



Lesson 5 | A Faith that Questions God

Genesis 15:1-6

Sometimes we fear honest questions. Perhaps a three-year-old might need to be told, “You don’t need to ask questions; you just need to obey.” With adults, however, that should almost never be the case. When we read the Bible carefully, we will see that God does not fear our questions. Instead, God invites our questions and God answers our questions. Many people think that questioning God is a sign of doubt, and it can be. But real faith also asks questions, and in Genesis 15 we see Abram demonstrating his faith by asking God hard questions.

Why do we sometimes fear questions?

After the tremendous faith that Abram has shown in God, both in taking on the kings from Mesopotamia and interacting well with the kings from Canaan, God appears to Abram to reconfirm His promises. This is now the third time God has confirmed to Abram His plan to bless the patriarch (cf Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-17). But although God keeps saying this will happen, Abram wrestles with these promises because it sure doesn’t *seem* like they’re going to happen. Abram was 75 when he left Haran (cf Genesis 12:4), and after some time wandering around in the desert, he isn’t any closer to having a son. And so Abram does the unthinkable – he asks God how this would be possible.

Genesis 15 covers two related topics: Abram and God’s promise of descendants¹ (15:1-6) and Abram and God’s promise of land (15:7-21). In both sections, we find Abram asking God questions about how God planned to do what He had said He would do. Yet what we need to realize is that these questions are an outgrowth of Abram’s faith, not a lack of faith. Sometimes faith means wrestling through questions and doubts with God. This week will cover the first issue addressed

¹ The KJV has “seed” throughout this chapter, which is a literal translation of the Hebrew *zera’*, a Hebrew word which can refer either to seeds from plants or to someone’s children. Most modern translations opt for “descendants” or “offspring” (NASB, NKJV, ESV, NIV, CSB) since the meaning of “children” for the English word “seed” is considered archaic in modern English usage. This lesson will alternate between the two.

in this chapter (the question of Abram's seed), and next week we will cover the second issue (the question of Abram's land).

God's Promise to Abram (15:1)

Abram had just conquered an army. We might think that the next time we find Abram he is confident, self-assured, and perhaps even a bit arrogant. That does not seem to be the case. Instead, we read that God comes to Abram and tells him not to be afraid.

Based on what God says to Abram, what might Abram have been afraid of?

Sometimes spiritual victories can be spiritually draining. Often after big victories we feel our weakest and perhaps even fearful of what the future might hold. Here we see Abram after an incredible victory of faith in a place where he is afraid. We need God after spiritual failures, but we also need God in our spiritual successes as well. It is during this time of fear and perhaps even discouragement that God comes to Abram in a vision, comforting and encouraging him with promises about the future.

God Promises to Protect Abram

Abram has just attacked an army, or to be more precise, several armies. It's doubtful that every single soldier was killed, and so who knows what will happen in a year or two. Maybe Chedorlaomer will be back with another army, and what if Abram doesn't have the element of surprise this time? God lets Abram know that He will protect him, and Abram need not fear the retaliation of man.

What passages assure the modern-day believer of God's protection?

How might the promise of God's protection of His people be a comfort to us today?

God Promises to Reward Abram

We read here: "I *am* thy shield, *and* thy exceeding great reward." Notice, however, that the word "and" is italicized in the KJV, meaning that it was added by the translators. The verse could more literally translated as "I shield to you, your reward very much." Obviously, this needs to be smoothed out, and the two ways you could do that are by translating this "I *am* your shield, *and* your very great reward" or "I *am* your shield, your reward *is* very great." The KJV, NIV, and NKJV go with the first, but the second translation is followed by the ESV, NASB, and CSB, as well as ancient translations like the Greek Septuagint and the Latin vulgate. The second translation also

works better with the Hebrew text² and makes more sense in the context. It's possible that by giving up the wealth offered by Sodom, Abram was beginning to worry if he had made a mistake. God promises Abram that whatever he has given up will be more than generously rewarded.

How might we be tempted to think we have missed out because we follow God?

What promises does God have about reward for modern-day believers?

Abram's Questions (15:2-3)

Abram responds by pointing out a problem with God's seemingly straightforward promise. He does not have any seed, so how could God's promise of reward be any good to him? If God blesses him greatly, in the end he will die and someone else will receive all those blessings. In the ancient mindset, it was through one's children that a lineage was continued. Abram finally says what has been bothering him for awhile: "But God, I don't have anyone to pass on my family name." In the second verse, we see Abram double down on his question. In fact, he goes from the more indirect "I don't have a child," to the more direct, "You haven't given me a child." Much like Abram's later bargaining with God over Sodom, Abram starts hesitatingly, but then eventually says what he is really thinking.

We have stated earlier that these questions are being driven by faith, rather than doubt. But how can we know that? What is the difference between honestly wrestling with God in faith and asking questions from a heart of doubt?

God's Answer (15:4-5)

God does not rebuke Abram or berate him for asking silly questions. Rather, He takes these questions seriously and answers them. God responds to Abram's questions specifically by clarifying that the nation that was coming would be through the physical descendants of Abram himself and not through a servant, and then by assuring Abram that he would have eventually have many descendants.

² "First, the italicized "am" indicates a verbless clause in Hebrew, and the italicized "and" denotes a word not in the original text. The KJV construes the original Hebrew as one verbless clause with "I" as subject and "thy shield" and "thy exceeding great reward" as the predicate. This is not a likely or plausible reading of the Hebrew text. The fact that "and" is not in the text signals a new, separate verbless clause in which "your reward" is subject and "very great" is the predicate. The lack of a clause connector (asyndeton) is not unusual in such a sequence of verbless clauses." Gentry, Peter J., and Stephen J. Wellum. 2018. *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*. Second Edition. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, page 285.

God Clarifies the Promise (15:4)

God had told Abram at the beginning that through him all the nations would be blessed, and that there would be a great nation that would come from him. He had told Abram that his seed would be as the dust of the earth. But it is here that God makes it incredibly clear that it is through Abram's own physical descendant that these promises will come true.

Why might Abram have wondered if God would provide an heir?

Perhaps Abram thought he might have misunderstood God. It's possible he was wondering if God had forgotten, or if God was planning on using Abram's servant rather than a son of Abram. Maybe he thought he messed things up with Egypt and now he would not have a son. Abram might just have been at a low point in his faith. Whatever the reason, God in His grace and mercy come to Abram with a fresh promise, calling for a fresh response of faith.

Why did God tell Abram what He planned to do even though He had already done so twice? What does this teach us about God's character?

God Confirms His Promise (15:5)

God furthermore gives a promise that Abram's descendants will be so numerous they cannot be counted. This stands in stark contrast to what Abram is actually experiencing. An old man, without children, is told that he will have seed to numerous to count. But God is doubling down here. He wants Abram to know He has heard his question and that God has an answer. Abram will not just have one son, but from that son will come a great and mighty nation.

Why would Abram believe God even though he was so old and still didn't have a son?

Why should we believe God when we look at life and don't see how God could fulfill His promises?

Abram's Faith (15:6)

So how did Abram respond? He had asked God how the promise would be fulfilled, and God promised that it would be through Abram's own son, not his servant. He then told Abram his children would be as many as the stars of heaven. But that is all He told him, and He gave no more specifics. Would the promises of God be enough for Abram, or would he demand more evidence first?

It is here that we read that Abram believed God, and that God counted or reckoned that as righteousness for him. This verse becomes critically important for the New Testament, being picked up and interpreted by both Paul and James.

Paul and Abraham's Justification (Romans 4:1-4; 9-12; 18-25)

The key to understanding the difference between Paul and James is to realize that the two men are facing different problems. In Romans, Paul is addressing Jewish legalism – the belief that in order to be truly saved Gentiles had to keep the law of Moses, including circumcision. To counter this teaching, Paul points to the order of the story in Abraham. God sees Abraham as righteous, then later Abraham is given circumcision as a sign of the covenant with God, not as the basis. The point that Paul is making is that you do not need to do good things in order to be saved. Abraham was declared righteous before he was circumcised, so circumcision must not be necessary for salvation. We are saved based on faith, and faith alone!

How can Paul's application of this verse – that we are saved apart from works – be a help to people today?

What happens if we miss this important truth or get it wrong?

James and Abraham's Justification (James 2:21-23)

Many people are familiar with the argument Paul makes – Abraham was declared righteous on the basis of faith alone. But many people either don't know about James or are slightly uncomfortable with what he says – that faith is made perfect through works. Yet we know that Scripture is consistent, and if Paul and James sat down and talked both would be in agreement about what the gospel is and the place of faith and works. Why then does it sound on the surface like they disagreed?

The answer to this seeming problem is that the situation James is facing is a different situation than the one Paul is facing. James is concerned about Jewish Christians (cf James 1:1) who claim to be followers of God (cf James 2:19) but then don't live any different as a result of their supposed "faith." So James argues that the Scripture declaring Abraham righteous (Genesis 15:6) is "fulfilled" by the account of him offering Isaac (Genesis 22). In other words, Abraham's faith was later demonstrated to be true faith, or "perfected" as James would put it in 2:22. James is not saying that you have to do good works to be saved. He agrees that salvation is by faith. But he is quick to point out that saving faith will show up in someone's life, or it's not real faith.

How might James's application of this verse – that true faith will show up in the way we live – be a challenge to people today?

What happens if we miss this important truth or get it wrong?