

Place: NAC

Date: 25/10/20

Passage: Genesis 15

Key idea: Abram's dealings with God reveal the foundations of God's dealing with humans: by promise and faith.

FCF: That God deals with humans in any other way.

Application: Trust God and his promises

1. How does God deal with humans?

How does God deal with humans?

It is a question that everyone asks at some point in their lives – and everyone has an opinion. To some, God doesn't exist, so he doesn't deal with humans. To others, God is a figment of our imagination, so we deal with God. To many, God is a neglectful dictator – he made the world, he can fix the world, he runs the world, he just can't be bothered. Others see God as a convenient whipping boy – we deal with him: we complain to him but we ignore him when things are going well.

So, how does God deal with humans?

It is an important question because, at its heart, it deals with the guts of Christianity. I mean, that is the message of Christianity, isn't it: God wants to deal with you, relate to you, and this is how he does it.

Abram's discussions with God in Genesis 15 reveal how God deals with humans.

PRAY...

2. Insurmountable obstacles

The world is broken. It is broken by human sin – the desire and action that says ‘I am God and God is not’. God has judged this sin – the right penalty for rejecting the author of life is death. But God has not neglected his creation nor his image bearers – he loves them too much. So, his plan remains the same: his people, living with him in his place under the blessing of his rule.

God chooses Abram as the man through which to restore this design to the world. He makes three promises to Abram: Abram will have a large family that will become a great nation, Abram’s family will have land, and through this family, God will bring blessing to the world: he will reverse its brokenness.

Abram obeys God but, there are some significant obstacles to these promises: Abram’s wife is barren, the land promised is occupied, Abram’s nephew Lot is pesky, and there is the truth of Abram’s human nature.

Now, after Abram has demonstrated his reliance upon God again – God will give the land to Abram and Abram will not seize it by his own strength – those problems rear their ugly head again...

3. Faith and the problem of security (children) (15:1-6)

Read verses 1-6...

‘After these events’ – we are told exactly when these two conversations take place: sometime after Abram has shown that he is the strongest man going around the land of Canaan.

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The structure of this passage is striking: twice, God speaks to Abram; twice, Abram responds with a question about God's promises; and, twice, God demonstrates his faithfulness by reassuring Abram.

On face value, Abram's biggest problem at the moment is that he has a target on his back. That happens when you demonstrate that you are the strongest bloke in the sandpit. Abram has just walloped the local colonial powers, freed his nephew and restored the possessions of the king of Sodom. Everyone will be gunning for the strongest bloke on this patch of dirt – especially because he is a foreigner without the security of land or home.

And, so, God reassures Abram – **look at verse 1... READ.**

God speaks to Abram. That is enough. God's word reveals God. God's word reassures. God states very clearly that he will protect Abram – that, under God, there is nothing to fear.

We expect God to say this. After all, God is the reason Abram is here. God is the one who has just manifestly enabled Abram to beat these local kings and rescue his nephew. We expect God to say this.

But, Abram has a question – **look at verses 2-3... READ.**

I don't think that this is a rude question. I don't think Abram is having a whinge. I don't think that Abram is being doubtful. Abram has just publicly committed himself to trusting God. Now, he wants to deal openly and honestly with God.

And the issue of children is the real issue of security. Abram will only survive as a name in this land if he has kids. In all truth, this lies at the heart of the very promises of God that brought Abram to the land he stands in now.

‘God, if you are my protector, what about my children – where are they? God, if I am to be a great nation, how will this be?’

God answers immediately – **look at verses 4-5... READ.**

God’s response is a promise. I don’t need to tell you how impressive the image was – we know what stars look like out here. But, this is God’s promised word to Abram: like the stars, so will your descendants be – and it will start with a child from your own body.

Abram’s response to God is crucial – **look at verse 6... READ.**

Here is the first part of how God relates to humans: he does so on the basis of faith – or, ‘trust’. Let me say that again...

In general, our world loves this idea. Often, I have heard people say, as they make decisions, or as they deal with hardship, or as they face dilemmas and challenges, ‘You’ve just gotta have faith’. It’s a lovely statement, but utterly meaningless!

The importance is in the detail – and we need to notice the detail in verse 6:

- Abram has faith IN someone. The object of Abram's faith is crucial: it is in God, not some airy-fairy thing out there. Faith works this way – to be anything other than a waffley meaningless truism, 'faith' must be IN something, or someone. Otherwise, it is nonsensical.
- Abram's faith in God is because of what God has REVEALED in his WORDS. This is crucial: Abram trusts what God promises because he knows that God will deliver on his words. In this sense, Abram doesn't have faith in things unknown or unheard of – there is nothing blind about this faith. He has listened. He has seen. He trusts.
- Abram's trust in God and his promise leads God to DECLARE something about Abram: that Abram is 'righteous'. Put simply, he and Abram are relating as they should. This is crucial because here we see the guts of how humans and God deal with each other. On the one hand, Abram can do nothing about the obstacles in his life to the promises of God – he cannot undo the barrenness of his wife, remove the inhabitants of the land, remove Lot as his nephew, or even change his own human nature. He is completely reliant upon God. On the other hand, God promises to deal with all those issues as he speaks. Humans are completely dependent upon God so that they can relate rightly to him (REPEAT).

This, then, is the guts of the relationship between humans and God: God does it all, and humans trust him (take him at his word and live like it), depending upon him. Abram is declared to be relating rightly with God because he trusts him. This is not an

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action or good deed by Abram – it is a state of relationship. Abram trusts God – and God declares that he is relating rightly to him.

4. Covenant and the problem of land (15:8-21)

God speaks again, but this time he refers not to security but to the land – the other key physical part of his promise to Abram – **look at verse 7... READ.**

God states, clearly again, his promise to Abram: this land will be his. And yet, Abram asks the question we know he will – ‘How do I know that this will take place?’

What follows is a significant ceremony – **look at verses 9-12... READ.**

There are many things here that have puzzled commentators and readers across the years – why these animals? Why their age? Why this cutting? Why the set-up?

I have no answers to these this morning, except to make two observations.

First, this is a significant moment because whatever is taking place involves the death of significant assets.

Second, this moment is terrible, in the sense that meeting God is always terrifying – **look at verse 12... READ.**

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Abram has just been declared to be relating rightly to God and yet he is still terrified. And, then, God speaks – **look at verses 13-16... READ.**

These are remarkable words! For one of the original readers, these words are a summary of the next five books of the Bible. How did God know this? Well, because God had planned this!

Abram's family will possess this land – and that means Abram will. God promises this to be the case – and it will happen in his time. This ceremony is all about God committing himself to the fulfilment of his promise for the benefit of Abram: at a certain point in time, which God has already decided, Abram's descendants will possess this land.

And, if you know your Bible, this actually happens as God says: in 400 years' time, Abram's family does come to this land, after being rescued from slavery in a land not their own. They do take this land!!!

This ceremony is not complete – God uses an image to finish the ceremony – **look at verses 17-21... READ.**

Here is God's accompaniment to faith: he cuts a covenant with Abram. Literally, that is what the language says – God cuts a covenant with Abram. Something dies to show the significance of this moment. God's movement between the carcasses is almost as if he is saying, 'What happened to them will happen to me if I do not keep my promise'.

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Now, a covenant is an agreement between two or more people – a binding agreement with obligations on both sides. And, yet, if you look closely at verses 17-21, there is only one party committing here, only one party obligated, there is only one party doing all the work: and that is God. All Abram needs to ‘do’ is to accept and trust God’s promise.

Here is the accompaniment to faith: God’s binding commitment to his promise to deal with the world through Abram’s family, and to do it for Abram’s family – and the world.

5. The same way...

In many ways, what we have just looked at seems a little removed from our question: ‘How does God deal with humans?’ After all, Abram was thousands of years ago, unique and living in a very different world. Why would God do things the same way now?

It is interesting, then, that the apostle Paul uses the very same episode to show that this is how God has always dealt with people – even more so now.

If you look closely at what Paul is saying in Romans 3 and 4, you realise that God is still dealing with people in the same way: freely committing himself to their benefit, doing it all himself, and all they need to do is trust him – take him at his word.

The problem remains the same – all people are sinful – all people are living as if they are God and God is not (3:23). Humans face an insurmountable problem: they cannot deal with sin themselves. Sounds a little like Abram?

And so, God brings his plan – begun in Abram – to completion:

- He sends the descendant of Abram – God’s own Son – to live, die and rise for humans. God freely does this so that the judgement for human sin is dealt with by his own Son (3:24)
- God’s work is available to any human being who takes God at his word – who trusts that God has dealt with their sin by turning his judgement on Jesus for them (3:23).
- If humans take God at his word, God declares that they are right with him: they relate to him through trusting what he has done for them in Jesus (3:24).

Do you see that God relates now, through Jesus, in exactly the same way he always has?

God promises. God does. He does it freely and completely – in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. And humans, unable to deal with their obstacle of sin themselves, must trust him. In this, God declares them right with him.

How does God deal with human beings? Well, he deals with them with free mercy, unmerited kindness and with complete love.

How should humans deal with God? Well, they need to take him at his word, trust that he will do what he says, and rely solely on his actions – through Jesus – to deal with human sin and the brokenness of the world.

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Here, then, is the guts of Christianity: God deals with humans with mercy they do not deserve, doing all the work to deal with their sin, committing himself unwaveringly to his rebellious world. Our deeds do nothing. Our actions create no obligation on God's part. All humans must do is trust what God has done for us. That is how God has always acted. And that is what we need.