

Chapter 7: The Covenant of Abram

Genesis 15:1–21

Our lives are full of disappointments. Even if we try not to, we perpetually develop expectations for how relationships, or investments, or careers, or our other plans will turn out. When reality does not meet our expectations, we experience disappointment—sometimes minor disappointments, and sometimes major disappointments.¹ Beyond the emotional experience of disappointment, we also begin to question how to move forward. Should we stick with our current course of action, hoping and praying that the situation will improve? Or, should we cut our losses and quit what we are doing, hoping to avoid throwing good money after bad? What do we do when the honeymoon is over?

Perhaps more than anything else, disappointment puts severe strains on our faith. If God is good, and if God loves me, and if God is faithful to keep his promises to me, then why am I experiencing my disappointing suffering? Do I have any guarantees that my situation will improve, or should I cut my losses and try to find someone or something else when God does not seem to be keeping up his end of the bargain? Or, from the other perspective, what should I expect from *God* when *I* have failed to keep my promises and vows to him? After a lifetime of seeing people abandon me when I disappoint them, what hope do I have that God can still love *me* after what I have done?

Christianity is not wishful thinking or blind optimism. In the Bible, God tells us about the promises that he makes to us; however, he also acknowledges that our feeble faith needs something more than his word. God is faithful and true, so that he cannot lie. Nevertheless, we are weak and confused, so that we still struggle to believe him. Therefore, God meets us in our faltering faith with his *covenant*. By his covenant, God not only makes promises to us, but he solemnly binds himself to uphold those promises, no matter what the cost. Whether it seems that the honeymoon is over in our relationship with God because *we* have sinned, or because *God* seems to have failed to keep his word to us, God reminds us that he will unfailing keep his covenant promises. Even through the deepest suffering, God's covenant gives us confidence, as we will see in Genesis 15: *God's covenant assures us in suffering that God will keep his promises.*

The Presence of Suffering (Gen. 15:1–6)

On the surface, Genesis 15 does not appear to have much in common with the preceding chapter. Upon closer inspection, however, we discover several links between Genesis 14 and Genesis 15. Even the opening transition of Genesis 15 demonstrates this connection: “After these things...” (Gen. 15:1; cf. Gen. 22:1, 20; 39:7; 40:1; 48:1).² Thus far, God has asked Abram to walk by faith through a variety of tests and trials in the areas of “security (a burning issue to a homeless man), through stresses of anxiety and ambition”; however, from this point on, God will test Abram's faith in regard to the promised offspring.³ So, consider the many connections between Genesis 14 and 15: “Damascus” (Gen. 14:15; 15:2);⁴ the same root words for “delivered” (Gen. 14:20) and “shield” (Gen.

15:1); “go/went out” (Gen. 14:17–18; 15:4–5, 7, 14); “possessions” (Gen. 14:11–12, 16, 21; 15:14); and *Shalēm* (Gen. 14:18), “complete” (*shalēm*; Gen. 15:16), and “peace” (*shalôm*; Gen. 15:15).⁵ Whether Abram is on the battlefield, dealing with the King-Priest of Salem, or worrying about his ongoing childlessness, Abram’s faith is stretched at every turn. The elements of the challenges may change, but their fundamental nature as tests of faith remains the same.

Abram the Prophet

What happens “after these things” of Genesis 14 is important for understanding Abram and Abram’s relationship to God. Specifically, the text of Genesis 15:1 goes out of its way to demonstrate that Abram is a prophet: “After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: ‘Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great’” (Gen. 15:1). Later on in Genesis 20:7, God will specifically call Abram a prophet, and this text in Genesis 15 is proving that assertion in advance.⁶ The phrase “the word of the LORD came” commonly describes how God gives revelation to his prophets (e.g., 1 Sam. 15:10; Hos. 1:1); however, this specific phrase only appears twice in the book of Genesis, and both times are in this chapter (Gen. 15:1, 4).⁷ Then, to confirm even more that this is prophetic revelation, the author of Genesis tells us that the word of the LORD comes to Abram “in a vision.” Within the Pentateuch, this word appears only here and in Numbers 24:6, 16 to describe the visions of the seer Balaam.⁸ These two phrases demonstrate that Abram is a prophet, and that true prophets are exceedingly rare.

Still, this does not mean that Abram’s life is filled with special revelation from God. Yahweh spoke to Abram to call him out of Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 12:1–3), and Yahweh appeared again to Abram after arriving in Canaan (Gen. 12:7) when the patriarch was seventy-five years old (Gen. 12:4). Yahweh spoke again to Abram after Lot separated from him (Gen. 13:14–17), but Yahweh is silent in Genesis 14. In the next chapter, Yahweh speaks to Hagar (Gen. 16:8–13), but not to the eighty-six-year-old Abram (Gen. 16:16). Yahweh speaks to Abram only four times over the course of eleven years. Hearing Yahweh’s voice is the exception, not the rule, in the life of Abram.

Why, then, does the word of Yahweh come to Abram at this point in time? John Calvin outlines several possibilities: (1) Abram might have experienced trials that the author of Genesis does not record for us; (2) Chedorlaomer and his allies might return at any moment to exact revenge, so that Abram is afraid; (3) Abram’s neighbors may have begun to look upon his success with suspicion and envy; (4) Abram may have grown prideful, so that Yahweh seeks to correct him from being too elated by his success; and/or (5) Abram may need encouraged not to fear as he grows older.⁹ As we will see, the prospect of growing older prompts fear from Abram, since he still does not have the son whom Yahweh has promised to give him (Gen. 15:2). It also may be possible that Abram’s fear derives from Yahweh’s presence itself: “The juxtaposition of ch. 14 and ch. 15 suggest that it is not nearly as fearful to meet an antagonist on the battlefield as it is to encounter the deity in a *vision*. Abram may confront Chedorlaomer and live, but can he confront Yahweh and live?”¹⁰ Regardless of what exactly prompts this vision, the broader scope of the Scriptures suggest that God commonly intervenes “to cheer a hard-pressed servant... (cf. 32:1; Jer. 45; John 9:35; Acts 23:11).”¹¹

To amplify the exhortation not to fear, Yahweh adds two specific promises: “I am your shield; your reward shall be very great” (Gen. 15:1). First, Yahweh insists that he will be Abram’s shield (*magēn*), echoing the word that Melchizedek used to describe how God Most High had “delivered” (*miggēn*) Abram’s enemies into his hand (Gen. 14:20): “Yahweh himself now confirms

Melchizedek's verdict."¹² Second, Yahweh promises that Abram will receive a very great reward. Technically, Yahweh does not say that *he* is the greatest reward Abram could possibly have, although that would be true.¹³ Instead, as a shield, Yahweh promises protection; in the reward, Yahweh promises provision.¹⁴ The word for "reward" may even mean something like a mercenary's pay or a soldier's booty (cf. Ezek. 29:19).¹⁵ If so, then Yahweh seems to be acknowledging Abram's faith by rejecting the spoils of Sodom (Gen. 14:22–24). Regardless, Yahweh speaks these promises in order to lead Abram to trust *him* (and not the rewards Abram may gain) more completely: "Trust, then, is to be in the person of God; hope, in the promise."¹⁶

The First Lament of Abram

In response to Yahweh's promise, Abram lays out a *lament*:¹⁷

[2] But Abram said, "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." (Gen. 15:2–3)

For the first time, Abram speaks in response to Yahweh.¹⁸ Before, Abram only listened and acted, but now, Abram enters into a conversation with his Lord. To initiate this dialogue, Abram addresses Yahweh with a unique name: *Adonai Yahweh*. Within the book of Genesis, this name for Yahweh appears only here and a few verses later in Genesis 15:8.¹⁹ This specific title seems to convey deep respect for Yahweh (*Adonai* means "Lord") at the point where Abram is making a serious complaint. The two most common translations both convey this idea well: "Lord GOD" (KJV, NASB, ESV) or "Sovereign LORD" (NIV).

Abram's lament is simple. If Yahweh has indeed promised to make Abram into a great nation (Gen. 12:3) and to give Abram's offspring the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:7; 13:15), where is the fulfillment of the promise? How can a childless man become a great nation? How can Abram's offspring become more numerous and uncountable than the dust of the earth (Gen. 13:16) if Abram does not even have *one* child? If Yahweh has not fulfilled his promise to give Abram offspring, then why should Abram believe that Yahweh will be his shield and will give him a very great reward? As it stands now, Abram's heir is a distant relative: Eliezer of Damascus.²⁰ This could mean that Eliezer has the strongest legal standing to inherit Abram's wealth. Alternately, Abram may be asking whether he should adopt Eliezer to establish Eliezer as his heir, according to a common practice of the day for childless men.²¹

What should we make of Abram's lament? Does the narrator wish to cast Abram in a negative light, or should we interpret this in some other way? In fact, we should recognize that Abram's prayer is an act of faith. Abram believes that God *wants* us to cast our cares upon him (1 Pet. 5:7) and that God's promises of blessing the entire world through him require offspring (cf. Gen. 12:3).²² Therefore, Abram is not content until he gains what Yahweh has promised him. Abram lays his lament before Yahweh not as someone who doubts whether Yahweh will do what he has promised to do. Instead, Abram's lament takes the posture of a man who *believes* that Yahweh will keep his promises, and who, from that faith, is asking to know when Yahweh will fulfill what he has spoken.

Still, we should note whitewash Abram. It is not as though Abram is sailing smoothly through this trial without anxiety or some level of doubt. God, however, does not expect us to live entirely

doubt-free. The point we should glean from this passage is not *whether* to have doubts, but *what* to do with those doubts. When we struggle in our faith, we should take our doubts and anxieties directly to God in prayer. This will not be Abram's last battle against doubt and anxiety over the promises. After Genesis 15, the next words that Abram speaks to God will again be words that call God's promises into question: "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" (Gen. 17:18).²³ Abram still struggles with understanding how God will give a son to a man who is one hundred years old and a woman who is ninety years old (Gen. 17:17), so he pleads that Yahweh will instead accept Ishmael as the fulfillment of the promises. Abram, like us, experiences many doubts and concerns. We, like Abram, should bring all of these laments to the Lord in prayer.

The Response of Yahweh

Once again, the word of Yahweh comes to Abram:

[4] And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." [5] And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." (Gen. 15:4–5)

Abram's role as a prophet was not a one-time event, but an enduring reality for his life (cf. Gen. 20:7). Furthermore, Yahweh is not offended or put off by Abram's questions. The word of Yahweh comes to Abram again, and Yahweh doubles down on his promises. He specifically excludes Eliezer of Damascus as Abram's heir and insists that "your very own son [lit., *from your inward parts*] shall be your heir" (Gen. 15:4).

Still, this is not a new promise. By insisting that Abram will have offspring (lit., *seed*; Gen. 12:7; 13:15–16), Yahweh has already implied that Abram's heir will be a son generated biologically from his own body. Yahweh takes his promises a step further by leading Abram outside, since apparently Abram has been inside his home for the first part of this dialogue.²⁴ Then, Yahweh points to the starry sky as a symbol of the uncountable offspring that he will give to Abram (Gen. 15:5). Just as Abram's offspring will be as innumerable as the dust of the earth (Gen. 13:16), so also his offspring will be as innumerable as the stars of the sky. It is not that pointing to the stars *proved* Yahweh's promise. Instead, as Derek Kidner writes, "God's sign, the starry sky, proved nothing; it was not that kind of sign. But it did serve as a 'visible word', a focus of the promise, somewhat as the sacraments do; for the experience was unforgettable."²⁵ Additionally, by pointing to the stars, Yahweh reminds Abram that he was the one who *created* the stars, so that Abram might think to himself, "He who by his word alone suddenly produced a host so numerous by which he might adorn the previously vast and desolate heaven; shall not He be able to replenish my desolate house with offspring?"²⁶ The offspring of Abram will be compared to the stars of the sky at several other points throughout the Scriptures (Gen. 22:17; 26:4; Ex. 32:13; Num. 24:17; Deut. 1:10; 28:62).²⁷

The Faith of Abram

At this point, the author of Genesis writes one of the more important lines in the entire Bible: "And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). The grammar of this verse is critical. Our English translations make this verse sound as though Abram's faith occurs

sequentially *here*, right after Yahweh's preceding words to him in Genesis 15:4–5, and right before Yahweh's subsequent words in Genesis 15:7. The Hebrew language has a very natural way for capturing this kind of sequential order, but that is not what we see here.²⁸ So, we should not imagine that Abram has done everything so far *apart* from faith. It is *by faith* that Abram departed from Ur of the Chaldeans, sojourned in Canaan, made altars and proclaimed the name of Yahweh, prevailed in battle the Mesopotamian armies, received Melchizedek's blessing, and rejected Sodom's wealth (cf. Heb. 11:8–19).²⁹

Instead, this remark about Abram's faith is background information.³⁰ That is, the author of Genesis here breaks the flow of the narrative “in order to supply this information about the faith of Abram.”³¹ As Abram raises doubts, concerns, and anxieties about how Yahweh will indeed be his shield and provide him with a very great reward (including a child in Abram's extreme old age), the author of Genesis lets us know that Abram does this within the context of faith. As Sailhamer puts it, “Abraham [raises] so many questions in this chapter that the author seems compelled to remind the reader of his unwavering faith (15:6).”³² In the midst of so many unfulfilled promises, Abram does not pull away from Yahweh in skepticism and doubt. Rather, Abram *puts his faith in* Yahweh.³³ As John Calvin puts it, Abram relates to God in such a way that he views God's promises as “evidences of that paternal love, and of that gratuitous adoption, on which [his] salvation is founded. Therefore, we do not say that Abram was justified because he laid hold on a single word, respecting the offspring to be brought forth, but because he embraced God as his Father.”³⁴ He looks to Yahweh in faith, and we must interpret all his questions to Yahweh accordingly.

Still, we cannot ignore the fact that Abram's faith takes a specific shape. In other words, Abram trusts that Yahweh will fulfill very specific promises of giving him offspring and land. In themselves, these promises are important simply by virtue of the fact that God has promised to give these things to Abram. If God promises something, then we must believe him. Beyond a basic duty to believe whatever God promises, however, Abram's faith in offspring and land points beyond itself. Abram is not merely believing that God will give him *offspring* in general; by his faith, he is expecting that God will raise up offspring from him for the salvation of the world (Gen. 12:1–3). The promises of offspring and land were types and foreshadows of a much greater fulfillment of the promise yet to come.³⁵ So, although Abram does not know all the details of how this will play out, he is putting his faith in *the* coming offspring who will redeem the world: the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Gal. 3:16).³⁶

More than simply telling us something about *Abram* and his faith, this verse also tells us something about *Yahweh* and how he receives Abram's faith. Yahweh *counts* Abram's faith as righteousness. This idea of *counting* is an accounting term. It means to credit, impute, or reckon something as though it were something else. Gordon Wenham explains this nuance of the verb from other passages in the Pentateuch this way:

The legal texts quoted illustrate the meaning of “count”: when Levites pass on a tenth of the tithes they receive, that counts as though they had given a tithe from their own produce (Num 18:27, 30). Similarly, killing a sacrificial animal outside the tabernacle compound counts as murder: “he has shed blood” (Lev 17:4).³⁷

In both of these cases, one action *counts* as though it were another action. That is, the first action is *treated as though it were* the other action. In Genesis 15:6, therefore, the author is telling us that

Abram's faith *counts* for righteousness (even though faith is *not* righteousness), so that Abram's faith will be *treated* as though it were full righteousness. God's covenant, on its own, will not make Abram righteous.³⁸ Furthermore, God will not demand unattainably perfect righteousness in Abram's moral conduct.³⁹ After all, we have already observed one major lapse of faith when Abram and Sarai went down to Egypt and lied about their relationship (Gen. 13:10–20), and we know that Abram was an idol-worshiper earlier in his life (Josh. 24:2). Abram is not righteous. Nevertheless, Abram's faith *counts* for righteousness.

Justification by Faith Alone

This verse explains a great mystery. The more we understand the breadth and scope of our sin, and the more we glimpse the blazing holiness of God, the less we understand how we could ever be reconciled to God. How could sinners like us ever hope to make up the infinite ground that we lost at the Fall of Adam and Eve? How could we ever dare to stand before a righteous God? What could we possibly do to merit righteousness before him? The answer is clear: there is *nothing* we could possibly do to earn God's favor. In our own strength, we are entirely without hope.

Yet, while we have no ability to reconcile ourselves to God, God has nevertheless provided a way to be reconciled with him. He does not ask us to perform some great feat of faith, or to limit our sins below a certain threshold. Rather, he demands that we acknowledge and repent from that we are dead in our sins and trespasses, the children of wrath like the rest of mankind, deserving God's eternal judgment and condemnation with us (Eph. 2:1–3). Our hope of righteous standing before God has nothing to do with us and everything to do with *God's* free grace and mercy. Because of the great love with which he loved us, God appoints *faith* as an instrument of our justification. When we put our faith in Jesus Christ (that is, in the fulfillment of God's promises to Abram), then God *counts* our faith as though it were righteousness. Our faith is *not* righteousness, and, in fact, our faith is often faltering and weak. Nevertheless, God credits our faith with the full status of righteousness before him, imputing to our account the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ himself. Through faith, God gives us the same blessing of righteousness that he gave to Abram himself (Rom. 4:1–12; Gal. 3:6–29).

We all endure suffering. Because of the fall of Adam, the perpetual presence of suffering surrounds us. Within this suffering, faith plays a critical role. To begin, God promises to lift us out of our sin, suffering, and despair by faith. We gain all the blessings that God promised to Abram through our faith in Jesus Christ, Abram's true offspring. Additionally, faith allows us to bring our laments before God in prayer. *Without* faith, our prayers would be nothing more than a list of demands. *With* faith, our prayers will still lay out our requests before God; however, our prayers will take their shape primarily from our desire to relate to the Giver himself, and not merely on his gifts. Faith gives us a context for recognizing and deferring to God's wisdom when we do not get what we want—that is, when we suffer. Even so, God knows how difficult this is for us. Therefore, God gives us even more than his bare word to bolster our weak faith, as we will see next.

The Promise of Suffering (Gen. 15:7–16)

Genesis 15:7 begins a new scene that closely parallels the earlier scene through repetition of key words: “Lord GOD” (Gen. 15:2, 8), “offspring” (Gen. 15:3, 5, 13, 18), “heir/possess” (Gen. 15:4 (x2)),

7, 8), and “bring out” (Gen. 15:5, 7).⁴⁰ If the first scene dealt with “Abram’s trust in the word from God,” the second scene will deal with “God’s guarantee of the trustworthiness of his Word.”⁴¹ Yahweh’s word is perfect and true; however, in order to aid the faith of Abram, Yahweh solemnly swears that he will fulfill his promises by entering into a covenant with Abram. It is not that Yahweh promises something new, but that he enhances the reliability of his promises with a covenant by which Abram will know that Yahweh has not spoken empty, false words.⁴² As Allen Ross writes, “Up till now the text has recorded and reiterated the divine promises to Abram; from this point on, those promises may be looked upon as covenant promises, for God now establishes the covenant and guarantees the fulfillment by this solemn swearing.”⁴³ So, Yahweh commences this covenant-making ceremony with a declaration of his relationship to Abram: “And he said to him, ‘I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess’” (Gen. 15:7). Not only will Yahweh give Abram offspring (Gen. 15:4–5), but Yahweh will give Abram the land of Canaan to possess.

We should also notice that Yahweh’s opening words during the covenant-making ceremony on Mount Sinai are almost identical to Genesis 15:7 in form, and adjusted only in the particulars: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” (Ex. 20:2; cf. Deut. 5:6).⁴⁴ In both settings, Yahweh reminds his people of the longevity of his relationship with them. The covenant is a serious step forward; however, it is not as though Yahweh has been absent until this point. Yahweh does not establish the covenants to keep himself accountable, since his word is infallible and trustworthy; instead, Yahweh establishes the covenants to build up *our* weak faith. We will return to study other similarities between this covenant and the covenant at Sinai later in the chapter.

The Second Lament of Abram

As in the first scene, Abram responds to Yahweh’s promise with a question of doubt: “But he said, ‘O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?’” (Gen. 15:8). If we read the statement about Abram’s faith as sequential in the narrative, so that Abram *just now* puts his faith in Yahweh (Gen. 15:6), this question will sound odd to us. If Abram asked his questions in Genesis 15:2–3 *apart from* faith, but he *now* believes (Gen. 15:6), then why does he continue to ask God questions? Instead, this is where it is helpful to recognize that Genesis 15:6 is background information. Everything Abram says to Yahweh during this chapter arises from faith. His initial questions about offspring arose from faith, and now this new question about possessing the land arises from faith as well. He is not trying to poke holes in God’s promises; he is asking for God to help bolster his faith.⁴⁵ That is, he is praying some version of the prayer that the father of the demon-possessed child pleads to Jesus: “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).⁴⁶

Preparation for the Covenant

At this point, Yahweh shifts from making promises to issuing commands:

[9] He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” [10] And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. [11] And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away. (Gen. 15:9–11)

More literally, Yahweh says “*Take to me...*” (Gen. 15:9). The word *take* “often introduces a ritual such as a sacrifice, e.g., Lev 9:2, 3.”⁴⁷ Abram seems to understand exactly what Yahweh is after, so he not only *takes* the animals, but he cuts them in half—all except the birds (Gen. 15:10). The later sacrificial law of Moses will specify that birds must be treated differently from other animals (cf. Lev. 1:14–17).⁴⁸ Therefore, either Abram receives additional revelation at this point that is not recorded, or his actions reflect general knowledge about appropriate sacrificial behavior that he received at some point earlier. Gordon Wenham writes, “For stylistic variation, the command is brief than the description of its fulfillment: it is common for the command to be more detailed than the record of its fulfillment.”⁴⁹ Regardless, Abram is entirely obedient to Yahweh, even in the finer points of the yet-unwritten law. We observed the same kind of obedience in the way that Abram faithfully fought a foreign war in Genesis 14 (cf. Deut. 20:1–5).⁵⁰

After Abram finishes his initial work, he looks out on several bloody carcasses of dead animals lying on the ground, their blood pooling between the two halves of the pieces. Most likely, these sacrificial animals represent the future fate of Abram’s offspring: they will suffer and die before taking possession of the Promised Land (cf. Gen. 15:13–16).⁵¹ The diversity of animals represents the totality of Israel, and the three-year-old age of the female goat and the ram represents the three hundred years of suffering (cf. Judg. 6:1, 25) that Israel will endure in Egypt after the first generation (who flourish under the protection of Joseph) die out (Gen. 15:13; cf. Ex. 1:1–8).⁵² Birds of prey are considered unclean (Lev. 11:13–19; Deut. 14:12–18), and the rest of the Old Testament uses birds of prey as common symbols for foreign nations (Ezek. 17:3, 7; Zech. 5:9); therefore, the birds of prey probably represent the Egyptians.⁵³ Abram’s efforts to drive away the birds of prey symbolize the manner in which the Abrahamic promises and the Abrahamic covenant will protect God’s people even in the midst of their deepest suffering.⁵⁴

Darkness

Eventually, Abram falls into a deep sleep (cf. Gen. 2:21) and experiences a horrifying darkness as God gives him the next part of the revelation:

[12] As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. [13] Then the LORD said to Abram, “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. [14] But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. [15] As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. [16] And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.” (Gen. 15:12–16)

Previously, Yahweh brought Abram outside his tent to look at the stars (Gen. 15:5). So, the fact that the sun is setting here (Gen. 15:12) tells us that this encounter with Yahweh has stretched into a second day.⁵⁵ On the first day, Abram expressed several doubts as Yahweh assured him of the certainty of the promises. On the second day, Abram undergoes a dreadful, great darkness as Yahweh assures him of the certainty of his promises while also testifying that the fulfillment of these

promises will be painful. Derek Kidner remarks, “Even the New Covenant would be inaugurated in darkness and earthquake (Matt. 27:45, 51).”⁵⁶

This is the only time that Abram is fearful in God’s presence; however, Adam (Gen. 3:10), Jacob (Gen. 28:17), Moses (Ex. 3:6), and the Israelites (Ex. 20:18) all experience great fear in God’s direct presence.⁵⁷ Abram does not seem to be afraid of Yahweh himself, but of the dark nature of his dream.⁵⁸ Here, Yahweh explains a terrible future for Abram’s offspring. They will sojourn in a foreign land as slaves, afflicted over a period of four hundred years (Gen. 15:13). Another part of this darkness, though, seems to reflect the great judgment that Yahweh will bring upon that foreign nation in order to bring out his people with great possessions (Gen. 15:14). Abram must endure darkness during this dream, but he will not endure the torment of the slavery. Instead, Abram will die in peace, buried in a good old age (Gen. 15:15). It may be, then, that Abram’s deep sleep symbolizes his death before the darkness descends on his offspring.⁵⁹

Then, Yahweh adds one more note to explain the passing of time that must happen before Abram’s offspring takes possession of the land. Israel will not inherit the land until “the iniquity of the Amorites is...complete” (Gen. 15:16). There is a play on words between the *peace* (*shalôm*) in which Abram dies and the *completeness* (*shalēm*) of the iniquity of the Amorites.⁶⁰ This explains why Yahweh’s people should wait at all for the land, which is a major question through the entire Pentateuch.⁶¹ Here, we learn that Israel’s invasion into Canaan is “an act of justice, not aggression. Until it was *right* to invade, God’s people must wait, if it cost them centuries of hardship.”⁶² Yes, God will give his the land of Canaan as a free, gracious gift; however, God is also entirely justified to evict the other nations from the land for their great sin.

Through Many Tribulations

We typically see suffering as a threat to the fulfillment of God’s promises. When we experience setbacks, losses, and opposition, we quickly start to question whether God will ever accomplish what he has promised to do. In part, God establishes his covenant with us to encourage us in the midst of that suffering. From another perspective, however, God also promises that the fulfillment of his covenant will *require* us to pass through suffering. Suffering is not a roadblock that keeps God from fulfilling his promises; rather, suffering is the means by which God fulfills his promises. We see this reality expressed most clearly in the suffering and death of our Lord, Jesus Christ. Nothing less than the cross could bring about the fulfillment of God’s promises. This reality was not unique to Jesus, however. After Paul is beaten and left for dead at Lystra, he pointed to his sufferings as the normative template for the Christian’s life: “[21] When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, [22] strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and *saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God*” (Acts 14:21–22). Your suffering does not set God back; God redeems your suffering to fulfill his covenant promises.

The Purpose of Suffering (Gen. 15:17–21)

All of this has been prelude to the actual solemnization of the covenant: “When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces” (Gen. 15:17) As the sun goes down, Abram experiences more darkness, accompanied by

smoke and fire. These elements clearly indicate a *theophany*—that is, an appearance of God himself. Furthermore, the smoke and fire closely parallel God’s presence among Israel by a pillar of smoke during the day and the pillar of fire during the darkness of night.⁶³ Additionally, if the torn pieces of the dead animals represent Israel’s great suffering in the land of Egypt, then God’s appearance to pass between the pieces seems to represent God’s pledge to walk among his people after their Exodus, both by the pillar of smoke and fire, but also in the tabernacle (cf. Ex. 40:34–38; Lev 26:12; Deut 23:14).⁶⁴

Continuity with the Covenant at Sinai

We observed earlier that Yahweh’s opening words to identify himself as the God who brought Abram out of Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 15:7) mirror the opening words of Yahweh during the inauguration of the covenant at Mount Sinai (Ex. 20:2). The darkness (Gen. 15:12, 17; Ex. 19:18; 20:21; Deut. 4:11), dreadful fear (Gen. 15:12; Ex. 20:18–19), smoke (Gen. 15:17; Ex. 19:18; 20:18), and fire (Gen. 15:17; Ex. 19:18; Deut. 4:11) also appear during the inauguration of the covenant at Mount Sinai. Furthermore, we should see the bloody carcasses of the sacrifices in parallel with the blood that Moses spreads between the people of Israel and the altar on Mount Sinai (Ex. 24:5–8).⁶⁵ In a general way, these similarities “chiefly proclaim the ‘terror of the Lord’, the impact of holiness on sin.”⁶⁶ Yahweh’s holy presence inspires fear and demands blood atonement for any worshiper who dares to come near.

In a more specific way, however, we should see how these two covenants tie together. Indeed, during this covenant Yahweh promises that he will bring Abram’s offspring both *through* and *out of* Egypt; then, in the covenant at Sinai, Yahweh explains the significance of his action as the God who *brought* Israel out of Egypt (Ex. 20:2). John Sailhamer writes this to explain the purpose of these close narrative similarities in the two covenants:

If we ask why the author has sought to bring in the picture of Sinai here, the answer lies in the purpose of the book. It is part of the overall strategy of the book to show that what God did at Sinai was part of a larger plan which had already been put into action with the patriarchs. Thus, the exodus and the Sinai covenant serve as reminders not only of God’s power and grace but also of God’s faithfulness. What he sets out to accomplish with his people, he will carry through to the end.⁶⁷

The covenant with Abram is the foundation for Yahweh’s plans for blessing the world; however, this covenant is only the beginning. Yahweh plans to raise up an offspring for Abram and to give that offspring the land of Canaan as a possession, but even that is not an end in itself. Through these fulfillments of the covenant, Yahweh will eventually raise up the ultimate purpose for his covenants: sending his own Son into the world as the final fulfillment of his promises to bless the world through Abram’s offspring.

Unilateral Covenant

In the midst of all this, Yahweh solemnizes this covenant in a surprising way. The ritual of entering into a covenant by passing between torn animal pieces does not appear only here in the Bible. This was a common means of inaugurating covenants and treaties, and Yahweh’s words in the

book of Jeremiah explains the significance of what it means to pass between the pieces:

[18] “And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts—[19] the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf. [20] And I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives. Their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.” (Jer. 34:18–20)

To pass between the pieces is to swear an oath of self-malediction: “I will make them *like* the calf that they cut in two pieces and passed between the parts” (Jer. 34:18). The covenant-maker is swearing, “If I break the terms of this covenant, may my body be broken like these sacrificial animals.”

Notice, though, that Abram does *not* pass between the pieces. Normally, both parties entering into a covenant would pass between the pieces to swear their commitment to uphold their end of the agreement. Here, Yahweh alone passes through twice—once as a smoking fire pot, and against as a flaming torch (Gen. 15:17). By doing so, Yahweh is swearing that he will take full responsibility for the fulfillment of the covenant *and* that he will take the full brunt of the curses that will come for failure to keep the covenant.⁶⁸ Through the course of their history, Abram’s offspring will violate the terms of Yahweh’s covenant again and again. Rather than destroying his chosen people altogether, Yahweh does something radical and extraordinary: he *becomes* one of his own people. God the Son becomes incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and, ultimately fulfills the terms of the covenant when he offers his own body to be broken and his own blood to be shed just like the animals whose carcasses Abram split apart. In the suffering of Christ, God declares to us his great love for us and his absolute dedication to fulfilling his promises: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32).

God’s People Restored to Eden

As the terms of this covenant, God promises to give his people the land of Canaan, just as he has promised:

[18] On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, [19] the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, [20] the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, [21] the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.” (Gen. 15:17–21)

Israel will not take all of this land right away, nor even during the lifetime of Joshua. Only after David drives out the Jebusites from their capital city, Jerusalem, does this promise come to complete fulfillment (2 Sam. 5:6–10).⁶⁹ God will indeed bring about his promises, albeit over a long period of time.

Still, there is one more element to notice in this passage. By describing the borders of this promised land along the lines of “the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates” (Gen. 15:18), the author of Genesis connects us back to an earlier description of a land marked by borders—

the garden of Eden:

[10] A river flowed out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers. [11] The name of the first is the Pishon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. [12] And the gold of that land is good; bdellium and onyx stone are there. [13] The name of the second river is the Gihon. It is the one that flowed around the whole land of Cush. [14] And the name of the third river is the Tigris, which flows east of Assyria. And the fourth river is the Euphrates. (Gen. 2:10–14)

John Sailhamer writes this about the borders of the garden of Eden, which is worth quoting in full:

The location of the Garden of/in Eden has long been debated. Two of the rivers mentioned in association with the garden can be identified with certainty, the Euphrates and the Tigris. It is difficult to identify the other two, the Pishon and the Gihon. Since the “land of Cush” is identified in the Bible as Ethiopia, the Gihon is most likely the river which passes through the land of Ethiopia. If so, the author apparently has in mind the “river of Egypt.” The land of “Havilah,” however, cannot be identified.

It should be noted that the amount of description given to each of the four rivers is in inverse proportion to the certainty of the identification of each of the rivers. The narrative gives most attention to the river Pishon, but there is at least certainty regarding that river’s identification and location. By contrast, the narrative merely states that the well-known Euphrates is the fourth river. The author’s attention to detail with the two lesser-known rivers (e.g., the gold and jewels) can be tied to the parallels between the role of the Garden and that of the tabernacle later in the Pentateuch (See below). Moreover, the mention of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers can be linked to the identification of the Garden of Eden and the Promised Land. It can hardly be a coincidence that these rivers, along with the “River of Egypt,” again play a role in marking boundaries of the land promised to Abraham (Ge 15:18).⁷⁰

God is not giving a piece of real estate chosen at random to his people; he is resettling his people near the original garden of Eden.

Of course, Israel’s experience in the land of Canaan will not be paradise restored. The problem, however, will not revolve around any kind of lack of provision on God’s part. Instead, Israel will struggle in the land of Canaan because of their own sin and hardness of heart. God will walk among his people, but only in a partial way, and Israel’s rebellion will prevent any further integration between God and his people. Therefore, God must do much more over the course of time until he can walk freely and without inhibitions among his people. Only after the Lord Jesus Christ returns to establish his people in the new heavens and earth will God fulfill the furthest reaches of these covenant promises to Abram, by dwelling with his people forever and ever (Rev. 21:3).

Discussion Questions

1. Do you ever worry that expressing disappointment to God may signal a lack of faith? Or, do you

tend to avoid praying laments from the sense that God does not care about your disappointments? Why does the author of Genesis tell us about Abram’s justifying faith in the midst of his lament-filled prayers? What laments do you need to pray right now?

2. What does it mean that God *counts* Abram’s faith as righteousness? Do we actually believe that faith counts as righteousness? What kinds of things do we tend to think will *count* for righteousness, whether for the world or for God? If someone studied our lives, what might that person observe about what we *really* think will count for righteousness?

3. What does God promise about the ongoing presence of suffering in our lives? If so, why does suffering surprise us? How does God use suffering? Why doesn’t God use some other method than suffering? How do we develop mindsets to “count it all joy” (Jas. 1:2) and to recognize that we must enter the kingdom through many tribulations (Acts 14:22)?

4. What does the suffering of Jesus teach us about our own suffering? Why did Jesus willingly embrace suffering? What does the suffering of Jesus teach us about God’s faithfulness to keep his covenant? What does the suffering of Jesus teach us about our eternal hope? What practical significance should the suffering of Jesus have in our day-to-day lives?

Notes

1. Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, 87.

2. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 327.

3. Kidner, *Genesis*, 133.

4. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 150.

5. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 327.

6. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 149.

7. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 327.

8. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 149.

9. Calvin, *Genesis*, 397–99. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxi.i.html>>

10. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 418.

11. Kidner, *Genesis*, 133.

12. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 327.

13. “For the word ‘reward’ has the force of *inheritance*, or *felicity*. Were it deeply engraven on our minds, that in God alone we have the highest and complete perfection of all good things; we should easily fix bounds to those wicked desires by which we are miserably tormented. The meaning then of the passage is this, that we shall be truly happy when God is propitious to us; for he not only pours upon us the abundance of his kindness, but offers himself to us, that we may enjoy him. Now what is there more, which men can desire, when they really enjoy God?” (Calvin, *Genesis*, 400. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxi.i.html>>)

14. Allen Ross notes that the Hebrew is precise: “‘your reward shall be great,’ rather than ‘I am your reward.’” (Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 308.)

15. “‘Your reward,’ שָׂכָר: Kaiser (cf. Cazelles, Lohfink) suggest that this is the term for a mercenary’s pay.

In Ezek 29:19 it refers specifically to a soldier's booty, although it is a broad term meaning 'wage' or 'fee' (Gen 30:32; Exod 22:14 [15]; Num 18:31). Nevertheless martial overtones would be quite appropriate in this context following chap. 14.)" (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 327.)

16. Kidner, *Genesis*, 133.

17. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 308.

18. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 419.

19. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 327.

20. This is most likely the meaning of the Hebrew text; however, more literally the text reads, "...and the heir of my house is Damascus, Eliezer." John Sailhamer makes an interesting connection regarding the common themes of faith, offspring, and Damascus between this passage and Isaiah 7:4–9: "The mention of 'Damascus' in chapter 15 is apparently intended to draw a connection to Abraham's victory near 'Damascus' in chapter 14 and to tie the themes behind the events of chapter 15 to those of chapter 14. The latter chapter showed that the fulfillment of God's promises lay not in the strength of 'Damascus,' where Abraham defeated the four kings, but in the 'faith' of his chosen 'seed.' In much the same way, the prophet Isaiah warned the weakhearted of his day: 'Do not fear...It will not take place, it will not happen, for the head of Aram is Damascus, and the head of Damascus is only Rezin...If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all' (Isa 7:4–9)." (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 150.)

21. "The Hebrew of 2 is obscure, but 3 explains the point of it, and it is well known that among the Hurrians a childless man might adopt an heir to ensure his proper burial, or a borrower secure a loan by adopting the lender." (Kidner, *Genesis*, 134.)

22. Calvin, *Genesis*, 401–02. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxi.i.html>>

23. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 151.

24. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 423.

25. Kidner, *Genesis*, 134–35.

26. Calvin, *Genesis*, 403–04. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxi.i.html>>

27. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 151.

28. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 309.

29. Calvin, *Genesis*, 408. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxi.i.html>>

30. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 151.

31. Ross continues: "There are several ways to explain the significance of this construction in the chapter—apart from the idea that Abram's meritorious faith resulted from the word of assurance in the preceding verses. The verse may be a summary statement of Abram's faith, or a transitional note between sections. It could be translated parenthetically, as disjunctive clauses often are ('Now Abram believed...'). The verb could be explained as having a characteristic nuance ('now Abram believed,' in the sense that he was a believer). In other words, the text does not necessarily mean that Abram came to faith here. Hebrews 11:8 asserts that he left Ur by faith. Genesis 15:6 simply reports at this point the fact that Abram believed, and for that belief God had credited him with righteousness. The verse is placed here as a conclusion to the dialogue in which Abram questioned God about the promise, and prior to the enacting of the covenant. Abram's status as a believer to whom God imputed righteousness is reported here—now God will bind himself by covenant to Abram the believer." (Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 309–10.)

32. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 149.

33. This is probably the best literal translation of the Hiphil perfect tense form of the verb *believe* and the prefix "in" before Yahweh's name.

34. Calvin, *Genesis*, 407. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxi.i.html>>

35. "This covenant [of grace] was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel: under the law, it was administered by promises, prophecies, sacrifices, circumcision, the paschal lamb,

and other types and ordinances delivered to the people of the Jews, all foreshadowing Christ to come; which were, for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation; and is called the old testament.” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 7.5)

36. Calvin, *Genesis*, 406. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxi.i.html>>

37. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 330.

38. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 152.

39. “Normally righteousness is defined in terms of moral conduct, for example, Ezek 18:5; ‘If a man is righteous and does what is lawful and right.’ There then follows a list of actions prohibited in the Pentateuch which a righteous man refrains from doing (vv 6–9). God himself is frequently called ‘righteous’ (e.g., Deut 32:4; Ps 7:10 [9], 12 [11]) and righteousness might well be paraphrased as God-like, or at least God-pleasing, action. This sense of God-approved behavior is apparent in Gen 18:19; 30:33; 38:26.

But here Abram is not described as doing righteousness. Rather faith is being counted for righteousness. Normally righteousness results in acquittal by the divine judge. Here faith, the right response to God’s revelation, counts instead. As the rest of the story makes plain, this faith leads to righteous action (e.g., 18:19), but only here in the OT is it counted as righteousness.” (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 330.)

40. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 325–26.

41. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 308.

42. John Calvin writes that it is “as if he were saying, ‘I do not now first begin to promise thee this land. For it was on this account that I brought thee out of thy own country, to constitute thee the lord and heir of this land. Now therefore I covenant with thee in the same form; lest thou shouldst deem thyself to have been deceived, or fed with empty words; and I command thee to be mindful of the first covenant, that the new promise, which after many years I now repeat, may be the more firmly supported.’” (Calvin, *Genesis*, 410–11. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxi.i.html>>)

43. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 305.

44. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 152.

45. “He does not, however, reject, on account of its difficulty, what might have appeared to him incredible, but brings before God the anxiety by which he is inwardly oppressed. And therefore his questioning with God is rather a proof of faith, than a sign of incredulity. The wicked, because their minds are entangled with various conflicting thoughts, do not in any way receive the promises, but the pious, who feel the impediments in their flesh, endeavor to remove them, lest they should obstruct the way to God’s word; and they seek a remedy for those evils of which they are conscious. It is, nevertheless, to be observed, that there were some special impulses in the saints of old, which it would not now be lawful to draw into a precedent. For though Hezekiah and Gideon required certain miracles, this is not a reason why the same thing should be attempted by us in the present day; let it suffice us to seek for such confirmation only as the Lord himself according to his own pleasure, shall judge most eligible.” (Calvin, *Genesis*, 411–12. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxi.i.html>>)

46. “Abram’s ‘*how am I to know...?*’ (8, RSV) reveals the strain he was under, for his faith was nothing facile: its spirit was that of ‘Lord, I believe, help thou mine unbelief;’ not that of Zacharias’s retort in Luke 1:18, for it earned no rebuke, only reassurance. God’s regular provision for such a need is ‘signs’ and ‘seals’ (cf. Rom. 4:3, 11a) to confirm the spoken word. Here his full answer is a formal covenant (verse 18), executed in two stages. The first is in this chapter, an inauguration of a particularly vivid kind. The second stage, in chapter 17, was the giving of the covenant sign, circumcision. For good measure, as Hebrews 6:13, 17 points out, there was finally an oath to reinforce it in 22:16ff.” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 135.)

47. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 331.

48. Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 129.

49. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 331.

50. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 148.

51. Calvin, *Genesis*, 412–13. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxi.i.html>>

52. “These verses prophesy the Egyptian bondage and the exodus after 400 years (v 13) in the fourth generation (v 16). Apparently the two periods are equated, so one generation equals 100 years. This suggests they are intended to be round numbers (cf. Exod 12:40). In this case the three-year-old animals (v 9) could well symbolize three generations of oppression in Egypt (so Keil, 215, following Theodoret).” (Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 332.)

53. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 433.

54. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 335.

55. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 434.

56. Kidner, *Genesis*, 136.

57. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 434.

58. Calvin, *Genesis*, 414. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxi.i.html>>

59. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 335.

60. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 311.

61. Calvin, *Genesis*, 418–20. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxi.i.html>>

62. Kidner, *Genesis*, 136.

63. Kidner, *Genesis*, 136.

64. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15, Volume 1*, 333.

65. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 433.

66. Kidner, *Genesis*, 135–36.

67. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 152.

68. “The emphasis on divine promise in this covenant is brought out strikingly by one distinctive aspect of the narrative. Contrary to what might be expected, Abraham does not pass between the divided pieces representing the covenantal curse of self-malediction. The Lord of the covenant does not require that his servant take to himself the self-maledictory oath. Only God himself passes between the pieces.

By this action, God promises. The Lord assumes to himself the full responsibility for seeing that every promise of the covenant shall be realized. It is not that Abraham has no obligations in the covenant relation. Already he has been required to leave his fatherland (Gen. 12:1ff.). Later he shall be required unequivocally to administer the seal of the covenant to all his male descendants (Gen. 17:1, 14). But as the covenant is instituted formally in Genesis 15, the Lord dramatizes the gracious character of the covenantal relation by having himself alone to pass between the pieces. This covenant shall be fulfilled because God assumes to himself full responsibility in seeing to its realization.

The pleading voice of the patriarch had urged: “How can I *know*? How can I be sure?”

The solemn ceremony of covenantal self-malediction provides the Lord’s reply: “I promise. I solemnly commit myself as Almighty God. Death may be necessary. But the promises of the covenant shall be fulfilled.”

In Jesus Christ God fulfills his promise. In Him God is with us. He offers his own body and his own blood as victim of the covenantal curses. His flesh is torn that God’s word to the patriarch might be fulfilled.

Now he offers himself to you. He says: “Take, eat; this is my body. This is my blood of the covenant shed for many. Drink, all of you, of it.” (Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants*, 145–46.)

69. Kidner, *Genesis*, 136.

70. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 99.