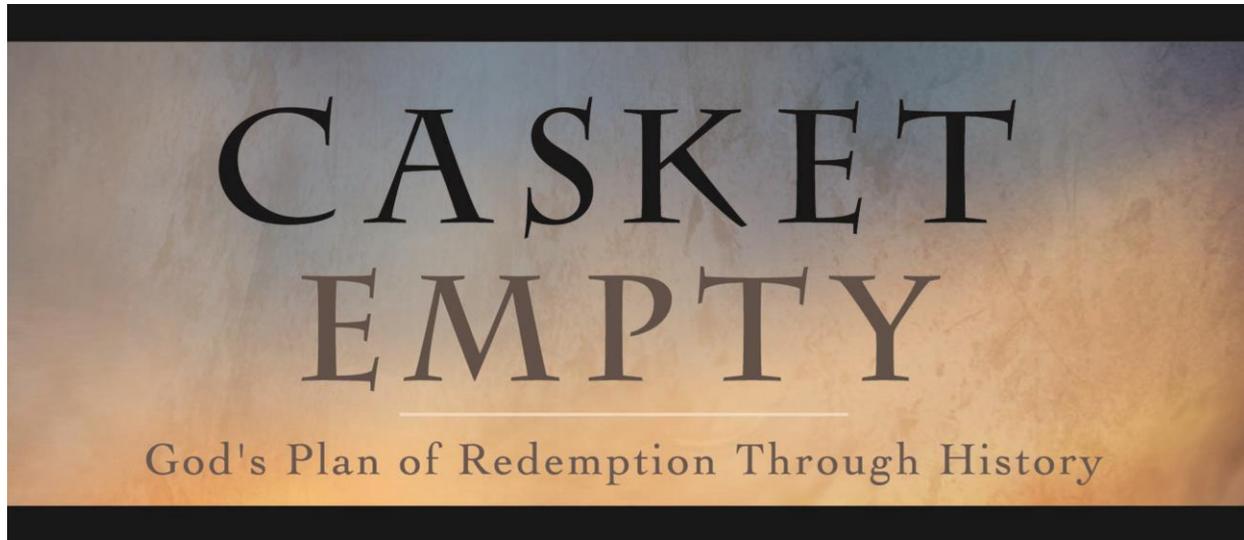


A is for Abraham
CASKET EMPTY Sermon Series
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
September 24, 2017

TEXT: Genesis 12:1-3 and Genesis 15:1-21



This morning we continue in our fall series tracing God's redemptive plan through the pages of the Old Testament. You will remember that our acronym for this year is CASKET EMPTY. CASKET stands for the Old Testament. The last two weeks, we looked at C, which is for CREATION. We turn now to the next letter: A is for ABRAHAM as God's redemptive purpose, that includes you and me, takes a decisive turn. Pastor Scott shared with us very powerfully last Sunday from God's Word that sin ruined the good life. As we begin this morning, I want to ask the question: What does God do about it? This is one of the questions that we have lurking within our hearts. We see evil in the world; we see evil within; we see life as it is not supposed to be; and yet, what does God do about it? Many people raise this question in a variety of forms—the problem of evil, and I believe with all my heart that if you raise this question sincerely, the only thing that you can be is a Christian. This question of what does God do about the evil in the world, when asked sincerely, we find that it's only in the pages of the Bible that we get an answer. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob actually does something about it. God acts in a decisive way to redeem a world gone awry, and as we look at the life of Abraham, we will see the glory of God who commits Himself to act and initiate His plan and purpose of redemption. We will see in the life of that what God requires of us. What God requires of you and me, is the same thing that He required of Abraham.

Abraham lived 2000 years before Christ; we live about 2000 years after. We both have the same distance, and yet the same thing is required of both of us, and that is faith in Him, belief in the Person and character of God, a trust in His provision and promise. Tremper Longman III writes:

“There is quite a shift in the narrative focus [in Genesis 12].

Previously the focus has been on the whole world;

now there is a close-up on one man, Abraham.

Previously narrative time moved with great rapidity,

but starting with the Abraham narrative time slows down.

After the introduction of human sin, God worked to reconcile all people to himself,

but Genesis 1-11 devolved into a pattern of sin, judgment and token of grace.

God now seeks to address the sin problem and reconcile humanity to himself

through the person of Abraham and the promise he will give him.” *Genesis*, 157

We look this morning at Genesis 12 and 15. In Genesis 12:1-3, the Lord God Almighty dramatically enters the narrative of Scripture with a decisive call. Keep your Bible open to this call. Longman says again that one cannot overestimate the importance of these verses, for the story of Abraham, for the first five books of the Bible, and for the entire Bible itself, Old and New Testament. Genesis 12:1 begins as the Lord calls and says to Abram with this summons:

“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.”

Abram at this time means *exalted father*. His name was given to honor his father Terah. We learn from Joshua 24 and the Book of Acts, and Jewish tradition is of one voice on this, that Abram at this time in his life was an idolater and that he was from an idolatrous family. Several ancient sources say that his family was even in the business of manufacturing and selling idols.

Abram is an idolater, he is an elderly man, and that his wife is barren. Yet, God breaks in. Aren't you glad that God breaks into our lives and calls idolatrous people like you and me to follow Him? The Lord tells him to leave. The call to Abram is a summons—it's a costly separation. The first call of faith is a leaving; it's a leaving of what's familiar to go into the discomfort of the unknown. It's a costly separation, first from your land, the area in which you have lived, from your clan group, your kindred, and ultimately from your father's house—your immediate surrounding family, and Abram is invited into the life of faith. The life of faith is risked on a trust in the Person and purpose of God. The life of faith is where God's call guides us forward, where God's presence is our protection, where we discover that life is found in hearing God's voice and obeying it. We also discover that faith is a journey, and that there is an interval, a torturous interval, it feels at times, between God's promise and the full realization of it. When God calls

to Abram, He first asked him to leave, which he does. Notice at the end of Genesis 12:1 that the Lord says: *“Go to the land that I will show you.”* He will not see the land unless he obeys God in following—just as our Lord Jesus says: *“Pick up your cross and follow Me”*; just as Jesus says to the earliest disciples: *“Come and see.”* The Lord then makes these staggering promises not only of a land, but in Genesis 12:2, He says:

“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.”

God promises to Abram that He will bless him, and in Genesis 12:3, He says:

“I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

He ends with this staggering line, one of the most important lines in the entire Old Testament, *“and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.”* On anyone's reckoning of time, there is more time that passes in Genesis 1-11 than from Genesis 12 to the rest of the Bible. Time slows down, and God brings into focus this elderly man who is an idolater, with a barren wife, and promises to him the knowledge of God, for a man who has none; promises descendants to a man who has none; promises him land that *“I will show you.”* We discover in this initial promise something like a new creation account. Notice that the blessing is of land, people, and a blessing, filling the earth, and a remarkable thing happens in Genesis 12:4:

“So Abram went, as the LORD had told him.”

Abram does what God says. I love that. I love that as a parent; I love that as a pastor; I love that as a citizen: there's a righteous request, and it's just done! Isn't that amazing? He leaves and he journeys to the land of Canaan. In Genesis 12, when he reaches the land of Canaan, he passes through, down the central ridge valley to Shechem, and he discovers that there are already people living in the land.

The journey of faith shows us soon that there are obstacles to the fulfillment of God's promise in our lives. Have you noticed this? Have you noticed that the journey out of your paganism into Christ-likeness has obstacles? There are external obstacles and internal obstacles, and Abram discovers that there are people living there. The Canaanites are there. So what does he do? The Lord graciously, in Genesis 12:7, appears to Abram right at this point, a reassuring appearance of His Person, power, and promise, and He says:

“‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.”

He worshiped the Lord. Worship is an act of claiming God's promise in our lives. Worship is the expression of trust in Him. Don't think of it as a small thing to offer praise and worship to God. I

love to listen on Sunday mornings when we as a church family are being drawn into praise. Something very powerful is happening when we worship God. According to Scripture, we become like the One we worship. We see Abram here journeying through the land, and at each point he is stopping and worshipping. He is claiming God's promise by setting up an altar and calling on God's Name. He does this at Shechem. He moves south across the land in between Bethel and Ai. He moves south to the Negeb and again offers praise and worship. After journeying all the way down to Egypt in the course of a famine and coming back up with great possessions, which anticipates the plot line of the Pentateuch, he comes back to the land, and God restates his promise. In Genesis 13:16, He says:

“I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.”

The Lord calls him in Genesis 13:17:

“Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.”

Again, Abram worships, this time at Hebron. I want to challenge, you even at this point, from the life of Abraham, that it is a characteristic of the life of faith to trust God and allow God to speak to you the next step. I used to teach in the biblical studies department at Gordon College where Salome is now student, and I remember after about 250 conversations with college students, the two main topics were: What's God's will for my life? and Who should I marry? Somehow those were often tied closely together. I remember thinking after about 200 of those conversations: “You know, life is not just one decision that then rolls on. The life of faith is thousands of decisions and then taking what God is showing you and calling you to trust God as His purpose and plan unfold. There are obstacles externally—Canaanites in the land. There is deep fear that lies within us, doubt whether God has the power to accomplish all that He has promised, and yet we see Abram journeying through the land and building these outposts of worship to the true and living God and dotting them throughout the land. The Lord tells Abram to walk around the whole length of the land. I want to challenge you, with all that God has promised to us in Christ, no matter what the obstacles you may be facing right now, externally or internally, one of the most subversive acts you can do is to set up signposts of worship as you claim the promise of God.

We turn to Genesis 15, which follows Genesis 14 outside our topic this morning. In Genesis 14, Abram wins a great battle to rescue his nephew Lot. Sometimes we imagine Abram just alone out there in the land, and yet, Genesis 14 reminds us that he had 318 men in his household that were trained for battle. So, we should imagine a large group awaiting God's purpose and plan. Remember that God had promised Abram descendants, possession of the land, and a blessing to all the earth. At this point, he has not seen the realization of any of these things. God called to him when he was 75 years old. Say ‘amen’ if you believe that God is not done with you yet.

Isn't that hopeful? We don't know the moment in his life, that Genesis 15 takes place, but it is sometime after this initial call. Genesis 15 takes us inside a very powerful moment that shaped Abram's faith and is instructive for us this morning. Let's look at this glorious passage in more detail.

In Genesis 15, we read that after these things, after these events, great journeys to the land, down to Egypt, and God wins a great victory, even after all these things and the steps of God's provision, we find that Abram is still afraid. He's afraid because he hasn't seen the realization of God's promise. The Lord comes to him in the midst of his fear in a vision and says in Genesis 15:1:

"Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."

"I will protect you," the Lord says. Then the Lord says, *"Your reward shall be very great."* The Hebrew expression here can be taken two ways. It can be that Abram's reward will be great, or it can be taken to be the Lord saying: "I Myself will be your very great reward." I find that deeply attractive. The Lord says: "Don't be afraid because I am your shield, and I am your very great reward." Abram enters into conversation with the Lord, and he says in Genesis 15:2:

"O Lord GOD, what will You give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"

Scholars have been puzzled by the Hebrew of Genesis 15:2. The syntax seems jumbled, and yet I think we see a very real sense of Abrams fear and uncertainty. When you're afraid, sometimes you don't speak really eloquently, and I love that that's preserved in the text itself. He's afraid and he says, "As it looks right now, I'm going to have to adopt Eliezer of Damascus. You have given me no descendant." Abram is following customs of his own time and era. Documents we have from the Nuzi archive show they could legally adopt someone into their family who is a household worker or servant and they will be given the inheritance. Abram says, "It looks like this is what's about to happen," and the Lord says, "No!" The Word of the Lord come says in Genesis 15:4:

"This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir."

This man will not be your heir but your very own son—something that would be impossible humanly speaking. God takes him outside and tells Abram in Genesis 15:5:

"Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.' Then He said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'"

Abram looks up to the night sky. He has no neon signs to distract him, no ambient lighting from his cell phone, and when he looks up, he sees at least 9,000 stars which are visible to the human eye on a clear night. There are about 100 billion stars out there, but you can see about

9,000. As Abram looks at those descendants like the stars, the staggering promise, Genesis 15:6



says about Abram:

“And he believed the LORD, and He counted it to him as righteousness.”

Abram trusted God though he had nothing in hand but God's promise and the provision that he had seen to this point. The life of faith is characterized by this interval

between God's promise and its ultimate realization. God wants you to trust Him with difficult dynamics you are facing in your family. He wants you to trust Him with challenges you have about your vocational calling, financial provision. The Lord calls us to trust in His Person and promise, and Abram believes the Lord, and we read that God is pleased with this response and reckons it to him as righteousness. In Genesis 15:6, Abram stands right before God. The apostle Paul sees and writes about this centuries later, that this is the the place where we see what it means and how we are to be right with God. This is the source, the spring, crystal clear waters gushing forth, of the doctrine of justification by faith. Abraham is right with God for he trusts in God, and then the Lord reveals to him His pleasure in Abram's faith and His profound commitment to bring about all He has promised.

The second half of Genesis 15 is a dramatic scene. It is a dramatic scene that impressed itself on Abram's memory; it's a dramatic scene that fills our hearts with hope and faith. In Genesis 15:7, toward the end of the chapter, the Lord comes to Abram again, and He speaks. He says:

“I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.”

And Abram says in Genesis 15:8:

“O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?”

How will I know that You are going to complete everything that You have promised? The end of Genesis 15 is a dramatic covenant-making ceremony. Let's look at it more closely together. The Lord tells Abram in Genesis 15:9:

“Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.”

He summons him to bring these animals. We note that these are the animals which are legitimate for offering in Leviticus 9. Abram takes these animals, and without being told what to do, he knows what to do. Would you have known what to do? Let me refresh your memory on covenant-making. Abram takes the animals and he cuts them in half, and he lays the sides of the animals next to each other, forming a pathway in-between these cut pieces. The birds are not cut in half because they are too small. They are probably just laid one on either side. How does Abram know what to do without instructions? He knows what to do because this is a very known costume in the ancient near East. We have dozens of examples of this covenant-making ceremony. Let me share with you just one example from ancient Assyrian King Ashurnirari V, not to be confused with I through IV, and Mati'ilu of King of Arpad. They make a ceremony, a covenant between them, an agreement of loyalty, and at the end of the ceremony, we discover that there are animals set in pieces side-by-side, and this space in-between the animals creates a space through which the covenant-making parties walk. They walk in-between these pieces to call down an imprecatory curse upon themselves should they not be loyal to the terms of the covenant. In all the examples we have, it is the lesser party who walks in-between the pieces. In this case, it's Mati'ilu, and as Mati'ilu walks in-between the pieces, he says these words confirming the covenant. He says:

“This lamb has been brought from its fold not for sacrifice, not for a banquet, not for a purchase: it has been brought to sanction the treaty between Ashurnirari and Mati'ilu.

If Mati'ilu sins against this treaty made under oath, then just as this lamb will not return to its fold, Mati'ilu together with his sons, daughters, officials, and the people of his land will not return to his country.

This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati'ilu, it is the head of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land.

If Mati'ilu sins against the covenant, so may the head of Mati'ilu be torn off.”

It's pretty clear, isn't it? You pass through this covenant ceremony, calling down the curse if you are not loyal to the covenant. Jeremiah 34 preserves the same custom. The Lord speaks “to those who have transgressed My covenant” and in Jeremiah 34:18-20 we read:

“And the men who transgressed My covenant and did not keep the terms of the covenant that they made before Me, I will make them like the calf that they cut in two and passed between its parts the officials of Judah, the officials of Jerusalem, the eunuchs, the priests, and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf. And I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their lives. Their dead bodies shall be food for the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth.”

The covenant-making ceremony involves this ritual slaughter of the animals, pieces laid on each

side, and the lesser entity of the covenant-making parties passes between the pieces. That's what we see in every other example: this image of the covenant-curse coming on those unfaithful; the image of the birds of prey. Back in Genesis 15, Abram drives them away, and now we have the most remarkable, astonishing ending to the scene. Abram is getting everything ready. He knows what's to come next. His question is very powerful: "How will I know, Lord, that You are going to fulfill Your promise to me?" The Lord says: "Get the covenant ceremony ready." You can imagine that Abram is getting ready himself to walk between these pieces. Instead, in Genesis 15:12, we read:

"As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him."

This is the same language that is used of Adam in the Garden. A deep sleep comes upon him, a dreadful darkness. This is the language of theophany, of God's presence. This darkness that surrounds the glory of the Lord comes and surrounds Abram, and the Lord speaks from this cloud and says to Abram in Genesis 15:13-14:

"Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions."

The gospel of the Old Testament, the Exodus deliverance, is in view from Genesis 15 forward. The Lord says: "I'm writing within the narrative the death and resurrection of the beloved Son. There will be intense suffering, 400 years, fourth-generation they will come out with great possessions." The Lord says: "My purpose will ripen." Then, as the sun had gone down and this thick darkness was surrounding Abram, we see something that we do not see in any other covenant-making example. Abram must have prepared himself: "God is making a covenant with me; the pieces are ready; and He is now going to ask me to walk through these pieces, to call down the curse of the covenant upon myself to fulfill the obligations and stipulations of the covenant," and he is preparing himself for this moment. Yet, in this deep sleep, in this glorious cloud of Divine Presence around him, Abram is not asked to walk between the pieces. Look very closely at what happens because you will see this only here. As this pathway of "curse be upon me if I do not keep my word," as Abram stares down this corridor, he sees the pillar of cloud. He sees the pillar of fire. He sees the Lord God Almighty stride between the pieces and say: "I will make a covenant with you, and I will bind Myself with you, and you need only to stand and see the salvation that God will work for you." There is no other example of any other covenant-making moment in the history of the world where the greater entity passes between the pieces.

The life of Abraham calls to you this morning to trust God. I love being a pastor because I get to

ask people to trust Jesus Christ all the time. In my experience of being a pastor, it makes me older sooner, in a good way, because I'm connected with 700 lives that have trusted Christ, and I can tell you that that trust is well-placed because of how Jesus Christ deals with His people. That trust is well-placed, and Abram's trust is well-placed, because the Lord God Almighty has committed Himself to you in covenant. All He has asked of you is that you trust Him. You must trust Him now and trust Him in that interval, that agonizing interval, between His promise and its realization. The life of Abraham is a summons to trust Him. The banner that has come up in the sanctuary this week, so beautifully done, depicts this critical moment when he looks up at the heavens and sees descendants like the stars, and his trust is well-placed. It is well-placed because God has committed the full resources of His Person to carry this about. It is this promise that we one day do see fulfilled in Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus Christ that this promise that all who trust in Him are justified, declared righteous by faith, comes true. It is in Jesus Christ, the descendant of Abraham, that all who believe in Him are reckoned as righteous, and all who believe in Him are adopted into the family of Abraham.

The apostle Paul writes in Galatians that the Lord promised this promise. He says in Galatians 3:8:

"And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.'"

Those who are of the faith of Abraham are blessed along with Abram, the man of faith. Paul writes in Galatians 3:26-29:

"In Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise."

God's redemptive purpose flows through this channel. It is by faith in Christ the descendant of Abraham that His promise comes true. There are two billion people alive right now who believe in Jesus Christ. God said: "Count the stars, if you can. So will your descendants be." Faith in the living God is rightly placed this morning, and wherever fear takes hold of you, or has you in its grip, I want to encourage you from this scene in Genesis 15. The Lord told Abram: "Don't be afraid. I am your shield; I am your great reward," and the Lord has committed Himself to you. There is no other book that you can open and discover this God, His saving purpose, His commitment to us. It is His intention to fulfill what He said in creation—that He would fill the earth with image bearers of His glory who would know and respond to Him in praise. The land promise we will see carried out as we journey through the Old Testament, as we come further this year into the New, we will see that this promise of the land, the Apostle Paul interprets as a promise for the whole earth. As you journey this week, set up signposts of worship for all that

God has done. Lay hold of the promise with your eyes riveted to Him in faith, and allow His commitment to you to banish fear wherever you face it this week. Amen. Let's pray.

Lord God Almighty, we love You, and we praise You for who You are and what You have done. We thank You, Lord, that You have called down the curse upon Yourself should You fail to keep Your Word. So, Lord, our trust in You is rightly placed. Father, I pray this morning for each one of us where we are experiencing the cloud of fear. Lord, would You lead us forward, speak to us as we trust You, and confirm Your plans for us. We thank You, Lord, that You have initiated redemption and You will carry it out. Lord, replace our fear with faith in You. We praise You and magnify You, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

In Christ's Name, Amen.