

# **“Trusting God When It Hurts” Part #2 - Is God Trustworthy?**

**Genesis 15:1-21**

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on January 8, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

## **INTRODUCTION**

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Genesis 15.
- In C.S. Lewis' class series, *The Chronicles of Narnia* children from our world enter a magical land that was created by a Great Lion named Aslan. In the book, *The Silver Chair* a girl named Jill Pole is searching for a stream to quench her thirst.
  - She finds the stream but is paralyzed when she sees Aslan sitting beside it. He is sitting right next to the water, still as a statue but terribly alive. She waits for a long time for him to go away but he will not.
- Finally Aslan speaks, ***“If you are thirsty you may drink”... “Are you not thirsty?” said the Lion. “I am dying of thirst,” said Jill. “Then drink,” said the Lion. “May I – could I – would you mind going away while I do?” said Jill.***
  - ***The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And just as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her frantic. “Will you promise not to – do anything to me, if I come?” “I make no promise,” said the Lion.***
- ***Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer. “Do you eat girls?” she said. “I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,” said the Lion. It didn't say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.***
  - ***“I daren't come and drink,” said Jill. “Then you will die of thirst,” said the Lion. “Oh dear!” said Jill, coming another step nearer. “I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.”***
    - ***“There is no other stream,” said the Lion.***
- Jill's question is a good one. Can the Lion be trusted? She is invited to drink His water but can she trust the Lion? He is unpredictable – he swallows up cities and realms. He is not tame – he swallows up kings and emperors. He invites her in and yet can he be trusted?
  - If we are honest, we echo the same thoughts about God. More specifically we want to know if God can be trusted when life is filled with trials and sorrow.
- Many of us are experiencing the reality of what Paul speaks about in Romans 8 when he says, ***“we groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”*** As Christians we have hope but we still groan.
  - That word “groaning” is both personal and intense, an agony so deep that it cannot be put into words. And so often we are groaning – groaning in the death of beloved friends and family, groaning in loss that comes from miscarriages, groaning in the frailty of our bodies as sickness and disease damage old and young, groaning in the battle against the sins which so easily destroy us, groaning in the difficulties of marriage, and groaning under the weight of anxiety and worry as we consider our future.
    - What I love about the Bible is that it never downplays our groaning.
- But there is a unique temptation that we face when we groan. You see, in times of trial the devil seeks to use our pain to make us question if we can really trust God. If He is God why doesn't he stop the pain I am feeling? Can I really trust that His plan for my life is wise? Can I really trust that He cares for me when I am groaning like this?

- Once we start doubting God’s trustworthiness we begin to pull away from Him. We start looking for comfort or help or assurance in other places.
  - We look for other streams. But there are no other streams.
- Today, by God’s grace, I want to strengthen you. I want to infuse hope into our groaning. By God’s grace, I want to accomplish this by doing two things:
  - First, I want to *display* the utter trustworthiness of God’s character.
  - Second, I want to *demonstrate* his trustworthiness in a few specific areas of groaning and call us to trust.

## GOD’S PROMISE TO ABRAM

- So let’s begin by **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** displaying the trustworthiness of God from Genesis 15.
  - In the first eight verses of this chapter God makes a huge promise to Abram. Despite the fact that he and his wife Sarah have never been able to have kids, and despite the fact that he is 75 and she is 65, God promises that they will have a son. Moreover, this son will give Abram descendants more numerous than the stars in the sky. In fact God will change his name to “Abraham”, which means, “father of many.”
    - Verse 6 tells us that Abram trusts God and believes this promise. Then in verse 7 God makes another promise. He says this son will become a great nation and this nation will inherit the land Abram is standing on. This is rather shocking because it currently belonged to the Amorite nation – a fearsome people who practiced child sacrifice.
- Look at verse 8. **READ 8** - *But he said, “O LORD God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?”*
  - Abram wants some solid assurance that God will come through and God gives it. God displays how trustworthy He is. Are you ready to see the utter trustworthiness of God? It is revealed in verses 9-21.
- **READ 9-11** – *He said to him, “Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.*
  - Not quite what you would expect is it? What a scene. Abram drags a heifer out into the field. He not only kills it but then he saws it in two and then drags the one half a few feet away from the first. Then he does the same with a goat and a ram. What a gruesome scene. There is a pathway of blood-soaked ground with animal carcasses acting like decorating stones on either side. To add even more, he kills a dove and a pigeon and lines them up with the other animal remains. Bizarre. How many of you have ever sawed a few animals in half and used them to create a blood soaked pathway?
    - All of this is very strange to our ears but it wasn’t strange in ancient times at all. Notice that God did not have to even tell Abram what to do with the animals. Abram knew because it was common knowledge for thousands of years – this is how a person makes what is called a “covenant.”

## WHAT IS A COVENANT?

- Well, what is a covenant? Let’s take a few minutes to answer that question and then come back to the passage.
  - **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** A covenant is first and foremost a bond or binding agreement made between two parties. Even when a person is utterly trustworthy to do what they say, there are times in life when people need more than our bare word. Heather does not need a vow from me that I will be home at a certain hour but when I asked her to marry me, she wanted more from me than a simple affirmation that I would be her husband. In our wedding ceremony we made vows; oaths sworn before God. These were given before we entrusted our entire selves to each other. A wedding ceremony is a covenant.

- So a covenant is first a bond or a binding agreement between two parties.
- Secondly, **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** in ancient times this bond or binding agreement is a bond of life and death. You might call it ‘a bond in blood.’
  - The phrase **“to make a covenant”** literally means, **“to cut a covenant.”** It is a reference to blood, meaning that once it is made, it cannot be reversed without the spilling of blood.
    - So a common way to make a covenantal oath was to cut an animal in half. Then both parties would walk between the animals. What they were saying by this action was, **“If I should break the covenant that we have made I call down the same curse upon my head as is upon this animal. May I be killed and hewn in two.”**
      - It is what is called ‘a self-maledictory oath.’ Malediction means “curse.” It is calling a curse down on yourself if you break the oath.
- In Jeremiah 34 we see a vivid example of a broken covenant. The people had made a covenant with God at Sinai to free their slaves every seven years. But they broke the covenant and kept them in bondage.
  - So God says in verse 18-20, **“The men who have violated my covenant and have not fulfilled the terms of the covenant they have made before me, I will treat like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces...I will hand them over to their enemies...their dead bodies will become food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.”**
    - We also have many examples from archeology of this blood-bond. An 8<sup>th</sup> century BC Assyrian text includes the following: **“This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati’lu. If Mati’lu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off...the head of Mati’lu be torn off, and his sons.”**<sup>1</sup>
- A covenant is deadly serious. It is a binding bond between two parties that cannot be broken lest blood be spilled. Now are you starting to see what is going to happen here?
  - Remember God has given his word but Abram wants assurance that God will be faithful to make His promise come to pass. God in his grace desires to reassure Abram and all his people of his character – that when he promises something he is faithful to make it all come to pass.

## GOD’S SELF-MALEDICTORY OATH

- Alright, that is enough on covenants. Let’s come back to the passage. **READ 12** - **As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him.**
  - This is a supernatural darkness. In the midst of it God speaks and tells Abram again that he will indeed give the land to his descendants. And then in verses 17-21 we come to the pinnacle of the story. Now we come to some of the most astounding verses in the entire Bible. These verses send chills down my spine.
    - **READ 17-21** – **When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”**
- Alright we need to ask two questions about this verse. First, what is this fire imagery all about?
  - In the scriptures fire represents the presence of God Himself. To Moses, he came in the burning bush and the very ground was considered holy. He was the pillar of smoke and fire that led the Israelites out of Egypt. Mount Sinai was **“covered in smoke, because the LORD descended in fire”** (Ex 19:18). It was the fire of the Lord that fell and burned up Elijah’s water-soaked sacrifice and at Pentecost the sign of God’s presence was that tongues of fire rested over the heads of those in the Upper Room.

<sup>1</sup> Cited in Bruce Waltke, “Genesis”, 245.

- So this is the presence of God moving between the hewn animals.
- Second, what is the significance of God's presence moving through the animals?
  - To understand the significance of it let me quiz you with another question. ***“What is different about this covenant compared to how I described covenants to you earlier?”*** The answer to this is the heart of everything today.
    - Well it is the same on many levels isn't it? There are two parties involved here. There is a promise given. There are the animals that are hewn in half. There is blood. It all seems the same and yet there is one area where it differs from others. What is it?
  - Answer: Only God walks the blood-soaked pathway. Abram does not walk the pathway. Do you see the significance?
- This is astounding. God, the Almighty ruler and Creator of heaven and earth takes upon himself a self-maledictory oath.
  - In other words, he is saying, ***“Abram, you want assurance that I am faithful to keep my promises, then here you go. Abram, if I should break this covenant with you. If you should find me to be unfaithful in keeping my word, then may I the Lord of the universe be hewn to pieces. May I be slaughtered. May I be cursed. May I the God of all be destroyed. May I fall into destruction. May God be de-Goded.”***
- In other words, ***“When I make a promise I will fulfill it. You can bank everything on my trustworthiness.”*** And all of this points forward to an even great covenant that God made, not just with Abraham but with all whom Jesus came to die for. Do you remember on the night Jesus was betrayed he took the cup and said, ***“This cup is the new covenant in my blood”?***
  - On the cross, Jesus' body was torn and his blood was shed. God made a new covenant with His people. It is an eternal covenant. And it is on the basis of the blood of Jesus that we can fully trust the promises of God. For as II Corinthians 1 says, ***“For no matter how many promises God has made they are ‘yes’ in Christ.”***
    - On the basis of Jesus' spilt blood we can trust that all God's promises will come true. For if God did not spare his only Son, but gave him up for us all, that is – if God gave up what is dearest to him, will he not then graciously give us all things?

## DEMONSTRATING THE TRUSTWORTHINESS OF GOD

- All of this is meant to show us the trustworthiness of God. He put himself on the line, supremely through the death of His Son to show us this. Now we are ready to **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** demonstrate the trustworthiness of God.
  - Let's take four areas where we groan and apply the trustworthy promises of God to them. May this infuse hope into your groaning.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** First, let's demonstrate God's trustworthiness when we groan under the feeling that God has left us. What you need is to recall the promises that say that God will not and cannot ever forsake his blood-bought children.
  - This may be a shock to some of you but there are things that God cannot do. God cannot lie. God cannot sin and listen, God cannot forsake his blood-bought children.
- I will go even further. What I am about to say may seem irreverent but I will contend that it is not. If God were to forsake his children he would deserve to be slaughtered and hewn in two. That is not irreverent to say because God has said it. He is the one who put forth His own Son to make a new covenant with us. He is the one who says he will never break that covenant.
  - That is why we can cling to the promises of God. Promises like:
    - Hebrews 13:5 - ***“Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.”***
    - Romans 8:38-39 – ***“For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”***

- If God breaks these promises, he is unfaithful to the new covenant, which means he is unfaithful to himself and therefore is under curse as a covenant breaker. But God has made these promises and his character is at stake in keeping them. Oh, rest your soul on the fact that God is faithful to his promise that He will never let anything separate you from Himself.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** Second, let's demonstrate God's trustworthiness when we groan under certain sins that keep deceiving us. This is the moment when your heart is so heavy with guilt and you groan feeling that God cannot accept you. In such a moment, you also must remember something God cannot do. He cannot hold confessed sin against you.
  - I John 1:9 – ***“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness”***
    - So there is the promise. Do you feel unworthy to come to God? God says he is faithful to forgive confessed sin. Therefore if God does not forgive confessed sin, He is an unfaithful covenant breaker who deserves to be slaughtered and hewn in two. Oh rest in the faithfulness of God and find freedom from your groaning.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** Third, let's demonstrate God's trustworthiness when we groan with anxiety about future needs. We worry about finances, where you will live, what job you will have. What promises has God given to you to enable you to trust Him with your future?
  - In Matthew 5 Jesus says, ***“Do not worry.”*** Why? Because Jesus says, ***“If God takes so much time to care for the birds of the air will he not care much more for you who are worth more?”*** Jesus says don't worry and run after these things rather he makes this promise: ***“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.”***
    - That is another promise that rests on the character of God. He puts his character on the line saying trust me with your future.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** Fourth, let's demonstrate God's trustworthiness when we groan in bereavement.
  - There are many promises for you but one of the biggest for the Christian is the future hope we have in Christ. For as Paul writes in I Thessalonians 4, we do not grieve like the rest of people who have no hope. We have hope in our groaning. Why? ***“We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him. According to the Lord's own word, we tell you that we who are still alive, who are left till the coming of the Lord, will certainly not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage each other with these words.***
    - When Jesus returns he will bring your loved ones with Him. Bank it all on the trustworthiness of God. That when he says He will return with your loved ones, He will do it.

## CONCLUSION

- Do you see how all this works? When we groan we are tempted to turn away from God, to look for another stream. We do this because we are not sure God is trustworthy. But as G.K. Chesterton put it, **(SHOW SLIDE 10) *“When belief in God becomes difficult, the tendency is to turn away from Him; but, in heaven's name, to what?”*** There is no other stream.
  - This morning you have seen a God who has gone to ultimate degree in sacrificing his own Son to prove how trustworthy He actually is. He has given many promises to enable our trust.
- Now the question you are faced with is the same one that faced Abram, ***“Will you trust God?”***
  - Will you trust him with your future? Will you run to him in your groaning? Will you first trust him with your soul? He has given His Son for you. He has made a covenant and he never breaks his covenant.