The gospel that came to Abraham

by David R. Tasker

Trusting God to fulfill His promises, especially at a time of greatest discouragement, is an integral part of salvation.

Why did Jesus die? Was it a demonstration of divine love, some cosmic legal transaction, human rejection of God, or something else? Or all of the above?

The Book of Genesis records a profound incident that provides an intriguing perspective to this question when God appeared to Abram and asked him to perform an unusual ritual that ended with a pillar of cloud wafting through an avenue of sacrificed animal pieces. These things may be unintelligible to people living today, but if we could peel back the curtain and see them through the eyes of the ancient world, it might help us to understand not only Christ's first advent, but also the reason for the plan of salvation.

The story commences with the words "after these things" (Genesis 15:1).* The previous chapter describes Abram's extraordinary efforts in freeing his nephew Lot and a handful of other captives, and restoring not only their stolen property but also all the loot taken from the five cities of the plain by a four-king confederacy. With the "318 trained men" of his household, Abram stages a daring rescue and routes the enemy. The story ends with Abram paying tithes on his share of the proceeds to the enigmatic Melchizedek.

So it is after this that the events of chapter 15 happen. It is also quite some time after God's promise to Abram that his children would become "a great nation"—as numerous as the "dust of the earth." It appears that that promise was made too long ago and Abram's hope is growing dim. In response, God appears in a vision and speaks directly to Abram reassuring him, "I am your shield, Abram. Your reward will be very great" (Genesis 15:1). The mystified patriarch considers how that could be true while he remains childless. God had assured Abram on at least two previous occasions (Genesis 12:2 and 13:16) that he would have many children. But nothing had happened, and he wasn't getting any younger. And his wife, Sarah, was moving from grandmother to great-grandmother vintage. He is seriously wondering how he could ever be a father and has begun considering that maybe the promise of a gazillion descendants would be fulfilled through an adopted son—his young servant, Eliezer. So he suggests that option to God.

God's reassurance

But God has other ideas. He reassures the aging patriarch that his "very own son" would be his heir, not Eliezer. And he repeats the promise that this heir will be the firstborn of a great multitude. The promise will be fulfilled. To drive the point home, God takes Abram outside and tells him that his children will be as numerous as the stars. As we read the rest of the story, it is apparent that at this stage it is still daylight. It is not until later in the chapter that darkness falls. "Look towards the heavens and count the stars. See if you are able to number them (Genesis 15:5)." Being late afternoon, or at least early evening, that would have been an easy task. If there were any stars shining at all, there would only have been one or two at most.

The point is made. Although Abram cannot see the full complement of stars, he knows that as the night deepens, stars rapidly appear until the whole sky is full. God had promised Abram many descendants, but Abram could not see how there could be any. Until now. Stars may not be visible in daylight, but when the Sun goes down, the sky is filled with them. Countless billions. And just as fading daylight enables a person to see more and more stars, so Abram would see increasing numbers of his descendants—in God's good time. Obviously, the time was not yet right for Abram, but when it was, God would make good on His promise. At this insight, Abram falls on his face in worship, now knowing by faith that God will fulfill His word. This was not only an "aha moment" for Abram, but the Lord "counted it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6) as well. Trusting God to fulfill His promises, especially at a time of greatest discouragement, is pinpointed here as an integral part of salvation.

This part of the story gives us insight into why Abram is recognized as a major hero of faith. His struggle is ours. Maybe there has been a time when each of us wanted something desperately. We may even have been convinced that God would answer our prayers. But God's schedule is not our schedule. He is not some convenience item that we can manipulate to make our life more comfortable.

He is the Sovereign Lord. He upholds the worlds by His powerful word (Hebrews 1:3). We need to trust Him to work out the unknowns in our own lives.

But the Lord is not finished making His point. "Bring Me a three-year old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, and a three-year-old ram, plus a young turtledove and a pigeon," (Genesis 15:9). Those animals and birds must have been in pens close to his tent, because it does not take Abram long to retrieve them, slaughter them, and, except for the birds, cut their carcasses in two. There is not much daylight left, but Abram is able to complete the task quickly. He then lines the pieces in two rows, opposite each other, forming an alleyway or corridor. This, of course, is an open invitation to the birds of prey in the area. The smell of freshly slaughtered meat attracts many of them, and Abram soon finds himself surrounded by hungry vultures. Again, there is a delay in God's schedule, and Abram diligently engages in "busy work," maybe wondering why God didn't take the next step in this exercise. He vigorously (and successfully) fights off the birds of prey until at last collapsing in an exhausted sleep on the ground (Genesis 15:11, 12). At least he has preserved the sacrifice that God had asked him to prepare.

Darkness is still approaching, but it has not completely fallen yet, so Abram's sleep is only a power nap, maybe no more than five to 10 minutes. He is startled awake by God's voice, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be servants there… or four hundred years," (Genesis 15:13). God is giving Abram a fast-forward glimpse into the future, assuring the old patriarch that even though his descendants will face tough times, they will return to their own land greatly multiplied in numbers and possessions (Genesis 15:14). It all adds weight to the certainty of Abram having children.

It is reassuring to see this description. God's people would not be a super race, but a band of mortals with human limitations; they would face the reversing fortunes of life only too familiar to us. Although people at times have imagined they can successfully live their lives apart from God, He remembers that they are dust (Psalm 103:13, 14). Our first parent was created out of the dust of the ground (Genesis 2:7), reminding us all of our humble origins. God is not so much interested in where we have come from, but more in where we are going. He does not expect us to perform at superhuman levels, achieving hero status. Therefore, the descriptions of the slavery and affliction of Abram's descendants bring a human face to the situation—a reality check. God specializes in dealing with ordinary human beings with extraordinary struggles.

When it is fully dark (Genesis 15:17), the most amazing thing happens. A "pillar" of smoke and fire passes through the alleyway of animal pieces, traveling slowly from one end to the other. It is surreal, and probably causes the hairs on the back of Abram's neck to stand on end. He is observing something very strange and unexpected. Not only does he recognize the presence of the Almighty, but also being a child of his times he is fully aware of the full significance of what he is seeing. And as the scene unfolds, he is probably utterly dumbstruck. About the only familiar element to us in this story is the pillar of cloud and fire from the Exodus story (Exodus 13:21), but that is hundreds of years later. The rest of the story seems very foreign. What is going on, exactly?

In the ancient world at that time, there was a ritual (most clearly recorded by the Hittites) that formalized a treaty between two kings.[1] In those days, there were no countries, as we know them, just confederacies of city-states. If one of these smaller states was concerned about its "international" security, it had the option to join forces with a powerful neighbor. So a treaty was formalized between the king of a small city-state (a vassal king) and the king of a super-power (a suzerain king). Some of these confederacies grew quite large, until they reached empire status.

The treaty was formalized by a series of festivals and ceremonies, and a legal contract was drawn up. The climax of the ceremonial proceedings was when the vassal king (the little guy) would walk through an alleyway of animal halves, while the suzerain

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king (the big guy), surrounded by his officials, would look on approvingly. The point? The little king was signing his life away in front of the powerful leader (and many witnesses), that if he ever did anything to break the treaty, he deserved to be put to death—sacrificed like the animals he was walking between.[2]

Abram had already shown himself to be a king of sorts, and a highly skilled military tactician. He was very highly respected by the kings of the valley after he defeated Chedorlaomer and his confederacy of four kings of the east and had retrieved plunder taken by them. With his tiny force (Genesis 14:14), he defied the odds and routed an enemy of superior strength. When Abram subsequently returned tithes to God instead of taking the spoils of war for himself, he was acknowledging God as his supreme commander. In other words, he recognized God as the suzerain, and himself as the vassal.

God takes personal charge

So why did the suzerain God go through the split-animal alleyway, when it should have been Abram the vassal doing that? God was simply declaring that He has taken personal responsibility for the success of the plan of salvation. He assures us that the covenant is not based on human faithfulness. And we need to know that! As we read the history of Abram's descendants, we notice that they are known more for their failings than for their successes. And we know that it is not only Abram's descendants, who vacillated between the very bad and the very good. We need to be reminded that our salvation is not dependant upon human ability or action, but upon the action of One who came as a man to fulfill all the legal requirements of the divine-human treaty. And instead of each of us having to suffer the consequences of human infidelity, God promised that He would do that for us.

Although Abram's faith in God was strong, that of his future children would be a lot less certain. If there was to be any future hope for the people of God, there had to be something more definite than the good intentions of a weak-minded people. If God's people are to have a glorious future, then God Himself must be prepared to take the consequences of the broken covenant. In other words, by passing between the pieces, God sealed an oath with Abram that if ever the covenant between them was broken, God Himself would put His life on the line.

And He did—at Calvary.

David R. Tasker (Ph.D., Andrews University), is Dean of the Seminary and Associate Professor of Old Testament Interpretation and Exegesis, Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Philippines. E-mail: DTasker@aiias.edu.

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*The Bible version for this article is the English Standard Version – 2001(ESV)

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Action Report

Continued from page 23

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Zane Yi is a Ph. D. candidate in Philosophy at Fordham University. He teaches Philosophy courses at Kennesaw State University. His e-mail is zane-yi@gmail.com.

For more information about the Society's upcoming inaugural conference, visit http://adventistphilosophy.wordpress.com. Theme: "Athens and Jerusalem Revisited: Adventism and the Love of Wisdom."