

**Text: Genesis 15**

**Theme: God who Keeps His Promise**

**Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Morning Prayer Service on 04/10/2015 at 10.30am**

**Genesis 15 is one of the most important chapters in the Old Testament, because it teaches us so much about the covenant-making and covenant-keeping of the God we love and serve.** But it also reveals a God who loves to promise, to bless and to give. A God who displays humility in spite of His All surpassing greatness.

### **The right kind of questioning**

We've already seen that the trek of faith is not usually a straight line of consistent progress but that in faith, as in life, we experience times of failure and fear along the way. I'm so glad that God knows our fragilities and wants to encourage and strengthen us; and the Word of God is so frank as not to edit out the failures of our heroes of faith. It shows us that they are human beings as we are and it is the grace of God that makes them who they become.

Over the years, I have made some progress in my faith walk mainly because I've tried to sort out truth from slogans. At times, asking questions has felt precarious, and still does. **But truth can stand up to interrogation. As I question, want to do so with an attitude of unbelief turning to true belief** or, to echo the prayer of another: 'I do believe; help my unbelief (Mark 9:24, NASB). I am convinced that was the attitude behind Abraham's question.

Despite having received the word of the Lord on a number of occasions, and having been blessed and helped already, Abraham still had times of uncertainty and, as is obvious by what God said to him in this episode, fear as well. But God's response to him was one of kindness and gentle help, rather than anger and impatience. The Lord was more than willing not only to repeat what had already been promised, but to expand upon it and then to illustrate and confirm the promises too.

We tend to read Abraham's two-part question to God as one extended question. But some commentators don't see it that way. They suggest that Abraham posed one question, which was met with silence, and then posed a second question, one that God finally responded to. That's often the way faith is. **We ask, 'How?' or 'Why?' but get no obvious reply.** Abraham's question was perfectly reasonable. It's obvious that even Lot was off the scene by now, because Abraham had no family heir, only a valued servant in his household. Abraham was somewhere between 75 and 86 years of age at this point and Sarai was ten years younger. It must have seemed as though he was living in the precise opposite of all that God had promised him. Instead of a multitude of descendants, he had none. And then his question about that was met, not with a swift answer, but what might have seemed like indifferent silence.

**I love it when God explains, but we'd do well to hesitate when He doesn't. We can be tempted to rush in and speak for Him,** resulting in hollow slogans rather than statements of truth. Faith is living through the silence. We damage people when we try to come up with answers to fill in the blanks that God hasn't filled in.

Perhaps this is more than an item of vague interest to you today. Your heart is heavy because you have asked why, and no answer or explanation has been forthcoming. May you be strengthened to respond to God when He speaks, and trust in Him when He doesn't.

Turning to the New Testament and looking at the way Jesus dealt with the disciples, we see a similar picture of grace. Despite having front-row seats for His epic miracles and stunning teaching, they still stumbled along, making wrong assumptions, bumping into conflict with

each other, misunderstanding His instructions and generally showing their imperfections at every turn. And yet how patient Jesus was with them, even if, at times, He found them frustrating. God is not surprised by our frailties, but wants to help us in them. If your idea of God is of a tut-tutting, endlessly demanding employer, rather than a gentle father who knows and loves you 'warts and all', then I pray that your understanding of Him will change today.

**God reiterated His promises to Abraham to strengthen him in time of doubt. But notice the language that God used, as He referred to Himself as Abraham's shield.** This was a reference to the victory that Abraham had experienced, defeating the Canaanite kings. With carefully chosen words, God pointed Abraham back to a past victory, reminding him that He, God, was the ultimate source of Abraham's strength in battle. He reassured Abraham in the present by pointing him back to the past.

Nostalgia can easily ensnare us. We look through rose-coloured glasses at what is behind us, causing us to think that it was better than it was. But pondering the past can greatly strengthen our faith. Just recently, I've revisited significant answers to prayers in days and decades long gone. It is not because I want to be back there, but the memory of what God did then nudges me to believe once again in what God can do today.

Even, as I ponder the years, the great things God has done for us in this church, the open doors, I realise that what has happened has not just been the result of good planning, but is the blessing of the Lord. As I remember, I believe again.

In the face of reaffirmed promise, Abraham has questions and complaints for God. His prayers are totally honest, not only affirming his disappointment that he has no child and heir, but laying the blame for his lack firmly on God's shoulders.

**Abraham is one of the most celebrated people of faith in the entire Bible. But faith is not about the absence of questions or even anger towards God, but rather our willingness to trust when our questions are not answered, and maintain obedience when we're deeply upset at God.**

I've also found out that asking God open-ended questions is a good habit. Put your question to Him, and then carry on with life. I've often found that an answer has come in the unfolding next couple of days. **But don't forget this: faith is standing firm when the questions have been asked, the anger expressed, but still heaven remains silent.**

#### **God is trustworthy (Verses 9-12)**

Verse 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."*

Verses 9-10 describes the ceremony that God used to assure Abraham of his faithfulness. As we see this lane of blood being created, we might wonder what was behind it. But for Abraham, familiar with the customs of the day, the ceremony made perfect sense. Normally such arrangements took place between kings & nations for mutual benefit. Both sides would walk through the animal pieces & both were bound to its terms. If you and I wanted to enter into an agreement in those days, we would follow the same pattern. The animals would be killed and arranged, and then each of us would pass between them, making our pledges to each other. **The symbolism was obvious and horrifying: we would be saying, 'May I be torn apart, just like these creatures, if I break my word to you. I'd rather die a horrible death than be unfaithful.'** Remarkable though it is, **God was saying exactly that to Abraham. God would be ripped apart before He could break His covenant promises.**

But did you notice how the emphasis in this covenant is paced largely on one side? In v17 smoke & fire appear to "cut the covenant" as it was called. As often in the Old Testament smoke & fire

represents a theophany, the special presence of the Living God Himself. So, you see the wonderful fact that **Abraham was not required to pass between the pieces of animal. This covenant was made at God's initiative alone. And He would keep His word.**

**Faith only makes sense if the one in whom we place our faith is trustworthy.**

In v18 "on that day the *LORD* made a covenant with Abram". Abram does not earn this covenant blessing. It is wholly initiated by God it's based on God's generosity. God in this covenant underlines His promise; it is His pledge of faithfulness, marked in a visible way. It is given completely by God's grace & received by believing God's promise. This is such an encouraging incident for us. **We think of faith as us holding onto God's promises and it is, but more accurately faith is opening ourselves to allow God to hold onto us knowing that He is faithful.**

Christianity is not about God becoming a genie in a bottle who offers to fulfil our wildest dreams. That's a key fallacy in faith-prosperity teaching. Instead, we're invited to offer ourselves to God, so that He can fulfil His kingdom dream in us. There's a vital difference, and it's illustrated in this dialogue between God and Abraham.

The incredible plan that Abraham, a man in his eighties, would have children was God's idea, a result of God's initiative. And when we read that Abraham believed God, the word literally means 'amen'. God spoke and then Abraham responded by receiving and accepting the word of the Lord. Another way of translating this would be Abraham saying, 'May it be so'. **God was not responding to a wild idea that Abraham dreamed up, but rather Abraham was accepting and responding to God's wild and humanly impossible idea. Abraham chooses to have ongoing confidence in what God has announced.**

Some Christians abandon their faith when God doesn't give them what they hoped and dreamed for. But that's unfair, because we are then indicting Him for not doing what He never promised to do. Let's be open to God planting a seed of possibility in us, and let's be ready to say a sincere 'amen' if He does. Let's give our lives today, not just to merely surviving, but to playing our part in the kingdom dream that God has for planet Earth.

Christianity never works when it is just an additional compartment, a Sunday-centred hobby. **Following Jesus means that we invite the ultimate disruption into our lives, overturning our values, habits, priorities, spending patterns, relationships and hopes.** And that's why taking up our cross, dying to ourselves and determining to live for, and with, Christ is a daily choice. Pleasing God should be the first question we address in making decisions, and not the last. Let's ask the Holy Spirit to help us organise our lives around Jesus today. Living by faith is for us all.

Two thousand years before Christ, and before the Law was given through Moses, Abraham was declared righteous before God, not because of anything he had done, in terms of sacrifice or obedience, but simply because he put his faith in God. He had trusted God with varying degrees of success over the previous decade, but now Abraham's faith was defined. It was a turning point, as he leans his weight totally on the promises of God.

In unpacking this truth, Paul points us to David, a man after God's own heart but also a man who was familiar with the "sin territory". He broke three commandments in his affair with Bathsheba: covetousness, adultery and murder. There was no provision for this under the Law, so David was in a place of hopelessness. But he was able to affirm that God had forgiven him anyway, even though there was nothing that he could do about his terrible crimes. He could only cast himself upon the mercy of God, and trust Him for grace.

**If we are going to make any progress in our own faith walks, we need to allow God to forgive us, and believe that He has.** Abraham had made some terrible and costly mistakes,

and there would be more to come. But faith leans totally on mercy, enabling us to walk forward without dragging our past failures along with us. **Being forgiven isn't based on feeling, but belief and trust. And it leads to thanksgiving and a sense of blessing.**

We began this study by celebrating the truth that God acted first, reaching out to us while we were still sinners. Today, let's remember that the way of salvation is not a human idea, but a pathway that God has opened up for us. He does not accept or forgive us reluctantly, with a sigh of resignation, but with joy, enthusiasm and passion. We don't please Him by our works. It has always been His delight to rescue us, and in response, we want now to please Him. Human nature always wants to pay, to make our own way. But, as we see Abraham saved without circumcision or law, we recognise how committed God has been to fully open His arms and heart to us. People sometimes say that we Christians are hypocrites. But we're the ones who admit that we're sinners, and that there was nothing we could do to rescue ourselves.

Let's not allow the stories and the promises of Scripture to become vague, but rather let's connect them up to where we live. **What that means today is that, whatever our circumstances, there is another dimension of possibility, because there is a God who cares.** Perhaps you're in a situation that looks utterly hopeless right now. I hesitate to say this, lest I be guilty of palming you off with a hollow cliché, but I pray that you will simply know that God is, and that God is able, and that faith and faithfulness will be in your heart as you navigate this challenging pathway. You're not an accident: you are one of Father Abraham's children.

#### **The big plan: God wins**

Over the last year, we have been saddened by the terrible news: conflicts where thousands of innocents have died, images circulating on the internet of beheadings and mass executions, fears about well-funded and organised terrorism - all have become familiar. It is so easy to fall into despair and fear. In the midst of all of this darkness and pain, we can forget this vital truth: there is a God, and He is working to a master plan.

#### **Verses 13-16**

Abraham was told that there would be a period of extreme difficulty for his people, for no less than four hundred years but afterwards there was promised blessing! But, in making such a pledge, God was revealing Himself as the eternal One, able to work out strategies and plans that would continue long after Abraham had died.

God will ultimately have His way, and the kingdom of peace and grace, where evil is banished and tears are wiped away, will come. As we live in the gap between the now and the not yet, our hearts break when the innocent suffer. Our voices must be raised to defend those silenced by oppression. Our hands must work to do whatever we can to be agents of that same kingdom while we wait for the fullness of its coming. But let's not forget this: this reality is not the ultimate reality, and although there is darkness in the earth, we remain firm in the hope that light will come when the winning Jesus is finally revealed. God has a big plan, and God wins.

**As we close this discourse, we must remember how God made and affirmed His covenant with Abram. I swear by myself - If I break my covenant with you may I be turn into shreds like this animal. And look at the extent to which God had to go to stand by His covenant, He sacrificed His very son.**

Let me close by telling you a story, which you may have heard from me before. If that is the case, please forgive the repetition.

There once was a man who worked in a small town as the operator of a drawbridge on a river. A train track ran across the bridge, and the operator's job was to keep the bridge up when no train was coming so that the boats could pass underneath. When a train approached, he was to blow the whistle and let down the bridge.

One sunny Saturday morning, the man brought his seven-year-old son along to work with him. The boy could frolic along the river, skip rocks on the water, chase butterflies, or even try to catch a fish.

Shortly before noon, a passenger train was due to come through the area. The man began to make preparations to let the bridge down so the train could pass safely across the river. As he examined the bridge, he noticed that someone—a small child—had somehow climbed over the guardrail next to the bridge, and was playing at the very spot where the bridge would come down. As he looked closer, he realized with horror that the child was his son. In desperation, he yelled out his son's name, but the sound of the approaching train drowned out his screams. He knew he had to make a quick decision. If he lowered the bridge now his son would die. But if he didn't, all the people on the train would die as the train plunged into the river. He barely had time to think.

As he screamed in agony, the man thrust forward the lever to lower the bridge just as the train arrived. His son died instantly. And as the train passed by, the people just smiled and waved as they passed by the man in the control booth, with his head bowed low, oblivious to what had just taken place. (Adapted from "To Sacrifice a Son" by Dennis Hensley.)