

I'm a Believer

Gen 15

You might recognize the words of this song which was apparently written by Neil Diamond. But sung by the Monkeys back in the 60's. And re-recorded by different people since then. The song's called Then I saw her face.

Goes like this.

I thought love was only true in fairy tales. Meant for someone else but not for me.

Sorry if you're getting pictures of Shrek in your mind!

Love was out to get me, that's the way it seemed. Disappointment haunted all my dreams. Then I saw her face, now I'm a believer, without a trace of doubt in my mind, I'm in love, I'm a believer, I couldn't leave her if I tried.

It's the story of someone disappointed and let down by love, someone who'd given up. Next verse goes what's the use of trying, all you get is pain, when I needed sunshine I got rain.

And maybe you're saying it's true it's true.

Then I saw her face, now I'm a believer, without a trace of doubt in my mind.

And you find yourself singing along.

Well I hope as we read through chapter 15 of Genesis. That you find the same thing.

Because without a doubt. The pivotal verse of chapter 15 is verse 6. As Abraham turns believer.

Verse 6. Abram believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.

In a world that's fallen. A world of unbelievers. Here's a believer. Someone living in a world of pain and strife. Here's someone who in his heart of hearts. Who believes God. And stands as a model for the rest of us.

The nation of Israel. They'll look back to him. And so do we.

It's interesting. If you're a follower of Jesus I'm not sure how you refer to yourself. Whether you call yourself a Presbyterian. Call yourself a Christian. But in the NT, for starters the term Presbyterian is never used to describe Jesus followers. Take that home and think about it. And even the term Christian's only used twice. Once in Acts by King Agrippa who asks Paul if he thinks he can make him into a Christian. The other one's in 1 Peter.

But the term believer(s) plural is there 21 times. Here's a few examples.

SLIDES

Acts 1:15 ¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the believers

Acts 2:44 ⁴⁴ All the believers were together and had everything in common.

1 Corinthians 14:22 ²² Tongues, then, are a sign, not for believers but for unbelievers; prophecy, however, is for believers, not for unbelievers.

Galatians 6:10 ¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

1 Timothy 4:12 ¹² Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.

And not only does the New Testament call us believers. It makes the connection with Abraham.

SLIDE

Galatians 3:6-7 ⁶ Consider Abraham: "He believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." ⁷ Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.

So it's worth just focusing on Abram's belief here in Genesis 15. And pulling it apart a bit. And seeing. What are the core ingredients of his belief?

And I'm just going to start by going through the passage. I'll point some things out along the way. Then we'll go back and I'll make some observations about Abram's belief.

Now, here's the context. Abram's just had a fantastic victory over the superpowers of the region. With God's help. He's just rescued his Nephew Lot from a huge and powerful army, and he's done that with only 318 men.

But then you read there in verse 1.

God appears in a vision to Abram. And he says. Don't be afraid. Verse 1

Genesis 15:1 After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." Or some translations say. Your reward will be very great.

Which sounds a bit odd. You'd expect something like that just BEFORE.. Abram jumps on his horse to head off for THE BATTLE. Don't be afraid. I'll be with you. But here we are AFTER THE BATTLE'S WON....and God's saying don't be afraid.

And some commentators have pointed out that maybe he could be afraid that the kings from up in the North would be licking their wounds and getting their armies ready for a comeback. With Abram at the head of the hit list. And that makes some sense.

What makes more sense though.... Is what Abram blurts out to God there in verse 2.

Genesis 15:1-2 he word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." ² But Abram said, "O Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless....

See. God's words in a way are a general comfort. But they're significantly lacking in detail. It's almost like God's prompting Abram to spill his mind. OR, I might say spill his guts but that would be too crass. Because Abram was 75 when he left Ur at the beginning. And there's been a fair bit of water under the bridge. HE's walked up and down the land. He's been down and back to Egypt. God's spoken to him a number of times. In chapter 16 he's 86. So maybe it's been ten years at

this point. But still.... no title deed in his hand. And still..... no kids of his own. So there's these burning questions for Abram.

You can just imagine Abram at the weekly bible study and they get to prayer points. And Abram's got his hand up AGAIN. "Abram, still no kids? " Ok 2000 weeks in a row we'll keep praying for that. Anyone else? Saul son of Kish. Still looking for those lost donkeys? Ok. And Abram again. Still looking for the land to be yours.

It's completely understandable that those things are on his mind.

God you said my offspring would inherit the land. That's what you said. Genesis 12. But what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?"?

And same question put another way.

"You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

Now if that's you. What would you like to know? What sort of answer are you looking for? Would you like the timetable layed out for you? Would you like to know HOW it's all going to happen? Would you like to know WHEN? Because that's what I'd want to know.

Instead.....It's night time. And God takes Abram out of the tent. And shows him the stars.

Genesis 15:5 ⁵ He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars-- if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be."

I guess you'd call it a dose of perspective. And at that point Abram believes God.

And Paul's going to point to Genesis 15.6. He's going to take us back to this point here and say if you're a believer. That's how you're right with God. Through faith in Jesus Christ.

Just like that.

But there's one more thing on Abram's mind. And that's the question of land.

And this time God sort of leads him into it.

Genesis 15:7 ⁷ He also said to him, "I am the LORD, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it."

And Abram's like. Yep. Just on that point. I do remember that. I've got a question there as well. And he's very respectful. As he addresses the God who made the stars.

Genesis 15:8 "O Sovereign LORD, how can I know that I will gain possession of it?"

And God tells him to go get these animals. And there's this scene that's pretty weird for us. Where Abram gets these animals and he cuts them in half. And sets the halves down opposite each other. So you end up with this sort of gruesome

dead animal guard of honour type aisle. But for them. That's how you make a covenant. That's the set up for a binding agreement. When you think about it it's much more civil than involving solicitors!

So what you do is you cut the animals in half and then both parties to the agreement would walk between the halves of the animals as a way of saying. May this happen to us if either of us break the agreement. It's a symbolic gesture that signifies the commitment and seals the covenant agreement. So Abram sets it all up. And he has to keep the vultures at bay. Until he falls into a deep sleep. Where God says his descendants will possess the land after 4 generations of slavery in another country. And then there's this. Verse 17. Abram sees

Genesis 15:17 a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.

And if you're in any doubt about what that means. You just have to read it there in verse 18

Genesis 15:18-21 ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates-- ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, Kenizzites, Kadmonites, ²⁰ Hittites, Perizzites, Rephaites, ²¹ Amorites, Canaanites, Girgashites and Jebusites."

Now the reason you and I have to sign documents when there's an important agreement. Is because human beings aren't necessarily all that trustworthy. So oaths and covenants are kind of a way of getting some sort of surety. But surely God's word's good enough you'd think.

And it is. But God sets this thing up. And he covenants himself. He binds himself by this ceremony. And Abram just looks on. As the smoking firepot passes between the animals. As if it's God himself. Unilaterally binding himself. By this covenant.

And that's the end of this meeting.

So lets make some observations about the kind of belief Abram displays here. If ee Abram's the father of believers. First observation. Is a fairly simple one. But one that needs to be made anyway. And that is. Abram believes what God says he'll do. Abram believes God's word. And that phrase comes up there in verse 1

Genesis 15:1 the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision

There again verse 4

Genesis 15:4 Then the word of the LORD came to him:

Verse 5 he took him outside and said

Verse 7 he also said

And it is a conversation so it goes back and forth. But then in the end verse 18 the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said.

So Abram's belief has nothing to do with a funny feeling. But the thing is. Plenty of people will look you in the eye and say they believe God's going to do something for them. When he hasn't said. Problem being. When it doesn't happen. You look silly. Believers look silly. And maybe you lose faith yourself and

blame God. For something he never said he'd do. Because you haven't got the perfect life. He didn't promise you would. You haven't got the perfect health. Not there either. Lots of people expect God's going to give them a level of guidance for decisions He just doesn't promise to give. So you make stuff up. You have to decide between two jobs. So you say if this happens. Maybe if the phone rings in the next ten minutes. God's saying take job A. If not. He's saying take job B. NO HE'S NOT.

There's a bit of a running joke at Christmas time in my family. After the presents have all been unwrapped I make an incredulous announcement. So where's my playstation?

And they just laugh at me. Why should I expect a six hundred dollar entertainment unit? I haven't asked for it. Although I'd like to think somebody would take the hint. Nobody said they'd get me one. Why should I expect it?

So lets understand what God says. And believe him for that. Which is why it's smart to know your bible. Because that's where he speaks.

So that's the first observation.

And the second one's more of a sideline.

Now I wonder if you feel a bit uncomfortable about Abram's questions?

What can you give me Lord? How will I know Lord?

Abram believes what God's said. But he's got some questions. It's a questioning belief. And I don't know about you. But I find that strangely comforting. Because I've got some questions of my own. But is that ok?

Are we supposed to tut tutt Abram here? I take it that questions accompany faith. I tell my kids we're going somewhere. They ask me questions. When? How? Will there be toys? That kind of thing. I take it that these are searching questions. And even though he doesn't answer with the kind of detail Abram's maybe fishing for. God doesn't rebuke Abram.

There's a Christian bumper sticker that says. God said it. I believe it. That settles it. And in the end. I guess that's right. But I wonder if there's something a bit unnatural about that. And something about that way of thinking that stops our natural inquisitiveness. That says don't ever ask question. That maybe in the end. Could make us naïve and weak in faith rather than stronger?

Sometimes I think we can feel guilty about having doubts at all. So you just push them aside. But they're still there. And maybe you won't get the full answer you'd like. But unless you know why you believe what you believe. You'll be vulnerable. And there's a whole bunch of standard questions – like the issue of Hell. And judgment, and science and how the bible's written. And all sorts of things. And you should chase down those things if you're a person of faith.

Tim Keller who's written a lot on Christian apologetics says doubts are a bit like antibodies. They actually serve a helpful purpose. To strengthen your faith.

And if you've read a few psalms. Some of them are question after question after question. Jesus says ask and seek and knock. So let's not be afraid to say why Lord? How Lord? When Lord? Questions I think. Are good accompaniments to belief.

But let's look at God's answer to Abram for his first question. And I think it's reasonable. Abram says I don't have any kids. I'm an old man. What can you give me? And you'd be asking the same question. Because on the face of it. It just looks impossible.

But God's answer is a bit like his answer to Job. What God does. Is he gives Abram a bit of perspective. And reminds him of his power. And you can almost imagine Morgan Freeman playing the role here. In his white suit.

And he takes Abram out of the tent and says. Look up and count the stars. Which by the way. He made. Count them he says. If you can. So shall your offspring be.

And Abram believes.

Because the God who made the vastness of the universe. Can probably do what he says.

And he goes on to make a covenant with Abram.

To help him and the generations after him including us. To believe and to keep believing.

So Paul points back to Genesis 15 Romans 4. And says the righteous. Just like Abram will live by faith. And not by thinking God's impressed by bare morality or religious ritual.

And it's always been like that.

And Galatians which we've recently been through points out that ultimately the offspring God speaks of is Jesus. He's the seed referred to. And so we're believers in him.

SLIDE

Galatians 3:26 - 4:1 ²⁶ You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.

We're not people of a particular nationality or genealogy. We're believers in God's word of promise..... the words of Genesis 15 which came about exactly the way God said. The words of promise in the Old Testament, which are ultimately fulfilled in the person of Jesus.

I'm a believer.

In God's word fulfilled in Jesus. And in God's power displayed. In his creation for one. But also the power he displayed in the Exodus. I am the Lord you read in the old testament. Who brought you out of Egypt. The one who separates the waters

at the Red Sea. Who displays his power over and over again to his people. Who displays his power in Jesus. As he raises people from the dead. And gives the blind sight.

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Colossians 2:11-12¹² having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead.

I'm a believer. Colossians two. In the God who powerfully raised him from death.

God's word fulfilled in Jesus. God's power displayed in and through Jesus.

I'm a believer. I'm a child of Abraham. Declared righteous because of what he's done at the cross.