

Genesis 15A (2011)

- As we reach Chapter 15 of Genesis, we find Abram wandering, worrying and wondering
 - He's still wandering in the land he has been given as a future inheritance
 - He moves from here to there and continues to grow under God's direction
 - His most recent wandering was actually a pursuit, as he chased the kings of the north out of the land
 - And rescued his nephew Lot
 - Through that experience, Abram showed strength in trusting in God
 - He gave God credit for the victory, thanking God in tithes
 - And he showed growing spiritual maturity
 - He had in his possession the wealth of a lifetime
 - He could have become king of Sodom, settling down in one location and living off the wealth he captured
 - Instead he turned it all back to the king of Sodom, preferring to rely on the inheritance that God has promised
 - But Abram's bold move to subdue the northern kings has also left him worried
 - He should naturally expect these defeated kings to make a return visit to the land to attack Abram
 - They may have been beaten once, but they greatly outnumber Abram
 - And it was only natural for Abram to let his fears get the better of him as he imagined the kings would return and defeat him
 - So as he sits and worries, God appears

Gen. 15:1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying,
 “Do not fear, Abram,
 I am a shield to you;
 Your reward shall be very great.”

- God tells Abram that he shouldn't fear, for the Lord will be Abram's shield
 - The kings will not return, they will not defeat Abram
 - In fact, Abram has nothing to fear for the Lord will not only protect Abram, He will also bless Abram as He has promised
 - So Abram's worrying is ended in another promise from God
 - But as Abram hears God's reassuring words, it draws his mind back to an earlier promise of God
 - Abram begins to wonder when God will fulfill that promise
 - The promises God made to Abram when he left Ur were to provide Abram both an inheritance and an heir
 - In fact, Abram was told he would have nations come from him
 - But Abram isn't getting any younger
 - And Sarai is long past child bearing years
 - So while Abram is confident in God's promise of an inheritance, he's starting to wonder whether the guarantee of an heir was still on the table
 - From the introduction of Abram in Chapter 12 until this moment, the focus of Moses' narrative has been on God's promise of the inheritance
 - But beginning with this chapter and continuing until the end of Abram's life, the story focuses on the other half of God's promises...the seed

Gen. 15:2 Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?”

Gen. 15:3 And Abram said, “Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.”

- This is such a classic response to God's timing
 - You've probably heard it said that God often takes longer to answer our prayers than we prefer, but His timing is always perfect
 - This sums up the problem with our perspective in trying to judge God's faithfulness
 - We know He is faithful to His word and yet, when too much time passes, we begin to doubt
 - Because we know that men often make promises that are not always kept
 - Because men change their minds, disappoint, forget

Promises are like the full moon, if they are not kept at once they diminish day by day.
~German Proverb

- But God does none of these things
 - His promises are no less assured even when many years pass by, because He does not change His mind and He is unaffected by the passage of time
- So as we start Genesis 15, one of the most important chapters in Scripture, it's important to remember that Abram is a man of faith and a man of doubts
 - He has faith God can and will deliver an inheritance in the land
 - And he is living by that faith as we saw at the end of Chapter 14
 - But he has some doubts about the promise of an heir
 - And God in His mercy goes an extra step to reassure Abram of His promise to provide a seed
- Abram makes his case before God
 - He points out that as it stands now, this wonderful inheritance God is promising to Abram will only go to one of his servants
 - Specifically, the chief servant in Abram's home was Eliezer of Damascus
 - Abram says this servant was born in his house

- According to custom of that day, the inheritance of the estate belonged to the oldest servant born in the house
 - But this is not the heir Abram desired
 - What good was a great inheritance if it could not be transferred to the family of Abram?
- This is the first time we see Abram engaged in a dialog with God
 - In fact, this is the first time Abram receives a vision of God
 - And during the vision, Abram approaches God boldly seeking answers
 - Notice how Abram makes his appeal?
 - He appeals to God's character and promise
 - Abram places God's own promises before Him and expects God to respond according to His character
 - This is how we should pray
 - Appealing for God to act according to His character and word
 - And those prayers will be answered in accordance with God's faithfulness
- So how does God respond?

Gen. 15:4 Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir."

Gen. 15:5 And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

- Back in Chapter 13, God spoke to Abram for the second time
 - There He told Abram that he would have descendants so numerous they would be like the dust of the earth
 - Literally innumerable
 - The word for descendants in Gen 13:16 is *zera*, which means seed
 - So God spoke specifically saying that Abram would have "seed"

- But somewhere along the way Abram began to doubt whether God meant Abram would have physical descendants
- So God repeats to Abram that Abram would have an heir from his own body
 - As God gave Abram this assurance, Abram must have been in his tent
 - It's evening, so God tells Abram to leave his tent and go outside
 - As Abram leaves the tent, God tells him to look up at the night sky
 - Though today most of us live in cities filled with lights
 - As a result, the sky is lit even at night, making it impossible to see stars most nights
 - But if you go camping or to a rural place and look up at the night sky, you see a carpet of stars
 - And galaxies and planets
 - I hope you've had that experience, because it makes it easier now to imagine Abram's perspective as he gazed into the vastness of the universe and heard God's words
 - God says to Abram count the stars, if you can count them
 - So shall your descendants be
 - Try to imagine your reaction to hearing such a promise
 - Imagine the glory of the universe on display before your eyes
 - Everywhere you look, you see stars
 - Even in the darkest places, as you stare, even more stars appear
 - There seems to be no end to them
 - And as you appreciate the impossibility of counting so many stars, you hear God say you will have no fewer descendants
 - Abram, the man who is already old
 - The man whose wife is past childbearing years
 - The man who has yet to see a single child come from him

- Nevertheless, God says this is your future
- How would you respond to hearing such a thing?
 - Do you ask a question?
 - There are certainly many questions that come to mind
 - How can such a thing happen?
 - Why hasn't it happened yet?
 - Will it be by Sarai or someone else?
 - How long before the first child comes?
 - Do you doubt the promise?
 - Do you consider the awesome expanse of the universe and reflect on your body's weakness and conclude it can't happen
 - That would have been the natural thing to do
 - Rational people make decisions on what to believe based on data, probabilities, likely outcomes, etc.
 - And the prospect of millions or even billions of descendants seems out of reason with the facts
- What does Abram do?

Gen. 15:6 Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

- Arguably, the most important verse in the OT and maybe in the Bible
 - Abram believed the Lord's promise to make Abram's descendants too numerous to count
 - And because Abram believed God's promise concerning this future event, God credited Abram's faith as righteousness
 - There is actually a play on words in Hebrew that we miss in most English versions
 - Abram was told to count the stars, but yet he couldn't because there were too many

- So God counted faith as righteousness
 - Because Abram couldn't do what God told him to do (count), yet still He trusted God to keep His word, therefore God did the work for Abram by counting faith as righteousness
- For the first time in Scripture we see belief, justification, and righteousness in a single statement
 - And this statement is foundational to all that we understand about how God is at work to save men from sin
 - Abram was following God, but we have already seen that Abram's walk with God was imperfect
 - He's made mistakes, and sin separates him from God
 - And Abram couldn't perform enough work to change the past or erase his debt before God
 - One day he might obey more than another, but the problem is the word "righteousness"
 - It means what is right, without error, perfect
 - Abram was far from perfect – as so if he was to be righteous, he must be perfect
 - But here we see God declaring that Abram was counted, or reckoned as righteous
 - Actually, we need to be very specific here because Abram was declared to BE righteous
 - Instead, God gave Abram righteousness on another basis
 - Abram was determined to be righteous on his own
 - He was considered righteous
 - On what basis was God willing to count Abram as righteous?
 - Because Abram believed God's word concerning His promise to Abram
 - God made a promise to Abram concerning His descendants
 - But it was an impossible promise

- Abram and Sarai hadn't produced a single child in decades of marriage
- But now Abram was supposed to believe that God would produce millions of descendants?
- Nevertheless, Abram took God's promise concerning the future and accepted it
 - He began to look forward to that future, to anticipate it, to see it as if it was already a present reality
 - This is the definition of faith, a belief in the future so sure and unwavering that we accept it as if it were history

[Heb. 11:1](#) Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.
[Heb. 11:2](#) For by it the men of old gained approval.

- According to Hebrews, the definition of saving faith involves both an object of faith and the content of faith
 - The object of faith is always the same: God's promises
 - The promises of God hold hope for the future
 - They ask us to accept something that seems impossible on their face
 - For Abram, the foolish promise he received was to have a multitude of descendants when he had yet to bear even one child naturally
 - The only way to accept such a promise is if you have a faith beyond even human reasoning
 - It must come from a supernatural source

[1Cor. 2:14](#) But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised.

- The content of the promise varies in keeping with God's revelation of His purposes
 - As history has moved forward from the day of Adam, God has progressively revealed more and more of His plan

- Every generation of faith is based on the content of a promise they have received
 - Adam received the promise that Woman would become the mother of a Seed to defeat the enemy
 - Noah believed a promise that a coming flood would destroy the earth
 - Abram received a promise of an inheritance and descendants
- The content changes, but the object doesn't
- Saving faith today follows the same pattern
 - We are saved today by grace, through faith
 - The faith we have today is based on a promise in God's word
 - Like Abram, our faith has an object and a content
 - The object of our faith is the same as those saints of old: we have faith in God's promises concerning a future
 - The content of our faith is a promise concerning the man Jesus of Nazareth

1John 5:9 If we receive the testimony of men, the testimony of God is greater; for the testimony of God is this, that He has testified concerning His Son.

1John 5:10 The one who believes in the Son of God has the testimony in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony that God has given concerning His Son.

1John 5:11 And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son.

1John 5:12 He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.

- The Father has testified concerning Jesus that He is the Son of God and is the One Who died for our sins
 - The Bible teaches the same salvation from the beginning of Genesis until the end of Revelation
- We cannot earn our righteousness but we can be credited as righteous by God Who is rich in mercy

- And He credits us with Christ's righteousness when we accept His promises
- Why did God extend His mercy on this basis and not some other?
 - Because demanding faith in God's promise is a specific remedy for the error Adam made in the garden
 - Adam sinned when he heard a promise from God but did not act in accordance with faith in that word
 - God promised that eating of the tree of Knowledge would bring death
 - But Adam didn't believe God's word and fell into sin
 - So today God has determined that righteousness will be restored on the basis of faith in a promise
 - Lack of faith in God's first promise brought spiritual death
 - So God decreed that a demonstration of faith in God's final promise in Christ is the requirement to bring eternal life
- Having seen Abram declared to be righteous by faith in v.6, we might ask if this is the moment that Abram actually became a believer
 - Two pieces of evidence tell us that this isn't true
 - First, the Hebrew construction of v.6 does not indicate consecutive action, but rather indicates a disjunctive action
 - In other words, v.6 doesn't come after v.5 in time
 - It was already in effect
 - We could write v.6 as, "Now, Abram had believed..."
 - Secondly, Hebrews tells us clearly that Abram was showing faith even as he departed Ur

Heb. 11:8 By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.

- So Abram is not being declared righteous in Chapter 15, but reaffirmed as a man following God in faith

- A man who believed God's promise and kept on believing it
- So why does Moses insert this statement here and not earlier?
 - I believe the answer is to clarify to the reader that Abram's questions concerning his descendants were not questions born out of a lack of faith
 - Rather, Abram was simply eager for a child, longing for the posterity God promised
 - We should take note of Abram's persistence as a man of faith
 - Specifically his willingness to press God for the fulfillment of His promises
 - As His children, we are told to approach the Father boldly
- And sometimes we will approach with questions or emotions that seem to suggest a lack of faith
 - But faith can coexist alongside many other natural emotions and responses to our circumstances
 - Faith and impatience, eager for God's promises to come to fruition
 - Faith and ignorance, not understanding God's purposes and desires in our circumstances
 - Faith and sorrow, when the world wears us down and brings us trials
 - Faith and doubt, when we can't see how God will fulfill His word
 - And God delights to reveal Himself in greater ways to His children who desire to see Him demonstrate His faithfulness