

God's Covenant is a shield throughout life, and death

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Preacher: Dylan Marais

- [0 : 00] Good morning everyone and stay with me or keep your Bibles open in Genesis 15. Today's sermon is titled, God will shield us by his covenant through life and death.
- And you can see just by the title and by the readings, it's a really big, we're covering some really big ideas. You'll notice the reading itself is very interesting and dark and mysterious things happening.
- And so today we're looking at a very key text in the Bible. With some very important concepts for us to get hold of and to make part of our Christian life.
- We will see how a key concept like the covenant, how it actually works. We will see how faith is the key to unlocking the keys of the kingdom.
- These are biblical concepts, very important concepts that we must understand and teaches us how we relate to God and how, basically how our Christianity works. Now as we begin, there's two things I want us to know about the passage that may help us to understand how important this passage in Genesis 15 is.
- [1 : 21] Firstly, it tells us what God is going to do throughout the rest of the story of the Bible. This chapter begins to set in motion one of the, well, the great story of the Bible, but it includes the other great stories of the Bible.
- The Exodus, the conquest of the land under Joshua. And it doesn't stop there. The Bible story continues, but it uses these verses or this chapter and what happens here as a kind of a springboard that the rest of the Bible continues the story.
- The New Testament as well uses this chapter to define for us key concepts like faith and covenant. So this chapter sets up the storyline of the rest of the Bible.
- Now of course it comes from chapter 12 and so it's part of the whole biblical narrative of what God starts in chapter 12 with Abraham. So it tells us what God is going to do.
- It also shows us how God is going to work. It shows us how God is going to bring his promises to reality. There's language of signs.
- [2 : 32] There's a deep and mysterious covenant ceremony. It shows us that God is going to work in covenantal terms with his people.
- The rest of the Bible is an outworking of the covenant promises that God makes to Abraham over here. Now as we look at the passage, there are three things to pick up in the first part of the story.
- The first part of the story is that first vision that Abraham has and God appears to him and he says to him, Do not be afraid, Abraham. I am your shield, your very great reward.
- The first thing we see at work is the idea of promise. When God speaks, he makes promises to his people. His word gives shape to our relationship with him.
- Gives us the details of what he promises us. We must take those promises seriously. We can't decide for ourselves which promises we want and which promises we don't want. Which promises are more important and which promises aren't that important.

[3 : 37] If God promises land and people and blessing, then that is what we must expect from him. Indeed, that is what Abraham is going to expect from God.

Notice what God promises to Abraham here. Abraham asks God, And Abraham said, Now we know that God has already made promises to Abraham of a nation and blessing.

Remember Genesis 12. And he repeats it in Genesis 13. And now Abraham is a bit confused. He knows he's getting on in age. Remember when God first called him, he was already 75 years old.

By the time of Genesis 15, he's not quite 100 yet. He's in between. So he's between 75 and 99 or 100. And that's when he actually has Isaac. So Abraham is getting a bit worried.

You can see his faith is a little bit shaky here with what God has promised him. Well, how does God respond to Abraham's anxiety and concern about his promises? Well, he makes a promise again.

[4 : 50] Verse 4. Then the word of the Lord came to him. This man, meaning Eliezer of Damascus, who's not one of his children, will not be your heir.

But a son coming from your own body will be your heir. He took him outside. He said, look up into the heavens. The important thing to notice here is that Abraham's children are the people who are going to receive his inheritance.

So we have an important hurdle to cross. If we want to inherit the promises that God gave to Abraham, there's a little bit of a problem for us who are not born of Abraham's body, who are not biologically his children.

Now, the New Testament shows how this is possible. And it shows us also that faith is the key. But that's for later on. So in Abraham's life, God promises to be his shield.

And he promises to give Abraham a huge reward. Some text, it says, I am your great reward. Or you will get a very great reward. What God is promising here is to shield Abraham through his entire life, from here on in until he dies, to make sure that the covenant promises that God makes to him will come true.

[6 : 05] You with me? That's what the word shield means. It protects you. You know when you go into battle, you get a big shield. I mean, you wouldn't go into, in those days, these days, you don't need a shield.

Unless you're Captain America, in which case it's kind of helpful. But a shield stops the attacks from coming at you and protects what is important. God is going to be Abraham's shield.

Not just once off, not just when he gets attacked, but through his entire life. Then God makes a sign with Abraham. Verse 5, God takes him outside and says, look up to the heavens and count the stars.

If indeed you can count them. And he says to him, so shall your offspring be. God makes a promise. And then, in order to make sure that Abraham gets it, that he knows that he's going to receive it, he shows him something physical from his creation, so that he knows he will indeed be given those promises.

Do you see how the sign works? Now remember, we've had this in Genesis 9 with Noah. When God makes his promises, and he puts a rainbow in the sky to remind Noah back then that he, God, will remember not to send another flood.

[7 : 17] So signs work in a funny way. They work to remind God of his promises, but they obviously also work for us. Every time Abraham looked up at the night sky, he would have been reminded of God's promise to him.

It would have helped his faith. It would act as a reminder. It would still his fears and help him trust God even more. Now, can you imagine the stars that Abraham looked up at that time, before industry and cities?

You know, when you go to the mountains or you go out into the wilderness or go to the desert and you see the stars? It's amazing. Abraham would have even seen even more stars than that. So what we see is that God makes a promise, and then he shows us a sign that helps us have faith in the promise.

Does that make sense? Covenant signs reassure us that God doesn't just promise to do something, but that he himself will take the steps necessary to make the promise a reality.

The way that God works, when he makes a promise, he then makes the promise happen. Abraham is getting old. How am I going to have children? That's going to come up in the story later on in Genesis.

[8 : 32] And God says, don't worry. I've got this. You're going to have as many stars as you can have as many children as the stars that you see at night. Signs of the covenant reinforce the promises of the covenant, and therefore reinforce our faith in the person making those promises.

Does that make sense? Signs help faith grow. Covenant signs, not just any sign. It's got to be a sign that God says is linked to his promises.

Now covenant and promise are kind of the same thing, and we'll see that later on in the passage they really are linked. When you have God's promise, you've got his covenant, and if you've got God's covenant, you've got his promises.

Does that make sense? Then we see that once God makes his promise to Abraham, that he's both going to be a shield, and that Abraham is indeed going to get all the things that he said he is, even though it doesn't look like he can get it, then he shows him a sign, and Abraham responds by faith.

Abraham believes God, and God credits it to him as righteousness. It's a key, key, key verse. Verse 6. Abraham believed the Lord, and he credited to him as righteousness.

[9 : 52] Well now, isn't that interesting? I thought the Old Testament was all about works, and the New Testament was about faith. The Old Testament is about earning your salvation, and the New Testament is all about grace.

Have you heard those kinds of things before? Have many Christians that say, oh no, they're New Testament Christians, they don't really go for the Old Testament. What is justification by faith doing here in the Old Testament?

Well, in the context, what is God saying about this? What is he saying when he says, he credits it to him as righteousness?

What God is saying is that Abraham's response of trust, of faith, is the correct response to his promise and sign. He's saying that faith is a good response.

It puts Abraham in a good standing with God, and in a sense it allows God to make his covenant with Abraham. It's a little bit of a long shot, that one, but the covenant promises or the covenant ceremony comes after God gives him the faith, or after Abraham has faith in God.

[11 : 00] Faith is such an easy thing to understand, although it's also profound at the same time and sometimes not so easy to understand. Faith is believing that someone or something will do what they say they will do.

It's really as simple as that. Abraham trusts that God will actually do what he says, even though it doesn't look like it's possible.

God, and the thing that God promises him is lots of kids, which is kind of interesting. But Abraham just believes God. He says, okay. He sees God in a vision.

He hears him. The word of the Lord comes to him. God makes his promises. He says, look at the sky. That's how many kids you're going to have. And Abraham says, oh, okay, cool.

That's faith. That's how faith works. When you read God's word, the right response is just to believe it.

[12 : 06] There's many other responses as well, to obey. But faith works as kind of like it's trust. It's belief. It's faith. They're all the same kind of a word. Interestingly, this very text is used by Paul in the New Testament to show that non-Jews, people not born to Abraham, Gentiles, outsiders, us, are the people who make up the Christian church, who can indeed inherit the promises made to Abraham.

We should end our time in Romans 4 just to show that to you. So in the first section of the story, we see God working by means of his word, which is a promise word.

It comes to us as a promise. Attached to his word are signs that help us to have faith. And faith obviously is the key to having a good working relationship with the Lord.

Then we come across this next bit of the story, which is very, sometimes quite difficult to understand. I mean, what's going on here? There's darkness. It's a little bit scary.

Not sure what's going on. There's a fire. There's animals that are cut in half. And God again making promises. Now what's going on there? In ancient times, when kings got together, they would make treaties.

[13 : 36] Where there's a treaty, there's a ceremony. What would happen is one big king would pitch up with his army to a smaller king's city and announce himself and say, hey, I'm your new king.

Now, if you don't like that, we can fight, but you're going to die and my army is going to kill you and everyone is going to be dead, basically. So they don't even ask, would you like to enter? It's just obvious. Yes, okay, we'll enter into a treaty.

Now, interestingly, the word for treaty is the same word that we've got for covenant. It's the same Hebrew word. It's the same ancient Near East, whatever words are used in Syrian, Sumerian, and all of that.

It's the same word. Treaty and covenant mean the same thing here. Now, we've got actual examples of what these ancient treaties looked and sounded like.

Here's one from King Ezahadon, who's the king of Assyria. I don't know if he appears in the Bible as such, but he's the king of Syria, which is the capital was Nineveh.

[14 : 40] You remember Job going to Nineveh? He was one of the great kings of Assyria just before it went down. He was taken out by, well, by God's word from the prophets, but later on by the Babylonians.

And Ezahadon has pitched up to a city, and this is what the treaty says. This is actually, they found a text, a tablet that actually explains these things. And I'm going to quote from it.

I didn't read it myself. It was translated by someone. This is the treaty of Ezahadon, king of the world, king of Assyria, son of Sennacherib the Great, with Ramataya, that's the other king, of Urukazabanu.

Okay, well. And with his sons and grandsons and all the people of the city. This is the treaty which Ezahadon, king of Assyria, establishes with you in a binding fashion under an oath.

And what would happen is that all the people of the city would come out, and the king with his army would stand there, and they would have priests. They would take a whole bunch of animals, cut them up, lay them side by side, almost lay them out like a sort of bloody kind of avenue.

[15 : 51] And they would slowly walk through those animals, because they're taking oaths here, and oaths require blood. As they walk through the animals with the high priest in front of them and the two kings behind, he would probably be walking with a censure, you know, a little thing with a bit of fire, making smoke, because there's sacrifice and the gods are involved.

As they walk through the animals, this is what they said. This head is not the head of a lamb. It is the head of Ramataya.

It is the head of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land. If Ramataya sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb that is torn off, so may the head of Ramataya be torn off and his sons.

If you, Ramataya, do not continue to do everything included in this treaty, just as these yearlings and spring lambs are cut open and the entrails are rolled around their feet, so may the entrails of your sons and daughters be rolled around your feet.

Now, of course, we don't have ceremonies like that anymore. Do you think that if you were part of that ceremony, you would remember it? Yes. Interestingly, as they walk through, and as they get to the end, there will be a table, and they take a meal.

[17 : 22] And it says, That just means to be part of you.

Isn't that interesting that in the covenantal ceremony, the treaty ceremony, with a covenantal or a treaty meal, with bread and wine. Now, when we're in this territory of covenants, we're not talking about small little paper contracts here.

And we don't use the word covenant often in our everyday language. But notice, it's when you're entering into a covenant, you're entering into an oath.

You're taking and giving oaths that bind you. You're entering into a ceremony sealed with blood and sacrifice. Sacrifice. Promises are made and oaths are taken.

It's a big deal to go into a covenant relationship with someone. It's not just a so-by-the-way thing. Going into a covenant with someone creates deep, unbreakable bonds of fellowship.

[18 : 28] We're not talking about popping over to someone to have tea and a chit-chat and some biscuits. Covenants are life-changing things. They change time and space and reality. They change the course of history.

That's exactly what's happening here in Genesis chapter 15. Notice what God says to Abraham. Notice, of course, well, before God speaks in verse 8, Abraham says, O sovereign Lord, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it?

Remember, he's talking about the land. God has promised us before that. He says, I'm the Lord who brought you out of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it. Remember the land that we looked at last week?

God says to him in verse 9, Bring me a heifer, a goat, and a ram, each three years old, with a dove and young pigeon, and then they cut them in two. Abraham, verse 10, Abraham brought all these to him, cut them in two, and arranged the two halves opposite each other.

And then this darkness begins to fall. A deep sleep and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. And then God makes his promise to him, Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers, etc.

[19 : 48] And when the sun goes down, Abraham sees a smoking brazier, a pot, an oven, a flaming torch. That, of course, represents God.

There's darkness and dread, fire and smoke, doom and prophecy. It just meant to show that this is really serious stuff. I hope you get that. You don't just enter into covenants lightly, just so by the way.

So you need a number of elements when you make a covenant. You need blood and sacrifice. You need promises. And you need a king that makes those promises and makes the covenants happen. There's one major difference between what happens here, or maybe, no, one major difference between what happens here and the other covenant ceremonies.

Both kings would walk through the sacrificial animals. Yes, it was mainly directed to the smaller king. If you don't keep the terms of the covenant, and essentially it was to pay tribute and to promise not to go to war with the big king.

But the big king also had to make promises that if the small king got into trouble, he'd send his army and help him. And if he didn't send his army to help him, he'd be breaking the covenant, and the curses would fall on him. So both would walk through the sacrificial animals, saying that the curses and the blood and the death that you see here would fall upon me if I don't keep to the covenant.

[21 : 07] Now you'll notice that Abraham doesn't walk through those animals. He stands there, and he sees God walking down that sacrificial avenue.

You notice that? Verse 17 and verse 18. By walking through the sacrifices, God is saying, I will make the covenant happen.

Abraham is a passive participant in the covenant. Abraham is not going to make the covenant happen. God is giving the things promised, and Abraham is receiving them. Abraham is receiving a reward.

God is going to make sure he receives that reward. He receives a people. He receives land. He's shielded and protected by God. God takes the lead.

He moves to ensure that the covenant will happen. And it's an act of pure grace and mercy. Essentially what God is saying is, if the covenant stipulations are broken, I, God, will pay the price to make sure that you, Abraham, and your children will get the reward.

[22 : 17] Now that works its way out in the Christian gospel under Christ. As you know, he is the one that dies on our behalf to make sure that we don't taste death.

Those are all covenantal things that happen in the New Testament. There's one other little twist here in the text. Abraham, the whole time, is asking God, when am I going to get these things?

Are you sure I'm going to get them? He's pressing God. He's asking, please make sure that I know that I'm going to get this. And God's answer in this covenant ceremony is interesting. You'll see Abraham's question.

Verse 8. O sovereign Lord, how can I know that I shall gain possession of it? And then this darkness descends and the sheep are there. And then verse 11.

Then the Lord said to him, know for certain that your descendants shall be strangers in a country not their own and they will be enslaved and ill-treated 400 years. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves and afterwards they will come out with great possessions.

[23 : 19] You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. In the fourth generation, your descendants will come back here for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.

So Abraham is asking, how will I know that I'm going to get the land? And God says, well, you're going to die first. And it's going to take 400 years.

And then your people are going to inherit the land. Now that's a very strange way to make a promise. If God were here, well, he is, I guess, but, and came to make certain promises to us, when would we want those promises to happen?

If God says, hey, listen, I'm going to give you a land, when would you want that land? Like, now would be nice. I'm going to give you a great nation. I'm going to make you rich. That would be nice to have it now.

And God says, no, you are going to have it, but I'm not going to give it to you yet. That's really difficult for us to accept. It's not just difficult for children.

[24 : 27] It's difficult for adults as well. How is Abraham going to receive these promises if he's dead? Well, he can't. So it doesn't spell it out for us in this passage, but what God is saying is that I'm going to have to, well, he's not saying this, but Abraham is going to have to reason to himself.

God has made a promise of land, real land, of people, real people, of blessing, real blessing, of reward, real reward. I'm not going to get it before I die.

God cannot lie, so I am still going to get it. So there's only one possible option for Abraham here. Resurrection. He has to come back from the dead, or rather, well, he can't, can he?

He reckons that God is going to have to bring him back from the dead so that he can get these things. Are you with me on that? Might be a long shot, but hopefully I can show that to you a little bit later.

But this is where God's shielding comes into play. Remember in verse 1, God says, I'm your shield. This shield of protection is not just for this life, although it is for this life.

[25 : 35] But God is so powerful, and his shield's so strong, that it doesn't matter if you die before you receive his promises. He'll bring you back from the dead, and he'll make you alive again so that you can inherit his promises.

That's one of the great promises of the New Testament for us. And it's something to hold on to for the rest of our lives, and even into death.

We don't often think about that. We live our lives, and we're happy, or not so happy, or, you know, we struggle along as best we can. But God's promises are here for life, and for death.

And they are so strong, they carry us all the way through. It's like a, like death is like a, oops, okay, but don't worry, pick it up, and there you go again. Oh, there they are. Abraham was willing to wait 400 years.

He thought he was probably only going to wait 400 years, and then be brought back to life. Just so happens that it's a little bit longer than that. By the way, Abraham is 2000 BC. We're 2080.

[26 : 40] It's been 4,000 years. That's okay. What's 4,000 years when you're going to inherit eternity? Now, just to end our time off together, the same promises and the same covenant that God makes with Abraham, he makes with us.

The same promises, the same covenant. There's some slight differences. The covenant signs are different, but it's the same promise and the same covenant.

Are you with me on that? I'm going to turn to two passages. We need to look at that Romans passage, but let's turn to Luke chapter 1.

I just want to show you that the Bible itself says that these covenant promises made to Abraham continue into the New Testament. Now, we're going to look at these things in detail at Christmas time.

We've started to plan for Christmas already, and God willing, we'll look at the first few songs in the book of Luke. There's some magnificent theology there, and we won't have time to unpack it all today.

[27 : 53] But if you turn to Luke chapter 1, and you look at Zechariah's song, which starts towards the end of the chapter, just notice how the New Testament talks about Jesus, and what God is going to do for his people.

I'll read from verse 68. Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David.

By the way, that's a covenant that gets made with David, which we'll pick up later. Well, not in the story of Genesis, but later on in the scriptures. As he said through his holy prophets of long ago, salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to show mercy to our fathers and to remember, note, his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham, to rescue us from the hand of our enemies and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

Is that not the same promise that God has made to Abraham? That has come true for the Jews. Okay, well, good for them. We're not Jewish. How do we enter? You know, when someone dies and you go to a will giving, I don't know what they call it, I've never been to one, a testament when they read it out.

Now, I've got some rich friends, thankfully, and their parents are getting old. You know, I can't just go to their, where they read the will and testament and say, yes, I'd also like some, and they'd be like, no, you're not the family.

[29 : 48] You know, where there's a, what do they say? Where there's a will, there's family. So how do you get it? Well, you either have to be biological family because then you inherit it legally or you can be adopted.

And that's what the Romans passage is all about. Let's end our time there. So just turn over to Romans chapter four. How do we get the promises that God made to Abraham? Paul, of course, is trying to explain how justification by faith works.

You'll remember that from Romans chapter one, the famous part in Romans. I'm not saying the gospel for it is the power of God to salvation for all who believe. In other words, all who have faith. And of course, Paul is trying to explain to non-Jews that they are as much inheritors of God's promises as Jews are.

Verse 16. Now the promise comes by faith, which we've seen. So faith is the key to receiving the promises of God so that it may be by grace. In other words, God's gift and not our works and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring.

Not only to those who are of the law, meaning the Jews, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written, I've made you a father of many nations.

[31 : 07] He is our father in the sight of God in whom he believed. The God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were. Do you see all those covenant things we're talking about?

God is able to call things that are not as though they were, as if they actually are. So when God makes the promises to us in the gospel of forgiveness of sins, of the Holy Spirit, of resurrection, by the way, of land, so that we come back and live here on planet Earth with his people, alive in our bodies, as you've been taught by Nick.

How do we know we're going to get them? We've got so far to go. Life is so difficult. No. God is able to make things that are not as if they were and to bring the dead back to life.

Abraham got it, verse 18. Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations. That means not just Jews. As was said to him, so shall your offspring be.

And without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead since he was about 100 years old. That's later on in the story. And 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 the power to do what he had promised.

[32 : 35] And that's why it was credited to him as righteousness. That promise, verse 24, is not only for him, but is written, is not written for him alone, but also for us.

To whom God will credit righteousness. For us who believe in him. Who raised Jesus from the dead. And so there's the promise. He's paid for our sins.

We've got nothing to worry about. God is our covenant king. He's our covenant shield. He will keep us through life and through death. And we can be sure that we will receive these promises along with Abraham and all God's people.

Amen. Amen.