as righteousness. This statement points both us and Abram beyond the physicality of the covenantal relationship to the spiritual nature of a covenant between the Creator, the Possessor of Heaven and Earth, and creature. God says, Abram look to the stars and count their number. Abram responds in faith and God counts not stars, but righteousness to Abram. God does so, not because of what Abram does, but because of what God will do in the future. Somehow, some way an exchange has taken place... an exchange that will be portrayed in an unforgettable way before the evening is over. At the end of himself, when he can do nothing, Abram believes and in the great exchange receives a righteousness that is not of his own making or design.

If we did not know it up to this point, Moses is pointing out what is at stake in this covenantal relationship. Nothing less than right standing with God. Abram gets it. Abram doesn't miss it. This isn't simply a matter of not believing the Possessor of heaven and earth is going to provide Abram with biological posterity, in the same way that you or I believe that the Bengals will win this afternoon. No, much more is at stake. This isn't simply about biological posterity but eternal destiny. Abram places a saving faith in the promise of a son, a faith that places Abram among the great cloud of witnesses for all time.

The second "I am" statement

But the story doesn't end there.

In the wake of this grand statement about the nature of Abram's belief in the "I am shield" who will provide a *son* who will fill the earth as if it were the heavens, God makes a second grand "I am" statement, that against runs to the heart of the covenantal promises he has already given Abram. "I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of the Chaldeans to give you a land to possess". "I am the Lord who brought you out..." sounds quite a bit like "I am the Lord who brought you out of the land of Egypt", but I digress. The Great "I am" isn't simply protector-provider, but the Great "I AM" is also savior-provider. The one who protects is the one who saves. The grand act of salvation for Abram didn't begin with the promises, it began with God's act of saving him from the land of the Chaldeans. The Great "I AM" is a savior before Abram can lift a finger or get on a camel. He is Savior because Abram cannot save himself. If it had been up to Abram, Abram would still be in the land of Terah, just outside of Canaan, but not quite in.

And this Great "I AM" savior isn't going to provide merely an heir, as miraculous as that will be, but he will provide an inheritance for the heir. From a land of Abram's own making, Ur, to a land that is born of the heavens, his inheritance. Again, Abram is forced to think beyond himself. This inheritance is not constituted of Abram's earthly possessions, but of that which Abram does not yet possess. In fact, Abram not only will Abram not possess it in his lifetime, "this land" cannot be secured by human hands. What kind of "land", what kind of inheritance will serve as inheritance to a posterity as numerous as the stars of the heavens? What kind of inheritance will serve as inheritance to a posterity whose makeup is of a heavenly orientation? The Great "I AM" Savior will provide Abram, from beginning to end, an heir and an inheritance that is both outside of Abram's ability to secure, and not of this world.

Abram's second question

Abram, like he had done, after the first "I am" statement, responds with a question, a second question that runs to the heart of the covenant unfolding between God and himself.

“How am I to know I will possess it?” “How will I know?” This is Jewish-speak for “what sign will you give me?” First, “what will you give me?” Now... “what sign will you give me so that I will know that I will possess it? A natural question, especially given Abram’s age and the fact that there is no heir present. Abram has already been given one sign... a sign in the heavens. Now he asks for a second; one wonders if though he has faith, he still doubts.

God’s Promise and Provision

What happens next is beyond surreal. Rather than answer Abram outright, God begins to act on Abram’s behalf, though Abram may not yet be aware of it. The Great I AM Protector, the Great I AM Savior doesn’t simply act, he decisively acts on Abram’s behalf. There must be more to securing Abram’s heir and inheritance. There must be more to Abram’s salvation.

Abram speaks no more. He is done speaking. God is going to provide an answer that again is beyond Abram. God has Abram secure animals that will appear again hundreds of years later in Leviticus 1 as an atonement offering for sin. Covenant making of this kind, covenant-making that results in a righteousness being accounted to Abram, cannot happen without the shedding of blood. In order for there to be an heir, in order for there to be an inheritance there must be a right relationship with the Great I AM, the kind of relationship that from almost the very beginning of the creature’s existence was marred by rebellion, transgression, sin. And in order for there to be an heir and an inheritance that is bound up in terms of righteousness there must be a death.

It what seems like a bizarre ritual to us, in the most serious of covenant making in the times of Abram, the two parties making the covenant with each other would “cut a covenant”. This in fact is embedded in the word “covenant”... to cut. And it comes from this ceremony. That’s the word used both in verse 10 and alluded to in verse 18. In a formal covenant ratification ceremony, an animal would be flayed in pieces, and lined up in two rows. Then the two parties would take turns walking between the pieces of that animal, not only promising to keep his end of the bargain, but also signifying what would happen to that individual were he to violate that covenant. In this manner, the death of the animal was exchanged for the life of the covenant maker, signifying the curse of the covenant.

But more is happening in this particular ritual. Not only is a covenant being ratified here in Genesis 15, the ratification takes place using the animals of atonement. Thus, the covenant ratification also functions as a picture of what is taking place in the atonement for sin. The symbols of covenant ratification are always bound up with in the atonement imagery. Sacrifice for sin is always tied to the terms of the covenant.

No hope for Abram

The Great I AM Protector-Savior, having brought Abram to the end of himself, answers Abram’s doubts with a solemn covenant ratification ceremony. Having flayed the animal and lined them up in their stark rows, God and Abram will ratify the covenant between two parties. But as the time draws near, only one party in this instance will walk between the pieces. As the sun disappears to the west, a deep sleep... so deep it is called a dreadful and great darkness... falls on Abram. There is covenant to be made, but the terms for this covenant are too impossible... the situation is too dark and too terrible for Abram. You

see, the terms were so great, so stupendous, Abram cannot keep the covenant necessary to obtain the blessings. Abram is doomed. If left up to Abram, all there is in his own life and in his own future is covenant breaking. This kind of covenant demands perfect completion. The dead animals, in the terror of darkness, portend Abram's terrible fate. He's sleeping. He cannot walk through the pieces. He cannot even begin to attempt to agree to the terms of the covenant, let alone meet the terms of the covenant.

The sun completely disappears. There is no hope for Abram. This is the end of Abram. But into this dark and terrible scene, with Abram helpless to help himself from certain doom, God speaks. The Great I AM Protector and Savior speaks words of promise. Yes, again, there will be covenantal blessing. There will be an heir. There will be an inheritance. And there will be another great act of salvation for Abram's offspring, bringing the offspring, like Abram, from another country into their Canaan inheritance.

One great act of love

But the terms for such grand blessing are too steep for Abram. So in one great act of love and mercy, into the blackness of the night there's a ray of hope coming from an orange translucent glow. The fire from the torch brightens the place where Abram is sleeping. The billowing smoke from the firepot envelopes the scene. The Great I AM, in swearing the oath by himself, walks through the pieces alone, not simply for himself, but on behalf of Abram. As the torch and firepot move toward the pieces, the Great I AM portrays for Abram the promise of his presence, his dwelling with Abram, throughout the course of the covenant, a covenant that will be everlasting. This will be the identifying mark of the covenant... I will be Abram's God, and his people will be my people.

But this Great I AM will do more for Abram than simply dwell with him throughout the life of the covenant. As the torch and firepot move through the pieces, the Great I AM, Shield and Savior, not only promises to make Abram the father of a posterity that cannot be counted that will encompass the whole world, he also invokes the curses that would have been Abram's on to himself. If the covenant is broken, the Great I AM will be treated as a covenant breaker and undergo the curses of the covenant, becoming like the sacrificial animals.

Abram will be the beneficiary of an everlasting covenant, but he cannot and will not execute the terms or secure the blessings. No, this must be done by the only one, in the fire and in the smoke, who can and will secure the blessing on Abram's behalf. There will be a son. There will be an inheritance. But there will also be a death. A death that should have been Abram's. A death that will be provided by the flaming torch and smoking firepot walking among the pieces.

Conclusion

Yitzhak ben Yehudah continues to gaze at the orange, translucent glow in the distance. A torch by night. A smoking firepot by day. The presence of the Great I AM Protector Savior, the unquenchable fire of the burning bush, constantly hovers over the tent of meeting. There had been a son. There had been many sons. Yitzhak and the rest of Israel were on the cusp of an inheritance, after another great act of salvation in a rescue out of Egypt. As they made their journey to Canaan, the torch and firepot, God's presence among his people, led the way.

Near that orange shekinah glory cloud earlier in the day, Yitzhak ben Yehudah flayed a bull in two, the life of the bull exchanged for his own, making atonement for covenant breaking. The bloody mess of the atonement ritual was a reminder that ultimately somehow, some way the Great I AM would secure eternal and unimaginable blessing for Yitzhak and every other son of Abraham. This inheritance he would soon see was but a small downpayment on what he knew would someday encompass the entire earth. But in securing such glorious blessing for all the offspring of Abraham, the Great I AM, an offspring himself would invoke on himself the curses of the covenant breaker. In the sacrifice of the bull, at the foot of the smoking fire pot, Yitzhak entrusted all of his hopes and dreams of unimaginable posterity and inheritance to the Great I AM dwelling among His people.

And there did come a day, when shekinah glory descended to take His place among his people, coming not only to bestow unimaginable blessing on those he calls his own, but to invoke the curses of the covenant breaker. While we were sinners, asleep as though dead men unable to help ourselves, doomed to the destiny of flayed animals, at the end of ourselves, Christ died for us. The Great I AM Torch and Fire Pot gave us life in exchange for his own life, making atonement for sin that we had committed. In making the atonement we could not make, keeping terms we could not keep, The Great I AM Torch and Fire Pot has made us joint heirs of a grand inheritance with him, the beneficiaries of a grand inheritance of which, like Abram and Yitzhak ben Yehudah, we have only been given a taste.

Hebrews 6 tells us, "For when the Great I AM made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, Surely I will bless you and multiply you... So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an Torch and Fire Pot oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become our high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."

Jesus, Abram's Son, has been both covenant maker and covenant keeper. Christ, in keeping covenant, secured for the rest of Abram's offspring, all of the countless posterity and world-encompassing inheritance. In this great act of salvation, the Torch and the Fire Pot both fulfill the terms of the covenant and becomes the covenant breaker in order to give us a righteousness that is not our own. Christ walks the covenant walk we could not walk. His death is the death of the guilty. Abram's hope is the One who has redeemed for himself a people as numerous as the stars in the heavens, a posterity born with life from the heavens and given a heavenly orientation. Abram's hope is our hope. Our response is to be that of simple faith. And there will come a day when this grand posterity that He has redeemed for himself will cover the earth as dust, enjoying an inheritance that covers the earth. There will come a day, when we will bask in the glow of a Torch who will dwell with His people forever, having walked between the pieces on their behalf.