



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

Five Dead Animals, Two Floating Fires, and One Grumpy Patriarch

SERMON BY REV. STEVE CLARK ■ AUGUST 27, 2023

I am with seven friends in Istanbul, Turkey, and I have just doomed us all! After an amazing six-week mission trip in Dubai, seven seminary friends and I took off from Dubai at 3:55 AM, just in time for the world's least convenient layover. Our flight landed in Istanbul; our flight home to Boston was from Ankara. Ankara is another city in Turkey, separated by a one-and-a-half-hour drive over the Bosphorus Strait, which divides Europe and Asia. That's right; we literally had to find a shuttle bus driver to drive us to a different continent to make our flight. Suddenly, Chicago O'Hare didn't seem so bad. But we had enough time before our flight that we convinced our driver to do a bit of sightseeing in Istanbul. We drove by the Hagia Sophia, we stopped and picked up some Turkish bread, and then to our delight, he took us to a local tea shop. Turkish folks know hospitality. We filed out of the bus and were enjoying our Turkish tea on the water when the driver told us he needed to re-park the vehicle. "I'll be right back," he told me. I waved cheerily with my tea. Then, he hopped on the bus and I watched him drive away. I couldn't figure out why my friends were suddenly panicking...until I realized he was driving away with our luggage...and all our money...and our passports. We were stuck at a tea shop in Istanbul and our only hope of returning home was a random shuttle bus driver's promise. Not my best move.

Thankfully, after a few nerve-wracking minutes, the bus driver returned. We made it home, and my friends were still speaking to me. But for ten terrifying minutes, everything hung in the balance of trusting the promise of someone we barely knew in a foreign country.

Some of you know the feeling of having to trust someone to keep a promise when you don't know if you can trust them. It's scary to trust a financial adviser with your retirement, a doctor to perform an operation, or a man to marry your daughter. If you don't know that someone is a person who keeps their word or keeps their promises, you are hesitant to trust them with something as important as an operation, your money, or a marriage.

We feel the same way sometimes about God's promises.

God promises eternal life for those who believe in Jesus; He promises never to leave or forsake us; He promises to make us more like Jesus. These are some of the most important promises in the world to us. But sometimes it doesn't feel like God is really going to keep them! He promises never to leave or forsake us; why does He sometimes feel so far away? He promises to make us like Jesus but why do we keep messing up? Do we have any reason to trust that God will make good on His Word? Are we just hoping Jesus really will come back like He said, like the Turkish bus driver? To answer that question, we'll read today from Genesis 15:1-21, from the New Living Translation.

Some time later, the LORD spoke to Abram in a vision and said to him, "Do not be afraid, Abram, for I will protect you, and your reward will be great."

²But Abram replied, "O Sovereign LORD, what good are all your blessings when I don't even have a son? Since you've given me no children, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant in my household, will inherit all my wealth. ³You have given me no descendants of my own, so one of my servants will be my heir."

⁴Then the LORD said to him, "No, your servant will not be your heir, for you will have a son of your own who will be your heir." ⁵Then the LORD took Abram outside and said to him, "Look up into the sky and count the stars if you can. That's how many descendants you will have!"

⁶And Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith.

⁷Then the LORD told him, “I am the LORD who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as your possession.”

⁸But Abram replied, “O Sovereign LORD, how can I be sure that I will actually possess it?”

⁹The LORD told him, “Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtle-dove, and a young pigeon.” ¹⁰So Abram presented all these to him and killed them. Then he cut each animal down the middle and laid the halves side by side; he did not, however, cut the birds in half. ¹¹Some vultures swooped down to eat the carcasses, but Abram chased them away.

¹²As the sun was going down, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a terrifying darkness came down over him. ¹³Then the LORD said to Abram, “You can be sure that your descendants will be strangers in a foreign land, where they will be oppressed as slaves for 400 years. ¹⁴But I will punish the nation that enslaves them, and in the end they will come away with great wealth. ¹⁵(As for you, you will die in peace and be buried at a ripe old age.) ¹⁶After four generations your descendants will return here to this land, for the sins of the Amorites do not yet warrant their destruction.”

¹⁷After the sun went down and darkness fell, Abram saw a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the carcasses. ¹⁸So the LORD made a covenant with Abram that day and said, “I have given this land to your descendants, all the way from the border of Egypt to the great Euphrates River— ¹⁹the land now occupied by the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, ²⁰Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, ²¹Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites, and Jebusites.”

There are some passages of the Bible you can read and immediately apply. Colossians 3:13 (ESV): “*As the Lord has forgiven you, you also must forgive.*” Genesis 15 is not one of those passages! What is going on here? There are chopped-up cows, floating torches, and crazy names. Besides, wasn’t this guy named Abraham, not Abram? So, why did I choose such a confusing passage? Because Genesis 15 is all

about one core idea: **You can trust in God's promises.** To understand this text, there are three main questions we need to answer. First—what's going on with Abram? When God appears to Abram, his response in verse 2 is, *"...what good are all your blessings...?"* What's up with that? Second—what's going on with the animals? What's the meaning of this gory ceremony with all these chopped-up animals? And third—what's going on with the floating fire? What does that weird floating torch and smoking firepot mean at the end? This is why we're using the NLT version today—it's a translation that's a bit easier to understand, and as much as I love the ESV, I felt this passage was difficult enough to understand without using a translation that sounds like it was written by Yoda.

What is going on with Abram?

In verse 1, God appears to Abram, saying he will have a great reward. I don't know about you, but if God appeared to me saying I'd have a great reward, my response would be, "Wow! Cool! Tell me more!" But that was not Abram's response. Abram responded, *"What good are all your blessings when I don't even have a son?"* (Genesis 15:2). Yikes. What good are all your blessings? This sounds like your eighteen-year-old son who wants to move out of the house. Why is Abram so upset?

Back in Genesis 12, God had given Abram an amazing promise: *"Go to the land that I will show you. I will make you into a great nation...all the families on earth will be blessed through you"* (Genesis 12:1-3, NLT). Abram, at this time, was 75 years old with no children. The name Abram in Hebrew means "exalted father." Since he had no children, Abram probably had felt for a long time that his name was ironic. This promise would change all that: Abram would have a son after all! "God will make me into a nation. I'll be a dad!" But by the time Genesis 15 rolled around, there was no son in sight.

We don't know exactly how long it's been; Abram is 85 by chapter 16, so it's been close to ten years. That's a long time to wait! It doesn't look like God will keep His promises. As Abram said in verse 3, it looked like a servant in his home, a man named Eliezer

would be his heir instead of the promised son. So, when God told Abram he was going to have a great reward, his reaction was cynical: “What good are all your blessings? You made me a promise 10 years ago, God. Why should I trust you again?”

When it comes to keeping promises, we trust track records.

If our Turkish bus driver had not returned and I had to chase him down, we probably would try to find a different way to the airport. But because he came back according to his word, we could trust that he was reliable and would get us where we needed to go. That is why we check where our professors went to school or ask how many times a doctor has performed this surgery—track records matter to us. That is why God invites Abram to go stargazing. Imagine what the Middle Eastern night sky must have looked like with no light pollution. God told Abram, “*Count the stars, if you can*” (Genesis 15:4). Pastor Louie Giglio commented that if you tried to count all the stars in the Milky Way Galaxy, one per second, it would take you 2,500 years. God doubles down on His incredible promise as if to say, “If I can place all those stars in the sky, you can trust that I’ll keep my promise.”

Verse 6 tells us that “*Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous.*” This is a key verse for us to understand because it’s one of the most important in the Bible; it is quoted in the New Testament four times! We will come back to it later.

What’s going on with the animals?

In verse 7, we can tell Abram is still struggling to believe. God again promises Abram that he will inherit the promised land, to which Abram responds, “*O Sovereign LORD, how can I be sure that I will actually possess it?*” (Genesis 15:8). God doesn’t get angry at Abram for struggling to believe, but his response is bewildering. He instructs Abram in verse 9 to bring him a cow, a goat, a ram, and a couple of birds. Then we’re told: “*Abram presented all these to him and killed them. Then he cut each animal down the middle and laid the halves side by side*” (verse 10).

A bit of cultural background can help us with this strange symbolism. Early readers of Genesis would have thought, “Oh! Of course! I know exactly what this means: this is a covenant ceremony.” In ancient Near Eastern times, this was a common ceremony. A covenant is a binding promise between two parties. For example, a king might make a covenant with his servants to provide his protection if the servants swear their loyalty. Two shepherds might make a covenant that they won’t let their flocks graze on each other’s lands. In the Old Testament, God made covenants with Noah, Moses, and David: binding promises that could not be undone. These are more binding than our contracts today like signing a purchase contract for a car or an employment agreement. The closest example of a covenant we have today is marriage: a ceremony in front of witnesses that requires training, proper officiating, and sincere promises.

Sometimes, there was a ceremony to enact the covenant. We can see evidence of that in another Old Testament book when God speaks to Israel in Jeremiah 34:18: *“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.”* Let me demonstrate this with the assistance of Pastor Brad and a few Rogers’ family stuffed animals. We spread these animals across the floor and make a pathway between them—just pretend they’re cut in half. Now, let’s say Pastor Brad and I are making a covenant. Perhaps we are covenanting that I’ll stop throwing things at him when he walks past my office and that he will never again make me teach a DIG class on the demon-possessed pigs passage from Mark. Once Brad and I have decided on the terms of the covenant, we walk through the pathway between the cut-up animals to symbolize what we just saw in Jeremiah: if either of us breaks this covenant, may God make us just like these chopped-up animals. You see, covenants were more serious than our contracts today. Not only did covenants require something from both parties involved, but they also came with consequences: if I don’t keep my end of the bargain, may God chop me up like a dead animal. That completes our covenant ceremony.

God was proving why we can trust in His promises. He keeps His covenants—they are unbreakable. You and I, by the way, are told in the Bible that we have a covenant with God, too. We can trust His promises because we have a covenant with Him. But we have one final question. We know what’s going on with Abram. We know what’s going on with the animals. But...

What’s going on with the floating fire?

Here, early readers would have been just as confused as you and I are. The stage is set for Abram and God to walk through the animals together and to make a covenant together. But instead, in verse 12, Abram passes out. We’re told “*a deep sleep fell on Abram.*” That is a big problem! It is like oversleeping through your own wedding. Stranger yet, the language suggests God is behind the sleep. The word for “deep sleep” is the same word used when God put Adam to sleep to take out his rib to make Eve. With Abram in a trance, God reassured him that the promise will come true—his offspring will be slaves for hundreds of years, but they will possess the land—and then something unthinkable happened.

With Abram out of commission, and the sun down, verses 17 and 18 tell us, “*Abram saw a smoking firepot and a flaming torch pass between the halves of the carcasses. So the LORD made a covenant with Abram that day.*” We are expecting God and Abram to walk through the animals together. What’s going on with the floating fire? Well, let’s think for a moment together: Where else do we see fire acting in strange ways in the Old Testament? The burning bush when God appears to Moses; the pillar of fire when God appears to Israel; the fire on Mount Sinai when God appears on the mountain; when an inexplicable fire appears and starts acting in strange ways in the Old Testament it usually means one thing: God himself is showing up. God alone is passing through the animals. That means if the covenant is broken, God alone will bear the consequences. Normally, two parties walk through the animals as Pastor Brad and I did. That way, if I throw something at Pastor Brad again, only I bear the curse

of the covenant. But if only God went through the animals, it could mean only one thing: If either party broke the covenant, God Himself would bear the consequences.

I've been reading a beautiful story lately called *The Wingfeather Saga* by Andrew Peterson. It's a fantastic, Christian-inspired fantasy series which follows a woman, Nia, and her three children. Partway through the third book, one of the children is on trial before the village. For a host of reasons they don't trust the child and are ready to keep him in prison and never release him. But Nia steps forward and calls forth an ancient practice: *Turalay*. In this village's culture, *Turalay* was an unbreakable bond. If you declare *Turalay* it meant whatever crime the offending party committed, you will bear their punishment with them. If Nia's son were caught stealing and sentenced to jail for a week, she'd go to jail for the week. If Nia's son were caught murdering and sentenced to death, she'd go to the gallows with him. Nia cut her hand and placed her promise in blood upon the rock: whatever crime my beloved commits, whatever punishment they deserve, I will bear the punishment too.

You probably know where I'm going with this. In Genesis 17, we learn Abram's responsibility for keeping the covenant: "*I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless*" (17:2). Remember, covenants require both parties to have an obligation. We know God is going to keep His end of the bargain. He's God. But those of you who know Abram's story know he won't keep his end of the covenant. We already talked about his tendency to lie, laugh, and avoid responsibility. And Abram's descendants don't fare much better. Jacob cheats. Moses murders. David commits adultery. Israel breaks the covenant. God kept His end of the bargain; they fail to keep theirs. How could the promises to Abram be kept? The covenant had been broken.

But by passing through the animals, God had declared *Turalay*. In fact, He had declared something more. Not only would He share His punishment with His people, He would bear His punishment instead of His people. The night before Jesus Christ died for you and me, He took a cup, He lifted it up, and told His friends, "*This cup is*

the new covenant poured out for you in my blood" (Luke 22:20). Jesus was saying that God knew what He was doing when He passed between the animals. He was going to bear the curse of the covenant—through me. When Jesus died on the cross, He bore the curse every single one of us deserves for every single thing we've done wrong—every way that we have failed to walk "blamelessly" in the way of Abram. Why can we trust that God will keep His promises? It's not just because He's more trustworthy than a Turkish bus driver. It's because He has sealed His promises with a covenant—and because He bore the penalty when we broke that covenant. There is a photo that shows this truth in a beautiful way, drawn by a Christian man, Chris Powers. Jesus bears the brunt of all pain, sin, shame, and suffering. Because Jesus kept the covenant for us and bore the curse for us through His sacrifice, we are considered to have kept the covenant. You are one of Abram's descendants in the New Covenant.

The New Testament writers pick up on this. In Galatians 3, Paul quotes Genesis 15: "*Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness*" (Galatians 3:6). Paul goes on, saying, "*Know then, it is those of faith who are children of Abraham*" (Galatians 3:7). In other words, if, like Abraham, you believe in the promises of God, you are considered His child. You are an inheritor, an heir of the covenant God made in Genesis 15. If you have faith in God's promises, you are a beneficiary of the covenant. Paul hammers it home, saying, "*Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law, becoming a curse for us, for it is written, cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree*" (Galatians 3:13). Execution by hanging on a tree was established in the laws of Leviticus as a "cursed" way for someone to die. By bearing our sin on the cross, Jesus took on our curse. He became the animals cut in two. But if we believe in Him, as Paul goes on, "*In Christ Jesus, the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we may receive the promised Spirit through faith*" (Galatians 3:14). The promise is still intact. Our role is simply to believe in the promise. When we fail to keep our covenant, we thank Him for keeping it for us, and we get back up and try again.

Let's look at Genesis 15:6 one more time as we talk about what this truth means for us. God counts Abram's faith as his righteousness. He views Abram as righteous or as good because he believed in God's promises, not because Abram did good deeds or was a good guy. Abram came from a family of idol worshippers. Abram messed up a lot. He lied about his wife and treated her poorly; he had self-protective tendencies; he even laughed at God. But God counted him as righteous because he had faith in God's promises. Abram is considered "good" before God not because he was a good person, but because he had faith in God's promises.

Do you remember the first time you bought something with a credit card? When I was a seminary student, I needed to buy a window air conditioner for my room. The air conditioner cost \$116 at Walmart. I was a graduate student, so my net worth was about 44 cents. But, when I swiped my credit card, they counted my credit as payment. Even though I didn't have the cash on me, they considered the credit to have counted for my payment. This is what it means that God counts our faith as our righteousness. We don't accomplish righteousness on our own; none of us are blameless. But, if we have faith in His promises through Jesus, God counts Jesus' righteousness as our righteousness. We are considered "keepers of the covenant." And, unlike in the credit card example, there is no credit company coming after you for the payment later on. Jesus' righteousness has been credited on our behalf—it counts as our righteousness. And His death on the cross has canceled any outstanding debt.

This is what God did with Abram's faith. He was far from a perfect person but God counted him as "good" because of his faith. And by the way: He does the same thing for us. Now that you've been absolutely fire-hosed by covenantal theology for 25 minutes, let's try to bring this back to earth. God keeps His promises even when it doesn't look like it. He promises to keep His promises. He takes on the penalty if the promises are broken. What does that mean for us? Here are some questions for us to answer.

1. Which of God's promises do you struggle the most to believe?

We talked about them a bit earlier. Do you struggle to believe that God will never leave you or forsake you because He feels so far away? Do you struggle to believe that God really will forgive all your sins because you've just done one thing so, so bad? Do you struggle to believe you will receive eternal life because you don't feel you deserve it?

2. How would your life change if you started believing that promise?

What if you believed it was true? How much more peace would you feel if you truly believed God would forgive all your sins? How much kinder would you be to others? How would you act differently if you believed God said you were worthy of His love and if you believed that God works all things for good?

3. What is one step you can take this week to start living like that promise is true?

Perhaps, if you have trouble believing God will never leave you, you simply spend five minutes sitting in His presence. Perhaps, if you struggle to believe God will forgive you, you stop apologizing for what you did. Perhaps, if you have a hard time believing God loves you, you just spend a day living like He does. What might that be like? This is worth doing, because the reality is that every single one of His promises is true. And we have proof.

You might have noticed Paul called Abram, "Abraham." That's because, after the covenant ceremony, Abram got a name change in Genesis chapter 17. Abram meant "exalted father." Abraham meant "father of a multitude." God's promises were so sure that Abraham got his new name before his son was born. The very next year, Abraham's son, Isaac, was born. The promise was fulfilled. And to this day, by the grace of Jesus Christ, you and I are reaping the benefits of a God who keeps His promises. He keeps His covenants, and through Jesus, you have a covenant with Him. What would it look like to live as if that were true? ■



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