The Call of Abraham and the Covenant

Bible Stories Anthology — Genesis 11:27–12:20; 15

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> **Romans 15:4** *For whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through patience and comfort of the scriptures might have hope.*

Why These Stories Were Written — Romans 15:4

Paul had just quoted a thousand-year-old psalm and applied it to Christ (Romans 15:3, quoting Psalm 69:9), and then he explained why he could: *whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning*. **Written aforetime** — the scriptures that already stood before this present age of grace opened at Pentecost: the record God gave through Moses, the prophets and the writings, along with the Gospel accounts of Christ's earthly ministry, which belong to that same time before Pentecost. (When Paul wrote these words, the scriptures he had in hand were the Hebrew scriptures; the Gospels had not yet been written down.) **Written for our learning** — "learning" is the Greek word for *teaching*, the very word rendered "doctrine" in 2 Timothy 3:16. These are not quaint tales; they are doctrine in narrative form. Adam, Ruth and David never knew us, but God did, and He had their lives recorded with us in mind — written *for* us, though not all of it written *to* us, which is why we read Israel's history as our instruction and not as our marching orders. **Through patience and comfort of the scriptures** — "patience" is literally *remaining under*, the staying power we gain from watching men and women stay under a load; "comfort" is a *calling alongside*, the strength God brings when He meets them there, which is why Paul calls Him "the God of patience and consolation" in the very next verse. **That we might have hope** — not a wish, but confident expectation: the return of Jesus Christ and everlasting life with Him. That is why these accounts exist, and it is how they should be read.

Get Thee Out

God's plan to bless the whole world began with a childless old man and four words: *Get thee out … unto a land that I will shew thee.*

He was seventy-five years old. His wife was barren. His family worshipped other gods. He lived in one of the great cities of the ancient world, and God asked him to leave it — his country, his relatives, his father's house — and set out for a land he had never seen, on nothing but God's word. He went.

Years later, still without a son, he stood outside his tent on a clear night while God told him to count the stars. *So shall thy seed be.* And the Bible records the sentence Paul would later build the gospel on: **"he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness."**

That same night God made a covenant with him in a strange and solemn way — animals cut in two, a deep sleep and a great darkness, and a smoking furnace and a burning lamp passing between the pieces. It was the way men of that day swore an oath with their lives. But only God passed through.

This is the story of how the promise of Eden — the Seed of the woman — was narrowed to one man and his family, and of the faith God counted as righteousness. **"Now it was not written for his sake alone,"** Paul says, **"but for us also"** (Romans 4:23-24).

The Setting

When. Some centuries after the Flood and not long after Babel. By the ages Genesis gives, Abram was born somewhere between 292 and 352 years after the Flood (Genesis 11:26 and 11:32, read with Acts 7:4, allow either figure). Either way, Shem, the son of Noah, was still alive when God called Abram.

Where. It began in **"Ur of the Chaldees"** (Genesis 11:28), in the land of the two rivers — Mesopotamia, the same country where the tower of Babel had been built. Ur is usually identified with the ruins of a great city in southern Iraq, excavated in the 1920s: a wealthy trading city with a massive temple-tower to the moon-god. The family moved north-west to **Haran**, on a branch of the Euphrates in what is now south-eastern Turkey, another centre of moon worship. From Haran Abram went south-west into **Canaan**, the land that would later be called Israel.

His family's religion. Abram did not come from a believing home. Joshua told Israel centuries later: **"Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods"** (Joshua 24:2). ("The flood" there means the river Euphrates.) Abram was called out of idolatry, not out of a Bible-reading family.

The administration. This is the **Patriarchal** administration, which ran from the Fall to the Law at Sinai. God dealt with men through the heads of families, speaking to them directly, and a man stood right with God then as always — by believing what God said. There was as yet no written law, no temple, no priesthood of Levi. But God would say of Abraham that he **"obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws"** (Genesis 26:5).

What had gone before. At Babel men had tried to make a name for themselves, and God scattered them. The very next thing Genesis does is trace the line of Shem — whose name means *name* — down ten generations to Abram. The builders said *let us*. God now says to Abram *I will*.

The Story, Told Faithfully

The Family of Terah

> **Genesis 11:27** *Now these are the generations of Terah: Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begat Lot.*
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> **Genesis 11:28** *And Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees.*
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> **Genesis 11:29** *And Abram and Nahor took them wives: the name of Abram's wife was Sarai; and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah, and the father of Iscah.*
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> **Genesis 11:30** *But Sarai was barren; she had no child.*
>
> **Genesis 11:31** *And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his son's son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there.*
>
> **Genesis 11:32** *And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years: and Terah died in Haran.*

"But Sarai was barren; she had no child." Genesis says it twice in one verse, in Hebrew fashion, so that no one misses it. Everything God is about to promise depends on a child, and the one woman through whom that child must come cannot have one. The story is built on an impossibility from the start. That is deliberate. What God was going to do, no one would be able to credit to human strength.

"And they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there." They set out for Canaan — and stopped halfway. Genesis gives no reason. The father, Terah, died in Haran.

When did God first speak? Stephen, in Acts, says God appeared to Abraham **"when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran"** (Acts 7:2) — that is, in Ur, before the move to Haran. That is why the King James says in Genesis 12:1, **"Now the LORD *had* said unto Abram."** The call came in Ur. The family's journey to Haran was the first step of obedience, and Abram's journey from Haran to Canaan completed it.

The Call and the Promise

> **Genesis 12:1** *Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee:*
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> **Genesis 12:2** *And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing:*
>
> **Genesis 12:3** *And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.*

"Get thee out." The Hebrew is *lekh lekha*, literally *go for yourself* or *go, you* — emphatic and personal. This was not a family migration led by Terah any longer. God was speaking to Abram alone.

"Of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house." Three things to leave, each closer than the last: the land, the clan, the household. A man in the ancient East drew his whole identity, safety and inheritance from those three. To leave them was to leave everything that told him who he was.

"Unto a land that I will shew thee." Not *a land I have shown you*. God did not give Abram a map. **"By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went"** (Hebrews 11:8).

The promise. Then God spoke seven great promises in a row:

1. **"I will make of thee a great nation"** — from a childless man.
2. **"I will bless thee."**
3. **"And make thy name great"** — what the builders of Babel tried to take, God gives.
4. **"And thou shalt be a blessing."**
5. **"And I will bless them that bless thee."**
6. **"And curse him that curseth thee."**
7. **"And in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed."**

Notice the two different words for "curse" in the sixth promise. *"Him that curseth thee"* is the Hebrew *qalal*, to treat lightly, to belittle, to hold in contempt. *"I will curse"* is *'arar*, the strong word for a solemn curse. Whoever treats Abram with contempt will find himself under God's own curse. God's protection of this man was total.

"In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." This is the heart of it. The families scattered at Babel (the same word, *mishpachoth*, used of the nations in Genesis 10) would all be blessed through this one man. Paul calls it the gospel in advance:

> **Galatians 3:8** *And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed.*

As this series understands it, the promise of Genesis 3:15 — the Seed of the woman who would crush the serpent's head — is now narrowed to one family line. The Seed would come through Abram.

The Journey

> **Genesis 12:4** *So Abram departed, as the LORD had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran.*
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> **Genesis 12:5** *And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came.*

"So Abram departed, as the LORD had spoken unto him." No argument is recorded, no conditions, no questions. He did what God said.

"And Lot went with him." Lot was his nephew, the son of his dead brother Haran. God had said *from thy kindred*, but Lot came along, and much of Abram's trouble in the next chapters comes through him. As this series understands it, Lot's presence is not presented as disobedience — Abram was his natural protector after his father's death — but it is not presented as part of God's plan either.

"The souls that they had gotten in Haran." The servants and dependants of a large household. Jewish tradition took these words to mean people Abram and Sarai had turned to the true God. That is tradition; the text says only that they had gotten them.

"And into the land of Canaan they came." This time the journey was finished. The family had stopped halfway once; Abram did not stop.

> **Genesis 12:6** *And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land.*
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> **Genesis 12:7** *And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him.*
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> **Genesis 12:8** *And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Beth-el, and pitched his tent, having Beth-el on the west, and Hai on the east: and there he builded an altar unto the LORD, and called upon the name of the LORD.*
>
> **Genesis 12:9** *And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south.*

"Unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh." Sichem is Shechem, in the heart of the land, between two mountains that would one day be the mountains of blessing and cursing (Deuteronomy 11:29). "The plain of Moreh" is better *the oak of Moreh*; the Hebrew *elon* is a great tree, an oak or terebinth. *Moreh* means "teacher," and a famous tree may well have been a place where oracles were given. If so, God met Abram at a Canaanite holy place and claimed it for Himself.

"And the Canaanite was then in the land." The land was not empty. It was full of other peoples, with their cities and their gods. God was promising Abram a land someone else was living in.

"And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land." The first time scripture says the LORD *appeared* to Abram in Canaan — and the first time the land itself is promised. Notice: *to thy seed*. Abram had no seed. Stephen points out that God **"gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet he promised that he would give it to him for a possession, and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child"** (Acts 7:5).

"And there builded he an altar unto the LORD." Everywhere Abram went, he did two things: he **pitched his tent** and he **builded an altar**. The tent said he was a stranger and a pilgrim, living in the land as though it were not yet his (Hebrews 11:9). The altar said whom he belonged to. An altar was a place of

sacrifice, and sacrifice, from the coats of skins in Eden and Abel's lamb onward, was the way a sinner came to God.

"And called upon the name of the LORD." At Babel men wanted a name for themselves. Abram called on *the LORD's* name.

"Going on still toward the south." The Negev, the dry southern country, where grazing is thin and rain uncertain. It set up the next test.

Down Into Egypt

> **Genesis 12:10** *And there was a famine in the land: and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was grievous in the land.*
>
> **Genesis 12:11** *And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon:*
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> **Genesis 12:12** *Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife: and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive.*
>
> **Genesis 12:13** *Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee.*

"And there was a famine in the land." The man who had just been promised the land found it could not feed him. Scripture does not say God told him to go to Egypt, and it does not say he asked. Egypt, watered by the Nile rather than by rain, was where people went in famine. Abram went down.

"Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister." This was a half-truth. Years later Abraham explained, **"she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife"** (Genesis 20:12). She was his half-sister. But the purpose of the words was to deceive, and Abram said it plainly: **"that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee."** He was afraid for his life, and he put his wife — the only woman through whom the promised seed could come — in danger to protect himself.

Scripture does not hide the failures of its heroes. It was written for our learning, and one of the things we learn is that the man of faith in Genesis 15 was the same man who was afraid in Genesis 12. Faith grows. God is patient with it while it does.

> **Genesis 12:14** *And it came to pass, that, when Abram was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair.*
>
> **Genesis 12:15** *The princes also of Pharaoh saw her, and commended her before Pharaoh: and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house.*
>
> **Genesis 12:16** *And he entreated Abram well for her sake: and he had sheep, and oxen, and he asses, and menservants, and maidservants, and she asses, and camels.*

"The woman was taken into Pharaoh's house." Sarai was brought into the royal household as a future wife. And Pharaoh paid for her, in the manner of the day: sheep, oxen, donkeys, servants and camels. Abram was growing rich on a lie.

> **Genesis 12:17** *And the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai Abram's wife.*
>
> **Genesis 12:18** *And Pharaoh called Abram, and said, What is this that thou hast done unto me? why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife?*

> **Genesis 12:19** *Why saidst thou, She is my sister? so I might have taken her to me to wife: now therefore behold thy wife, take her, and go thy way.*
>
> **Genesis 12:20** *And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him: and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had.*

"And the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai Abram's wife." God stepped in. Whatever the plagues were, their purpose is plain: they stopped Pharaoh before he took Sarai as his wife — **"so I might have taken her to me to wife,"** he says, which shows he had not yet done so. God guarded the promise even when Abram did not. The seed of the promise would come through Sarai, and no Pharaoh would stand in the way.

"What is this that thou hast done unto me?" A pagan king rebukes the man of God, and the man of God has nothing to say. The same question God asked Eve in the garden — **"What is this that thou hast done?"** (Genesis 3:13) — now comes from Pharaoh's lips. It is a humbling scene, and scripture tells it without softening.

"And they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had." Abram left Egypt richer than he came, but not honoured. And one of the things he brought back, it seems, was an Egyptian maid named Hagar (Genesis 16:1) — a detail that would cost the family dearly later.

Between the Two Chapters

Genesis 13 and 14 carry the story on. Abram went back to his altar near Bethel and **"called on the name of the LORD"** again (Genesis 13:4). His herdsmen and Lot's quarrelled, and Abram, the elder, gave the younger man first choice of the land. Lot chose the well-watered plain toward Sodom. Then God told Abram to look north, south, east and west: **"For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth"** (Genesis 13:15-16).

In Genesis 14, four kings from the east raided the plain and carried Lot away. Abram armed 318 trained servants, pursued them to the far north and rescued Lot and all the goods. On the way home he was met by **"Melchizedek king of Salem"** who **"brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God"** (Genesis 14:18). Melchizedek blessed Abram, and Abram **"gave him tithes of all"** (Genesis 14:20) — a tenth of the spoils of that battle, given once, freely and without any command. Then the king of Sodom offered Abram the goods, and Abram refused every thread of it: **"lest thou shouldest say, I have made Abram rich"** (Genesis 14:23).

That refusal matters for what comes next. Abram had just turned down a king's reward. He had just defeated four kings, and might expect them to come back for revenge.

"Fear Not, Abram"

> **Genesis 15:1** *After these things the word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.*

"After these things." After the battle, and after the refusal.

"The word of the LORD came unto Abram in a vision." This is the first time in the Bible that the phrase *the word of the LORD came* appears — a phrase that will introduce hundreds of prophetic messages afterward. It is also the first time scripture mentions a *vision*.

“Fear not, Abram.” The first “fear not” in the Bible. Abram had reason to be afraid: the four kings might return. God answered the fear before Abram spoke it.

“I am thy shield.” The Hebrew word for “shield” is *magen*. Only a few verses earlier Melchizedek had blessed **“the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand”** (Genesis 14:20) — and “delivered” there is *miggen*, from the same root. God had *shielded* Abram in the battle; now He promises to *be* his shield. Calling God a shield is a **metaphor**, a figure of speech in which one thing is said to *be* another. God does not merely give protection; He *is* the protection.

“And thy exceeding great reward.” Abram had refused Sodom’s reward. God said, *I am your reward*. Not what God gives, but God Himself.

“What Wilt Thou Give Me?”

> **Genesis 15:2** *And Abram said, Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus?*
>
> **Genesis 15:3** *And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir.*
>
> **Genesis 15:4** *And, behold, the word of the LORD came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir.*

“Lord GOD.” This is the first time the double name *Adonai YHWH* appears in the Bible — *Lord* (master) and *GOD* (the LORD’s own name, printed in capitals). Abram addressed God as the Master who owns him.

“What wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless?” Abram was honest with God. Close to ten years had passed since he came into Canaan (compare Genesis 16:3). What use was a reward, or a great name, or a land, if there was no son to inherit them?

“The steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus … one born in my house is mine heir.” Tablets found at Nuzi and other ancient Mesopotamian sites record a similar custom: a childless man could adopt a trusted servant as his heir, who would care for him in old age and inherit his property. Abram was doing the sensible thing under the law of his day.

“This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir.” “Bowels” in Hebrew idiom is the inward parts, the body; the heir would be Abram’s own son. God did not accept the sensible substitute. He meant exactly what He had said.

Tell the Stars

> **Genesis 15:5** *And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be.*

“He brought him forth abroad.” God took Abram outside the tent into the night.

“Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them.” “Tell” is the Hebrew *saphar*, which means to count and also to *recount*, to tell a story — as our English “tell” does both (a bank teller counts; a storyteller narrates). It is the same word Psalm 19:1 uses for the heavens that **“declare”** the glory of God. As this series understands it, God was not only giving Abram a sum he could not do; He was pointing him to the heavens that had been declaring His glory and His promise since creation.

“So shall thy seed be.” Countless, beyond numbering. Earlier God had said *as the dust of the earth* (Genesis 13:16); later He would say *as the stars … and as the sand* (Genesis 22:17). Some Bible students have seen in the stars and the dust a hint of two kinds of seed — a heavenly and an earthly. That is an inference; the text uses both simply as pictures of a number too great to count. Hebrews says it came true: **“Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable”** (Hebrews 11:12).

He Believed

> **Genesis 15:6** *And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.*

This is one of the most important sentences in the whole Bible.

“He believed.” The Hebrew is *he’emin*, from *’aman* — the root of our word *Amen*. It means to be firm, to lean one’s whole weight on something, to rely on it. It is the first time the word “believe” appears in scripture. Abram did not see a son; he saw stars. But he leaned his whole weight on God’s word.

“In the LORD.” Not in a feeling, not in a plan, not in his own ability. In the LORD who spoke.

“And he counted it to him for righteousness.” “Counted” is *chashab*, to reckon, to credit to an account. “Righteousness” is *tsedaqah*, being right with God. Abram did not become righteous by his own record — Genesis 12 had just shown what his record was. God reckoned him righteous, credited righteousness to his account, because he believed.

Paul makes this verse the foundation of the gospel of grace:

> **Romans 4:3** *For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.*

And he points out *when* it happened:

> **Romans 4:9** *Cometh this blessedness then upon the circumcision only, or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness.*
>
> **Romans 4:10** *How was it then reckoned? when he was in circumcision, or in uncircumcision? Not in circumcision, but in uncircumcision.*
>
> **Romans 4:11** *And he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed unto them also:*

Abram was counted righteous here, in Genesis 15, before Ishmael was born when he was eighty-six (Genesis 16:16), and so at least fourteen years before he was circumcised at ninety-nine (Genesis 17:24). Righteousness came by faith, not by circumcision, not by any rite, and not by the Law, which came centuries later. That is why Abraham is **“the father of all them that believe”** — Jew or Gentile.

James quotes the same verse and adds: **“and he was called the Friend of God”** (James 2:23; compare Isaiah 41:8).

Whereby Shall I Know?

> **Genesis 15:7** *And he said unto him, I am the LORD that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it.*

> **Genesis 15:8** *And he said, Lord GOD, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?*

"I am the LORD that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees." These words sound very like what God would later say at Sinai: *I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt* (Exodus 20:2). The God who called Abram out of Ur would call his descendants out of Egypt.

"Whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?" This is not unbelief. Abram had just believed God about the seed. He asked how he could know about the land — and God did not rebuke him. He answered with a covenant.

Cutting a Covenant

> **Genesis 15:9** *And he said unto him, Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.*
>
> **Genesis 15:10** *And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not.*
>
> **Genesis 15:11** *And when the fowls came down upon the carcases, Abram drove them away.*

The animals. A heifer, a she-goat and a ram, each three years old — mature, prime animals — and a turtledove and a young pigeon. They are exactly the kinds of animals the Law would later require for sacrifice.

"And divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another." Abram cut each large animal in two and laid the halves opposite each other, making a path between them. In Hebrew, to make a covenant is literally to *cut* a covenant (*karat berit*). This is what the phrase came from. Jeremiah shows what it meant:

> **Jeremiah 34:18** *And I will give the men that have transgressed my covenant, which have not performed the words of the covenant which they had made before me, when they cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof,*
>
> **Jeremiah 34:19** *The princes of Judah, and the princes of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, and the priests, and all the people of the land, which passed between the parts of the calf;*

The men of Jeremiah's day had **"cut the calf in twain, and passed between the parts thereof."** Walking between the pieces was an oath with one's life: *May I become like these animals if I break this covenant.* Ancient treaties from the surrounding nations describe the same ceremony.

"When the fowls came down upon the carcases, Abram drove them away." Birds of prey swooped on the carcasses, and Abram guarded the covenant pieces until God came. Some have seen in the birds a picture of the adversary trying to snatch away what God was doing. That is an application, not a statement of the text; but it is a fair lesson — the promise of God is sometimes attacked before it is sealed.

A Horror of Great Darkness

> **Genesis 15:12** *And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him.*
>
> **Genesis 15:13** *And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years;*

> **Genesis 15:14** *And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance.*
>
> **Genesis 15:15** *And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age.*
>
> **Genesis 15:16** *But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.*

"A deep sleep fell upon Abram." The Hebrew *tardemah* is the same word used when God caused a deep sleep to fall on Adam (Genesis 2:21). It is a sleep God sends. Abram would not walk between the pieces. He would be asleep.

"An horror of great darkness." Before the promise of the land came a prophecy of suffering.

"Thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years." Israel's slavery in Egypt, foretold centuries in advance. Exodus gives the length of the sojourn as four hundred and thirty years (Exodus 12:40), and Paul counts four hundred and thirty years from the promise to the Law (Galatians 3:17). Bible students reconcile the round figure of Genesis and Acts (Acts 7:6) with the exact figure of Exodus and Galatians in more than one way; what matters is that God knew and told the future long before it happened.

"That nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance." Exactly what happened at the Exodus (Exodus 12:35-36).

"Thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age." To "go to thy fathers" is an **idiom** for death — a gentle way of speaking of it, the figure called **euphemism**. Abram himself would not see the land possessed. He would die in peace, trusting God to keep His word after him.

"For the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full." Here is one of the most remarkable sentences in Genesis. God would not give Abram's seed the land until the wickedness of its inhabitants had reached its full measure. God does not judge a people before their time. He waited four hundred years for the Amorites. The conquest under Joshua, when it came, was not a whim; it was judgment long delayed — and in the meantime a Canaanite woman named Rahab believed and was spared (Joshua 2).

The Furnace and the Lamp

> **Genesis 15:17** *And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces.*
>
> **Genesis 15:18** *In the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates:*
>
> **Genesis 15:19** *The Kenites, and the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites,*
>
> **Genesis 15:20** *And the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the Rephaims,*
>
> **Genesis 15:21** *And the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.*

"A smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces." In the dark, fire moved between the halves of the animals. Smoke and fire are how God showed His presence again and again: at Sinai **"the smoke thereof ascended as the smoke of a furnace"** (Exodus 19:18), and He led Israel by a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. The furnace and the lamp represented God Himself.

And notice who walked between the pieces. **God did. Abram did not.** Abram was asleep. In a covenant ceremony both parties normally passed between the pieces, each taking the oath upon himself. Here

God alone took the oath. The covenant depended on God keeping His word, not on Abram keeping his. Hebrews explains it:

> **Hebrews 6:13** *For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he sware by himself,*
> **Hebrews 6:14** *Saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee.*
> **Hebrews 6:15** *And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise.*
> **Hebrews 6:16** *For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife.*
> **Hebrews 6:17** *Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath:*
> **Hebrews 6:18** *That by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us:*

"Because he could swear by no greater, he sware by himself." God staked His own name on the promise. That is why Paul could say that the Law, coming four hundred and thirty years later, **"cannot disannul"** the covenant **"that it should make the promise of none effect"** (Galatians 3:17).

"Unto thy seed have I given this land." Notice the tense: *have given*. The land was still full of Canaanites, and Abram still had no son, but God spoke as if it were already done. This is the figure called **heterosis of tense**, the past put for the future to show that the thing is certain. With God, a promise is as good as done.

"From the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates." The land's promised borders, and the ten peoples living in it. The promise of the land was made to Abram's seed, and scripture holds it to them: God **"hath remembered his covenant for ever … Which covenant he made with Abraham … Saying, Unto thee will I give the land of Canaan"** (Psalm 105:8-11).

Where the Story Leads

To the Messiah

The Seed. The promises were made to Abram and his seed — singular. Paul reads the word exactly:

> **Galatians 3:16** *Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ.*

The whole line of Abram's descendants was the channel; the Seed at the end of it was Christ. **"The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham"** (Matthew 1:1). Mary sang of the mercy God had spoken **"to Abraham, and to his seed for ever"** (Luke 1:55), and Zacharias praised Him for remembering **"The oath which he sware to our father Abraham"** (Luke 1:73).

Abraham saw His day. Jesus said, **"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad"** (John 8:56). As this series understands it, the stars Abram counted, the promise of a seed through whom all families would be blessed, and the covenant God swore by Himself were all pointing to the day of Christ.

The covenant God keeps alone. Only God walked between the pieces, taking the whole weight of the oath on Himself. As this series understands it, that is a picture of what God did in Christ. Man could not

keep his side. God kept both. Jesus Christ was delivered for our offences, raised for our justification, and exalted to the right hand of God — and in Him every promise of God is yes (2 Corinthians 1:20).

To the Grace Administration

Righteousness by believing. Genesis 15:6 is the heart of the gospel of grace. Paul writes:

> **Romans 4:23** *Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him;*
> **Romans 4:24** *But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead;*
> **Romans 4:25** *Who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.*

"Not for his sake alone … but for us also." That is Romans 15:4 in action — written aforetime, for our learning. Abram believed God's promise about a son and was counted righteous. We believe God's word that He raised Jesus our Lord from the dead and are counted righteous. It is the same God, the same principle, and the same free gift. **"For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God"** (Ephesians 2:8).

The blessing of Abraham on the Gentiles. The promise that **"in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed"** reaches its fullness in this administration:

> **Galatians 3:14** *That the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.*

Believing Gentiles, once **"strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world,"** are now **"made nigh by the blood of Christ"** (Ephesians 2:12-13). **"Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham"** (Galatians 3:7). **"And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise"** (Galatians 3:29).

Sealed by God's oath. Hebrews says the oath was given so **"that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation."** God's promise and God's oath — the believer's hope rests on both.

Pilgrims. Abram lived in tents and built altars, looking for **"a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God"** (Hebrews 11:10). Believers today live the same way: in the world, but looking for the return of Jesus Christ and the everlasting life He brings.

To the Topic of Faith

- **Faith begins with God's word.** Abram believed what God said, not what he felt or saw.
- **Faith obeys without the full map.** He went out, not knowing whither.
- **Faith can falter and grow.** The Abram of Egypt became the Abram of the stars.
- **Faith is honest with God.** "What wilt thou give me?" was not rebuked.
- **Faith leans its whole weight.** That is what *'aman* means.
- **Faith is counted as righteousness** — not earned, but credited.

The Main Takeaway

God called Abram out of an idolatrous family and a great city with a sevenfold promise — a nation, a name, a land, and a blessing for all the families of the earth — and when, childless and old, Abram looked at the stars and believed God, God counted it to him for righteousness and bound Himself alone by covenant oath to keep every word; that promise and that way of righteousness come to us today through the Seed, Jesus Christ.

- **God's call comes with God's promise.**
- **Obedience means going when God says go,** even without a map.
- **God protects His promise** even when His people fail.
- **God is Himself our shield and reward.**
- **Righteousness is reckoned to those who believe** — then and now.
- **God's covenant rests on God alone,** sworn by Himself.

For Our Learning — The People

- **Terah.** Abram's father; an idolater (Joshua 24:2); led the family from Ur to Haran and died there.
- **Abram (later Abraham).** Called by God in Ur; left for Canaan at seventy-five; counted righteous by faith; the father of all who believe. His name was changed to Abraham, "father of a multitude," in Genesis 17:5.
- **Sarai (later Sarah).** Abram's wife and half-sister; barren; the mother through whom the promised seed must come.
- **Nahor.** Abram's brother, who stayed in Mesopotamia.
- **Haran.** Abram's brother, who died in Ur; father of Lot.
- **Lot.** Abram's nephew, who went with him and later chose the plain of Sodom.
- **Pharaoh.** King of Egypt, who took Sarai into his house and was stopped by God.
- **Melchizedek.** King of Salem and priest of the most high God, who blessed Abram.
- **Eliezer of Damascus.** Abram's steward and, by custom, his heir before Isaac.
- **The Amorites.** Inhabitants of Canaan, whose iniquity was "not yet full."

For Our Learning — Customs and Orientalisms

- **Leaving country, kindred and father's house.** A man's safety and identity rested on all three; leaving them was a radical act.
- **Tents and altars.** A nomad's tent marked him a sojourner; an altar marked the God he served.
- **Sacred trees.** Great oaks or terebinths, like the oak of Moreh, were landmarks and often places of worship.
- **Wealth in flocks and servants.** A man's riches were his livestock, servants and camels.
- **A wife taken into a king's house.** Kings added women to their households by payment to the family.
- **Adopting a servant as heir.** Ancient Mesopotamian tablets record childless men making a trusted servant their heir.

- **Cutting a covenant.** Parties walked between the halves of slain animals, invoking the same fate on themselves if they broke their word.
- **Going to one's fathers.** Dying and being laid with one's ancestors.

For Our Learning — Figures of Speech

A figure of speech is a deliberate departure from the plain, ordinary way of saying something, used by God to add emphasis and feeling. These are the ones in this story:

- **Metaphor** — one thing said to be another. "I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward" (15:1).
- **Idiom** — an expression whose meaning comes from the language's own usage. "Cut a covenant," the Hebrew phrase behind "made a covenant" (15:18); "out of thine own bowels" (15:4): from your own body.
- **Euphemism** — a gentle phrase for something painful. "Thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace" (15:15): death.
- **Heterosis of tense** — one tense put for another. "Unto thy seed *have I given* this land" (15:18): the future spoken of as done.
- **Simile** — a comparison using "as." "I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth" (13:16).
- **Repetition** — "Sarai was barren; she had no child" (11:30): the same fact said twice for emphasis.
- **Paronomasia** — play on related words. *Magen*, "shield" (15:1), and *miggen*, "delivered" (14:20).

What the Bible Actually Says

- **God first called Abram in Ur,** before Haran (Acts 7:2; "the LORD *had* said," 12:1).
- **Abram's family served other gods** (Joshua 24:2).
- **God's promise had seven parts,** ending with a blessing on all the families of the earth.
- **Abram lied about Sarai in Egypt,** and God protected her anyway.
- **Abram gave Melchizedek a tenth of the spoils once,** freely, without a command.
- **Genesis 15:6 is the first use of "believe" in the Bible.**
- **Abram was counted righteous before he was circumcised** (Romans 4:10).
- **Only God passed between the pieces;** Abram was asleep.
- **God foretold the four hundred years of affliction** and the Exodus before Isaac was born.
- **God waited for the Amorites' iniquity to be full** before giving the land.
- **"Thy seed" is singular,** and Paul says it is Christ (Galatians 3:16).

God's Will and Intent

- **God intends to bless all the families of the earth.**
- **God calls people out** of what is familiar and false.
- **God counts righteous those who believe Him.**
- **God protects His promises,** even from His own people's failures.

- **God binds Himself by oath** so that our hope may be sure.
- **God is patient in judgment,** waiting until iniquity is full.
- **God sends the Seed,** Jesus Christ, in whom every promise is fulfilled.