



## Dreadful Darkness and Infinite Compassion

Genesis 15:7-21

<sup>7</sup> He also said to him, “I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.”

<sup>8</sup> But Abram said, “O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?”

<sup>9</sup> So the LORD said to him, “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.”

<sup>10</sup> Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. <sup>11</sup> Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away.

<sup>12</sup> As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. <sup>13</sup> Then the LORD said to him, “Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. <sup>14</sup> But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. <sup>15</sup> You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. <sup>16</sup> In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure.”

<sup>17</sup> When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. <sup>18</sup> On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates—<sup>19</sup> the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, <sup>20</sup> Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, <sup>21</sup> Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites.”

In the March 4<sup>th</sup> edition of the Broadcaster I read the following story:

A 19-year old Viroqua man who crashed his car full of stolen goods while going 130 mph on a La Crosse County highway has pleaded guilty to six of the 32 charges leveled against him for burglaries in Vernon, Juneau and Sauk counties.<sup>1</sup>

Like all true stories, what’s really important is the moral of the story—the life lesson we can draw from it. To me, the moral of this story was quite obvious—if you plan to carry stolen goods in your car, don’t drive 80 mph over the speed limit. Do one or the other, but not both at the same time! If the famous bank robbers, Bonnie and Clyde, had settled down and raised a family,

this might be the kind of story that they would tell to their children, but you and I know it is not the moral of the story.

Anyone can read a story or make guesses as to its meaning, but when it comes to the Bible, we ought not to jump to conclusions. With a story like we have in the second half of chapter fifteen, we need to be particularly careful about what conclusions we draw. The facts of this story are rather strange—we have the Lord speaking to Abram, Abram is told to cut up a bunch of animals and then he falls into a deep sleep. The Lord appears as a smoking firepot and passes between the dead animals and then we are told this whole thing was the establishing of a covenant between the lord and Abram. The events of this story are completely out of the realm of our daily, hum drum lives, but even more than that, this story is unique in all of Scripture. How do we understand this? How do we apply this? What if I dropped by Rod Lysne's place and I saw him standing in the middle of a field with two rows of dead farm animals chopped in half? And I said to him. "Rod, what in the world are you doing?" And Rod replied, "Well, I have a difficult decision to make so I am following Genesis fifteen and waiting for the Lord to appear and tell me what to do." Rightly or wrongly, some Christians use Gideon's story and put out fleeces for the Lord when they are trying to make a decision, but this is hardly a paradigm for decision making.

We can know two things for certain about this story—verse eighteen concludes the story by telling us that it was a covenant and verses seven and eight tell us how this got started. God renewed his promise to Abram of the Promised Land and Abram asked for a sign that the promise would be fulfilled—"*O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?*" What do you think—was Abram's question one of innocent faith looking for a sign or was it an example of unbelieving doubt? I mean, if the Lord makes you a promise, aren't we supposed to just believe it? The Jews in Jesus' day were looking for signs and Jesus condemned them saying, "A wicked and adulterous generation asks for a miraculous sign! But none will be given it except the sign of the prophet Jonah." (Matt 12:39)

There certainly is such a thing as asking for signs in a spirit of doubt and scoffing, but it does not appear that Abram's request was sinful or was asked in a spirit of doubt. The Lord did not condemn or punish Abram for asking for a sign, in fact, he showed his perfect grace by granting his request through the means of this unique sign. God had already made the gracious promise of giving Abram a great land and great name and a great nation and the Lord added to his grace by giving this sign to confirm his promise. Abram's question was asked in response to the promise of inheriting the land, but we need to understand that all of these promises stand or fall together. In other words, the Lord did not give this unique sign just so that Abram would be certain of the Promised Land. All of these promises stand or fall together. They are essentially a packaged deal.

What have we learned the last few weeks about what these promises represent? From the book of Romans we understand that Abram was justified by faith in the promises of God. A few weeks before that we looked at Galatians 3:16. *The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say "and to seeds," meaning many people, but "and to your seed," meaning one person, who is Christ.* Therefore, the ultimate fulfillment of these promises was Jesus Christ. The gospel was preached in advance to Abraham. Abram was promised a literal

nation and a literal land, but the reason that God chose Abram was so that he could build a nation through whom the Messiah would be born. All nations would be blessed through Abram because the Savior would arise out of that chosen nation. Therefore, the promises were about grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. So when the Lord gave this sign of the covenant, he was not just guaranteeing the immediate promises, but he was giving a guarantee of the promise of future grace.

This free offer of grace is further seen in the way the covenant was established. Some covenants are much like a contract. The Mosaic covenant was like this. If the people would obey the laws laid down by the Lord, they would receive great blessings. That was the agreement—the people obey and the Lord blesses, but if the people broke their part of the agreement and did not obey, then God would not only withhold blessings, he would bring judgment. This kind of a covenant is called a conditional covenant—the promise of blessings was conditioned upon obedience to the law. Of course God could not possibly break his end of the deal, but his people had the option of walking in obedience or rebellion.

In contrast to the conditional covenant of the Law, the covenant with Abram was an unconditional covenant. God did not require Abram to do anything at all. Furthermore, only one person walked between the animals that were cut in two. What Abram saw was a smoking firepot with a blazing torch on it, but fire and smoke was a way for the Lord to represent his presence. When the Lord appeared to Moses on the plains of Midian, he showed himself as a burning bush. When the Lord appeared to Moses on Mt Sinai, he showed himself like this: *Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the LORD descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently.* (Ex. 19:18) Fire and smoke were symbolic representations of the Lord, so when Abram saw the smoking firepot and blazing torch, this was the actual presence of the Lord walking between the animal carcasses. This was an unconditional covenant, it was a unilateral agreement—the fulfillment of the promise depended upon the Lord alone and not upon anything Abram would do or not do. This is fully consistent with what we learned in Romans 4. <sup>4</sup> *Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.* <sup>5</sup> *However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.*

Even though this was an unconditional covenant of promise, we see hints of the covenant of law throughout this story. First, we have the Lord's words in verse seven—*I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans.* The careful Bible reader will be reminded of Exodus 20:1. *I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.* Do you remember what comes immediately after this? This is the introductory verse to the Ten Commandments. The Lord would use this title for himself dozens more times. The larger point to catch here is that the Lord is sovereign over every word on this page. He alone called Abram out of Ur. He alone promised all of the blessings. He alone established the covenant with Abram. He alone rescued his chosen people from the land of slavery. This is all about the Lord taking all of the initiative in the redemption of his people.

We also see hints of the Mosaic Law in the animals chosen by God—a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove and a pigeon. All of these were animals used in the sacrificial system to bring about atonement for sin. The Lord was showing Abram that blood was necessary for the remission of

sin. As we learned two weeks ago—sin is a debt that must be paid. To be sure sins can be forgiven, but in order to be forgiven, sin must be paid for. There is always a price and the price was always blood of an innocent sacrifice. But even in Genesis this was not a new concept. Blood was spilled when the Lord clothed Adam and Eve with animal skins. Abel offered a better sacrifice than Cain because he shed the blood of innocent animals. When Noah emerged safely from the ark he immediately offered some of the clean animals on a new altar. Innocent blood was the only payment possible for sin.

I want to focus for a moment on the heifer. In Scripture, we read about lots of bulls, rams, goats and sheep that were slaughtered for atonement of sin. We literally read about tens of thousands of these animals, but the heifer is quite rare and a slightly different case. The primary use of a heifer in the sacrificial system was for purification for sin. Every animal was sacrificed in front of the altar inside the Tabernacle, but only the heifer was to be taken outside of the camp. The priest would slit the animal's throat and instead of chopping it up as every other animal was for various types of sacrifices, the heifer was kept intact and the entire animal was burned until it turned to ash. The ashes of the heifer were then added to water, a branch of a hyssop tree was dipped into the water mixed with ash and sprinkled upon the people to cleanse them from sin.

Some of you are thinking, "That's kind of gross! Besides, how can dirty water make you clean? If I was sprinkled with water mixed with burnt animal hide I would want to immediately take a shower. It doesn't make any sense." Once again, to our 21<sup>st</sup> century way of life, ashes and water make about as much sense as walking through the middle of chopped up animals, but it's not our personal experience that is important, but rather the significance established by God. If it wasn't in the Bible, I would never have went in the front of a church of 150 people and let someone else dunk me under the water for my baptism. If it wasn't in the Bible I certainly would not stand before you and eat tiny pieces of bread and drink grape juice from ridiculously small plastic cups. Just as baptism and the Lord's Supper have meaning infused into them, so even the ashes of a heifer mixed with water can have great importance. We must be careful not to place our judgment upon Scripture and say that something is not important just because it is strange or we don't understand it.

First, it was a picture of Jesus. Hebrews 13 reads: *The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.* (Heb 13:11-13) The heifer was sacrificed and burned outside the camp and is a picture of Jesus suffering outside the city.

Related to this, it is a picture of ongoing repentance and cleansing for sin. Do you remember what Psalm David wrote after his sin with Bathsheba? If you remember, he committed adultery with Bathsheba and then murdered her husband in battle and made it look like an accident. Can you imagine if one of our presidents had done such a thing? He would not only earn a life sentence in prison, he would go down as the most corrupt president in U.S. history. But after David did these horrific sins, he penned the words of Psalm 51, which begin, this way.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions.  
Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.

David's chief desire was to be washed of his sin and he knew that God alone could do such a thing. When you jump down to verse seven, we read, *Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow*. Do you see? When David asked to be washed and cleansed of his sin, he had in mind the ashes of the heifer. When he wrote "cleanse me with hyssop," he was thinking of Numbers 19 when the hyssop branch was dipped into water and ashes of a heifer. Therefore, contained within this covenant with Abram, we see two types of forgiveness—a one-time forgiveness that comes from atonement for sin, what Romans call justification, and an ongoing forgiveness from the sprinkling of the ashes of a heifer—a continual cleansing from sin.

Last Sunday I made a plea for anyone who has not yet called on the name of the Lord for salvation to do so. Members and regular attenders know that I do not give a five minute emotional appeal for salvation every week as some churches do. I assume that worship is for the believer and that most people here have heard the gospel and have turned to the Lord for salvation. But neither do I assume that on any given week 100% of the people sitting in church are born again. That would be simply foolish and naïve. Therefore, occasional, clear invitations to confess your sins and call on the name of the Lord are absolutely necessary.

Tomorrow I will be in Tomah all day sitting on an ordination council and listening to pastors defend their 30+ page theological papers. One of the men up for ordination tomorrow was saved when he was six years old kneeling beside his bed with his mom. But he also shares his wife's testimony in the paper and she was saved during college while she was taking communion. He writes,

It was a communion Sunday and the pastor made clear that the Lord's Supper was only for those who called Jesus their Savior and Lord. He offered the opportunity to choose to follow him that morning. While the elements were being passed, she made a decision to surrender to Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

Isn't that awesome? I have never heard of someone getting saved during communion. The point is that the Lord can touch a heart at any time he desires. As Jesus said to Nicodemus, *The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.* (John 3:8)

I trust that each one of you is in a saving relationship with Jesus Christ, and for those who are, we all need to practice ongoing repentance of sin, similar to the cleansing of the ashes of a heifer. We need to say along with David, *Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow*. The Lord must do this cleansing because if we attempt to wash ourselves, the guilt and sin will remain. And to what did David appeal when he asked for cleansing? He said, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions." David wanted mercy that was in direct proportion to God's unfailing love. What is the amount of God's unfailing love? How do you quantify such a thing? It is infinite. David's words were a poetic way of saying, "Lord I know you have infinite mercy and that is what I need right now. Lord, I know you have infinite compassion and my heart cries out for that."

For most of us, this is not a cry for salvation because we have already been saved, but a cry of repentance for cleansing from guilt and shame. Do you know why most people don't practice repentance very often? Because we simply don't believe that God possess infinite mercy and infinite compassion, or if he does, he is stingy about it and not likely to give it to us. The other mistake we make in regard to our sin is not seeing God as a thick and dreadful darkness. In other words, we fail to see him in his perfect holiness. We fail to fear and tremble before a holy God. The Lord came to Abram in a "thick and dreadful darkness." If God is not holy then there is no such thing as sin. If we fail to see God in this way, then we will inevitably be callous and indifferent about our sin. When our sin is laid bare before the Lord we *should* experience genuine shame and guilt, but on the other hand, if we hold on to that shame and guilt, we fail to see God's infinite compassion. The Lord comes to us in a dreadful darkness but also infinite compassion. He simply waits for us to come and ask him to wash us and cleanse us from our shame and guilt.

One last thing we should note about this promise is verse thirteen. *Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years."* Now hang on! Just what kind of a promise is this anyway? The "promise" of inheritance of the land and all that comes with it also comes with a "promise" of four hundred years of slavery. Notice the guarantee attached to this—"know for certain..." The promise will be born but it will only come about by the birth pains of suffering. Why is it that we love the wonderful promises of God but we are quick to run away from pain and suffering? Actually, we all know the answer to that question—we are all a bit wimpy. We are conditioned by life to gravitate toward comfort and away from conflict. And if that was not bad enough, we have pastors and Bible teachers who seem to feed into this by emphasizing the good in the Bible and avoiding the bad.

It reminds me of Jeremiah 29:11. *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.* For many of you this is in the top ten favorite verses and I am sure that for at least one person it is their all-time favorite. But are you aware of the context of this verse? This was spoken by the Lord to the southern nation of Judah just after they were carried into exile in Babylon. This was spoken in the midst of the most severe judgments in all of O.T. history. The people were facing a 70 year exile in a hostile, foreign country ruled by the megalomaniac, King Nebuchadnezzar. They were banished from their homeland—the Promised Land—and were serving out a 70-year sentence of exile. It was into that context that the Lord spoke these gracious words. *For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.* They were facing a dreadful darkness yet the Lord came to them with infinite compassion. God doesn't always promise to deliver us from dreadful darkness but he always promises to bring infinite compassion into the darkness.

And like the Jews who were carried away into exile in Babylon, we often create our own darkness. Pain and suffering come our way due to the natural consequences of our sin, or else God brings a Fatherly discipline to us to correct us and bring us back. But other times the Lord asks us to intentionally walk into dark places of pain and suffering so that the kingdom of God can expand. Did you notice the invitation in Hebrews 13? *And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the*

*camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.* This is not an invitation to salvation but to suffering as part and parcel of our salvation. To be in God's presence is to suffer with his Son. An invitation to follow Jesus is an invitation to join him in disgrace and suffering. But as long as he is there with us, it is enough. This is dreadful darkness and infinite compassion. It is more than enough.

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<sup>1</sup> *Whittaker pleads guilty to six burglary charges*, Vernon County Broadcaster by Chris Hubbuch, Lee Newspapers, March 4, 2010.

<sup>a</sup> Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 24:7

<sup>2</sup> Michael Edwin Collison, Associate Pastor of Student Ministries, ACEFC, Appleton, WI, Ordination Thesis, December 2009.