

THE RESISTANCE LEADER

Genesis 15:7-21

Have you ever felt like God has gone AWOL? You keep praying, but nothing happens as the days turn into weeks, weeks turn into months and months turn into years, yet nothing changes. Your prayers seem to go unanswered. In his book, *Called*, Christian leader Mark Labberton tells the story of something that happened to him when he had a disagreement with the IRS. Yes, the dreaded IRS, that monolithic, uncaring powerful bureaucracy. After months of correspondence and legal advice the day came to actually have a face-to-face appointment with an IRS agent. He went to the IRS office in Oakland where he was asked to sit in a waiting area. There he waited. And he waited. And he waited some more. Finally, someone came and ushered him back through a warren of cubicles until he finally met the agent who would handle his case. He explained the circumstances and made his argument. She reviewed the paperwork. Then she said she had to consult someone else and left him there in the cubicle. And there he sat. For 10 minutes, 15, a half hour he sat there with not a word from anyone. He wondered if the woman had just forgotten him and left the building. He wasn't sure what to do and, not really knowing what else he could do, he just kept waiting and feeling hopeless. He had been repeatedly told that it would take many months, maybe more than a year for his case to be resolved, but he didn't think he would have to sit in that cubicle for the entire time. Fortunately, he didn't. After 45 minutes the woman finally returned and handed him a piece of paper. She said, "It's done. It's settled." He thought she meant she had gotten the resolution process started, but she turned over the piece of paper and showed him the 9 signatures she had gotten. She had taken the settlement paper and walked it through the building all the way up the IRS ladder to get approval of the final resolution. It was all done. He thought he had been abandoned, but in reality as he was waiting the agent was doing all the work necessary to finish the case.

Sometimes we feel like Mark: waiting, uncertain, feeling abandoned. Is it possible that, in fact, the one handling our case is doing the work necessary to resolve what we're dealing with? Today, we will see what happened when Abram was wondering if maybe he hadn't been forgotten as we look at Genesis 15:7-21

ABRAM HAD HIS DOUBTS

In verse 6 we encountered the monumental truth that when God made a promise to Abram he simply believed God would keep his promise, and that was exactly what God was looking for. That humble act of believing was credited to Abram as righteousness. Abram was exactly where God wanted him, and us, to be.

God followed up on that by promising Abram that not only would he give him a son but that he would also give the land where Abram was living to his descendants. This was not exactly breaking news. There was no need for, “Film at 11.” In 12:7, when Abram first arrived in Canaan, God said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” In 13:15 God reiterated his promise when he said, “All the land that you can see I will give to you and your offspring forever.” Now in chapter 15 God says it again. In verse 7 he says, “I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to this land to take possession of it.” He starts by reminding him who he is. He is the Lord. He is the one who rules over everything. Then he says that a big part of this exercise God has been taking him on, was giving him and his descendants the land of Canaan. Near the end of the passage in verse 18 God says it yet again, “To your descendants I give this land.”

Laurie has mentioned a couple of times to me that she doesn't want to do what old people do: Tell you the thing they've already told you, numerous times. She brought this up because there have been a couple of incidents where she has done exactly that with our kids and they've said, “Yeah, uh, you already told us that, Mom.” Was this a deal where God is really old? He's been around a long time and can't seem to remember what He's said. He keeps repeating, “I'm going to give you this land.” Has he forgotten that he's already said it?

No, God was not losing track of His promises. It doesn't take very long for us to read the entire story of Abram's life. It goes by pretty quickly. What we can easily forget is that these stories took place over the span of years. God reiterated his promise because he knew it might be easy for Abram to forget it.

Something else that is true of all of us shows up in this incident that is a bigger issue than our forgetfulness. We are both impatient and human. Because we are human we operate on a compressed time frame. When you're eternal a few years going by is like a few nanoseconds passing for us. Our lives are measured in years, and not all that many of them, so every year is big. When something we are hoping for and waiting for doesn't happen for years it seems like forever. And it feels like the hoping is pointless. We get impatient and give up hope.

The effect of this is that if God promises something and it doesn't happen in fairly short order we begin to wonder if the promise is for real. We begin to doubt. That is what happened with Abram. His response to God's promise about the land was, “Uh, yeah, about that. I've been here for 10 years now Lord, and I don't want to seem ungrateful and all, but do you know how many acres of this land I own right now? Let me check my figures. Ah, yes, here it is. That would be ZERO! It sure looks to me like you're not

coming through on this land deal.” That was the same thing that happened with the promise about having a son. Abram was looking for some assurance about this just like God gave him about that promise. So he asks, “How am I supposed to believe your promise? You keep making it, but I keep possessing no land, nor do I see any indication that’s likely to change any time in the foreseeable future.”

I get this. We have some friends who now live in Nebraska who have said, “We want you to come see us. We’re going to make that happen.” We said, “Let’s do it.” We would love to see them. But then we didn’t hear from them for quite some time. We tried to contact them, but there was no plan forthcoming. I concluded that it wasn’t going to happen. After you wait long enough you start to doubt. That’s what happened with Abram. He started wondering if this whole land promise thing was ever going to amount to anything. Isn’t it encouraging to know that a man of great faith like Abram, the man known as the father of faith, had trouble with doubts and impatience sometimes just like we do?

GOD DID NOT PROMISE ALL WOULD BE EASY

How could God confirm for Abram that at some point in the future he would, in fact, give to Abram’s family the land of Canaan? What would reassure Abram short of actually having him suddenly be able to displace all the residents and own the land?

Last year we had to get a new vehicle because the one we had turned into the automotive version of a “hanger queen,” which is pilot speak for an airplane that is incessantly in the hanger being repaired. However, we didn’t have the many thousands of dollars it takes to buy a new car. The car company solved our dilemma. They said they would lease the car to us. We just had to pay a certain sum of money to them each month and they would let us have the car.

This seemed agreeable to us. I assumed all I had to do was promise I would pay the required sum each month and we would drive away in the car. I was wrong. Even though I have never failed to pay money I have promised to pay to anyone, the car company took a tack with me much like Abram did with God. How do we know you will do what you promise? They doubted me! Our culture has created ritual for such situations. The high priest of finance takes the car lease wannabe into the Holy of holies, the inner sanctum. He recites sacred words like credit score, msrp, selling price, registration fee, apr, residual value and so on. Then you must sign and initial enough documents to cause deforestation of the entire Amazon Basin, all while resisting offers to add every imaginable extra into the deal. When you have satisfactorily completed the ritual the car company gives you the keys to the car.

In Abram's day his culture also had rituals for establishing a covenant that guaranteed you would keep your promise. They didn't sell or lease cars, but they did make deals. I guess they sold camels, or flocks of sheep, or land, or made treaties between clans, tribes or nations. God's way of answering Abram's question was to have a covenant creating ritual with him. He used the ritual form that Abram would recognize because it was part of his culture. What we see in this passage was the ancient equivalent of that ceremony in the little office at the car dealership. It involved some elements that are even more bizarre than some of the forms we had to sign.

God tells Abram to get some animals, kill them, cut them in half and lay the halves out on the ground. Boy, the routine with the high priest of finance is sounding better already. I may have been in danger of getting claustrophobia trapped in that little room and carpal tunnel syndrome from signing my name so many times but I didn't have to kill and carve up any animals. I am sure PETA would have rioted over that ceremony. However, that was the common and easily recognized ritual for creating covenants in Abram's day.

There are many examples of this kind of covenant ceremony in ancient writings. The parties signing the covenants would walk between the halves of the animals. Some people believe the significance of this was it suggested there was a curse associated with the covenant. The idea was supposedly that if I didn't keep the covenant what happened to the animals would happen to me. In other words, I would be carved up. However, this was probably not the case in Genesis 15. As we will see, God is the one who will walk between halves of the animals and he certainly would not fail to keep the covenant nor be subject to a curse.

Most likely the reason for the animals' death was that it symbolized the deep significance of the covenant. Animals were so important back then that their death tells us how valuable, how important this covenant was. No one would pointlessly kill such valuable animals. Their death said this was a huge deal.

Once the animals were laid out on the ground Abram waited for what came next. As he waited vultures descended on the carcasses and he had to chase them away. Why the vultures? Why did God have the vultures come? I think this symbolized the fact that the covenant would be attacked. There was also significance in the fact that Abram had to wait all afternoon. That is a sign that the promise was not going to be fulfilled immediately. It reminds us that waiting is difficult and it's usually involved in God's promises.

The biggest form of attack that we will face comes in the form of doubts. I think that's what the vultures represent. Hopefully in the future as the doubts came, Abram would remember his experience with the vultures. But there is more difficulty ahead. Our hero goes to sleep and a deep fear falls on him. It is during this time that the Lord tells him that his descendants will be enslaved for 400 years. Why does God tell Abram this? I think it is to inform him that hard times are ahead for his people. He's telling him that possessing the land is not going to happen for many years. It also tells him that the process of gaining the land will not necessarily be an easy one. He's telling him to just wait for there will be a long delay before his descendants enter the land.

The message of this chapter is that, although God keeps his promises, it doesn't mean that life will necessarily be easy for us. There may be hard times that happen in the process of seeing God's promise fulfilled, and it could involve a long wait.

GOD'S PROMISE WAS ONE SIDED

While Abram was asleep he saw the vision of a smoking fire pot and a blazing torch passing between the animal pieces. Well, that was a little weird. The custom was that the parties to the covenant would walk between the halves of the slaughtered animals. Instead all of a sudden we see a fire pot and a torch come floating through. Talk about spooky. It sounds like something out of a scary movie. What was *that* supposed to mean?

Scholars speculate and disagree about what this means. We know the fire pot was probably a cooking tool that was used in ancient times. It would have had an open flame. We understand what a torch is. It was an ancient form of light. So here is what I think this means: The fire pot and the torch represent God. They portray God passing between the halves of the animals, thus ratifying the covenant. The fire pot is a mobile form of fire. The torch represents light. The symbolism is that God brings both fire, meaning judgment, and light, meaning truth.

The main significance of this vision is that God ratified the covenant, and God alone ratified it. Abram never passed between the animal carcasses. He was not required to sign the contract. When we agreed to lease our car, a representative from the dealership had to sign some of the papers. We also had to sign the papers. Thus, both agreed to the terms of the contract. What amazes me is that Abram never had to sign the contract. All he did was fall asleep. This is a one-sided contract. This means that God was promising that he would keep the covenant regardless of what Abram did. It was not up to Abram to fulfill some stipulation in the contract in order for the promise to be fulfilled. The promises of this covenant depended only upon God's faithfulness to his promise and God's faithfulness

alone. That would be like the dealership saying they would let us have the car regardless of what we do.

IMPLICATIONS

GOD MEETS PEOPLE WHERE THEY ARE

I find it interesting that God did not criticize Abram for doubting. Furthermore, when Abram asked for confirmation of the promise, God gave it to him in a form that made sense to him. God reached into his world and communicated with him through a ceremony that was perfectly understandable to him.

This reminds us that God reaches into our broken, fallen world and communicates himself and his truth to broken, fallen people where they are. Later in the book of Genesis, Jacob would be an incorrigible schemer. In no way was he following God. He was all about taking care of Jacob regardless of what it took, but in Genesis 28 God suddenly appeared to Jacob. He gave him a vision in which he saw a stairway between earth and heaven, symbolizing a way to God. The message of that story was that God met that undeserving man where he was and promised to be his Lord and lead him to heaven.

In Luke 15:3-7 Jesus told a parable about a shepherd who loses one of his 100 sheep. He asks what does he do? The answer is he leaves the 99 sheep and goes in search of the one. The message is that God is the shepherd who searches for the lost sheep. The sheep are not out there trying to connect with the shepherd, they are just dumb and wandering away to their own peril. But the shepherd goes to find them where they are. There are many instances in the Bible of how God met lost sheep where they were. There was the woman at the well in John 4. There was Zaccheus, a despised outcast whom Jesus intentionally befriended. In fact, the whole story of Jesus' life was about God entering our broken world to save his fallen people and reach them where they were.

A couple of months ago I became impatient when our cable television service quit working. I called the cable company and went through all the gyrations they asked me to do even though I had already done them. Finally, they admitted their equipment had a problem. They promised to mail us a new cable box. We received it two days later and hooked it up. It didn't work. I checked to make sure it was plugged in because I knew from Toby's stories of working as an IT guy, that that was one of the most common problems he encountered. ~~how common it is for people to forget to do so.~~ It was plugged in and the display on the front was lit up showing it had power. I checked all the connections twice and they were fine. Just to make sure, I rebooted everything and tried it again. It didn't work. I was now very irritated because the company, which wasn't great in the first place,

replaced the failed equipment with a piece of junk that didn't work. I called again, waded through the annoying phone system and talked to another representative. I explained the situation and told him all that I had already done. I was very frustrated but tried to contain my impatience and irritation. He began taking me through the steps I had already done. It was very annoying. After he had taken me through checking all of the connections to be sure they were right, checking the machine was plugged in and once again rebooting the system to no avail I thought that surely he would admit that problem was the equipment. Instead, he told me to push the power button on the front of the unit. Power button? I didn't know there was a power button on this unit. Our other cable box did not have a power button. In other words, the unit didn't work because I hadn't turned it on. Guess who felt really stupid? Surprisingly, the cable company representative was very gracious and didn't treat me like a total idiot, which, of course, I had just proven myself to be. He kept talking to me, in laymen's terms, very respectfully, without pointing out that what I had done was totally stupid. He didn't laugh at me or express disgust or scorn. He may have rolled his eyes, but I couldn't have seen that if he had. Perhaps that comes from being an IT representative since you have to deal with a lot of stupidity. Whatever the case, he met me where I was.

That is what God does for us. Undeserving and broken though we may be, weak of faith and doubting though we often are, he comes to meet us where we are. He deals with us, not according to our sin, but according to his grace and his faithfulness. If you ever feel unworthy, guilty and deserving only of God's disdain, remember how he met doubting Abram where he was. That is exactly what he does with us. Just as he was patient with Abram when he doubted and was impatient, so he is with us.

The message of Abram's vision at the end of this scene is powerful. If the promise depended upon Abram and his total faithfulness for it to be fulfilled, then it was never going to happen. The great news was it didn't depend on Abram at all. It only depended upon divine faithfulness and grace. And that meant it was certain. And so is God's promise to us.

Our problem is that we're so used to having to earn and deserve the acceptance and approval of people. Novelist Amy Tan was recently interviewed by the *New York Times*. In the interview she was very candid about her experience of growing up with an Asian mother who had very high expectations. She said that as a child she knew she would be a huge disappointment to her mother if she did not grow up to be a neurosurgeon during the week and a concert pianist on the weekends. She said that after it was announced that her novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, had reached number four on the *New York Times* best seller list her mother said, "What happened? Who is number one, two and three?"

Wouldn't you think that having a book become number four on the best seller list would be good enough for anyone? Amy's mother didn't see it that way. That puts enormous pressure on Amy. In such a situation to gain approval one must always perform. And that's how we usually think our relationship with God works. But this little story from Abram's life tells us we are wrong. God signed the contract and that was all that was needed. What Abram did or did not do was irrelevant. And so it is with us. We can rest secure and rejoice in knowing that God meets us where we are with all of our flaws and still keeps his promise to us because that is his nature. He is faithful regardless of what we do. His promise is guaranteed by his faithfulness alone, not by anything we are or do.

TROUBLES COME AND DOUBT HAPPENS

One of the lessons that I see in this chapter is that God's promise will involve waiting, and in that period of waiting there will be hardship. Abram had to wait for God to show up and even when he did the Lord told him that there would be hard times ahead for his people. That is a message I don't enjoy hearing. Yet it is one we all need to get a firm grip on. So, let's be clear there are two truths about life as we will all experience it: First, there will be waiting, and second, there will be difficulty.

There are numerous verses in the Bible that talk about waiting. Psalm 27:14 says, "Wait for the Lord. Be strong and take heart and wait for the Lord." Isaiah 30:18 says, "Blessed are those who wait for the Lord." Habakkuk 2:3 talks about a revelation coming from the Lord. It says the revelation awaits an appointed time. And it says wait for it. It will certainly come and it will not delay.

These verses tell us to expect to have to wait to see God work and to see his answers in our lives. We tend to expect God to work according to our timetable. When things don't happen according to our expectations, we begin to struggle with doubt.

More than 50 years ago James Bruner and Leo Postman did an interesting experiment at Harvard University. They showed subjects a series of ten playing cards. Four of the cards were normal playing cards. However, six of the cards were trick cards. Although the face values were correct, the colors of the suits were incorrect. For instance, one of the cards was a red six of clubs. The researchers discovered that it took the students four times longer to identify a trick card than it did a normal card. The students' brains struggled to process something that was different from what they expected. They drew the following conclusion. "For as long as possible and by whatever means available an organism will work on the perception of the expected." When we expect God to work and he doesn't do so in our timeframe it can easily disorient us. It can cause us to seriously doubt whether he

is ever going to keep his promise to us. This is why the Bible commands us so frequently to wait on the Lord.

We need to learn to wait on the Lord. Abram never knew why he needed to wait nor did he know why his descendants would have to suffer. But he trusted God's faithfulness. And we can look back now and see that God did indeed keep his promise in his good time. And so he will do in our lives.

Oxford University philosopher Basil Mitchell provides a helpful illustration of how to think about this question. He said to imagine that you are in Nazi-occupied France during World War II and you want to join the resistance movement. Then one evening a stranger comes up to you in a local café and introduces himself as the leader of the local resistance. During the evening he discusses the general requirements of duties you would have if you work with him, and gives you an opportunity to assess how trustworthy *he* is. He offers you the chance to back out. He issues a stern warning. He tells you that if you join, your life will be at risk every moment. He says this will be the only face-to-face meeting you will have with him. After this you will receive orders and will have to follow them without question. Often you'll be in the dark about why and how an operation is taking place and you will always fear that you may be betrayed. Mitchell's question is this. Is it reasonable to trust the resistance leader? Sometimes what he is doing is obvious. He's helping members of the resistance and you are thankful that he is on our side. But sometimes it is not obvious what he's doing. You don't understand his orders to you and he doesn't clarify or explain them at all. He shows up in a German uniform arresting partisans and, unbeknownst to you, secretly releases them to help them escape. The resistance leader knows best, you say. But it is only after the war that all the secrets will become known. Records will be revealed that vindicate true comrades and expose traitors. Only then will sense be made of all the actions of the resistance leader.

We are in a war. It is a spiritual war in which we are living in occupied territory. We are part of the resistance. Sometimes our leader's decisions and actions are a complete mystery to us. Other times it is clear what he is doing and we are thankful that he is on our side. But always he is faithful. Always he is worthy of our trust. This it is why we are commanded to wait on the Lord and to put our hope in him.

Yes, there will be doubt in this world. Unfortunately, that is the nature of living by faith. In his book *Faith and Doubt*, John Ortberg relates an illustration he uses. He tells his audience that he has a \$20 bill in his closed hand. He asks for a volunteer who believes that he is telling the truth. A few hands go up. He picks one and asks if that person really has faith in what he says. When that person affirms that he does have faith that he has a \$20

bill in his fist, Ortberg tells him he is going to destroy his faith. He opens his hand revealing the \$20 bill. He then points out that he has destroyed that man's faith because the man no longer needs to have faith that he's telling the truth. He can see it for himself. Faith is not required. Faith is required only when there is room for doubt. If we are to live by faith it means that we necessarily will have to live with the reality of doubt.

Doubt is a part of living by faith. That we sometimes must deal with doubts does not mean that we have lost faith or that there is something wrong with us spiritually. It is merely the nature of living by faith. So the message of this little story from Abram's life clearly must be that there will be hard times times – yes, there will be times when it seems like God has disappeared – but in those times we need to wait and trust.

When the doubts come, go back to what you know to be true. Let your doubts exist without letting them be the core of who you are. Our son-in-law, Michael, came up with this idea of taking an aerial tour of some of the Hawaiian islands while we were on vacation. It sounded like a kick. We were excited about it. Then came the day of the great flight. That's when the doubts showed up. What had I gotten myself into? I recalled a flight we were on once years ago in a smaller airplane going into Maui when that thing was bouncing and dropping and people, including me, were white knuckling their way through it. And I remembered that bad feeling you get when you are getting a little bout of motion sickness. It was no fun at all and not an experience I was anxious to repeat. That plane was considerably larger and more stable than the one we were going to be flying on. The thought formed very clearly, "What was I thinking? Isn't there some way out?" We sat in a hangar at the airport for nearly an hour while Michael was checked out on the aircraft, and I had *all* that time to contemplate the stupidity of what I was about to do. Then we walked out and saw the plane. I was not encouraged. It was old and honestly, looked more than a little used. The windows didn't operate properly. One question kept repeating in my head, "What else doesn't work?" I got on that airplane. Yes, part of the reason was there was no gracious way out, at least none that were not totally humiliating. But mostly one thing got me through. I trust Michael. I know he is one of the best pilots in the world. As an experienced fighter pilot he is a member of a very small fraternity. I knew if he considered this to be safe, if he felt it would be a good experience, then I could count on that. So I said, "Okay, here we go. Let's do this," and I strapped into my seat in that plane. And I had one of the great experiences of my life. It was terrific. I will never forget it. One thing made that possible. I counted on one thing I knew. I could have total confidence in Michael. Doubts will come. When they do, go back to what you know. God loves you. He is real. He is proven himself in Jesus. He is always faithful and will keep his promise. So strap yourself in and hang on.