

June 15, 2014

A Sure and Steadfast Anchor

Genesis 15:1 – 21

The series we are in is called Seeing and Savoring the Gospel in the Old Testament. And we've begun by looking at a few stories about what God is up to in the world here in the book of Genesis. We've looked at the creation and the fall; we've looked at the stories of Cain and Abel, and Noah and Babel. And last week we came to Abraham, or as he is known right now in the narrative – Abram. In each of these stories we have seen something of God's work in this world to rescue and redeem and restore humanity and all creation from the curse of sin and death. And the text this morning shows us again the good story of the gospel and teaches us something about how we are to live by faith in the finished work of Christ.

Abraham is often referred to as our father in the faith. His life is characterized by faith. Hebrews 11 records that it was by faith that Abraham answered the call of God and left a settled, comfortable life in Ur of the Chaldees; and it was by faith that he went to live in the land of promise. In fact, here in this story, Moses says that Abram believed the Lord and the Lord counted, or reckoned it to him as righteousness. And if we're not careful, we might get the idea that Abraham's life was one of an unbroken string of faith victories. But this story tells us something different about this life of faith. It tells us something about faith and doubt. In fact I think it shows us that if you have faith, you will have doubts. What I would like to look at this morning is **the anatomy of doubt** – what does it look like; **the remedy for doubt** – how do we win through to faith; and then make some application. Let's look at **the anatomy of doubt**.

Doubt is one of the biggest issues in the Christian life. And Abram was no different. Look at how this passage begins: *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."* After these things. What things? Well, we didn't read the intervening chapters from chapter twelve, but in thirteen and fourteen we have the story of Abram and his nephew Lot. Abram and Lot had parted ways at Sodom and Lot managed to get himself captured by some marauding kings of neighboring kingdoms; and Abram, in a daring night raid, rescued Lot and his family and all his stuff. After the battle he was met by a very mysterious king/priest called Melchizedek who brought out bread and wine and blessed him. And then God appears to Abram in a vision and says 'Fear not, Abram'.

What could Abram have possibly feared at this point? He had just defeated the combined forces of five kings, rescued his nephew and all his people and possessions, along with the rest of the captives, and there didn't seem to be anything to fear at all. But Abram is fearful – and I don't think that he is afraid of any kind of retaliation as some commentators think. I think he expresses his fears in the next two verses: *But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir."* Abram is afraid that God won't come through on His promise. He had some doubts. Where's my son?

You have to understand something to really get the impact of this. This story tells us that '*The word of the Lord came to Abram*'. This is huge. This is the first time we hear of this kind of thing in the Bible; and it is the only place in the first five books of the Old Testament that this expression is used. Later on it comes frequently to the prophets of God, but of all the important characters in these first five books, it only happens with Abram. What this indicates is a revelation, a vision, a word from God of unusual, stunning clarity. Abram hears an audible voice – God speaks directly to him. And what was Abram's response? 'Thank you Lord, I was beginning to waver there for a bit but now I'm okay?' No. Abram's first response is doubt. 'How do I know this will happen? I heard you say that but I still don't have a son'.

And then, Scripture records that God came to him again. In fact you can almost see God wrapping His arms around Abram's shoulder and pointing up into the night sky and saying 'Look up there Abram – count the stars – that's how many descendants you're going to have – trust Me'. *And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." 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 offspring be."*

And then God reminded Abram of his original call: *And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess."* And Abram doesn't turn around and say, 'Okay Lord, now I get it'. Abram says, *"O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?"* **'How can I know?'** **'How can I know?'** How can I know I'll have a son? How can I know I will have someone to pass on my inheritance to? How can I know that I'll even have an inheritance? **How can I know?** One of the things this reveals is **the inevitability of doubt**. We will doubt. That's just how we are. We doubt because we are not omniscient, we don't know everything and we certainly don't know the future. We doubt because we don't have the confidence to trust fully in God and we want and long for certainty in our faith.

But look how God deals with this. The word of the Lord comes to Abram twice, and twice Abram says, **'But how can I know?'** Does God at this point say, **'How dare you doubt Me?'** No. But neither does He say, 'That's okay Abram. We all live with doubt and we really can't help it'. No, He doesn't do that. On the one hand God does not condemn Abram for having doubts; and on the other hand He doesn't leave him to wallow in his doubts. He challenges those doubts – He keeps coming after Abram. Just like Jesus with Doubting Thomas. Remember him? 'Unless I see the nail prints in His hands and put my hand in His side I won't believe.' And Jesus comes and says, 'Do it Thomas – here are the nail prints and here is the hole in my side – now believe.' If it were a bad thing for Thomas to have those doubts, why did Jesus answer his request? And yet, when Jesus does answer his doubts, He says, **'Now stop doubting and believe'**. It is very strange that on the one hand **the Bible does not encourage doubt** – *But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind* – but on the other hand, **doubters are completely welcome** – *'Thomas, Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe'*. The call is to believe – not doubt; but doubters are never turned away.

The thing about the anatomy of doubt is that there are **two fundamental questions** that lie underneath it all. We see it in the objections raised by Abram. First of all he says, 'I don't have that heir yet – what will You give me Lord?' That's the first question. **How can I know about You, God?** And then down in verse eight Abram asks the second question, 'You promised this land to me. How can I know that I will possess it?' That's the second question – **'How can I know about me?'** How can I know about You, God? And how can I know about me?

First of all, **how can I know about You?** What guarantee do I have that You will come through for me, God? How can I know You'll give me what You've promised? How do I know You won't give up on me, in spite of my failures? How do I know for sure You'll keep Your promise? How do I know that You won't ask me to do something I don't want to.' A lot of people don't want to believe in God because they're afraid they'll lose control of things to God. **We're afraid that if we throw it all on God He'll send us to Africa.** A lot of us who do believe in God are still scared of that. We don't know if we can trust Him to do the right thing by us. We don't know if we can trust Him not to hurt us or ask us to do things that aren't safe or secure or comfortable, or that fit with the lifestyle to which we'd like to become accustomed.

And then the even scarier question, **'How can I know about me?'** One reason people don't come to faith in Christ and hide behind intellectual or personal arguments is that they don't trust God, that He is good and always good – that He always has our best interests at heart. And the other reason is that they don't trust themselves. 'I don't know about me. I don't know if I can carry this life of faith thing out all the way. I don't think I can keep it up all the way to the end. I'm afraid I'm going to fail. I'm going to fail God, I'm going to fail my family and friends, I'm going to fail myself! I know me too well. I'm afraid of this faith thing because A: I don't know about You; and B: I don't know about me.'

And then in the most remarkable chapter in the Bible, God deals with Abram's doubt, and our doubt. He gives us the most wonderful, stunning **remedy for doubt**. Look at verse 9: *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."* Remember, this is the Lord's answer to Abram's doubt – bring Me some animals. Any way you look at it – that's a weird answer. But it's only weird because we don't know the background here. *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.* Do you notice something interesting? God doesn't tell Abram what to do with these animals. He goes and gets them and gets right to work. Why? Because as soon as God says, 'Get Me some animals', Abram immediately knows what God is talking about. God knows and Abram knows, but we don't.

You see, as soon as God told him to get some animals, Abram knew God was about to make a covenant – a solemn, binding promise. Abram knew this because this is how people made covenants in those days. We don't do this because we have a writing culture; what the Lord might say to us is, 'Get Me a pen and some paper'. But Abram lived in a culture that dealt with picture stories and this was one of the strongest picture stories. In this culture what they would do is act out the terms of the covenant, and they dramatized the consequences of breaking the covenant. Abram said, 'O Lord, how will I know?' And God says 'Get me some animals'. He's going to make a covenant. **The remedy for Abrams doubt is a covenant.**

So what are the animals all about? If you look in Jeremiah 34 you see this thing played out. The Lord is speaking to His people and He says: *And the men who transgressed my covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts-- the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf. And I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives. Their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.* Jeremiah 34:18-20

This is how you made a covenant in those days. You took an animal, or animals, cut them in half and laid the pieces out and you walked between the pieces of the animals, identifying with those pieces, acting out the consequences, the penalty, for breaking the terms of the covenant. You have to keep in mind that the people who made covenants in Abrams day were usually kings making covenants with their subjects, their vassals. A greater with a lesser. And it was usually the vassal who took the walk between the pieces. Sometimes both would take the walk, but it was always the vassal who was expected to act out the penalty for breaking the covenant.

And what you were saying by walking through the pieces was, 'O great sovereign Lord, may I be cut in two, may I be cut up, may I be cut off, may my body be as these animals if I ever break covenant with you'. You are making yourself accountable to pay the penalty for the failure to fulfill your promise. In fact when the Bible talks about making a covenant, literally it talks about 'cutting a covenant'. Verse 18 says, *On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram.* But in the Hebrew it literally says, *On that day the Lord cut a covenant with Abram.* You cut a covenant – it's not a written contract. The promiser takes on the covenant curse and says, 'If I do not meet all the terms of this covenant I am making today – may I be as those animals I cut up'. We might get better service if we required covenants instead of contracts. But when God enters into the culture this way – He's taking on the cultural form of covenant-making – He enters in and transforms it.

We see that transformation in two ways in verses 17 and 18. One is what God does, and one is what He doesn't do. He does something in this covenant-making that must have utterly astounded Abram – and He doesn't do one thing that must have amazed him. And at the end of this, Abram doesn't have any more doubts. We don't hear Abram say anymore, 'But how can I know?' All his doubts have vanished. So what happens? The first stunning thing is **who walks between the pieces.** *When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.* Abram kills the animals and lays them out and he's keeping the birds of prey from eating the covenant up and everything's proceeding fairly normally, and then, instead of someone walking through the pieces, here comes a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch moving through the pieces. What is that?

Well if you go back to verse 12, the text says, *as the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him.* Actually the Hebrew indicates here that as it was getting dark outside, a darkness of dread was falling on Abram's soul. In other words there was a physical darkness falling outside and a spiritual darkness falling in his being. There was a darkness in the darkness. And even though it says he fell into a deep sleep, it wasn't a normal kind of sleep because he saw the fire pot and flaming torch passing between the pieces. What we get here is a horror of darkness and dread that crushed Abram to the ground. There was an incredible heaviness about all this, and he doesn't know what is going to happen. And then he sees this smoking fire pot and blazing torch passing between the pieces.

And what is stunning is that these are the same words describing the scene when God came down on Mount Sinai. Billowing smoke and blazing fire. The very presence of God. God shows up and passes between the pieces. Remember how in Exodus God appears to the children of Israel as a column of smoke by day and a pillar of blazing fire by night? What this means is that the very presence of God is passing between the pieces. God shows up and calls out the terms of the covenant – He makes His covenant promise to Abram. **And there is only one thing this can mean!** God is saying, '**Abram, you want to know for sure? You want to know how you can know? If I don't bless you, if I don't give you a son and make you a blessing to the world and give this land to your descendants and fulfill all the terms of this covenant, may I be as these animals. May the immortal become mortal, may the immutable become mutable, may the infinite become finite. May I be cut off, may I be cut up, may I die.**'

But that's not all. That is wonderful, that is stunning, staggering, amazing. But that's not all. Because if that were all, we would be left with the other question of doubt. God passing between the pieces ends our doubt about Him. But what about **our** doubt about us? What if **we** don't measure up to the terms? What if **we** don't fulfill the terms of the covenant? At some level we are pretty sure God can keep His promise – but at the deepest level, we're pretty sure we can't. 'Lord I know that You've promised to be my God, but I don't know if I can be your people. I don't know how I can ever measure up to the terms of the covenant. After all, Jesus told us that we are to be holy even as You are holy, and in the gospels He tells us to be perfect even as His heavenly Father is perfect. I know I'm going to let You down, I'm going to let me down – I just don't see myself getting to the finish line in any case'.

But just as there is something God does, there is something He doesn't do. He doesn't call us to go through the pieces. The first staggering truth is who goes through the pieces; **the second staggering truth is who doesn't.** You see verse 18 tells us: *On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram.* There, God cut the covenant. It's done. It's over. After God goes through, the covenant is made. Abram is not even invited to go through. You see, in that culture, the vassal always had to go through the pieces. Sometimes the king might, mostly he wouldn't, but the vassal always went through. And this is the only covenant we know of that only the King went through, and when He went through, He says, 'The covenant is made'.

And there is only one thing that could mean! God is saying, 'Abram, I promise to bless you. And if I fail to bless you, I will pay the penalty. And if you fail to live up to the terms of the covenant, I will pay the penalty. If I fail, I will pay – if you fail, I will also pay. **I will absorb the cost for both of us.** If either one of us fails – I will bear the cost.' This was God's way of saying, 'I will be torn apart if I fail, and I will be torn apart if you fail.' Does that stagger you? It should. Does that amaze you? It should. That the very God who created us should be wounded for our transgressions – should be cut off for our sins – should pay the penalty for our failures. And Abram had no idea of the cost of this oath of grace.

But centuries later, the very God became incarnate in Jesus Christ – the immortal became mortal, the immutable, mutable, the infinite, finite. And one day He was nailed to a cross and a dreadful darkness fell and covered the face of the sun at Mount Calvary. And on the cross, Isaiah 53 says, the Son of God was cut off from the land of the living. That's covenant language – cut off, that's the curse. When Jesus cries out, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?' He's saying, '**My God, My God, I'm alone and in the dark and You've cut Me off.**' He bore the curse for us. God is saying, '**My blessing to you is unconditional. If you believe in Me, if you enter into this covenant with Me, not only will I not fail – that is, My failures are not going to get in the way of blessing you – but your failures are not going to get in the way of Me blessing you.**'

That's why Paul writes in Galatians, *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles* Galatians 3:13-14 This covenant is unilateral – it is one sided. God says '**I will do it.**' The gospel is not a cooperative effort. We never read in Scripture that God helps those who help themselves. You only find that verse in the first book of Me, Myself and I. God says, '**I will make a covenant with you so that you won't have any doubts about Me and to end your doubts about you.**' The writer of Hebrews tells us that this covenant is an anchor for us: *So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of His purpose, He guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul,* Hebrews 6:17-19

You know what an anchor is? It is something that keeps your boat in place in spite of the current that is trying to wreck you on the rocks. That is what this covenant is – an anchor for our souls. We tend to think that faith is holding on to God for dear life. But what the covenant says is that God is holding on to you. **Faith is not merely your holding on to God—it is God holding on to you. He will not let you go!** E. Stanley Jones

There are some of you here that haven't really made a commitment to Christ. And some who thought you did till you came here and I've thrown you into doubt. But you've never made a commitment and the question is why not? And you say, 'Because I've got all these questions and doubts'. And what you're really saying is that you've got to get it all together before you step out. You're either looking at God and saying, 'I don't know if You'll come through for me' or you're looking at yourself and saying, 'I don't know if I'll come through for me'.

And what you're really thinking is 'I've got to walk through the pieces myself'. Every other religion makes you walk through the pieces yourself. Only Christianity has a God who says, 'I'll walk through the pieces'. He says to us as He says to Abram 'I am your shield, I am your great reward.' Every other approach to living without fear and doubt says 'This will be my shield, this will be my reward'. 'I'll be a moral person – I'll be a good person – I'm going to serve people – I'll join the Peace Corp – I'll go to Calcutta like Mother Teresa – I'll walk through the pieces myself. Then I'll know'. And you are going to fail. You know at the deepest level you'll never make it through. The currents of life will wreck you on the rocks. You've got to have an anchor for your soul.

If you put your anchor down in anything or anyone besides this God of the covenant – you'll be wrecked. Because everything else is shifting, everything else is changing, everything else is moving with the currents of this world. What do you think will always be there for you? Where have you set your anchor? You will set your anchor somewhere. You might not give yourself to God but you will give yourself to something. Is it your family? It's going to go. Is it your looks? It's really going to go. Is it your talent? Is it money, or sex or fame? It's all going to go. Everything else is going to go – but this promise of God will never go. Every other attempt to be sure and certain in a world of doubt lets down your anchor into your performance, or your good works, or if you're not religious, something else.

But here is an anchor that will outlast heaven and earth. Here is something that is unmoved by the tides of time and chance. When God says, '**I am your shield and your very great reward**' He is saying 'Unless I'm your shield, it's foolish to think that you have any security. There is no security in this world apart from the God who says, 'I am your shield'. He says 'Unless I am your reward, you don't have anything – everything else is going away. My reward is eternal and certain and sure'. Everything else will go away. Why not take Him up on this? What have you got to lose?

For those of you who are Christians, you need to think about this. **Do you realize that all, all, all, of your problems come because you don't have your anchor down far enough?** All of our problems come precisely because we do not trust God – we don't trust the promises of God. **Do you know why you're worried?** You don't trust His wisdom. You don't think He knows what is best for you. **Do you know why you struggle with anger and bitterness?** Deep down, you don't really trust His justice – that He really will right all wrongs and settle all accounts. **Do you know why you don't like yourself?** Why you beat yourself up? Why you don't have any self-esteem? It's because you don't trust His love and acceptance.

In fact **do you know why you ever disobey God?** Why you sin? It's because you don't trust that God Himself is a better reward than the passing pleasures of sin. You don't trust that a relationship with Him is a thousand times more satisfying, more rewarding, more pleasurable than anything you could have by disobeying Him. You don't trust His promises. You do trust in the deceitfulness of sin, but you don't trust Him. You trust that what sin offers is better than what God promises. You're saying to yourself 'I'd better do what makes me happy because if I trust God all the way to the bottom, I'll miss out. I'm sure what He wants will make me unhappy. He won't choose what is best for me'. And your anchor is ten feet short of the bottom. You may intellectually know the promises of God, but you've never really gotten your anchor down in them.

Set your anchor down deep this morning in the solid promises of our covenant-making God who walked between the pieces for you and I, taking on the curse, suffering the wrath of God for our failures, our sin, cut off so that we might be brought in, cut up so that we might be made whole. As we come to the table this morning and re-enact the covenant God made to us with the bread and with the cup, let this dramatization speak to you of Jesus' love and commitment to bring you all the way through – let it anchor your soul.

Our gracious heavenly Father,

Mere words fail as we look upon the stunning display of Your love for us. It was You who walked through the pieces – it was You who was wounded for our transgressions; it was You who was crushed for our iniquities; it was You who was beaten and torn, taking the penalty that belonged to us in Your own body. As we come to the table this morning, let it be the place where all our doubts are dispelled. When we ask, 'How can I know that You are for me and not against me? How can I know that You will be my shield?' At this table You answer and say, 'Look at the bread in your hand – My body was broken for you'. When we ask, 'How can I know that You will bless me and bring me into my inheritance?' You answer us, 'Look at the cup in your hand – I sealed this covenant with My own blood, and I will not fail to carry out all its terms'. May the anchor of our faith grip the solid rock of Your unfailing love and promises we pray in the precious name of Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen.