

## Prayers

### Opening prayer

Glory be to You, O Lord our God, for you have brought us into a world in which there are so many wonderful things. Thank you for books to read, for the use of the internet, for beautiful objects to place in my home and food to buy in the shops. Save us from using these things inappropriately or for evil, and help us to value all Your gifts, through Jesus Christ we pray, AMEN

### Prayer Suggestions

**Prayer ideas** *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

If you can find the opportunity, shout out your requests to God as loud as you can. There is something powerful about releasing your prayers in this way (but not to inconvenience others by the noise we make!).

#### **On-going prayers**

- **Pray for those involved in investment and the creation of wealth.** *Pray for those who have the money to invest in new ventures. Pray that money will be properly used for the good of all*
- *Praise God for His power to deliver from evil. Stand firm against the devil and all his works in whatever way seems most suitable for you.*
- *Pray for whatever is headline news in your own country today. Make the effort to find out more about it from the internet or from reading news items you might otherwise ignore*

### Meditation

Receive salvation, my friend, it may not now make sense to you  
But you will find that faith will lead you upwards, not downwards.

Follow the Lord, my friend, you may never know what will happen  
But the journey you will take will go far beyond your expectations.

Accept the Church, my friend, be vilified; you will not like the pain  
But the fellowship of believers is the most precious thing on earth.

Bear the Cross, my friend, it binds you to the suffering of Christ  
But it is lighter than the burdens placed on you by this world.

Await the vision, my friend, the Lord has things for you to do  
But you will never know them if you do not give Him time, and listen.

Rest in the Lord, my friend, there's no reward for doing right on earth  
But knowing His everlasting love is safety enough for you, forever.

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## Bible Study

### Bible passage – Genesis 15: 7-21

<sup>7</sup> Then God said to him:

‘I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land as an inheritance.’ <sup>8</sup>

Abram replied,

‘My Sovereign Lord, how may I know that I am to possess it?’

<sup>9</sup> Then He said to him,

‘bring me a three year old calf, a three year old goat, and a three year old ram, a dove and a pigeon.’

<sup>10</sup> Abram brought Him all these and cut them in two, placing each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. <sup>11</sup> Then birds of prey swooped down on the carcasses and Abram drove them away. <sup>12</sup> While the sun was setting, a deep sleep fell on Abram, and a great fearsome darkness overcame him.

<sup>13</sup> The Lord then said to Abram,

‘Know this for a fact, that your descendants will be temporary residents in a land which is not theirs; they will be slaves there and be oppressed for four hundred years. <sup>14</sup> But I will judge the nation they serve, and they will eventually come away with great wealth. <sup>15</sup> However, you will join your ancestors in peace and will be buried at a good old age. <sup>16</sup> But they will return here after the fourth generation, when the sins of the Amorites have reached completion.’

<sup>17</sup> When the sun had set and it was dark, a smoking fire-pot and a torch of fire appeared and passed between the pieces. <sup>18</sup> The Lord made a Covenant with Abram on that very day:

‘I give this land to your descendants, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates, <sup>19</sup> the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, <sup>20</sup> the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, <sup>21</sup> the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.’

## Review

There are powerful mysteries within these words which mean that none of us can expect to fathom its depths completely. It is an ancient story describing an ancient practice with which we are completely unfamiliar, and it contains the gory details of a sacrifice (15:9,10,17) with birds, possibly symbolically, attacking the carcasses (15:11) and a great darkness which overcame Abram (15:12) with scary connotations of chaos and death. There are also some amazing features of the text which follow on from what we read previously in the first six verses of chapter 15, for example, the Lord's prophetic words of reassurance to Abram (15:7), His prophetic words about the future of God's people (15:13-16) and the established by a mystical Covenant between God and Abram which related to land (15:18). Even though this is a passage from Genesis which seems to be almost incomprehensible, there are some fascinating truths about God's Covenant relationship with His people which add to yesterday's story. The first half of chapter 15 is about the Covenant of inheritance and faith (vv1-7), but the second half which makes up our reading today is about the Covenant and 'land'.

Our passage begins with the Lord speaking directly to Abram, giving him the promise of land for his inheritance and also a word of reassurance after his expression of faith (15:6). Abram was perplexed about God's plans (15:8), so God commanded Abram to do something which sounds quite repulsive to us who read this text today. All we can do is to stand back from our instant dislike of what God told Abram to do and try and understand what was going on. There was raw symbolism in Abram's cutting up of animals (15:10), which was not a form of sacrificial worship, but probably a symbolic ancient act used by people to make agreements (sometimes called 'covenants') with each other. However, in this encounter with God, Abram was required to do all the preparation work himself, but it was to be a covenant agreement which depended upon God and not on Abram. The agreement took the form of a promise by God (15:13-16) that he would give his descendants a land in which to live. Only God had the authority to grant such ownership, but Abram would have to take hold of it by faith. Abram's faith in accepting God's promise was symbolised by the 'smoke' and the 'fire' (15:17) which moved between the animal pieces prepared by Abram; they were Old Testament symbols for God (as for example, when God led the people of Israel in the desert, for example, Exodus 13:21,22, 40:38f.).

Of great interest to us is what God said prophetically about His people in the central promise given in verses 13 to 16. Abram, we must remember, had erroneously gone down into Egypt and then returned to Canaan (12:10-20), so God prophesied that his descendants would also go to Egypt, but not return for four generations (counting each generation as being one hundred years, making 400 - see v13 & v16). This reads like an amazing prophecy, yet it was one that gave assurance to God's people that God was in control, whatever happened. Just as God had been faithful to Abram, He would be faithful to His people, despite the errors of their ways. To Abram, the promise of land in which to live sounded almost too impossible to be true; but God, through this Covenant and His prophetic Word, had committed Himself to this. All He required

of Abram was that he trusted Him and was obedient; and in the same way, God has always required the same from Abram's descendants.

God's promises sometimes come to us in strange ways. For myself, I know that the Lord promised me certain things about my ministry one evening whilst I was thinking about how the internal combustion engine worked; I have now forgotten all about the workings of this type of engine, but the Lord has fulfilled all His promises in my ministry! All of us, like Abram must be open both to the Lord's promises, but also to His prophetic Word.

## Going Deeper

- Asking for a sign
- The sign of the sacrifice
- The prophecy
- The Land of Israel

Abram's faith was the earlier highlight of chapter 15, but now, the focus of the chapter has moved to God's eternal promise. How we interpret this promise today is an important matter, because the possession of the land of Canaan was never entirely completed in the Old Testament (see Judges 1) and is a matter of international contention to this very day. That, amongst other things, is what we shall look at now in the main Bible study.

### ***Asking for a sign***

It was earlier, just after Abram had entered Canaan and while he was in Shechem, that he first heard God tell him that his ancestors would live in the land to which he had been called; 'to your offspring I will give this land' (12:7). Later, after Lot had chosen to go his own way and journeyed towards the plains of Jordan and the city of Sodom, that God blessed Abram again by showing him all of Canaan, as far as he could see (13:14,15). He invited Abram to 'walk the length and the breadth of the land' (13:17) which would one day be the land of his inheritance.

All this lies behind our reading today, in which God re-affirms the promise of land to Abram (15:7) after he had shown faith by accepting the promise of a child (15:4). Abram's response to God's promise of land was to ask a question; it was not disbelief, but what seems an obvious question; he said, 'how may I know that I am to possess it?' (15:18). This question was noticeably less sharp than those Abram had asked of God about his lack of an heir (15:2,3), so it does appear that faith had moved Abram to a different place in his relationship with God. In reality, what Abram was doing was using very polite language to ask the Lord for a sign to confirm what he had said. This was quite normal for Old Testament times and to do this was regarded as an act of faith (see for example how Gideon asked for a sign from the Lord to test his understanding of God's will when he laid out his fleece – see Judges 6:37ff).

### ***The sign of the sacrifice***

The sign that God gave him was a sign that Abram would have understood, but is hard for us to accept, because it involved sacrifices of animals. There is some evidence in ancient documents available to us that it was common for agreements, called 'covenants' to be made between powerful people such as kings, for example, in just this manner. Animals would be slaughtered as a sacrifice to the gods and laid in half, one side against the other with a pathway between the two. When the two parties agreed their business (for example, an agreement on a boundary line) both of them would take an oath of loyalty and walk between the two halves of the sacrifices, swearing on the names of their gods that they should become like the animals they walked between (i.e. dead) if they transgressed the agreement. It is somewhat scary to us, but this is what was done in very ancient times.

Under God's instructions, Abram prepared a covenant agreement in the usual way, but two things happened between the preparation and the consummation of the Covenant by the Lord. Firstly, 'birds of prey' swooped down and disrupted the preparations (15:11 - probably vultures), and Abram has to chase them away. There may be some ancient symbolism in this, but the church has traditionally seen this episode as Abram taking responsibility over the 'birds of the air' to prevent them disrupting God's work, as if warding off evil and driving away evil and demons. Other people think of this episode as representing Abram's care over God's work, but we cannot assess these interpretations because there is nothing else like it in scripture! Perhaps there may be an element of truth in both of them, but it would be unwise to guess more.

### ***The prophecy***

At sunset, Abram fell into a deep sleep. The Hebrew words indicate an awesome darkness which accompanied the presence of God (as on the Mountain of Sinai before Moses gave the Law – Ex 19:16ff), so whilst the translation sounds terrifying, it was a dramatic way of preparing us for God's prophetic words. The

prophecy itself (15:13-16) is clearly a foretelling of time Israel would spend in Egypt prior to the Exodus and the conquest of the 'Promised Land'. There is no disparity between the 400 years and four generations mentioned (vv13,16) because with the great age of the Patriarchs, a generation was then commonly regarded as 100 years. Abram himself was promised in this prophecy that he would die in peace within Canaan, and not in Egypt (15:15).

It is obvious when we read Genesis that the whole book has been put together by scribes who have used ancient sources to produce the final document we have today. The big argument is whether this 'prophecy' here with its accurate predictions, was placed in the story after the time of the exile with the good intention of helping later generations see that God was in control; or was this prophecy part of the ancient story that genuinely came from the story of Abram? Arguments still rage, but the language of the whole section is consistent, and the prophecy links so powerfully with every feature of the story that it is best to read it exactly as it is, whatever we think about the history of the text itself. If we do this, then it is clearly a promise of God about future events under His control. He will not even allow the conquering of the 'Promised Land' until a condition (see 15:16) was reached concerning the Amorites (a general term for all those living in Canaan). This is an indication that God was at work in more ways than are recorded even here in scripture!

### ***The Land of Israel***

The land of Israel which is represented by the geography of verses 18 to 21, and the definition of the people who lived there (15:19f.) has been a source of debate, and even war, for centuries. The promise of God to give the land to Abram's descendants is therefore no small matter. It is easy to gloss over the details and ignore the truth of what the Old Testament tells us actually happened to this land. Firstly, despite optimism in the book of Joshua, the books of Judges, Samuel and Kings make it very clear that God's people never took possession of the entire Promised Land, and the reason they did not, was because they succumbed to sin. Even the greater Israel of David and Solomon only reached the borders mentioned in Genesis 15:18 by way of colonial agreement and interstate politics. The truth is that verse 16, whilst sounding awful, outlines a general principle which God consistently uses; He does not allow people to live in the 'Promised Land' if they sin. Firstly, when the Amorites sinned (or their sin 'was completed'), he would give the land to the people of Israel; secondly, when the people of Israel and Judah sinned and the Lord had given them time to repent but they did not (see 2 Kings 24:1-7, 2 Chron 36:15ff), He ejected them from the Promised Land by conquest by Assyria and Babylon respectively. The Promised Land is given to those who are Abram's descendants who live by faith, but they have no rights over the land if they sin!

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## **Discipleship**

### **Application**

In verse 17, God alone passed between the animals in the mystical sign Abram saw, and Abram observed. Throughout history, therefore, God alone has been in control of the Promised Land, whether occupied by Amorites (Kenites ... etc), Israelites, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Exiles, Arabs, Jews or Christians. Israel's current right to live in Palestine is therefore a matter of moral judgement concerning the 'righteousness' or otherwise of what the Jewish people do in the land that God has given them. It may be that the sins of all who live in Palestine now prevent the goal of peace for God's Old Testament people in their 'Promised Land'.

It remains right for Christians who are Abram's ancestors by 'Faith' to see in this ancient promise of God the new promise of His Kingdom, as taught by Jesus; a new 'Promised Land' which covers the whole known world just as Genesis 15:18 described land that was all the 'known world' to a nomad such as Abraham. Whatever you think of what is happening in Israel today; the Promised Land for all Christians is, through Jesus Christ, this renewed Kingdom of God which covers all creation. There is no hint of any other interpretation of what might be called the 'Promised Land' within the New Testament. Further, we should be morally cautious and not dogmatic about the right of the Jewish people to inhabit Palestine to the exclusion of all others. We need to consider the whole matter in the light of the same morality God used in Genesis 15 and throughout the Old Testament to decide who should live in the 'Promised Land' given to Abram's descendants.

God's desire for all people now is that they would learn from Abram and live by faith in Him, as is now possible for all people through Jesus Christ. It is also God's desire that all His people live in peace and enter His Kingdom, but He knows, as we all do, that this will never be entirely true until Christ comes again in Glory to judge the whole world; as 'sheep and goats'!

### **Questions for groups**

1. From what you read in the study, how do you interpret the 'birds swooping down'? Does this mean anything to us?
2. How does the prophecy of verses 13-16 help us to understand God's Word about the Promised Land?
3. Discuss what God promises Abram in His Covenant. How is this fulfilled in the Christian church today?

## Discipleship challenges

- *If you know anyone who is deeply connected with the land of Israel and has a passion for the land, try to make time to have a conversation with them about it. See what you can learn from them.*
- *Think through what you believe about the Kingdom of God. What it is, and how it relates to what you experience of the life of God's people today.*

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## Final Prayer

All praise to You, Lord God Almighty, for You see all history, and You created time. We praise You for the beginning of the World, for You created it, and we praise you for its coming End at which You will come in Glory. Through Jesus, make us ready for the coming of Your Kingdom. AMEN

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