

### God Confirms His Covenant with Abraham

#### Genesis 15:7-21

Genesis 15:7-21 - *“Then He said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.”<sup>8</sup> And he said, “Lord GOD, how shall I know that I will inherit it?”<sup>9</sup> So He said to him, “Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”<sup>10</sup> Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two.<sup>11</sup> And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.*

*<sup>12</sup> Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him.<sup>13</sup> Then He said to Abram: “Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years.<sup>14</sup> And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions.<sup>15</sup> Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age.<sup>16</sup> But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”*

*<sup>17</sup> And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces.<sup>18</sup> On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying: “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates—<sup>19</sup> the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites,<sup>20</sup> the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim,<sup>21</sup> the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”*

#### Background Notes

How many of you are a little confused about this section of Scripture? Cutting animals in half, and arranging the pieces to make a walkway or corridor between them? A smoking furnace and a burning torch passing between the pieces? What was going on? Well, don't feel bad! Without some knowledge of the historical background, it would be pretty hard to figure out what Abram was doing here.

The event that is described here was a “treaty ceremony” that was used in ancient days when a covenant or agreement was “cut” between two parties. When a covenant was made, the two parties would cut a sacrificial animal (or animals) in half, and the two parties would walk between the animal parts, to signify their agreement to the terms of the covenant. What they were saying, symbolically, was that if either party broke the covenant, then they deserved to die like the sacrificial animals. Jeremiah 34:18: *“And I will give the men... who have not performed the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between the parts of it...”*

So the reason for this unusual episode is clear. God was confirming his covenant with Abram, particularly in reference to the Land: *“To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates”* (v18). Only during the reign of Solomon did Israel control the Land to that extent, from Egypt to the Euphrates. However, according to Romans 9-11, the Abrahamic Covenant is still valid today. When the nation of Israel returns to the Lord in the future, they will once again possess all the Land.

In the Old Testament, animal sacrifice points forward to the future great sacrifice of the Lamb or God, Jesus Christ. In this Genesis 15 covenant ceremony, the sacrificial animals are a spiritual picture of the sacrificial work of Christ on the cross. The cross was the necessary basis of God’s covenant of salvation with us.

## Doctrinal Points

### 1. God’s delays are not necessarily His denials.

In this covenant ceremony God told Abram, in no uncertain terms, that the covenant and its blessings would definitely be fulfilled - but not immediately. *“Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years”* (v13). The Lord told Abram about the bondage that his descendants would experience in Egypt. The misery of their slavery was dramatized in verse 12, where we read of the horror and the darkness: *“a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him.”* But then the promise of the Exodus followed (v14-16).

Of course all of this literally came true. Abraham died in peace at the good old age of 175. His descendants became a nation under bondage in Egypt, but God brought them out of slavery and back to the Promised Land under Moses. Verse 14 says that they would come out of Egypt with great possessions, and this promise was literally fulfilled: *“Now the children of Israel had...asked from the Egyptians articles of silver, articles of gold, and clothing.”*<sup>36</sup> *And the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they granted them what they requested. Thus they plundered the Egyptians”* (Exodus 12:35-36).

So we see that God meant exactly what He said when He promised to give the Land to Abraham and his descendants. And although there was a delay, there was not a denial! God’s delays are not necessarily His denials. God always has reasons for His delays.

In this case, one good reason for the delay is given in verse 16: *“But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”* The pagan Amorites were a major tribe in Canaan, and they were very wicked. God was patient with the Canaanites, but they didn’t repent. God finally judged them at the time of the Conquest, when Israel entered and conquered the Land under the leadership of Joshua.

God is long-suffering and patient. Remember how Noah preached for 120 years while God waited patiently for the people to repent? But when they didn't repent, the judgment of the Flood came. 2 Peter 3:9 says, *"The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance."*

In view of verses 18-21 and the extent of the land that was given to Abraham and his descendants, this promise has not yet been completely fulfilled. However, it will be fulfilled when the nation of Israel returns to the Lord in the future. God's delays are not necessarily His denials. In fact, if God promises something, His delays are **never** denials!

Years ago when I was working as a research scientist, I sensed God calling me to teach His Word full time. However, several years went by before God worked that out in my life, and opened the doors to full time ministry. Sometimes God's delays are much longer - as in the life of Joseph, for example. But remember, God's delays are not necessarily denials!

## 2. God's promises are always as sure as His existence.

*"And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces...." (v17).*

The smoking furnace and the burning torch were symbols of God's presence. The smoking furnace (or firepot) speaks of God's judgment against sin, because God is a holy God. The burning torch speaks of God's guidance. Whenever God makes a covenant with man, both aspects of God's character are involved -- His judgment of sin, because man is a sinner, and His guidance, because man needs a Leader.

There was a judgment side to God's covenant with Abram and his descendants. Over the years God has disciplined the Jewish people - from their time in Egypt to the present time. However, God has always guided His people. God has faithfully led and preserved the Jewish people for over 4000 years - and He will continue to do so!

There is also a judgment side in God's covenant with us. Our sins are forgiven because of the Cross of Jesus Christ, pictured here in the sacrificial animals. But as children in God's family, God must discipline us for our sins and disobedience. He will sometimes "put us through the furnace" to refine us and purge out the impurities. But, praise the Lord, the burning torch is there as well! God is always there to guide us.

The main point in the Genesis 15 covenant ceremony was that it was **not** a **joint** venture -- it was a **unilateral** covenant! Both God and Abram did not pass through the pieces of the sacrificial animals together, as was the normal procedure in making a covenant. **God alone**, in the symbols of the furnace and torch, passed through the pieces of the sacrificial animals. By this gesture God was saying to Abram, "Regardless of whether you (Abram) and your descendants (the Jewish people) keep this covenant, I (God) will keep **My** promises of the covenant."

In fact, God's promises were as sure as His existence! That is the meaning of the symbols of God's presence passing alone between the animal parts. "Abram, I am guaranteeing the promises of the covenant by My very existence. If I exist, you can be sure of My promises!" And this is still true today: God's promises are as sure as His existence.

## Practical Application

### Let's drive away the vultures!

There's another spiritual picture here. In Scripture, certain kinds of birds are a picture of satanic activity. Do you remember what our Lord said about the birds in the Parable of the Sower? The birds represented Satan coming and taking away the good seed from the hard ground, before it had a chance to penetrate and take root.

Well, I believe that the vultures, the unclean birds of prey mentioned here, were an indication of satanic activity. Notice that they were disturbing the sacred ceremony - the covenant God was making with Abram and his descendants. However, notice that God didn't drive the vultures away - Abram had to drive them away!

Satanic activity still happens today. Satan will do whatever he can to disrupt and to disturb the relationship between God and believers. Satan may try to bring doubts about our salvation into our minds. He may attempt to draw us away from the Lord through the media and our culture, or through loss or suffering or grief. He may attempt to disrupt our families, or our efforts to teach God's Word to our children. Threatened legal action against a church may greatly disrupt a church's ministry.

**We** must drive away the vultures! It is **our** responsibility. Whether it is by regulating the TV or the music or the computer in our homes, or by safeguarding our children from negative influences in society and culture, or by steadily and faithfully teaching the principles of God's Word in the church and at home, or by guarding our minds from evil thoughts by soaking ourselves in the Word of God - **let's do it!!**

**Let's drive away the vultures!**