

So Abram had successfully defeated a confederacy of four city-states and rescued his abducted nephew as recounted in Genesis chapter fourteen. But Abram is now about to face a different kind of challenge...

***“After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward!’” (Genesis 15:1).***

This verse highlights a new conflict for Abram, although it may not be evident from this passage. You see, Genesis 15:1 reveals Abram’s next adversary: fear. We can identify the nature of Abram’s conflict if we consider God’s message to him in this passage: ***“Do not be afraid...” (CSB)*** or, ***“Fear not...” (ESV)***. God would not need to encourage Abram in this manner if he wasn’t already afraid.

This reference to fear conveys an image of fright or dread. <sup>(1)</sup> So, what may have triggered this emotional response in Abram's life? One possibility may involve his triumph over that four-city military alliance with his own armed force of three hundred and eighteen men.

Perhaps Abram may have thought, *“What if those cities regroup? What if they launch a counter-strike? What if they arrive with reinforcements? What if they seek to kill me?”* These questions offer an opportunity to contemplate a two-word phrase that can be immensely practical or incredibly destructive. That phrase is, *“What if...”*

For instance, the phrase *“what if...”* can stimulate imaginative thinking and help us generate creative solutions to complex problems. On the other hand, *“what if...”* may lead us to obsess over an endless array of negative outcomes. This takes the focus of attention off the God who has promised to care for our needs and often leads to stress, apprehension, and worry- things that God would have us avoid ([1 Peter 5:7](#)).

(1) H3372 yare' *New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary*. Copyright © 1994, 2003, 2006

But before we continue, let’s consider God’s interaction with Abram more closely: ***“...I am your shield, your very great reward” (Genesis 15:1)***. The word “shield” conveys a sense of protection, while the concept of a reward denotes something valuable and desirable.

By making this promise, God not only assured Abram of His protection but also assured him of a future reward. Thus, Abram had little reason to fear. The New Testament offers a parallel exhortation to fearlessness in 1 John 4:4, where we are told, ***“...the Spirit who lives in you is greater than the spirit who lives in the world” (NLT)***.

Jesus provided a similar message of encouragement for His followers...

***“I give them eternal life and they shall never perish. No one shall snatch them away from me, for my Father has given them to me, and he is more powerful than anyone else, so no one can kidnap them from me” (John 10:28-29 TLB)***.

So the Scriptures assure us that God’s power is greater than the challenges we may encounter. The Word of God thus serves as a compass that guides us away from anxiety towards a better path...

***“Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6-7)***.

These promises are especially thought-provoking when compared to another promise of reward that was once offered to Abram. You may recall that when Abram returned from his military victory against the alliance that captured his nephew as a prisoner of war, he was met by the ruler of the city of Sodom.

Since the city of Sodom was among those who had been defeated by that confederacy, the king was undoubtedly grateful to receive news of Abram's victory. In a gesture of appreciation for his efforts, the king said to Abram, ***“Give back my people who were captured. But you may keep for yourself all the goods you have recovered” (Genesis 14:21 NLT).***

This presented Abram with an opportunity to secure the wealth of an entire city. But Abram wasted little time in declining the king's offer..

***“I solemnly swear to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, that I will not take so much as a single thread or sandal thong from what belongs to you. Otherwise you might say, ‘I am the one who made Abram rich!’” (Genesis 14:22-23 NLT).***

So Abram rejected the king's offer in view of his sworn oath before God. And even though Abram turned down this seemingly remarkable opportunity, God will ultimately bless him to a far greater extent, just as He promised. Abram's experience thus serves as a testament to God's ability to furnish an abundant provision in the lives of those who seek to honor Him.

However, Abram faced another problem...

***“But Abram said, ‘Lord God, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ Then Abram said, ‘Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!’” (Genesis 15:2-3).***

A childless couple of that era could opt to bestow their inheritance upon a family member or adopt a servant who would provide care and support for the couple in their later years. The adopted servant would then become the inheritor of their estate once they passed away,.

Since Abram and his wife Sarai were childless, it appears that Abram chose this second option with a servant named Eliezer. If Abram were to die without any children, Eliezer would become the sole beneficiary of everything he left behind.

But why would Abram choose a servant over a relative to receive his inheritance? The answer becomes clearer when we consider Abram's options. First, Abram's father, Terah had already passed away ([Genesis 11:32](#)). Abram's brother Haran predeceased him as well ([Genesis 11:28](#)). So, who was next in line to receive Abram's inheritance among the members of his family?

The answer is Abram's nephew Lot, the son of his brother Haran ([Genesis 11:27](#)). As Abram's nephew, he should have been the inheritor of Abram's estate instead of a beneficiary from outside the family (like Eliezer). But Lot is strangely absent from this narrative for some unknown reason.

In fact, Lot seemingly disappeared from Abram's life after Abram rescued him. So where was Lot during this time? We'll get the answer to that question when we reach Genesis chapter nineteen.

So Abram responded to God by saying, ***“You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.”*** Does this infer that Abram harbored doubt towards God? To address this question, it's important to distinguish between a genuine question and a skeptical mindset that dismisses the possibility that God might actually fulfill His promises.

We can illustrate those differences with a look at the responses offered by two different individuals in

the New Testament gospel of Luke. Luke chapter one recounts the experience of a man named Zechariah who received a visit from an angelic messenger. That messenger announced the future birth of Zechariah's son, the child who is better known to us as John the Baptist.

Here is how Zechariah responded to that angelic pronouncement...

***“Zechariah said to the angel, 'What proof is there for this? I'm an old man, and my wife is beyond her childbearing years'” (Luke 1:18 GW).***

That brought a sharp and immediate response from God's emissary...

***“The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in God's presence. I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn't believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen'” (Luke 1:19-20 CEB).***

That same angelic being later appeared with another message for a young woman named Mary...

***“You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus” (Luke 1:31 NIV)***

Like Zechariah, Mary's response also took the form of a question...

***“Mary asked the angel, 'But how can this happen? I am a virgin'” (Luke 1:34 NLT).***

Given the superficial resemblance in these questions, there must have been a distinction between Zechariah's attitude and Mary's attitude towards God's message. Zechariah's question must have conveyed an attitude of skeptical unbelief while Mary took Gabriel at his word, but failed to grasp how his prophetic message might be accomplished. That contrast serves to account for the difference in Gabriel's response.

So what does this have to do with Abram? Well, God had already assured Abram that He would be his ***"exceedingly great reward"*** in Genesis 15:1 However, Abram responded by saying, ***“Sovereign LORD, what good will your reward do me, since I have no children? My only heir is Eliezer of Damascus” (Genesis 15:2 GNB).***

As we'll see, God's response to Abram tells us that Abram had confidence in God's ability to fulfill His promises. Abram, like Mary, displayed honesty and transparency when questioning God- and both demonstrated their willingness to take God at His word.

So here was God's response to Abram's inquiry...

***“And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir'” (Genesis 15:4).***

So, God informed Abram that He would honor His promise by granting him a son who would carry on his family lineage. But there is a missing element in this response that might go unnoticed.

You see, God informed Abram that he would be the father of this promised son, but notice that our text does not disclose the identity of the child's mother. This omission will later factor into the choices and decisions made by Abram and his wife, Sarai.

God then proceeded to guarantee His promise to Abram by means of an illustration...

***“Then He brought him outside and said, 'Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.' And He said to him, 'So shall your descendants be'” (Genesis 15:5).***

Astronomers believe the universe may contain up to one septillion stars, or one followed by twenty-

four zeros. This doesn't necessarily mean that Abram would have 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 physical descendants, but just like the stars in the sky, he would have too many offspring to count.

So, God provided Abram with two important guarantees. The first was recorded earlier in Genesis 13:17: "***Go and walk through the land in every direction, for I am giving it to you***" (NLT). Now God has added a second guarantee: Abram's descendants would be far too many to count, just like the stars in the sky. For Abram, this meant he would always have a reminder of these assurances regardless of whether he looked above or below.

This leads us to one of the most important verses in the Biblical Scriptures...

***"Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6 NIV).***

It is difficult to overstate the significance of this passage in terms of our relationship with God. We can begin with a look at the word "believed" in the original language of this passage. This word means, "*to stand firm, to trust, to be certain, to believe in.*"<sup>(1)</sup>

We should also notice that Abram did not place his belief in these promises. Instead, "***Abram believed the LORD...***" In other words, Abram believed these promises because he believed in the One who made them.

(1) H539 'aman *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*

This serves to illustrate the difference between a belief *in* God and simply believing that "god" exists. You see, it's one thing to believe in the existence of a "higher power" or "greater intelligence." However, it's something different to place your trust and belief in God as a Person.

This is a point that bears repeating. Abram didn't believe in the promises he received. Instead, "***Abram believed the LORD...***" In other words, Abram placed his trust and faith in God Himself.

But what does it mean to place our belief in God? The Biblical book of Hebrews asks that question and proceeds to answer it in the context of faith...

***"What is faith? It is the confident assurance that something we want is going to happen. It is the certainty that what we hope for is waiting for us, even though we cannot see it up ahead. Men of God in days of old were famous for their faith. By faith— by believing God— we know that the world and the stars— in fact, all things— were made at God's command; and that they were all made from things that can't be seen" (Hebrews 11:1-3 TLB).***

Faith is the unifying thread among those who accomplished great things for God within the Bible. One dictionary defines faith as "*A belief in or confident attitude toward God, involving commitment to His will for one's life.*" <sup>(1)</sup> Hebrews 11:1 also tells us, "***Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.***"

This is an old maxim that states, "*Seeing is believing.*" However, genuine Biblical faith is often just the opposite- *first* you believe and *then* you see. Jesus illustrated that difference when He told His followers, "***Therefore I tell you, whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours***" (Mark 11:24 NIV). This kind of faith becomes possible when we place our complete confidence and trust in the Person who can answer those prayers.

Faith involves the confident expectation that God will act in a trustworthy manner to fulfill His promises, even if external appearances seem to suggest otherwise. This kind of faith serves to define a Godly lifestyle, for as Romans 1:17 tells us, "***...it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith'***" (NIV). This makes faith something we possess and an attribute that characterizes a God-honoring life.

However, it's important to recognize the difference between "faith" and "blind faith." For instance, there are some who believe faith involves "belief without evidence." We can associate that conviction with "blind faith," or a faith that has no basis in reality. On the other hand, genuine Biblical faith represents *"a belief in or confident attitude toward God, involving commitment to His will for one's life."* (1)

We should never mistake genuine faith for something that has no basis in reality. The essence of authentic faith involves trust in the God who demonstrates His faithfulness through the pages of the Scriptures and the lives of those (like Abram) who follow Him.

(1) "Faith" *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, Copyright © 1986, Thomas Nelson Publishers

So Abram "invested" his faith in God, and God responded by crediting Abram's "account," so to speak. Genesis 15:6 identifies the nature of that credit when it tells us that God "...**credited it to him as righteousness.**" A righteous person is someone who has "right standing" with God, and the Biblical book of Romans explains that accreditation process in Abram's life...

***"(Abram) did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness'" (Romans 4:20-22 NIV).***

This has important implications for those of us who live today...

***"The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness - for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification" (Romans 4:23-25 NIV).***

The New Testament epistle of 2 Corinthians also goes on to tell us, ***"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God"*** (NIV). One source explains how that accounting took place...

*"God as judge assigned the responsibility of our sin to Christ, making it possible for Him to justly receive the punishment that we deserve for that sin (Is. 53:6; 1 Pet. 2:24). The verse shows that Christ was our substitute, accepting the penalty of sin in our place..."*

*Not only did God impute our sin to Christ, He also imputed Christ's perfect righteousness to us (that is, He counted it as belonging to us; Phil. 3:9)... Every Christian possesses, legally, the perfect righteousness of Christ imputed by God, and received through faith alone."* (1)

Thus, God assures us that He will accept us just as He accepted Abram when we place our faith in Christ.

Finally, Jesus was once presented with the following question: "...**What must we do to do the works God requires?**" Jesus addressed that question by saying, ***"The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent"*** (see [John 6:28-29](#)). God will credit righteousness to everyone who does the same.

(1) Sproul, R. C. (Ed.). (2015). *The Reformation Study Bible: English Standard Version* (2015 Edition) (p. 2057). Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust

***"Then He said to him, 'I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.' And he said, 'Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?'" (Genesis 15:7-8).***

So it appears Abram sought to build upon his faith by asking, ***“LORD God, how can I know the land will be mine?” (Genesis 15:8 CEV)***. Perhaps we might rephrase this question in the following manner: *“Please give me an added foundation to believe what you’ve already promised.”*

Here then, was God’s response...

***“So He said to him, 'Bring Me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.' Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle, and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away” (Genesis 15:9-11).***

There are many aspects of this scene that seem rather unusual from a 21st century perspective. However, some contextual background can shed light on what takes place here in Genesis 15:9-11.

Back in Abram’s era, the customary method of executing a contract or legal arrangement differed significantly from what we know today. In those days, agreements were formalized through the ceremony that is detailed for us within these verses. That ritual was known as “cutting a covenant” and it bound two parties together in a legal agreement that was sealed through the sacrifice of one or more animals.

The parties to a covenant would first cut the animals in half and place the halves opposite to one another on the ground. Each party then proceeded to walk between them. This ceremony offered a striking visualization, for it declared that those who failed to meet their covenantal obligations deserved to suffer the fate of those same sacrificial animals.

So God instructed Abram to prepare to enter a legal agreement according to the custom of that day. But even though Abram got everything ready to execute that agreement, God did not appear to Abram as soon as Abram was ready for Him.

Abram’s experience reminds us that God acts according to His timetable and not necessarily when we think the time is right. During those periods when God doesn’t seem to be moving as fast as we hoped, it may be easy to assume that He won’t act at all. But if Abram had made a similar assumption, then all the elements of the agreement that God instructed him to assemble would have disappeared.

You see, the animals that Abram prepared would have been swiftly devoured by the birds of prey that had been attracted to his work. If that occurred, then there would have been no agreement left to enter. But Abram demonstrated his faith and trust in God by driving them off. Thus, Abram was ready when God moved forward to confirm His promises.

***“Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. Then He said to Abram: 'Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions.***

***Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.”***

***And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. On the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: 'To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the River Euphrates— the Kenites, the Kenezites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites,***

*the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.”*  
(Genesis 15:12-21).

So it appears that God not only communicated with Abram but also gave him a tangible preview of what lay ahead. This accounts for the sense of fearful anticipation that we see in this portion of Genesis chapter fifteen.

That future included a long and difficult period for Abram's posterity: “...***Know this for certain: Your offspring will be foreigners in a land that does not belong to them; they will be enslaved and oppressed 400 years***” (HCSB).

This “***thick and dreadful darkness***” (NIV) that enveloped Abram thus served to reflect the slavery and hardship that his descendants would eventually suffer. But God had some additional plans for Abram’s progeny following that trial period...

***“But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions”*** (Genesis 15:14 NIV).

So God offered His personal assurance to Abram, and indeed, God rescued his descendants from the nation where they were enslaved and mistreated (see [Exodus chapters 1-14](#)). However, God also had another assurance for Abram as well: “***As for you, you will join your ancestors in peace and be buried after a good long life***” (CEB).

[Genesis 25:7](#) tells us that Abram passed away when he was 175 years old, so this represents another promised fulfillment. But something unusual took place following these things, for a smoking firepot and blazing torch suddenly appeared on the scene. Those items would seem to have very little to do with what we've discussed thus far- until we stop to consider what they represent.

***“When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces”*** (Genesis 15:17 ESV)

This “smoking firepot” was a round or cylindrical oven or furnace. The “blazing torch” was a lamp or flame that accompanied that firepot or emerged from it. So why would God employ these symbols as part of His interaction with Abram?

Well, these symbolic elements make better sense when we consider the fact that “...***the Lord your God is a consuming fire***” (Deuteronomy 4:24) and He “...***alone is immortal and who lives in unapproachable light, whom no one has seen or can see***” (1 Timothy 6:16). In fact, God will make further use of this symbolism in the Biblical book of Exodus when He will lead Abram’s descendants by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire at night ([Exodus 13:21](#)).

But there’s something else to consider in addition to these representative symbols. As discussed earlier, one might normally expect God and Abram to finalize their agreement by walking together between these animals in order to solemnize their covenant. But that’s not what happened.

Instead, Genesis 15:17 tells us this smoking firepot and blazing torch passed between the pieces on their own. In view of this, it seems that Abram’s responsibility consisted of preparing these animals and serving as an observer as God officially confirmed His promise.

We can find a good explanation for this when we consider the fact that Abram was a fallible human being. The only way to assure that this covenant would not fail was to ensure that God was the one who was responsible to fulfill it. Therefore, God entered into this agreement on Abram's behalf. Because of this, Abram could have complete confidence that God’s agreement with him would never fail because God is infallible.