

Genesis

A Test of Faith

History of the Early World	Patriarchs	Israel in Egypt	Conquest of Canaan	Judges	United Kingdom	Divided Kingdom Exile	Exile	Return	Maccabean Revolt	Jesus the Messiah	Church
----------------------------	------------	-----------------	--------------------	--------	----------------	-----------------------	-------	--------	------------------	-------------------	--------



Introduction

As Abram settled into the land of Canaan, we saw that he was a man of growing trust in God and virtue. After making amends for his behavior in Egypt, he made a fresh start with God. He showed himself to be dedicated to his family, even to the point of risking his life to save his nephew, Lot. He received God's blessing from Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High, who made an offering of bread and wine. He was one who recognized that God is worthy of human generosity. In a test of his allegiance, he refused the offer of great wealth in order to live only in God's debt. He appeared to be a man of solid faith.

From the time Abram left Haran to the time of the events recorded in chapter fourteen of Genesis, probably about ten years had gone by. In chapter fifteen, we will see what effect waiting can have on a man's faith. The promise of descendants and a great nation was wonderful, but it had to begin with at least one heir. Although Abram counts himself as God's man, what is he to make of the time it is taking for the really big event to happen? How does his faith hold up under that kind of test?

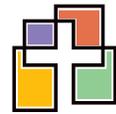
In this lesson, we hear a conversation that Abram has with God about this test. It will prove to us that our intuition about the intimacy and love that God and Abram shared was on target. This exchange is the first recorded prayer in Scripture—not, of course, the first time a man has prayed but our first record of a prayer. We already know Abram as a man of faith and obedience; surely he spoke regularly with God. The prayer recorded in Genesis 15 begins the long history of written accounts of what men of faith say to God, especially when they are tested, and what God answers back. We are all ears.

Read the following passage all the way through, at least once. Then answer the questions on the text that follow.

Genesis 15

1 After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." 2 But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what wilt thou give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "Behold, thou hast given me no offspring; and a slave born in my house will be my heir." 4 And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir." 5 And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." 6 And he believed the LORD; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness. 7 And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." 8 But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" 9 He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." 10 And he brought him all these, cut them in two, and laid each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. 11 And when birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away. 12 As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram; and lo, a dread and great darkness fell upon him. 13 Then the LORD





Genesis 15 (cont.)

said to Abram, "Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years; 14 but I will bring judgment on the nation which they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. 15 As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. 16 And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." 17 When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. 18 On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, 19 the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, 20 the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, 21 the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites."



Questions on the Text

Abram Questions God Read Genesis 15:1-6

1. "After these things" in vs. 1 refers to the events in chapter 14, when Abram rescued Lot, gave a tithe to Melchizedek, and turned down an offer of booty from the king of Sodom. Why do you suppose that "after these things," God would appear in a vision to Abram, encouraging him not to be afraid and speaking about a very great reward?
2. Abram begins a conversation with God, the first recorded prayer in Scripture. What veiled charge does Abram make against God? What indications are there that this is a problem that has been on Abram's mind for awhile?
3. How does God address Abram's doubt? Why do you suppose God responded this way?
4. Try to picture Abram gazing at the stars. What do you think was going through his mind? Describe the scene that you see as accurately as you can.
5. In vs. 6, we see that Abram "believed the Lord," and God "reckoned" or "counted" it as righteousness in Abram. In other words, Abram's trust in the promises of God made him righteous, or "pleasing," in God's sight. Catholics speak of this as being in a state of grace. This was not the first time Abram had put his trust in God. Why do you suppose this act was especially pleasing to God at this point in Abram's life?
6. Observing this exchange between God and Abram, what would you say are some characteristics of biblical prayer?

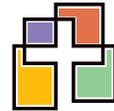
The Example of Abram in the New Testament Read Romans 4:1-4, 9-12

[The episode in Genesis 15 of Abram's faith making him righteous is one that is frequently recalled in the New Testament, especially by St. Paul. At the time of the Protestant Reformation, its interpretation became a source of sharp disagreement between Protestants and Catholics. It is worth pausing a moment to consider this. About the passage in Romans, note the following:



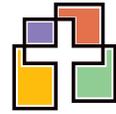
Questions on the Text (cont.)

The Example of Abram in the New Testament (cont.)



Catholic Scripture Study

- a. The word "justified" in vs. 2 means being in a state of grace, cleansed from sin and pleasing in God's sight.
 - b. St. Paul's reference to "works" (vs. 2) is not a reference to the "good works" that we do from faith and gratitude to God. The term as he uses it here refers to "the works" or "rules" that made the Jews a nation separate from all others, beginning with circumcision and including the dietary and liturgical laws, as well as the Ten Commandments, that God gave to Israel through Moses. Many Jews of St. Paul's day believed that simply by virtue of being born a Jew, observing all the requirements or "works" of the law, they were righteous in God's sight. For them, righteousness was not a matter of faith and trust in God but a matter of keeping all the rules.
 - c. To prove that Jews should not look to their observance of the Jewish law in order to be pleasing in God's sight, St. Paul uses Abraham as an example. He was, after all, the first Jew. Abraham was "reckoned as righteous" before there were any Jewish rules or "works." See that in vss. 9-12, St. Paul shows that Abraham was righteous in God's sight before he was circumcised (which would be a sign of the covenant between God and His people, but which doesn't happen until chapter 17 of Genesis). A true Jew, as St. Paul says, is one who is "not merely circumcised," but who follows "the example of the faith which our father Abraham had before he was circumcised" (vs. 12).
 - d. St. Paul's point in all of this is to say that Jews and non-Jews (Gentiles) are all "justified," or put into a state of grace, in the same way—through faith and not by keeping a set of rules. It is a gift from God (grace) and not something we earn.
 - e. Notice that St. Paul does not use the phrase "faith alone" when he writes about Abraham. He simply refers to Abraham's "faith." His point is that Christians must put their faith in an outrageous promise from God just as Abraham did. The promise of the gospel is wildly improbable. We must believe that God sent His Son in human flesh to live and die for us, sinners that we are. We must believe that Jesus worked miracles and came back from the dead. We must believe that He paid the price for our rebellion and made it possible for us to be forgiven and to live forever with God, in new bodies and divine glory. To put our trust in God for this promise requires the same kind of faith that Abraham had—"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb. 11:1).]
7. When St. Paul wrote about Abraham's faith in Romans 4, the faith he exercised before circumcision in chapter 17, what characteristics of faith would he have been thinking about? Describe Abram's faith as you have observed it, beginning with chapter 12.
 8. Catholics speak of salvation as coming through "faith," but we do not use the phrase "faith alone," a phrase that Martin Luther coined. Read James 2:14-24. Why is the phrase "faith alone" not useful when speaking about salvation?
 9. Looking again at Genesis 15:1-6, if Abram is righteous in God's sight because of his faith in the promises of God, should we assume that this status is something that he can never lose? Has this act of faith made him permanently pleasing to God?



Questions on the Text (cont.)

God's Covenant With Abram Read Genesis 15:7-21

10. Abram asks a question about his possession of the land of Canaan of the Lord in vs. 8. Is it a question of doubt? What kind of question is it?

[In ancient Semitic cultures, covenants were sometimes sealed by cutting animals into pieces and having the two parties making the covenant pass between the pieces (see Jeremiah 34:18). The idea was to demonstrate their commitment to keeping the terms of the covenant by taking an oath: "May what happened to these animals happen to me if I don't keep this covenant."]

11. Picture Abram setting up this elaborate arrangement of dead animals. He had to drive away the birds of prey. What does that tell you about the time factor in this scene? What do you think was going through his head?

12. Why do you suppose Abram fell into a deep sleep? Isn't that anticlimactic?

13. God speaks to Abram while he's asleep, apparently, and gives him a somewhat gloomy picture of the future of his descendants. How does this compare with God's earlier promise to Abram of a "great nation," one that would be a source of blessing to all men?

14. God is represented by a "smoking fire pot and a flaming torch" as He solemnized the covenant He made with Abram. [Note: This phrase probably indicates only one symbol, "namely, the appearance as of a smoking furnace from which torch-like flames shot out." (The New Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co, 1960; p. 90)] Read Exodus 3:2; 13:21; 19:18; 40:38. Why do you suppose God appears as a fire in the history of His people, beginning in this scene in Genesis?

15. Notice that it is only God who passes between the animal parts, not Abram. What does this suggest about the covenant that God made with Abram?



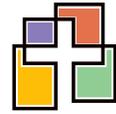
Questions for Reflection

One of the best ways to meditate on God's Word is to take it deeply into your life through memorization. The suggested memory verse is always highlighted in the text in the lesson. Or you may choose one of your own. For further reflection, consider these questions:

1. Do you experience doubt the way Abram did? Sometimes we may doubt a teaching of the Church. We may doubt that we can trust God to take care of us or those we love. We may doubt God's love for us and for the world. What have you learned from this lesson about how to respond to your doubt? Be specific and act upon it.

2. The prayer of Abram is one of many prayers recorded in Scripture. Whenever we encounter prayers in the Bible, it is good to check our own prayer life by them. Do your prayers contain the elements of Abram's prayer?

3. When you assist at Mass, do you think of it as an occasion when the New Covenant established by Jesus is confirmed again? Do you see it as an opportunity to renew your commitment to live the terms of that Covenant that you accepted in your baptismal vows? Do you listen to the readings from Scripture, knowing that they give you an opportunity to "hear" God's Word, as Abram did? Think about these things next time you are there, and remember Abram.



Opportunities for Additional Study

Points to Ponder

How interesting it is for us to absorb the details of Genesis 15. One lesson barely does justice to all that it contains. The great example of Abram's prayer, his experience of being counted righteous by faith, and the growing intimacy evident between God and Abram are all topics worth exploring more fully. Yet for Catholics, perhaps the most intriguing element in it is the first evidence in Scripture that God confirms His promises to His people not only in words but also in liturgical action. We have seen men build altars and make offerings to God in worship. We have seen God use elements in nature to remind men of His promises to them. Now we see all these coming together in response to Abram's question: "O Lord, how will I know...?" The question comes not from doubt but from faith. It is a human question from a human being. Abram desires the kind of knowledge that is distinctly human—that which comes through the senses. God is ready to accommodate this. In the liturgical action of fire passing between dead animal parts, with God speaking a word of promise, we have confirmation that humans in a covenant with Divinity can experience His presence and encouragement in a way they can comprehend. Fire, blood, flesh, and the Word of God all appear again dramatically at Mt. Sinai, when God made a covenant with His people, Israel, through Moses (see Exodus 24). From that time on, at God's command, they remain central to the worship of God by the Jews, right up to the time of Jesus.

The Incarnation, of course, is the culmination of men's desire to know Who God is and that He will keep His promises. No wonder, then, when Jesus was about to leave this world, at the Passover meal, as a priest in the line of Melchizedek, He speaks of bread and wine as His Body and Blood. His words and action combine the elements of the worship of Melchizedek (bread and wine offered in thanksgiving) and the worship of Israel (flesh and blood confirming a covenant). His command to His apostles to do this same action over and over until He returns means that in His Church, men can know in a human way—through a visible liturgical action of worship—that God will keep His New Covenant with them. In this worship, the Fire of God, the Holy Spirit, comes to transform bread and wine on the altar into Body and Blood. The Body and Blood will not be that of animals, as it was for Abram. It will be the glorified human presence of Jesus Himself, the Lamb of God Who is the Yes to all God's promises. It is then offered as a meal in thanksgiving to God for Who He is and for delivering us from death to life.

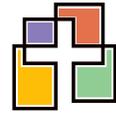
Catholic worship, therefore, is the fulfillment of the worship of the Jews offered when God made a covenant with them, begun here by the very first Jew, Abram, in Genesis 15.

Catechism Connection

Excerpted from the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

On Abraham and God's Covenant -- "The remote preparation for this gathering together of the People of God [in the Church] begins when he [God] calls Abraham and promises that he will become the father of a great people. Its immediate preparation begins with Israel's election as the People of God. By this election Israel is to be the sign of the future gathering of all nations. But the prophets accuse Israel of breaking the covenant and behaving like a prostitute. They announce a new and eternal covenant. Christ instituted this New Covenant." (762)

On the Faith of Abraham -- "Abraham thus fulfills the definition of faith in Hebrews 11:1: 'Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.' 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' Because he was 'strong in his faith,' Abraham became the 'father of all who believe.'" (146)



Summary

In this lesson, we observed that:

1. God appeared to Abram in a time of doubt. It had been ten years since he left his home, yet no son had been born to him. It was difficult for him to continue to believe that God would keep His promise. In desperation, Abram suggested that his slave would have to be his heir.
2. God assured Abram that his own son would be his heir. Instead of telling him exactly when that would happen, which might have alleviated Abram's anxieties, God took him out to look at and count the stars, renewing His promise to make many descendants from him.
3. Abram pondered the night sky, perhaps reviewing all the pro's and con's of putting his trust in God. Finally, he made an act of faith. God counted this act as righteousness in Abram. Abram was pleasing in God's sight because of his faith.
4. The elements of this first recorded biblical prayer included God's initiative and man's response, honesty and intimacy, speaking and listening, silence and action.
5. The references to Abram in the New Testament, especially in St. Paul's epistles, use him as an example of one who received the blessing of God ("justification") through faith and not as a result of being a Jew. St. James warned against misunderstanding salvation as coming through faith alone, however. Faith, in the biblical sense, means both belief and behavior.
6. Abram requested from God a sign of the promise He had made. God directed him to perform a liturgical action, involving animal parts. Abram fell into a deep sleep, indicating that God alone was responsible for this covenant. God told Abram of the future destiny of the nation that would come from him, a future that would involve some suffering before glory.
7. God then passed between the animal pieces in the form of a flaming torch, renewing the terms of the covenant. This scene is a type of the liturgical action that would become the centerpiece of the true worship

A Message from the Authors

Are you enjoying our study? Would you like this important service to continue? If so, please be aware that Catholic Exchange is a non-profit charitable organization totally dependent on your financial support to maintain both our website and our groundbreaking Catholic Scripture Study. So please make an on-line donation with your credit card at www.catholicexchange.com, call 1-888-477-1982, or mail as generous a donation as possible to:

Catholic Exchange
P.O. Box 231820
Encinitas, CA 92023

Thank you for making the Word of God available to anyone who wants it anywhere in the world.