

January 23, 2022 - Dave Stough

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Preacher: Dave Stough

[0:00] We welcome you to the media ministry of Bethel Community Church. Knowing Jesus, making Jesus known. We're looking at the main points of the foundational truths of the faith embedded in the history of the Bible in the book of Genesis.

You may have heard it said that history is his story. Most of us have heard that. History is his story. I would add to that, biblically speaking, that history is God's story of redemption unfolding. So today we're going to look at a portion of that in Genesis 15. And it's called the Abrahamic Covenant. This is what scholars have named it.

We're going to take a good look at what it is and what it means to us practically today. Before we get into this text, I think a bit of review is in order to put us in context.

The first week in this study, Teddy did a very good job of showing us the difference between being in Christ and being in Adam. In Christ we have life.

[1:19] In Adam we have death and waiting judgment. While going over this, Teddy emphasized how important it is to believe in a literal Adam.

God's story. Not holding to the story as God tells it in his word. It is to fall to the wisdom of man, which always fails us.

And it actually calls the gospel into question itself. Last week, David went through how God dealt with sinful man before, during, and after the flood.

God gave a conscience to man in Genesis 3 to restrain evil. Then because of man's rebellion, the judgment of the flood came.

And after the flood, God instituted human government and made an unconditional promise to never again flood the earth. The rainbow is a sign of this covenant God made.

[2:23] The rainbow was created by God for that purpose. And when we see the rainbow, we should be reminded of that, not of what sinful man has tried to make it out today to be.

David also taught the difference between a conditional and an unconditional covenant, which is important for us today. Conditional covenants require both parties in the agreement to take an oath to perform their side of the agreement, like a modern day contract, minus all the legal jargon and loopholes.

Unconditional covenants depend only on one party fulfilling a promise. They are not conditioned on the performance of the one to whom the promise is made to.

Unconditional promises that God makes, they are enduring. They go on. Unconditional promise. Thus, God told Noah that he will never again destroy. As long as the earth remains, he will never again destroy everything that he's made through a flood.

Even though the heart of man is sinful from his childhood. No requirements put on mankind for that promise. Then we get up to Genesis 10 and 11, which I'll just mention a little bit.

[3:47] Genesis 10 and 11 show the dispersion of the nations. And in essence, God told man, God told Noah, just as he did Adam, Hey, now we're starting over.

You guys need to spread out. That's the way he made us. Spread out. He made us to work. He made us to spread out. He made us to get married if possible. And he made us to enjoy the Sabbath rest. All that was before the flood.

Before the fall. I'm sorry. Before the fall. Well, he restates some of that to Noah again. And man, in his pride and rebellion, wants to build a monument to himself. So God comes down and judges him by confounding the languages and they spread out.

But as we see these events unfold in Genesis 1 through 11, a few things start to become obvious to us. God chooses different ways and different time periods to restrain evil while he unfolds or reveals more of his plan of redemption to us.

Which was started actually in Genesis chapter 3 verse 15. Now history, God's story, in the first 11 chapters of Genesis, has this real wide-angle lens if you're looking at it that way.

[5:03] God talks about all men. He gave all men a conscience. He told all men to spread out. And all men to obey human government. Now, starting here at the end of chapter 11 and chapter 12 of Genesis, the beginning of chapter 12, we see that camera lens narrowing down very, very, very narrow just to one person.

He chooses one person to focus on. And that man is Abram, later to be called Abraham. God takes a man, an inordinate person like you and me, and makes, he has weaknesses like you and me, and he makes great promises that not only transform his life, but actually set the course of human history on a different path.

A path of redemption. So God starts in Genesis chapter 12 to implement that plan. And he does this by giving unconditional promises to Abram.

Now, as we see the story unfold in Genesis chapters 12 through 22, Abraham's the primary character. And we see him struggle, but we see him grow in faith.

But more importantly, we see God's unchanging character revealed in his unconditional promises. That's kind of where I'm hoping what we could see today.

[6:41] God's unchanging character revealed in his unconditional promises. Now, as you read the Abrahamic covenant in the context of redemptive history, it's like God is saying, if you just step back and look at it and think about it for a moment.

God, you know, gave everybody a conscience and he warned them of the flood. And then he brought human God. He's he's telling me, you guys got to quit doing this. I'm going to do things to help you restrain evil.

And then so it's like he goes from giving man rules to switching to giving man a promise.

OK, and promises, these kinds of things, these promises that God gives. The first one, I guess, really is in regards to the way I'm thinking for redemption.

These kind of promises lead men to repent and personally trust the Lord. Can you put up that first slide? We're going to just take a quick if we're working.

[7:47] I don't know. Oh, good. OK, good. So in in in Genesis 12, God told Abraham, look, I always say Abraham, Abraham, get them mixed up. So bear with me. But he's Abraham right now in Genesis 12.

OK, and God told him, go ahead and leave the country and leave your father's household because go to a place I'm going to show you.

And I'm going to make a great nation out of you. And he told this to fatherless Abraham. And here's what he said. I will make you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great and you shall be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you and curse him who curses you. And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. And then later in the chapter, verse seven, the Lord appeared to Abraham and said to your descendants, I will give this land.

He was in Shechem then. OK, so as time unfolds here, we get up to Genesis 15 and God formally ratifies these promises in a covenant.

[9:01] And if you have your Bible open or your phone, turn with me to Genesis 15 and let's read it here. After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision, saying, do not be afraid, Abraham.

I am your shield, your exceeding great reward. But Abraham said, Lord God, what will you give me? See, and I go childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus.

Then Abraham said, look, you have given me no offspring. Indeed, one born of my house is my heir. I'm going to pause for a second. Abraham was 75 years old when God told him that.

He's got to be, maybe Frank can clarify this for us better next week, but he's got to be somewhere in his 80s here. It's been some years. OK, so he's saying, God, what's going on?

And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, this one shall not be your heir, but the one who will come from your own body shall be your heir. Then he brought him outside and said, look now toward heaven and count the stars if you are able to count them.

[10:15] He said to him, so shall your descendants be. And he believed in the Lord and he accounted it to him for righteousness.

Then he said to him, I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to inherit it. And he said, Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?

So he said to him, bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, three-year-old ram, a turtle dove and a pigeon. Then he brought all these to him and cut them in two down the middle and placed each piece opposite the other.

But he did not cut the birds in two. And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abraham drove them away. Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him.

Then he said to Abraham, know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs and will serve them and they will afflict them four hundred years.

[11:24] And also know the nation whom they serve, I will judge.

Afterward, they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace.

He shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation, they shall return here for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.

And it came to pass when the sun went down and it was dark and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces.

On the same day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram saying to your descendants, I have given this land from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates.

That's all we'll read there. Seems at the beginning of the chapter, Abram was getting concerned that he would not be a great nation as God had told him back here in chapter 12.

[12:23] So they still did not have a son. Now Abraham acknowledges to the Lord that he's the one that opens the womb. And he says, we haven't conceived.

So I guess Eliezer, my chief servant, he's going to be my heir. Then the Lord tells him, no, he reminds him, your own flesh and blood will be your heir.

Don't we need reminding of God's promises? I think we do. Then he takes them out and shows him the stars. And he tells them, count them. So shall your descendants be, the ones from your own flesh and blood.

It's like he's saying, Abraham, just wait. Keep trusting me. Now have you ever laid out in the dark on a clear summer night and looked up at the sky?

I think I might have asked you guys this before, but it is amazing when you look there and you realize that the universe seems endless.

[13:26] It's definitely uncountable. You can't count the stars, right? Imagine being someone who's about 80 years old. And let me pause for a second when I say 80 years old.

Put that in context. Maybe at this time, 80 was not as old because it seems that people were still living longer than they do today. But nonetheless, imagine being pretty darn old.

Hope I didn't say that wrong. But as far as bearing children, having children, and then being told, hey, you're going to have as many descendants that come from you.

Like you can't count them. That's how many you're going to have. That would kind of make you, wow. Then the famous words that we New Testament believers love to hear are spoken for the first time in Scripture.

He believed the Lord and he credited it to him for righteousness. Now Abraham believed back in chapter 12. We know that because he heeded the call and he obeyed.

[14:33] But after God reassures him, his faith is recorded here because they're getting ready to do this covenant. And you can say there's one thing.

When God has an unconditional covenant with anybody, there's only one thing he requires, and that is faith. Abraham believed the Lord. That's recorded here before he entered into this covenant.

So then after that, it's like Abraham says, well, Lord, I believe you're going to do this son thing through my own loins and all that.

But how can I know I'm going to possess all this land? What are you going to do to show me? I don't get that kind of what he's saying. How can you reassure me of that? That's what he says in verse 8.

How can I know that I will take possession of it? So what God does at this point, this is where he starts doing this covenant.

[15:36] This is where the promises he gave are ratified into a formal covenant. So God instructs Abram, go ahead and get me a heifer, a ram, and a goat, all of them three years old.

And I don't know the meanings behind three years old and why he didn't cut the, there's two turtle dove and a pigeon he didn't cut, though. I don't know all that. One thing I do know, Abraham did what God said.

And then he went and he did, he actually went ahead. And God never said cut him in half. But he just went ahead and did it. Right? So it's like Abram knows, well, God's getting ready to do a covenant here.

And I'm going to get everything ready and get myself ready. So in ancient Eastern cultures, covenants would be made in a ceremony in which animals were killed, sliced in half, and the halves were separated, making an aisle, like a bloody aisle, that both parties that were in a covenant together would walk down this aisle.

They would walk down the aisle and swear to do what they agreed to do. Now that's a little bit different than signing a contract today, isn't it? Hebrews 6.16 sheds a little light on this.

[17:00] It says, An oath for a confirmation is for them an end to all dispute. They pledged their lives if they did not live up to their promise.

This was a blood covenant. And it's saying here that this is the final word. This is an end to all dispute. That's how serious this was. When the parties took this oath, they swore by someone greater than themselves that they would do this.

So you can see this is no slight thing. And this is a conditional covenant. Both people agree to do something here. So what happens here in this ceremony in Genesis 15?

Who walks down that aisle? God alone, symbolized by the smoking oven and the torch, which consumed the sacrifice.

He alone goes down the aisle. He puts Abram in a deep sleep. And he's saying, look, Abram, I'm the one that's going to perform this.

[18:08] All Abram could do is just watch. And all of God's glory went down that aisle. What do you think he felt like? One thing we know, the full weight of the responsibility for the Abrahamic covenant falls on God.

That's the picture we have here. Now, Abraham and his descendants have a part in the covenant, but the obligation to fulfill it rests on God alone.

This is how we know the covenant's unconditional. Now, there's really three main parts to the Abrahamic covenant. There's more in it, but these are the three that carry the weight that we look at for today's purposes.

First, there's descendants, and I mean physical descendants. And then it says, all the families of the earth shall be blessed through Abram. And then there's a very specific piece of land promised. Let's talk about the descendants for a second. The Jewish nation could have, should have, by human standards, been destroyed a long time ago.

[19:23] They're a very old nation. I think we're here about 4,000 B.C. No, I'm sorry. 2,000 B.C. 4,000 years ago. Two times in history, the nation of Israel was defeated, scattered, and left for no more.

Once in the Assyria, Babylon time, and then later on by Rome, A.D. 70. Still, to this day, millions of Abraham's descendants live on.

And some of them can even identify what tribe they came from. No other nation in the world has been dispersed like this, lose their land and their language, and then all of a sudden be reborn 2,000 years later.

That's an act of God. Never been done by any other nation. So why is he doing that? It's because God made a promise to Abraham and to his descendants about this land and about blessing all the nations of the earth through him.

So the Lord's purposes through Abraham are he's still working them out and he's not yet finished. This is an enduring covenant. Now, think about this for a second.

[20:53] All biblical prophecy concerning the nations that has yet to be fulfilled revolves around how those nations relate to the nation of Israel, both geographically and politically.

So there's things in the future God told that he would do two nations in response to how they would react to Israel. How could God keep his word if the Jewish nation was gone?

All right? Make sense? Why do you think so many times in history, Satan has stirred up the world to try to totally destroy the Jews?

But they live on because God is at work. Now, another thing he said in there, in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Spiritual descendants here. Physically speaking, Christ is a descendant of Abraham, right? Christ is now building his church with both Jew and non-Jew alike.

[22:05] When we are saved and placed into the church, we are a part of the body of Christ as a son of Abraham. Listen to what Galatians 3 says.

We are a part of Abraham's spiritual seed, as it's been said.

And then, if you think about it, on top of that, as far as being a blessing to all the families or nations of the earth, in the future, in the millennial kingdom, all the nations of the earth will come and Christ will be a blessing to them in that time when the earth is restored and renewed.

So I'll start it with this covenant. All right. The last part, the land. You got that second slide there? I found this has been, it was kind of an interesting study here for me.

We can get that second slide up. In the Genesis 15, there's two borders given that God promises to the descendants of Abraham. One of them is really clear.

[23:29] It's the Euphrates River. And you can actually back that out a little, please, or lower it down. Okay. You see the very top in blue, there's the word Euphrates above the Hamath up there.

That's the Euphrates River. Okay. And then you got the Great Sea, or that's the Mediterranean Sea in the left. And then down here, at the bottom left, it says the Brook of Egypt.

Most people understand that the River of Egypt is not the Nile he's talking about because it's a different kind of word. It's not like a big river, like the Great River Euphrates.

All right. And so this particular boundary, I'm going to get to the rest of the map in a second, but the particular boundary is more than likely right there at the bottom where it's white and it says Brook of Egypt.

That's the boundary that he told Abram. And the other one is the Euphrates River. So when you look at this map, this is the time of David.

[24:29] Okay. And if you see, you can see Judah and Israel there. Do you guys see? Like the Tannish part there? That's right there is basically where the 12 tribes under Joshua said they dispossessed the land from the inhabitants, the Canaanites and the other ites.

And they took that part of the land. Now there's an interesting verse in Joshua 21, 43. It says that Israel rested and it took all of the land that it was promised to.

The fathers were promised. I was like, whoa, that's a... And the covenant theologians point to that verse and say, look, God fulfilled that already with the land.

But like anytime you're reading Scripture, context, context is really important. And what I've grown to understand, you go back to Numbers chapter 30 and Moses tells them the land that they will be taking.

And it's just that right there, what they took. Okay. So in context, if you look at very specific boundaries here in the Abrahamic covenant, under the law, that was what was promised them.

[25:48] Numbers 30. Okay. So then there's another thing that sometimes people will say, but wait a minute, Israel expanded and it did get up to the Euphrates.

So can you go to the third slide? Okay. This is a little different.

This is actually that little green pointed section is Israel today. And you see where it says Solomon's kingdom, David and Solomon's time, the empire did expand. And see, it went up to the Euphrates. However, there's a very important thing to understand. First Kings chapter four points out to us that the Israelites did actually, the sons of Abraham did not actually possess that.

That, that they were under control. That section up there, Hamath, paid tribute to David and Solomon. But the Israelites actually, it tells you very clearly in first Kings chapter four, they did not possess that.

[26:55] Okay. So, can you go to the last slide? Okay. Thank you.

Now, can't say for sure, but when you read the text, it says from that river of Egypt down there in the bottom left to the Euphrates, you see how the Euphrates runs down to Ur?

Is that the, I don't know this for a fact, but you can say without a doubt that Israel, the sons of Abraham never possessed the land to the Euphrates. Okay. The point is here in all this, God is faithfully at work fulfilling all three parts of this covenant still.

This is an enduring covenant. Okay. I just thought that was good to note. Now, one, I'm done with the slides.

One of God's attributes is his immutability, meaning he doesn't change. He's always faithful to do what he says.

[28:09] Also, God is holy, so he cannot lie. God is also sovereign, therefore he has the power to make his will come to pass.

God is the only one that we can totally rely on to keep his word. God is the only one that we can do to keep his word. Now, sometimes scripture offers a commentary on itself.

When the Holy Spirit explains in one part of the Bible what happened in another part, it's definitely worth reading and listening. We have in Hebrews chapter 6, verses 13 through 18, a commentary that sheds further light on what happened here in Genesis 15.

It tells us more about why God made this covenant and how it affects us today. I'll read it.

For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, surely I will bless you and multiply you, and thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise.

[29:25] for people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for the confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise, that's you and me, the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath.

So that by two unchangeable things, the promise and the oath, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

Can you see in this passage how God is desiring? He's saying, I want you guys to count on me. Can you have faith?

He's like, he's just, it almost sounds like he's yearning. He wants to show us the unchangeable character or the unchangeableness of himself and his promises.

That's really the main point here today. We can count on him because of who he is. God wants us to know that we can stand on his promises because they're based on his characters.

[30:47] Now those attributes I said before, those are worth repeating again here. God is immutable, meaning he cannot change. That means he's perfectly reliable with what he says.

He's faithful. God is holy, so he cannot lie. God is sovereign, therefore he has the power to make his perfect will come to pass.

So let's be practical here. I kind of thought it would be a good way to end today by closing this with a practical application.

Someone tell me at the top of your head what is a specific promise God has given to us? If you want. Go ahead. Anybody? I will never leave you or thank you.

I will never leave you or you guys were going to say the same thing, huh? Very important one. Any others? Any others? Just off the top. So our salvation, like, so yeah, specific verse, John 3, 16, or, so, okay.

[32:02] So, I had this, I'm asking for a reason because I think this is where we as believers kind of lose track or lose the way to hold on to the

promises God has given.

There's a couple of things to keep in mind when we have these promises before us. What kind of promises were those two? Conditional or unconditional? Unconditional.

I will never leave you or forsake you. There's nothing there saying we've got to do anything for God to never and we know that salvation is totally of God because of what Christ did at the cross, right? But what about these two examples?

This is kind of where I'm talking where we go sometimes. What about these two promises in the book of Philippians? He who began a good work in you will be able, will be faithful to complete it until the day of Christ Jesus.

Conditional or unconditional? Unconditional. Unconditional. What about this one? My God shall supply all your needs according to his riches and glory in Christ Jesus.

[33:13] Hmm. We're talking about money now. Oh boy. Well, how do we know? Is it conditional? What do we do to find out?

Because that verse is quoted a lot and I think this is quoted a lot actually. Well, context. You always got to go back to the context. The context. That context is the Philippians were giving, they were generous and they were wanting to help Paul with the ministry and they gave sacrificially and Paul says back to them, you know, God's going to take care of you and you go to the bigger context of scripture.

We know that when it comes to finances, there's conditions on this. Seek ye first the kingdom of God and all his righteousness and all these things shall be added unto you, right?

So there's, so my first point is when we're being practical about the promises we reap, let's find out if this is conditional or unconditional. Okay? And if it's conditional, well, what's my part?

You know, just kind of think that through as you're praying. That's a very practical thing. And then other times, like we might, sometimes people will say, you know, I'm, you got to make sure it's actually a promise.

[34:29] I've heard people, you know, say, well, God promised me this ministry. Well, maybe the Lord's leading you there like he led Abraham, right?

But maybe that's not what it, we could say without compromise, we can say we know from scripture that God gifts people a certain way and he's established Ephesians 2.10, good works for us for the foundation of the world to walk in.

We can stand on those, right? We got that. But you got to let God, so make sure it's a real promise, number one, find out if it's conditional, unconditional. And then three, there's, what about this promise?

Do you have people that speak about this one much? You got to, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution, conditional or unconditional.

Well, if you're living godly, you're going to suffer, right? So that does sound conditional. However, you're going to suffer without living for the Lord in some ways, aren't you? Okay? So my point is, embrace the promises, maybe that are not so popular with you, as well as the ones you like a lot, because you're going to need them all.

[35:45] You're going to need, the whole point behind these promises is God wants us to see him in the middle of it all, why we go through this chaos and turmoil in our lives and in this crazy world we live in.

So, I have, there's this quote I read about promises and I'm like, I just have to read this to end out today.

We'll sing a song after I read this if you're ready to come up. It's actually two quotes that I put together and I'll just read it. God's promises are meant to move and motivate us.

They are meant to instill hope. They are meant to give us courage. They are meant to defeat feelings of loneliness, inability, and feelings of fear.

They are meant to give us peace when things and all around us are chaotic and confusing. God's promises are meant to blow your mind and settle your heart.

[36:55] They are his gifts of grace to you. In your heart of hearts you know you could have never earned the riches that he pours down on you.

His promises are meant to leave you in awe of him and in wonder at the glory of his grace. His promises are designed to be the way that you interpret and make sense of your life.

Ah, but you say there's a gap between the promise I know and its fulfillment. It isn't easy to wait. It demands persistence when common sense says give up. It says believe when there's no present evidence that you can see to back it up.

Faith is forged in this delay. Character is forged in delay. The forge is the gap between the promise and the fulfillment.

[38:00] As gold is purified and shaped in white hot heat of a forge so we and our faith are purified and shaped and waiting. So just like Abraham we can learn to wait and live with the expectation that God will do exactly what he promised.

I would say lastly remember he's present with you just stand. coming through close the door and coming and