

GEN 15:1-18—THE GREATEST PROPHECY IN THE BIBLE

INTRO: Happy New Year everyone! Since we are beginning a new year, I think it is appropriate for us to consider why we are here in this place, the church. Many people come to church because that is how they were raised. Others because they think it is a good influence on their children or for society. Others because they get some personal benefit—it makes them feel better or have a better attitude or something. That’s all right as far as it goes, I suppose.

But there are lots of things that are good influences on children and society, things like the boy or girl scouts or 4H. And there are lots of things that make people feel better, things like a good job, or health, or even alcohol. Yet Christianity, which this church represents, is different. Christianity is both a belief system and a way of life.

There are lots of belief systems and ways of life: Islam and Hinduism and atheism and hedonism and all kinds of things. But Christianity says it is true in a way that the others are not. It is true and can both be known and verified in ways that all other belief systems and ways of life cannot.

All other religions or belief systems and ways of life essentially are based on founders or leaders who say, “This is what you should believe and how you should live.” They will give reasons as to why they think they are right. And you choose to follow them for various reasons. But at the end of the day, none of the other religions and belief systems can be demonstrated to be objectively true.

The ultimate issue is not “How does this make me feel?” but “Is this true and can I know that it is true?” There are many reasons why I believe that Christianity *can* be shown to be true in a way that no other religion or belief system can. One of the ways is the fulfillment of prophecy.

Why is prophecy important? Prophecy is important because what a prophet is saying is that **“God has told me that X, Y, or Z is going to happen in the future.”** X, Y, or Z are not in the control of the prophet. That’s why in **Deuteronomy 18** God said, **“The prophet who presumes to speak a word in my name that I have not commanded him to speak, or who speaks in the name of other gods, that same prophet shall die.’ And if you say in your heart, ‘How may we know the word that the Lord has *not* spoken?’— when a prophet speaks in the name of the Lord, if the word does *not* come to pass or come true, that is a word that the Lord has *not* spoken; the prophet has spoken it presumptuously.”** So this is serious business.

Sometimes God himself prophesies directly, and sometimes the things that he prophesies do not come true for hundreds or even thousands of years. But then they happen as was prophesied. When that occurs, it shows that human beings could not have manipulated events to try to “fake” a fulfillment of prophecy—because generations of people will have died out. When such prophecies *do* come true, it shows that God is real, and he is driving events, because he knows **“the end from the beginning.”** And that shows that the faith of those who follow him is based on objectively verifiable fact.

Today’s passage of Scripture, **Gen 15:1-18**, in my opinion, is probably the greatest prophecy in the Bible. It was given by God himself to a man named Abraham (or Abram as he was then known). Abram is the patriarch of three world religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He lived about 4000 years ago, around 2000BC. God had called Abram out of the city of Ur in modern day Iraq to go to a land God would show him. That land was Israel. God had promised to give Abram a seed or child and bountiful descendants, even though Abram was an old man and childless. God had promised to give him the land he would show him and promised to bless the entire world through Abram’s seed. That’s where our story picks up in **Genesis 15**.

O/S: Let’s walk through this passage section-by-section and see why it is the greatest prophecy in the Bible.

vv.1-6 [READ] Abram was about 75 years old when God first promised to make him a great nation in **Genesis 12**. Now in **Genesis 15** it is approximately 10 years later, and God specifically promises to give Abram a child from his own body. It would be another 15 years before Isaac was born to Abram and Sarai—when he was 100 years old and she was 90 and past the ability, humanly speaking, of having children. Yet God can and does intervene in human affairs to cause things to happen that are impossible for mere people to do. Not only was Isaac miraculously conceived, but the promise in **v.5** that Abram’s descendants would be like the stars in the sky was fulfilled as **Heb 11:12** states, when Israel became a great nation.

That brings us to the rest of this passage, **vv.7-18 [READ]** There are three things I want to talk about here; two are relatively minor (although they are still important) and one that makes this the greatest prophecy in the Bible.

First the two more secondary matters:

- God had just promised Abram to give him a child and make his descendants like the stars in the sky even though Abram was old and his wife was past childbearing age, and Abram had believed the Lord and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Now, the very next thing God does in **v.7** is remind Abram that he brought him out of Ur in order to give him this land to possess—and remember, Abram was *already in the land*. But instead of saying, **“I believe you Lord, even as I believe you about the child and the descendants,”** Abram says, **“O Lord God, how may I know that I will possess it?”**

What I find amazing is that God did not say, “How dare you question me? Good grief, you’re already in the land, what else do you want?” Instead, he does something to let Abram know that he will, indeed, possess the land. That is what we will be focusing on in a minute. But right now, I think it is important to emphasize that God is a gracious God. He knows what we are like. He knows that we are subject to all kinds of doubts. As I mentioned last week in connection with **Psalm 73**, doubts and questions are not the enemies of faith but can be the catalysts for a mature faith. There are good answers to most questions that people have about God and Christianity. When we see what God is like, when we recall what he has done in the past and what he has planned for the future, most of our doubts will go away. But even if we still have some doubts and questions, we will be able to hold them provisionally, in a way that does not destroy our faith.

- The other matter of more secondary importance is found in **vv.13-16**, where God told Abram that he would die at a good old age but that his descendants would be enslaved for 400 years in a land that is not theirs, but God would judge that nation and Abram’s descendants would return to this land with many possessions. All of those prophecies were fulfilled. **Gen 25:7** reports that Abraham died at the age of 175. The book of **Exodus** reports on how the nation of Israel was enslaved for 400 years in Egypt, but God judged the Egyptians, and Israel was eventually able to leave Egypt with great wealth. Note that the events involving Israel occurred hundreds of years after Abraham died and could not possibly have been “orchestrated” by any of Abraham’s descendants. The existence of fulfilled prophecy is a powerful indicator both *that* God exists and *who* the real God is. You do not find specific prophecies like these anywhere else, in any other religion or worldview, other than in the Bible.

That brings us to the core of what makes **Genesis 15** the greatest prophecy in the Bible. Remember in **v.8** Abram said **“O Lord God, how may I know that I will possess the land?”** The answer is found in **vv.9-10** [READ] What is going on there? Abram says, **“How will I know?”** and God answers by saying, **“Bring me these animals.”** Then Abram brings the animals but doesn’t just say, **“Now what?”** but immediately cuts them in two and lays the halves opposite each other. Why did he do that?

To answer these questions, we need to know something about the Ancient Near East. Today if you want to enter into a solemn agreement or covenant with someone, a lawyer draws up a formal written agreement. Then both parties to the agreement sign it in front of witnesses, and it is notarized. They didn’t do that in the Ancient Near East back in Abram’s day.

In Abram’s day, when two parties wanted to enter into a solemn agreement or covenant, they went through a covenant ceremony. The covenant typically would have blessings and curses attached to it. To solemnize the covenant, they would take animals such as God told Abram to bring, cut them in two, and lay the pieces opposite each other. So when God told Abram in **v.9** to bring him certain animals, Abram knew exactly what was going on—that God and he were about to enter into a covenant. That’s why in **v.10** when Abram brought the animals, he cut them in two and laid the halves opposite each other. BTW, in Hebrew the actual word for “making” a covenant is to “cut covenant.” So in **v.18**, even though our Bibles say, **“On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram,”** the actual Hebrew word is “cut” a covenant with Abram.

In the Ancient Near East what would then happen is that both parties would walk through the pieces of the dead animals in sort of figure 8 style. When they were walking through the pieces, what they were doing was symbolizing the punishment they were taking on themselves if they broke the covenant. What they were saying was, **“If I violate the terms of this agreement, may I become just like these dead animals here.”** Kind of an effective way to bring home the importance of what you were agreeing to, don’t you think?

This is where things get very interesting. Notice that in **v.12** God caused a deep sleep to fall on Abram. Then **v.17** says [READ]. What is going on there? That **“smoking oven and flaming torch”** was God himself in symbolic form passing through the pieces of the animals. We know that because later, when God led Israel out of Egypt, he went before them as a **“pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night,”** and when he appeared on Mount Sinai to give Moses the Ten Commandments, **Exod 19:18** says, **“Mount Sinai was all in smoke because the Lord descended upon it in fire, and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace.”**

Notice something very important. It was only God who passed through the pieces of the animals. He did not make Abram pass through the pieces. What God was saying was, **“Abram, if I violate the terms of this**

covenant, may I become like these dead animals.” But because God alone passed through the pieces, he was also passing on behalf of Abram—IOW, he was also saying, **“Abram, if you violate the terms of this covenant, by not believing me, by not following me, may I, not you, become like these dead animals.”**

This is known as the Abrahamic Covenant, and here in **Genesis 15** it is ratified. The Abrahamic Covenant is stated in somewhat different terms in **Genesis 12, 13, 15, 17, and 22**. When you put them all together, we find that there are three core promises that God makes: (1) promises relating to “seed” or descendants; (2) promises relating to “land”; and (3) promises relating to blessing the people of the world through Abram’s seed. This covenant unfolds throughout the rest of the Bible. In many respects, the Abrahamic Covenant is the theological backbone of the entire Bible. That is *one* of the things that makes **Genesis 15**, where the covenant is ratified, the greatest prophecy in the Bible.

But there’s more. In the NT we learn the true scope of what God was getting at with Abram from the very beginning. A key concept here is what the NT calls “types” and “shadows.” A “type” or “shadow” is a physical thing that points to something greater, something beyond itself. In **Gal 3-4** Paul discusses the significance of the covenant with Abraham. (If you have your Bible, please turn to **Gal 3**, since **Gal 3-4** is one of the most important passages in the entire Bible.) Paul points out in **Gal 3:16 [READ]**. So, yes, Abram did indeed have a son of his own body, the boy Isaac. But Isaac was a “type” and a “shadow” pointing to the true seed, namely, Jesus Christ.

Additionally, in **Gal 3:6-7, and 29** Paul says [READ]. You see, from the beginning, God had a plan that extended far beyond Abram, and Isaac, and even the nation of Israel, to include people in the entire world—from every **“tribe and tongue and people and nation,”** as it says in the book of **Revelation**. Thus, Abram’s *physical* descendants who became the *physical* nation of Israel were types and shadows of the true, spiritual Israel—namely, people from all over the world who are united to God through faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, even the land was a type or shadow. **Romans 4** talks about Abraham being the heir, not just the land of Israel, but of the entire world. That’s why this covenant, which is ratified here, is so monumental.

But what makes this the greatest prophecy in the Bible is that while God acted out this covenant in front of Abram by passing through the pieces of the dead animals, about 2000 years later, on a hill called Calvary or Golgotha, in the person of Jesus Christ, God did it for real. Think about this, God promised Abram a seed from his own body and descendants like the stars and Abram **“believed in the Lord and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.”** God even cuts a covenant with Abram to make the promise certain. Then in **Genesis 17**, God appears to Abram again and says your wife will bear a son from your own body, but Abram clearly doesn’t believe God. Instead, he laughs and cites his and Sarah’s ages, and says, **“Oh that Ishmael might live before You!” (Gen 17:16-18)**

This same disbelief characterized Abram’s physical descendants, the nation of Israel. Israel was miraculously led out of Egypt exactly as God had prophesied in **Genesis 15**. The people *said* they would believe and obey God, but they never really did. The same thing is true of us. Paul summarizes the situation in **Rom 3:10-11 [READ]**.

God had told Adam in the very beginning, way back in **Genesis 2**, that the soul that sins shall die. But people never learn. Adam didn’t, Abraham didn’t, Israel didn’t, we don’t. We all willingly go our own way, estranged and separated from God, and are destined for eternal separation from God unless we change our own hearts—but the problem is, we never can no matter how hard we try. Therefore, left to ourselves, we are doomed.

But God loves us. So he decided to come to earth *himself* as a human being—the person of Jesus Christ. As a man he did for us what we could not do for ourselves, namely, live the life we should have lived and, on the cross, pay the price for our sin that otherwise we would have to pay but never could. Think about those dead, bloody animals in **Genesis 15**. Jesus was whipped and beaten and then nailed to a cross where he died, shedding his blood just like those animals.

But what makes the prophecy of **Genesis 15** so amazing is the *detail* of its fulfillment. Remember that the animals were not just killed, but were cut in two. **Matt 27:51** tells us that when Jesus died, **“the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom.”** **Heb 10:19-20** tells us the meaning of that. It says, **“We have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh.”** That veil was showing that, on the cross, Jesus Christ fulfilled the Abrahamic Covenant.

But that’s not all. **Gen 15:17** says, **“When the sun had set, it was very dark”** That’s when the smoking oven and flaming torch passed through the pieces. **Matt 27:45** tells us that when Jesus was on the cross, **“from the sixth hour darkness fell upon all the land until the ninth hour.”**

The judgment of sin is eternal separation from God, otherwise known as hell. Hell is described in various places in the Bible as **“outer darkness” (Matt 25:30)**. The darkness of the sky when Jesus was on the

cross was a sign of God's judgment on the sin that Jesus was bearing. That darkness was symbolizing the outer darkness of hell itself. Since the essence of hell is separation from God, when Jesus cried out from the cross, "**My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?**" he was actually experiencing hell.

By definition, hell lasts forever. Jesus did not just bear one eternity in hell, but millions of eternities in hell, all compressed onto him in the time he was on the cross. That is beyond my ability to comprehend. But it reveals that what Jesus experienced on the cross—which is the reality of what had been symbolically acted out in **Genesis 15**—is unimaginable. But that is what it took to redeem you and me from the penalty of our sin.

One last thing: remember that covenants had both blessings and curses. **Gal 3:13-14** tells us that **[READ]**. The third core promise of the Abrahamic Covenant was that God would bless the entire world through the seed of Abram. Christ is that seed. But the only way we would receive the blessing was if he first bore the curse. He became the curse so that we would receive the blessing of eternal life. The prophecy that was acted out in **Genesis 15** was the acting out of the most important event in history—the salvation of humanity—by the most important person in history—Jesus Christ. That is why this is the greatest prophecy in the Bible.

CONCL: There is no other religion, belief system, or worldview like Christianity. Nothing else can be objectively verified like Christianity. The covenant God made with Abram was never limited to Abram's son Isaac or to the land or people of Israel but was always pointing to something far greater—the redemption of the world through what Jesus Christ would accomplish on the cross 2000 years after the covenant was cut. **Genesis 15** shows us that there *is* a God who is orchestrating history, who knows the end from the beginning. He is a God we can know. And he knows what we are going through because, in the person of Jesus Christ, he became a human being just like us.

If you have not done so, turn to him. If you have done that in the past but your faith is nominal or wobbly, this amazing prophecy shows that your faith is based on profound fact. So get real about Jesus—he and he alone fulfilled what had been prophesied and acted out thousands of years before. He and he alone did what we could never do—he took the covenant curse to give us the covenant blessing of new life. That's what makes this the greatest prophecy in the Bible.