

Fourth Revelation - Partnership - Genesis 15:1-20

Before the lesson: Prepare AV equipment to show the 4:03 minute video of Sara Groves' song, "Generations": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ev9x4izogI0> Print copies of the song lyrics for the Information session. Have the poster (from lesson 1) or the words from that poster written on a board for the Transformational Exercise.

Fellowship Question: (Use one of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

What is your best strategy when you disagree with someone more powerful than you? (a boss, a police officer, etc.)

Imagine someone has broken a promise to you. How do you feel? How do you react?

Information:

- Have a class member read Genesis 15:1.

“The word of the Lord came to Abram’ This is a formula for revelation characteristic of the prophetic books, not of the Patriarchal Tales. It is noteworthy that in Genesis 20 God refers to Abraham as a ‘prophet.’”¹

He didn’t become a prophet immediately, however. It took years for him to grow into that role.

Let’s review the growth of Abram’s faith and his relationship with God. So far, we have learned about three revelations from God.

In his first revelation, God speaks, “Go,” and Abram goes toward a land he does not know.

In the second revelation, God shows Abram the land that he will occupy.

In the third revelation, God has Abram walk the land, claiming it for himself and his descendants.

Abram’s journey of faith has involved listening, seeing, and walking. In his relationship with God, Abram has been observant, obedient, and active. He has been a good servant of God. He has also had a few slips, like giving his wife to Pharaoh. He will have more slips and more growth. One thing we learn about our faith journey from Abram’s story is that it is not one mountaintop experience after another. We tumble into valleys sometimes. Hopefully, we grow through those experiences as they make us stronger and offer us wisdom.

Now, it is time for Abram to grow a bit more in his faith.

¹ Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 63.

God's word to Abram begins with "Do not fear." Why would God say that? What does Abram have to fear? (He's just won a battle – fear of vengeance from enemies; He and Sarai have not had a child – fear that the promise will not be fulfilled; fear of God; fear of having yet another revelation; etc.)

"The fourth revelation, the central one, is coupled with the preceding story of Abram's campaign against the kings with a pun, the homophony of the word *miggen* (delivered up) in the final part of the story (14:20) with the *magen* (shield) in the beginning of the revelation (15:1)... The purpose of this coupling comes to light when one considers that the simile in the third revelation is based on seeing of the land, just as the simile of the fourth revelation is based on the seeing of the heavens. In the narrative between these two, God is designated, in the speech of Melchizedek and in the reply of Abram, as the 'originator of heaven and earth.'"²

"Those who believe the promise and hope against barrenness must nevertheless live with the barrenness. Why and how does one continue to trust solely in the promise when evidence against the promise is all around? It is this scandal that is faced here. It is Abraham's embrace of this scandal that makes him the father of our faith."³

- Have a class member read Genesis 15:2-3.

What is the difference between the way Abram behaved in the first three revelations and this revelation? (In the first three revelations, Abram does not speak. In the third, he speaks; he protests; he challenges God, etc.)

"Up until this point, all of Abram's responses to God have been silent obedience. His first actual dialogue with God...expresses doubt that God's promises can be realized: this first speech to God reveals a hitherto unglimped human dimension of Abram."⁴

Is it a sign of weakness or of strength to argue with God?

Abram offers a protest. God does not respond. So Abram adds to his protest.

Why does God not respond to the first protest?

"God remains impassively silent in the face of Abram's brief initial complaint, forcing him to continue and spell out the reason for his skepticism about the divine promise."⁵

- Have a class member read Genesis 15:4-6.

² Martin Buber, *On the Bible: Eighteen Studies* (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 36.

³ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 140.

⁴ Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 63.

⁵ Ibid.

Abram, from the beginning, has tried to help God fulfill the promise. He tried through his nephew, Lot (whom Abram seems to have adopted). Now, he reveals a plan God must not have thought of yet – a child of a man whom Abram owns.

“Rather than fear, this sounds like an effort to reassure God, to keep the status quo that Abram has himself managed.”⁶

Of course, there were other times when Abram put the promise at risk. He gave Sarai to the Egyptian pharaoh. He went into a battle, which could have ended his life and the promise’s fulfillment through him.

How does God react to Abram’s acts of trying to help God fulfill the promise? (God is patient; God does not condemn Abram or his level of faith; Nor does God condone Abram’s actions or behavior; God works to pull Abram out of the messes he makes; God continues to bless Abram with safety, property, wealth, etc.)

What does this tell us about *faith in God as a partnership with God*?

“After his initial skepticism, Abram is reassured by the imposing character of God’s reiterated promise under the night sky, which for the first time stresses the concrete idea of Abram’s biological propagation, ‘he who issues from your loins.’”⁷

“‘Fear not’ is interior, a challenge for the deepest psyche. Abram’s response is appropriately interior: ‘And [Abram] trusted in the Lord, and He reckoned it to his merit.’ Perhaps Abram is on his way toward mastering the fear problem after all. This is another step forward.”⁸

This remains a mystery, however. How in the world will God fulfill this promise to an elderly couple? “The same God who makes stars beyond number can also make a son for this barren family. And we understand no more about the one than about the other.”⁹

Next, we have a strange (to us) means of sealing the deal.

- Have a class member read Genesis 15:7-20.

“Since this covenant is sealed at sunset, it can hardly be a direct continuation of the nocturnal scene just narrated. The two scenes are an orchestration of complementary covenantal themes. In the first, God grandly promises and Abram trusts; in the second, the two enter into a mutually binding pact, cast in terms of a legal ritual....The first scene highlights dialogue and the

⁶ Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 66.

⁷ Alter, 64.

⁸ Borgman, 67.

⁹ Brueggemann, 144.

rhetorical power of the divine assurance; the second scene evokes mystery, magic, and the troubling enigma of the future.”¹⁰

“Even though God is the major player in this ritual, Abram must do the cutting and must ward off carrion birds that would like to eat the carcasses before the ritual has been completed. Abram says yes as a willing partner, though he must embrace a future for his offspring that will not be available for another four hundred years.”¹¹

Transformational Exercise:

Can you imagine that your faithful behavior will affect your descendants in 2420 AD?

- Play the Sara Groves song, “Generations”: lyrics sheet is at the end of this lesson plan.

Have you thought about how your behavior may affect generations of descendants that will follow you? Give some examples of how that may have positive and negative effects.

“To your seed I have given” – “For the first time the divine promise is stated with a perfective, not an imperfective, verb – that is, an action that has already been completed. This small grammatical maneuver catches up a large narrative pattern in the Abraham stories: the promise becomes more and more definite as it seems progressively more implausible to the aged patriarch, until Isaac is born.”¹²

[Point to the Abraham’s Faith Journey poster.]

God has given Abram four revelations. Each of these revelations has stimulated Abram to have a growing faith.

First, Abram *believed* that the Voice speaking to him was God, the one and only God.

Then, Abram *trusted* the Voice and acted on its command.

Thirdly, Abram *obeyed* the Voice by walking on and claiming land for his descendants who would not live on this land until 400 years later.

Now, Abram claims his *partnership* with God, while allowing God to be the lead partner.

Abram has tried to help God fulfill God’s promise. Neither of those plans worked. But now, God and Abram are partners in a covenant. Abram’s faith has not grown without a few stumbles, but it is progressing nevertheless.

¹⁰ Alter, 64.

¹¹ Borgman, 68.

¹² Alter, 66.

[Close in a prayer something like this: *You are God of heaven and earth and we are humbled that you invite us to partner with you. We confess that we are not perfect. We go our own way, trusting our weak wisdom. We overstretch our abilities. We put our wants above your needs. Although we stumble at times, help us to stumble forward as we strive to become better partners with you. Amen.*]

Generations

I can taste the fruit of Eve
I'm aware of sickness, death and disease
The results of our choices are vast
Eve was the first but she wasn't the last

And if I were honest with myself
Had I been standing at that tree
My mouth and my hands would be covered with fruit
Things I shouldn't know and things I shouldn't see

Remind me of this with every decision
Generations will reap what I sow
I can pass on a curse or a blessing
To those I will never know

She taught me to fear the serpent
I'm learning the fear myself
And all of the things I am capable of
In my search for wisdom, acceptance and wealth

And to say that the devil made me do it
Is a cop out and a lie
The devil can't make me do anything
When I'm calling on Jesus Christ

Remind me of this with every decision
Generations will reap what I sow
I can pass on a curse or a blessing
To those I will never know

To my great, great, great granddaughter
Live in peace
To my great, great, great grandson
Live in peace
To my great, great, great granddaughter
Live in peace
To my great, great, great grandson
Live in peace, oh, live in peace

Oh, remind me
Generations will reap what I sow
I can pass on a curse or a blessing
To those I will never know
Oh, I may never know