

God's Covenant With Abram (1)

Genesis 15

Promise and Sign

After the remarkable victory over the Kings of the East, and after the liberation of Lot, at which occasion Abram had demonstrated the power of his faith, a depression had set in. This becomes apparent from the LORD's words: "Fear not Abram, I am your shield, your reward shall be very great."

The first of these words could indicate that Abram feared that the defeated kings would return with a new army, to take revenge in a terrible way. Was he considering ways and means to withstand a potential attack? It is possible and it could be concluded from the encouraging words: that the LORD was his shield to protect him.

But we are also getting the impression that Abram was down-hearted and concerned over his lonely, childless life with a future that to him seemed to be hidden in clouds. It has happened more often that periods of high spiritual activity were followed by deep depressions. Heights and depths are close neighbours (Moses, Elijah, Peter). But the LORD, in His comforting speaking, completed the sentence: "your reward shall be very great."

There was no detail given about this reward. Hence Abram's question: "O Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, for I continue childless and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram continued: "Thou hast given me no offspring and a slave born in my house will be my heir."

In his depressed mood Abram was clearly concerned about the continuation of his generation. Twice God had promised him offspring, but it had not come and now he had already lived about ten years in Canaan and he was getting on in age. He was distressed that a slave from Damascus would receive the whole inheritance and that his own name would be no more.

This was not unknown to the LORD, but as a Father He allows a child to express his troubles. We may even say that the LORD, by mentioning a reward, has provoked this complaint, to give occasion to a new revelation.

Now God's words are very positive: "This man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir." The phrase "your own son" clearly indicates and strongly expresses that it shall not be a stranger, but a son of his own procreation.

To that the LORD added a sign, namely, the starry sky, which in the east appears to be fuller than in the west. Thus would be his offspring, immeasurable in multitude.

And Abram believed the LORD. He trusted His word, which as a new creation, caused the fire of his faith to flame up clearly and strongly again. And the Holy Spirit in His revelation adds the observation: "And He reckoned it to him as righteousness." That means that Abram in his faith was reckoned as righteous, one who stands right before God. Later in the discourse of Romans 4:1-5 this would become the very important evidence for the fact that man is not righteous before God on account of his good works, but only on account of his faith in God and His word.

Paul furthermore points to the fact that this preceded the circumcision so that Abram is not the father of Jews only, but also of the Gentiles, who, without having received the sacrament, have come to the faith.

It was probably the next morning that the LORD continued His revelation: "I am the LORD Who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess." And again God caused His servant to say what was in his heart. This time it was not regarding descendants but

about the second part of the promise which the LORD had already given and repeated: about the land. There is no mention now of a complaint. The revelation of the previous night ended with the triumph of the faith in God, so much that the Scriptures witness: Abram believed in the LORD.

A new complaint when the LORD continues His revelation the next morning is out of the question.

The words: “and he believed the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness” dominate the preceding as well as the following parts. And when we read that Abram asked for a sign, by which he shall know that he will possess the land, then that is not the expression of doubt renewed, but rather faith which has showed itself to be so weak, searching for a strong foundation. Even a believer like Abram could not carry on without signs. And don't we face the same? Why did we receive the signs of baptism and the Lord's Supper? Was it not to have them to lean on as crutches to steady our uncertain steps? Abram did receive a sign from God in His mercy. And did God not cause this request to be, so that he could continue with His revelation?

Abram had to bring a three year old heifer, a three-year-old goat, a three year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon. Note that the animals mentioned here can later be found back in Israel's laws on offerings. The age of three years indicates the youthful strength of life. No mention is made of what Abram has to do with them. Everything had to be prepared for the making of a covenant. Probably that custom was then already practiced, which continued its strong existence to the end of the era of the Kings (Jeremiah 34:18). For the Oriental, blood was the cement of the Covenant. Abram slaughtered the animals except the pigeons which, because they were so small, were kept whole. But the other animals were cut into two pieces each and then Abram placed the parts and the pigeons in two rows opposite each other. In between there was blood. To swear to the mutual obligations, the parties to a covenant used to go through that blood alley between the parts. And woe unto him who would break a covenant so undertaken; it would require his own blood.

After these steps Abram waited because it had not been revealed to him what would happen further. However, he could not passively await; it became a bothersome activity, because birds of prey came down to feast on the carcasses. Abram was kept busy till dusk chasing them away to prevent the violation of that which was intended for a sacrifice to the LORD. Then, when the sun was about to go down, God sent a deep sleep on Abram. And in this sleep, which completely isolated him from his surroundings, so that he became completely perceptive, a dreadful darkness fell upon him. God laid His hand on His friend and maintained the distance between Him, the Holy One, and His trembling creature.

In 15:13-16 we find what the LORD then said. Abram's descendants will become sojourners in a strange land and be oppressed for four hundred years and afterwards come out with possessions, when God will judge the oppressors. Abram himself will go in peace and be buried in a good old age. Only the fourth generation will return to Canaan, because the Amorites living there had not made full the measure of their iniquity. In that postponement also God showed His patience and His justice.

In the meantime the sun had gone down and great darkness had come over the world. We will have to assume that Abram had become awake. And then he saw the appearance of God, namely, a round baking oven above which heavy smoke came up as from a chimney and inside the glow of a flaming torch. Light in the smoke—the light of the fire as a sign of His holiness and the smoke as the veil for it, because man cannot bear the full revelation of God's holiness. And in that sign the LORD went over the path between the parts. Not Abram also, but only the LORD Who made His covenant and gave His promise. The promise was that the descendants would receive all that land from the border river of Egypt (the Arish) unto the Euphrates, the land of ten nations which are mentioned by name. We may also look upon the number ten as the indication of completeness.

So that was the making of the Covenant as sign to confirm the promise.

In 15:13-16 we find three elements: the way of *humiliation*, the way of *redemption* through judgments, and the *motivation* for the postponement. It contained foretelling and explaining of the future things. Remarkably we

see here what actually was already revealed in paradise in Genesis 3:15. It will be through suffering to glory, with Israel as well as in the historical development later with the Lord Christ (Luke:24:26). And this also is the design for all His believers who will through many tribulations enter into the Kingdom of God (Acts 14:22).

We shall not overlook the matter of the four hundred years (15:13), which have been years of oppression for Abram's descendants. Later it will become clear that this has special importance for the proper understanding of the continuation of the history in Genesis. Now the question is: From when are those years to be counted? Exodus 12:40 counts from the time of Jacob's arrival in Egypt: the time which the Israelites had dwelled in Egypt was 430 years. Galatians 3:17, however, counts from the promise to Abram, "the law which came 430 years afterward"—(that is two good months after the exodus). That promise is measured here from Genesis 12:2, 3 in which the ensuing promises are included (in Galatians 3:16 promises). It is apparent that in Galatians 3:17 Paul has made use of the then-commonly-used Greek translation (the so-called Septuagint), in which Exodus 12:40 is translated as follows: "The time which the Israelites and their fathers had dwelled in the land of Canaan and in Egypt, was 435 years. So it is also in the Samaritan translation, except that there the number 430 is used. Paul stuck to the 430 years.

If we ask how these differences can be explained, the possibility has been considered that the Septuagint has followed a manuscript which has since been lost. In any case, Paul, who as a Scriptural scholar was certainly aware of this matter and able to make these computations himself, did adhere to the Greek translation except for the number of years. And we accept his word as inspired. The same is also true of Exodus 12:40, but the question may be raised whether this has been passed on without imperfection. In our opinion Galatians 3:17 is so clear that we shall stick to that. It appears then that there have been 215 years from the promise till Jacob's arrival in Egypt and 215 years of staying in Egypt until the exodus. We do not agree with the objection that this stay was too short to afford the growth to so numerous a people. We have to keep in mind that the growth of their population in Egypt was a miracle which escapes our statistical measurements (Exodus 1 :7, 12, 20).

The following accounting then results: From Abram's arrival in Canaan to Isaac's birth is 25 years (12:4; 21:5). From Isaac's birth to the birth of Jacob is 60 years (26:26). From Jacob's birth to his arrival in Egypt is 130 years (47:9). Total 215 years. When Genesis 15:13 makes mention of 400 years of oppression for Abram's descendants, then, according to Galatians 4:29, this must be counted from the time that Ishmael as the first opened the line of oppressors when Isaac was weaned, which in those days would be at age 5. Thus the oppression began 25 plus 5, that is 30 years after Abram's arrival in Canaan. When we deduct those from the 430 years, we are left with the 400 of 15:13.

Concerning the *four generations* of Genesis 15:16 we will have to keep in mind the meaning of that word "generation." According to Genesis 50:22 Joseph lived 110 years and according to 41:46 he was 30 when he became Pharaoh's top man, while Jacob arrived in Egypt 9 years later, so that Joseph lived after this still 110 - 30 - 9, that is 71 years to see the third "generation" of Ephraim, his son. There is a difference in meaning of this word: generation. When the Patriarch or the head of the generation died, it was held that a new generation would arise. Thus in this way of counting, the first generation went from Abram to Jacob after Isaac's death, the second went from Jacob till the death of Joseph and his brothers (Exodus 1:6), the third from Kohath (46:11) who was already born in Canaan and lived to age 133 (Exodus 6:17), in which time Amram, the father of Moses, was born. That, then, was the fourth generation, the one of Amram and Moses, which departed from Egypt. In other words: each "generation" included a *number* of generations.

Finally it should be noted that the promise preceded the sign. First the Word, then the confirmation. Thus the sign was in full harmony with the promise. Not only did the promise show light in the smoke, so did the sign. In the history of Abram's offspring there was the radiating light of a glorious future, but it was clouded up by the darkening smoke of humiliation and suffering, so that many no longer saw the glory of the promise. And has it not always been like this? Even Christ's own road went to His own glory via the Cross.

Questions

1. (Re: verse 6) Can we say that Abram was justified before God because of his faith?
2. May we also ask for a sign of some sort when we lose heart?
3. With regard to, for example, the growth of the Church, is the sign of the starry sky still valid for us?
4. (Re: verse 11) What was the significance of the birds of prey for Abram?
5. (Re: verse 14) May we conclude that the oppression of Abram's descendants was a judgment from God, based on the statement "I will bring judgment on the nation which they serve"?
6. (Re: verse 17) Is there a similarity between this appearance of God and the one at the making of the Covenant at Horeb (Exodus 19:18)?
7. When God enshrouded Himself in dark smoke (compare Exodus 33:18-23) what explanation is there then that this did not happen when the Son of God, Himself also the eternal God, was on earth?
8. Why could Abram not go through between the parts, just like the LORD?
9. What era of history saw the fulfilment of verse 18?