

18 October 2009

## A Passageway of Blood

Reading: Genesis 15:1-21

Has there ever been a period in your life when you felt decidedly “down?” It may have been a time of doubt and questioning as you attempted to line up your faith with the realities of your experience. You may have wondered whether it was worth it all. Perhaps you were overwhelmed by the seeming impossibility of your situation. Despite the hopes and aspirations you once cherished, the future now seems bleak or at least pointless. “Depression” may be too strong a term, but you’d have to say that you were in the doldrums.

And you may even have felt guilty about the way you were feeling. You know, Christians are supposed to keep their chins up and all that . . .

Well, I think we have good reason to believe that Abram, the *friend* of God, and the man of such commendable faith, was experiencing one of those “downers.” What’s more, it occurred, as it sometimes does, when he had good reason to feel encouraged. It happened shortly after God had clearly demonstrated his faithfulness and given him success.

### I. LET’S FACE IT: THIS CAN EASILY HAPPEN WHEN WE LIVE IN THE GAP BETWEEN THE PROMISE AND REALITY.

What’s more, it so often happens after a “spiritual high!” Abram must have felt elated after the remarkable military campaign. He, and 318 men plus a few of the locals, had overcome a powerful alliance of foreign kings. The priest-king, Melchizedek, met him and blessed him in the name of *El Elyon*, God Most High, creator of heaven and earth. There’s a certain amount of adrenalin required for such exploits, and once the excitement dies down and life returns to normal, the disconcerting realities that existed before the event loom large.

#### **Negative Thoughts**

Now, back near Hebron, in the sobering silence of the semi-desert, some negative thoughts rise to the surface. Yes, the Canaanites had been aware of his presence and of his considerable wealth, but he’d been living among them quietly and courteously, under the radar if you like. Now they might see him as a serious military threat. Yes, they should be grateful, but that’s not how things always worked in the ancient near east.

And then there was the patent fact that the all-important aspect of God’s promise remained unfulfilled. Despite God’s promise, he and Sarai have no son. And what was *highly unlikely in the first place is now well and truly impossible!* There are some

clear pointers in the literary features of our passage that this was Abram's state of mind as he sat in his lonely tent one dark night in the Negev.<sup>1</sup>

## II. IN SUCH CIRCUMSTANCES, GOD DOES NOT LEAVE US TO WALLOW AROUND IN THE MIRE OF NEGATIVISM.

Of course, if we masochistically want to stay there, God will not drag us out against our will. But he offers to lift us right out of the quicksand of self-pity. So the word of the LORD comes to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.  
I am your shield.  
Your reward will be very great” (15:1).<sup>2</sup>

### Transparency

Abram says exactly what is on his heart. His complaint is curt and frank, but not insolent. Listen to him: “Sovereign LORD (Adonai Yahweh), what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir” (15:2-3).<sup>3</sup>

In effect, he was saying: “A thousand Melchizedeks can pronounce blessing on me. I may accumulate even more wealth than I currently have. You can be as a shield to me and protect me completely, but I didn't leave Ur simply to become prosperous or to enjoy your protection. It was in response to your promise, and at the heart of that promise was the assurance that Sarai and I would have a son. If *that* doesn't happen, nothing else really matters.”

Abram's candor is not a bad thing. Bruce Waltke's comment is appropriate: “Abram complains out of his faith, not his unbelief . . . Complaint and faith are not antithetical; complaint is based on taking God seriously.”<sup>4</sup> It is better to lay out our

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<sup>1</sup>The very fact that the LORD tells him not to be afraid, the pun on the words *migēn* (“delivered” in 14:20) and *māgēn* (shield in 15:1), the reference to Abram's true reward rather than the tarnished booty offered by the king of Sodom, are indicative of Abram's state of mind.

<sup>2</sup>It is not certain whether the LORD is saying, “I am your very great reward,” (TNIV) or “Your reward shall be very great.” (NASB). Either way, the Lord is assuring Abram that he is the heir of far more than he had been prepared to forego by returning all the booty to the king of Sodom.

<sup>3</sup>Abram speaks as a man of his time. This accurately reflects the practice of the day. A well-to-do, childless couple would adopt an heir whom they would appoint to care for them in old age and also inherit their estate.

<sup>4</sup>Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 241, 243.

thoughts and feelings that border on sin than to nurse them in our hearts. God can handle it; he knows our inmost thoughts anyway.

F. B. Meyer captures the spirit of Abram's complaint:

In that quiet watch of the night, Abraham poured out into the ear of God the bitter, bitter agony of his heart's life. He had probably long wanted to say something like this, but the opportunity had not come. But now there was no longer need for restraint, and so it all came right out into the ear of his Almighty Friend.<sup>5</sup>

### **God's Assurance**

Here's how God responds: Not only does he speak to Abram but he gives him a sign. "The word of the LORD came to (Abram), 'This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir'" (15:4).

Then God took him outside. There were no city lights, nor, in that region, is there any haze to obscure the view. "Look up at the heavens and count the stars – if indeed you can count them. As Abram looks up and sees myriad pinpricks of light, the word of the LORD comes to him, "So shall your offspring be." Today we know that there are trillions of stars. But even Abram, as he looked up into the clear sky, knew that they were innumerable. God was referring both to Abram's physical progeny and to his spiritual descendants.

### **Abram's Response**

See this man in his nineties standing gazing up into the sky awash with stars. The word of the LORD is ringing in his ears. And hear one of the most momentous statements in Scripture: "*Abram believed the LORD and it was credited to him for righteousness.*"

A verse from Jeremiah comes to mind: "Ah Sovereign LORD, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you" (Jer 32:17). You may remember a time when this verse we set to music and we used to sing the refrain, "Nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing, nothing is too difficult for you."

I love the way Paul depicts the moment:

(Abraham) is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed – the God who gives life to the dead and calls the things that are not as though they were.

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<sup>5</sup>F. B. Meyer, *The Life of Abraham* (Lynnwood, Washington: Emerald Books, 1996), 76.

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, So shall your offspring be.’ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead – since he was about a hundred years old – and that Sarah’s womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why “it was credited to him as righteousness’ (Rom 4:17-22).

### **The Importance of Faith**

Why is this so important? Why does God say so emphatically that we are justified by faith rather than deeds of righteousness of our own?<sup>6</sup> Here’s why. God wants a relationship with us. Some people think of him as a celestial law-giver whose major concern is our good behaviour. That places the emphasis in the wrong place altogether. In fact, it gets everything back to front. It makes out that God is concerned about the law *as an end in itself*. But God is much more than a celestial policeman or even a universal judge.

And faith is an attitude of trust and submission that makes it possible for there to be a real relationship between God and us. When he tells us he loves us and wants to have a relationship with us, instead of asserting our independence – and we can do this in religion as much as anywhere else - we *want* to believe it and submit to him. The greatest obstacle to faith is not intellectual difficulty, but a determination to assert our independence from God!

Over a hundred years ago, a Scot by the name of John Patten travelled to the New Hebrides, a group of islands in the South West Pacific. The islanders were cannibals and, not surprisingly, they didn’t have a word for “belief” or “trust” in their language. It’s difficult to trust people when they may be looking upon you as their next meal. Just how do you tell people the good news about Jesus when you can’t even find a word for “trust”?

Eventually Patten did find a way to convey the meaning of faith. A man came into his room. Without a word, Patten raised both of his feet off the floor, leant back in his chair and watched the puzzled look on the man’s face. He then asked, “What am I doing now?” In reply, the native used a word which literally meant “to lean one’s whole weight upon”. That was it! Patten had the word he was looking for. From then on he was able to explain to the islanders what faith really is.

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<sup>6</sup>For example: Rom 3:22, 27-28; 10:3-4; Gal 2:15-16; 3:6-9; Eph 2:8-10; Titus 3:5; Heb 11:6.

That's what Abram did and, as the Writer to the Hebrews says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God, for the one who comes to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who diligently seek him" (Heb 11:6). It was the way then and it is the way now!

If you want to have a relationship with God, this is good news, really good news! But there is even better news.

### **III. GOD *SO* WANTS TO HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH YOU THAT HE GOES TO THE MOST INCREDIBLE LENGTHS TO MAKE IT POSSIBLE**

We now have before us one of the most awe-inspiring incidents in the Bible. God also said to Abram, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it."<sup>7</sup>

But Abram said, "Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?" Clearly, his request for a "sign" here was motivated by faith, not unbelief.

#### **The Passageway of Blood**

God instructs Abram to bring him a heifer, a goat, a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon. He would have understood what he was required to do. He had to cut them in two and arrange the halves opposite each other.

A word of explanation is in order. This is the way people ratified important covenants or treaties in the ancient Middle East. This is a topic of considerable interest in recent Old Testament studies.<sup>8</sup> When two individuals or two powers entered into a covenant arrangement they would often ratify it by a solemn ceremony.

The records of such treaties usually contain a historical preamble, after which the conditions of the contract are stipulated. The parties to the contract would then conclude the covenant by passing through passageway between the severed animals. Actually, the Hebrew idiom employed relative to covenants is interesting: one does not "make" a covenant; one "cuts" a covenant. Some believe that this terminology comes from the very practice described here.

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<sup>7</sup>In the second half of the chapter, the focus is on the land, but this is tied indissolubly to the promise of descendants. We cannot say exactly when this occurred. The assurance of numerous descendants leads naturally to a renewed assurance concerning the land. We cannot separate these two aspects of the promise from one another. The author's use of the address, "Sovereign LORD (*Adonai Yahweh*)" in verses 2 and 8 underlines the fact that the two incidents are to be seen as a unit. Since it was daytime when the second interchange between God and Abram commenced and the first had occurred at night, it is not unreasonable to assume that it took place on the very next day.

<sup>8</sup>For example, Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1992), 77-102. Tremper Longman III, *Making Sense of the Old Testament: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 60-71.

The idea contained in the ceremony was that this was like *an acted-out curse*.<sup>9</sup> The parties to the covenant were, in effect, saying “If I break this covenant, may I be torn to pieces like this animal.” There is actually an allusion to this practice in Jeremiah 34:18, where the LORD says, “The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its two pieces.”

Commenting on the practice, Fleming Rutledge observes:

If the two parties making the covenant are equals, they will each pass through. That will be a sign from one to the other, both of them, that they intend to keep the covenant or else call down a curse upon themselves. However, if one partner greatly outranks the other, then only the weaker partner would be required to pass through.<sup>10</sup>

Look at what happened here. As the sun was setting, a deep sleep fell on Abram (that’s how it reads). He didn’t just doze off. A dreadful darkness came over him. God revealed to him that for four hundred years his descendants would be enslaved and mistreated in a country not their own. Eventually they would come out with great possessions. Abram himself would die at a good old age.

He awakens from his deep sleep. It was now dark. Before he could move, he saw the most awesome sight. In the thick darkness, a mysterious light passed between the detached pieces. The awesome presence of God, represented by a smoking firepot and a flaming torch, passed slowly and majestically down the passageway of blood. Later that same glory would be manifested in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

Could there ever have been a more graphic portrayal? *Only God* passes down the covenantal corridor. Abraham is motionless! He *may* not do anything. This is a unilateral covenant. God knows that our salvation cannot be a combined effort. He binds himself unconditionally to his fallen creatures. He takes the responsibility upon himself. Way back four millennia ago, God not only undertook to fulfill his side of the covenant; he accepted liability for any breach of the covenant on our part. He laid himself open for the full consequences of human failure and disobedience. Iain Duguid believes that in this act God was saying, “I would rather be torn apart

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<sup>9</sup>Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality: The Gospel According to Abraham* (Phillipsburg: P and R Publishing, 1999), 59.

<sup>10</sup>Fleming Rutledge, “The Bloody Passageway.” A sermon preached on May 5, 2009 at the Regent College Pastors’ Conference.

than see my relationship with humanity broken the relationship I have promised to establish through Abram's descendant."<sup>11</sup>

Two thousand years after this enacted promise, the symbolic portrayal became a living reality. God took on human nature and bore the curse associated with the breach of the covenant. Listen to Paul as he portrays Jesus' death for us:

All who rely on observing the law are under a *curse*, for it is written: "*Cursed* is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law . . . Christ redeemed us from the *curse* of the law by becoming a *curse* for us, for it is written: "*Cursed* is everyone who is hung on a pole." He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit (Gal 3:10-14).

“What a graphic portrayal of God's amazing commitment,” you say. “It's almost too amazing to believe that God would walk the passageway of blood alone.” What a commitment! But the truth of the matter is that ***the actual reality is even more amazing than this graphic portrayal***. God not only kept his side of the covenant; he bore the brunt of our disobedience. On the cross of Calvary he bore the full weight of our sin.

### **Conclusion**

This is the God who goes to incredible lengths to be our God. He is God. He is not hard up for your company or mine. But he loves us, so much so that he walks through the passageway of blood alone. And, in return, he says, “Trust me! Trust me fully! Trust me so fully that you commit your life to me.”

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<sup>11</sup>Duguid, *Living in the Gap between Promise and Reality*, 59.