

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
October 6, 2013

A Promise to Abraham

Read Genesis 15:7-21

Key verse: “That day the Lord cut a covenant with Abram: ‘To your descendants I give this land, from Egypt’s river to the great Euphrates’” (Genesis 15:18).

“After the sun set, Abram slept deeply. A terrifying and deep darkness settled over him” (Gen. 15:12). Genesis 15 tells a wonderful story of God’s promises and His faithfulness in keeping them. But it is fitting to set this part of the story in the context of Abraham’s “terrifying and deep darkness.” For, as we see in this chapter, it often in our dark night of doubt and struggle that our faith is tested and strengthened.

Abraham’s dark night came because it appeared to him that God would not keep His promise, at least not in the way Abraham expected. God had promised that Abraham’s descendants would be in number like the dust that covers the earth (Gen. 13:16). But Abraham and his wife, Sarah, remained childless, and Abraham saw no other way for God’s promise to be fulfilled than to make his servant Eliezar his heir (Gen. 15:2-3).

Modern archaeological discoveries have shown that it was customary in Abraham’s time for a childless couple to “adopt” a slave to be their heir. The slave would have the responsibility to care for the couple in their old age and provide for a proper burial at their death. In return, the slave would inherit their property. In spite of God’s promise to Abraham, he had concluded that this practice would be the only way to deal with the absence of a child. But God had a better idea....

God told Abraham, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.’ He brought [Abraham] outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be’” (Gen. 15:4-5).

In this way, God reassured Abraham that His promises would be kept! But God wasn’t finished. In verses 7-21, God gives Abraham added assurance of His faithfulness. (I am glad that God is patient with my struggles to believe Him and trust Him. God is so gracious to reassure us in our dark nights of doubt!)

God's assurance to Abraham came next as God revealed that Abraham's descendants would become slaves in a foreign land. However, God assured Abraham that, following 400 years of slavery, his descendants would return to the land God promised them (Gen. 15:13-16). This part of God's promise would be fulfilled by Israel's 400 years of slavery in Egypt and their return to the Promised Land under Moses and Joshua.

A third way of reassuring Abraham in his dark night of doubt is seen in verses 17-21. Here God renews His covenant with Abraham and reveals specific boundaries of the Promised Land.

In these verses, we see God using what was then a familiar practice of establishing an agreement between two parties. In this practice, animals were slain and the agreeing parties passed between the animal parts. (See verses 7-11.) The idea seems to be that the two parties making this covenant were saying, "May I be killed and partitioned in this way if I do not keep my part of this agreement."

This symbolic act of making a binding promise reminds me of the story of Daniel Webster's love knot. Daniel Webster, a 19th century lawyer and statesman, was courting his wife-to-be, Grace Fletcher. As Daniel held some strands of silk thread for her, he said: "Grace, we've been engaged in untying knots; let us see if we can tie a knot which will not untie for a lifetime." Together, Daniel and Grace tied a silk knot that would be almost impossible to untie. And grace accepted Daniel's marriage proposal.

Many years later, after Daniel's and Grace's deaths, their children found a little box marked, "Precious Documents." In the box were letters from the couple's courtship and a tiny silk knot—one that had never been untied. Throughout the years of their marriage, their love knot had been a symbol of their promise of love and faithfulness to each other.

Through the symbolic practice of "cutting" covenant, God met Abraham in his dark night of doubt. Our God is faithful not only to keep His promises to us but also to assure and reassure us of His faithfulness!

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