

Genesis 15:1-5 A Sermon

[Scott Lindsay](#)

Good morning and Merry Christmas to you all! It is good to be able to gather with God's people on this special day in which we celebrate and remember the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. To be sure, there is a sense in which every Sunday is a celebration of the birth of Christ, and must be so since He is the central and most significant reality that lies at the very core of the Christian faith.

And yet, there is still value in setting apart a *particular* day to remember his birth since it is the *historical nature* of his birth that is so important for us to recall. Jesus came and was born and lived in space and time, and that is as real as any other historical event that we commemorate in our culture - like Independence Day, for example.

In other words, it is not the mere *idea* of God sending his Son and making the ultimate sacrifice for his people that we remember on Christmas - as if the idea itself was good enough - whether or not it happened. Sadly, that is the sort of nonsense talked about by liberal churchmen and timid archbishops, and pathetically un-informed journalists who have completely missed the point. But the *idea* of a self-sacrificing God, no matter how inspirational it might seem, but that idea - if it is only *ever* an idea, is worthless and meaningless. It is only because it is an idea that actually *happened* that there is any value to it whatsoever.

And so that is what we remember on Christmas Day - not something that God only *thought* about doing, but something that God *actually did*, and whose origins can be traced to this very familiar event which we call "the Christmas story".

Now, the challenge of telling this Christmas story, as you can imagine, is that it gets told over, and over, and over again, year in and year out, to people who, for the most part, have heard this story many, many times. And so the temptation to wander and drift during the telling of it is a great one - for both the preacher AND the listener!

Nevertheless, while the story itself does not change from year to year, and this does affect the way it gets heard, it *cannot* be said that *the ones who hear it* do not change from year to year. On the contrary, a year is a long time, and can mean a great deal of change for a person. Great things and horrible things can all take place in the space of 12 months - all of which leave their mark on us and can drastically affect the way we see and understand both our world AND God's Word.

Even further, while the main events of the story are all pretty well known by now, there

are countless details and connections between the Christmas story and the rest of Scripture which are not nearly as well known, if at all. And so, keeping these things in mind, and in a spirit of wanting to keep the Christmas story “fresh”, I want us this morning to come at this whole thing by way of the Old Testament in general, and through the life of Abram in particular. Hopefully, by approaching things in this way we will all see something new in this story that, no matter how often we tell it, never gets old.....But before we go any further, let's pray.....

Great Father in heaven, please guide our steps as we think together about these things which are so near and dear to your own heart. Create in us a spirit of thankfulness and understanding. Make us more like Jesus. In His name we pray.....Amen.

In case you are with us for the first time this morning, let me just give you a little bit of background so you can better situate the verses you are about to hear. For a few weeks now we have been looking at the life of Abram in the Old Testament book of Genesis - the first book of the Bible. Starting in chapter 12, we saw how Abram was on the receiving end of a blessing that was promised to God's fallen people in the Garden of Eden, way back in Genesis 3.

At the same time, while Abram certainly was a recipient of God's blessing, he was also a *conduit* of God's blessing since much of what was promised to him was only going to be *experienced* by his descendants at some distant point 400+ years in the future. And even then, those people would still not be the ultimate destination FOR and recipients OF the fullness of what God had promised. That would not take place until Jesus Christ himself - THE ultimate descendant of Abram - came and received and consummated the fullness of the things promised to Abram many centuries earlier.

Well, in addition to seeing the blessing of God upon Abram and his descendants, we have watched how Abram himself has responded to God's gracious treatment of him. To his credit, sometimes he has responded with great faith and confidence. But at other times he has wavered and clearly doubted whether God was capable of delivering on the promises made. In short, we have watched the cycles of faith and doubt work themselves out in Abram's life which, really, is not that different from our own lives in that respect.

Nevertheless, throughout this whole time, Abram remains the man who has been greatly blessed by God and who has, in spite of his failings, served as an encouragement and example for God's people in every age.

In our study last week we saw how Abram responded to a family crisis - the kidnaping of his nephew, Lot - and how with an inferior army he was still able to defeat a number of other larger and more powerful armies within the Land of Promise, and so successfully rescued his nephew. Further, we saw that as exciting and hair-raising as that little adventure was, the more significant moment for Abram came as he was *returning* from the battlefield of victory. It was then that he was approached by two Kings - one who was the King of Salem and a priest of the one true God - Melchizedek - and the other

who represented all that God hated - Bera, the King of Sodom - a city known for its wickedness.

With these two kings came a test of sorts. Would Abram - who had cried out to God in his distress - remember God *now*, after the victory? Would Abram receive the simple provisions of bread and wine brought by Melchizedek? Or would his heart be stolen away by the lure of the worldly possessions which he had acquired as the spoils of war - and which he had vowed to have nothing to do with - even though the King of Sodom had left the door wide open for him in that regard?

In the end, Abram showed himself to be faithful, choosing not to enrich himself with the tainted possessions of the Sodomite King. And in that action he illustrated, in yet another way, his own confidence in what God had promised. And it is on the heels of all this, that the verses before us this morning come into focus..... (Read Genesis 15:1-6)

The writer of Genesis - a prophet named Moses - tells us that "after this" - the Lord came to Abram in a vision. Now we don't know *how long* it was after the incident with the two kings, but it was likely fairly soon afterward. Why do I say this? Simply because of *what* God says to Abram. He tells him, "*Fear not....I am your SHIELD....*"

Telling Abram that He was his shield was God's way of saying that he was going to protect Abram. But what did Abram have to fear? Hadn't he just defeated all the kings in the region? Yes, he certainly had. But Abram knew that his victory was a supernatural one. He could not and should not presume that God's providence toward him would always work out in the same way.

What's more, we have already seen that Abram, while a faithful man, was *inconsistent in his response*. At times he seemed to trust God easily, and at other times he seemed to rely more on his own cleverness than anything else. And so, knowing what we do of Abram thus far, it is not hard to imagine him, lying on his bed at night, staring at the roof of his tent, listening to the sounds of the desert, and wondering if the kings he had so recently dispatched were gathering now in some secret place - mustering some massive army, preparing for a counter-strike, or some sort of surprise attack.

And so, like the mother or father who comes to comfort their fearful child after he/she has cried out in the night, so God comes to Abram at night, by means of this vision, to tell him *not to be afraid*, and to remind him that *He will be his shield*.

But God does not only reassure Abram of his promise of protection - which he has already expressed to him in previous chapters - but goes on to reassure him that not only is he, personally, secure but his *reward* is secure as well. And in hearing God say these things to Abram, we see that it was not only issues of safety that were on Abram's mind - he was also apparently wondering about this one particular "reward" that God had promised to him: the promise that he would have a *son*.

Now this is not the first time that Abram has received this promise, is it? It has come to

him in several different forms, ever since the events recorded in chapter 12. In verse 2 of that chapter, you may remember, Abram was told by God that he would become a *great nation*. Later on in that chapter, after much journeying, Abram is reminded that “his offspring” will receive the land he is traveling in. Then, in chapter 13, after more time has passed, and after a close call with an Egyptian Pharaoh, he is reminded again that his offspring will inherit the Promised Land.

And this was precisely the problem. All of God’s steady reminders about the promise have served to highlight one glaring fact for Abram: *He still has not experienced the things promised*. To be sure, he keeps hearing these comforting words from God - and that’s a good thing, certainly. He keeps getting words; helpful words.

But he is not getting what the words are promising. The only thing that IS happening is that he is getting older. Every time God tells Abram what he is going to do for him, another year has passed. Abram is now quite advanced in age, as is his wife who is now well past the childbearing years. Now *how much* time has passed, we can not precisely say, but we do get the information in chapter 16 that, at the time of the events recorded there at least, 10 years had passed since Abram’s response to God’s call. So, at least 8-9 years have come and gone since God first called Abram, and made all these promises. And still there was no baby.

And the whole thing just seems more and more impossible and more and more unlikely all the time. So much so that Abram is already thinking in terms of contingency plans. Judging from what he says in verses 2 and 3, he seems to have all but ruled out the possibility that things were going to be worked out in the normal way.....

“.....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.....”

Notice Abram’s words here. He says “...the heir of my house IS Eliezer...” and then later he says, “....a member of my household WILL BE my heir...” In saying these things, he is referring to the custom - common in that day - of naming one of your servants as your heir, in the event that you have no natural-born heir. This is what Abram is talking about. And Abram’s language here leaves little room for hope.

But it seems to me that what we are hearing are not words of bitterness or accusation or defiance but rather words of confusion. These are the words of a man who is despondent, who simply cannot see *how* what God has promised is going to work out.

And so God responds by assuring Abram, again, of his plans to bring forth from him - from his own seed - countless descendants. Directly countering what Abram has said, God insists that Eliezer will most certainly NOT be Abram’s heir but, instead, Abram will have another heir - a child of his very own will carry on his name and will be the first of what will eventually become a great nation.

And then, God follows up his words of reassurance by employing a kind of “visual aid”. He takes Abram outside and gets him to stare up at the stars which, in that part of the world, and in that day and age, would have been some kind of show. The sky that Abram looked at that night would have been a sky that was fuller and more stunning than any sky you and I have ever seen. There would have been no competition from city skylines or streetlights or headlights or *anything*. There would simply have been this jet black sky, filled with countless points of light.

And God links his promise of a son, and many descendants, *visually*, to the spectacle of the night sky such that *every time Abram looked up*, he would remember this moment. Every time he saw the stars at night, these words and this moment would come to mind for him. And then, following all this, in verses 7-21 God will go on to further confirm this covenant that he is making by means of a special ritual which would have meant a great deal to Abram, even if it seems very strange to us. I hope to have a closer look at that ceremony in a couple weeks’ time.

But the thing I want you to see here is how very *pastorally* God is responding to Abram, giving him words of reassurance and then taking steps to help Abram *remember* those words, by linking them to the stars - to something in creation. He then does something further to help Abram *believe* that these things will all come true by linking them to this special ritual.

Well, on the heels of all this, and after God has reassured Abram of His faithfulness to him, we are told in the very important verse 6 about Abram’s being credited with *righteousness* as a result of his faith, presumably talking about how Abram responded to the reassurances just given him - believing that God would do the things he promised.

Now, as you may be aware, that declaration of Abram’s righteousness and the connection between IT and Abram’s faith is HUGE. There are enormous historical and doctrinal implications that flow from this verse and, as a result, it is worth our spending some time thinking about it all on its own. Indeed, the Apostle Paul draws heavily upon Genesis 15:6 for his teaching in both Romans and Galatians. And so, again, because this verse IS so important, and because it is such a big part of our own reformed theological heritage, I want us to reserve some time to think about it together next week.

For our purposes this morning, however, I want us to stop where we are and spend the little time we have remaining simply reflecting on the significance of this promise made to Abram that he would, indeed, receive a Son.....

If we look back to the Garden of Eden, we see that in the wake of the Fall of mankind into sin, there is a glimmer of hope extended in Genesis 3:15, where a promise is made that a descendant of the woman - her “seed”, some as-yet-unknown person would finally and fully defeat the serpent/Satan that had won this initial, and devastating, skirmish in the Garden of Eden.

And so is set in motion this momentum, this search for, and this emphasis upon this promised One who would bring all of what God had planned to pass and who would rectify the problem of sin and evil in the world. Which is why, in the Bible, you see all this attention being given to things like *genealogies*, and *childbirth* and *first-born sons* and *heirs and descendants*.

Over and over again, you see the spotlight being drawn onto these kinds of events. Every time you turn around you hear about someone begetting someone else, or you read about some significant person being born and going on to do significant things, or about someone being *barren* and NOT being able to have children, or about some great tragedy involving the *death* of children.

But the point is, everywhere you look, whether in a positive or negative way, there is this constant emphasis upon children and descendants and God's purposes and promises. And each time we hear about them, there is a slight *leaning forward*, a slight, holding-of-the-breath, as we wait to see what will happen, and how it all fits in the biblical plotline and if, in the case of a childbirth, this particular child might perhaps be the ONE that was promised.

And so, after Cain kills Abel, we note with interest the arrival of *Seth*. And then we hear about all sorts of descendants, until we get to *Noah*. And then we follow the development of *Shem's* line, until we get to *Abram*. And beyond Abram, great emphasis will be given to his son, Isaac, and to Isaac's sons Jacob and Esau, and to Jacob's son, Joseph.

Following that, we enter into a terrible period for Israel, 400 years of darkness and slavery that was, nevertheless, foretold to them through Abram. And what is one of the main events that signals their being delivered *from* this time of slavery - it is the birth of a child - a Hebrew child whose life is spared and, by some ironic working out of God's providence, ends up being raised by one of Pharaoh's own daughters.

Later on, as the last event which brought about the deliverance of the people of God from Egypt, the violence that Pharaoh had done to the children of Israel many years before is brought back upon his own head as a terrible plague ensues, killing the first-born of all people, including Pharaoh's own son, but excluding the Hebrew people entirely.

Then there is a time of wandering and conquest, ending with the realization that the people of God needed a King to guide them. Integral to this whole process of setting apart a king is the prophet Samuel - himself the child of a once-barren woman who, by God's gracious working, is enabled to become pregnant. Once again, we see great significance attached to events related to childbirth and descendants.

Following this, we see a king set apart by Samuel - Saul - who is later rejected by God and then we see a replacement king, David, who is a man after God's own heart, and who is promised that one of his descendants will reign eternally. Even in the story of

David we see these emphases upon children and descendants coming forward when, as a result of his sin, his own son dies. And yet we see right afterward God's mercy to him in another son being born - Solomon - who will be a blessing to Israel in many ways as their future king.

Then Israel enters into another terrible period and, not surprisingly, children and descendants play a big part of that story as Solomon's sons end up dividing the nation of Israel and we hear about kings coming and going on both sides - some being horrible, and some being alright but, on the whole, both kingdoms decline and head rapidly *south*.

And then there is the time of the exile and the words of the prophets who, amidst their warnings of judgment, also offer words of hope, including words which speak of - surprise, surprise - children and births and promises. And we get to the end of the OT period with all of these things ringing in our ears, and there is this huge, yawning chasm of silence - the time after the last of the writing prophets and before the first Gospels.

And out of the silence of several hundred years, God finally speaks again. And what is the word that he speaks? What does God say to break the silence?

"...In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men.....The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us....."

And so God breaks the silence by sending a child, His Son, who is "the Word of God made flesh" and who will be the fullest and clearest revelation and explanation and illustration of God and God's purposes that the world has ever seen, or ever *will* see.

And, again, just thinking about the birth of Christ itself and the events surrounding it, you hear these continued echoes of these themes of children and descendants and God's purposes and promises. You see it as the barren-ness of Hannah who gives birth to Samuel, who will anoint and set apart a king over God's people is echoed in the barren-ness of Elizabeth who gives birth to John, who will baptize King Jesus and prepare the way for his arrival.

You hear the echo again as you remember baby Moses, spared from the slaughter of infants amongst the captive Hebrews, raised in Egypt, and who eventually delivers God's people from their slavery - you hear the echo of all that in baby Jesus, who also is spared the slaughter of many children, who lives for a time in Egypt, and who also grows up to be the deliverer of God's people from their slavery to sin and death.

Do you see what I'm talking about? All throughout the Scripture, from Adam and Eve's children, to the Son promised to Abram - and all the way through - we get this repeated emphasis upon children and descendants and God's purposes and promises. Why?

Because all of God's plans will be wrapped up and brought to completion by the coming of HIS SON, by this little baby, Jesus, who is God incarnate, taking on human flesh and being this final word, this final, creative word that will speak and act and who will, through his life, death and resurrection, bring into existence a *new* people and a *new* world and a *new* hope and a *new* future.

And that is why, when we hear God's promise to Abram to give him a *Son* - when we hear those things, we hear so much more than the mere fact that Abram and Sarai will now have children of their own. That is why when we read Genesis 15, we can hear the Christmas story – in its most seminal form, in its most beginning of stages. We see the tiny thread from which the tapestry of God's redemptive purposes is woven. We see the tiniest ripple that will eventually become this powerful wave that will carry along all things before it in the inevitable working out of God's good and kind and wise and amazing purposes.

As we look at Genesis 15, and as we think about the significance of this day, let us join in celebrating with Abram not only the promise of A son, but the promise of THE son, who is also a descendant of Abram, and who has come into the world, to save us from our sins, to give us life, that we might have it more abundantly.....

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