



First Sunday of Advent

12/7/2025

Genesis 15:1-11,17,18

## How Can I Know?

How do you know you can trust someone?

That's a question I wrestled with a bit this past weekend. My family and I were returning from a Thanksgiving visit to WI. There's no direct flights back to Reno, so we had a layover in Phoenix. And of course, our first flight got delayed. As we checked the app, we realized we would have our layover was down to just half an hour. Then twenty minutes. Then less than ten. That's when we started thinking to ourselves, "There's no way we are making it in time!" We were worried enough that we asked one of the flight attendants about it, and she assured us, "There's other people heading to Reno after this too. And since it's the last flight, I'm confident they'll hold that flight for you!" That stewardess might have been confident... but I wasn't. I kept checking the Southwest app every five minutes for updates because despite the assurance of that flight attendant, how could I know for sure that we were going to make it?

I'm sure all of us can think of times like that, where someone told you things would turn out fine but you didn't think you could 100% trust them. That's actually what was going on in our verses for today. Abram is one of the most important people in the whole Bible. Already by this time, he had seen incredible things from the Lord. God had told him to move away from his home country and his family, and he listened. Just before today's verses, some of Abram's relatives get captured by an invading army. Abram gets a group of his own soldiers together, and the Lord gives him an incredible victory against a way larger force. You'd think that at the start of Genesis 15 Abram would be at a high point... but he's not. The first thing God says to him, "Do not be afraid". Afraid? Abram had just won a battle! Taken care of a bunch of enemies and seen God's faithfulness firsthand! Why in the world would he be afraid?

We find the answer in Abram's response. [READ] Years earlier, Abram had received an incredible promise. [highlight Gen. 12 verses] He would be a great nation. All peoples would be blessed through him – in other words the Savior was going to come through his family line! But there was one problem. Both Abram and his wife Sarai were old, and they had no children.

Years had passed since God said those words, and still Abram had no children of his own. It seemed like the promise could not possibly be true.

Back to today's verses. God doubles down on the promise he had given Abram all those years ago. He was going to have descendants – not from a servant or an adopted son, but from a biological child. They were going to be as numerous as the stars in the sky. The Lord even had a plot of land ready for them to live in, the land of Canaan.

That brings us to verse 8. Abram basically says, "Lord, how can I know? I believe in you. I've seen you keep your promises in the past. But how can I know a thousand percent for sure this is going to happen?"

Does it surprise you that Abram would say something like that? After everything he had been through? After we just heard in verse 6, [RECITE]. Did Abram think this promise was so huge, so over the top, that there was no way it could really happen? Maybe. But I think there's another layer to Abram's doubts.

It's not that Abram doubted God's ability to fulfill his promises. It's that he doubted his own standing with the Almighty. Abram is saying, "Lord, I know you are my God. But how can I know that I am really your person? Have these promises taken such a long time to get fulfilled because of something I've done? I know I don't deserve this, I know I'm a sinner. So what can I do? What can I do on my end to make this happen?"

I don't know about you, but I've thought like that before. Asked myself, What can I do to get rid of this guilt? To know for sure I'm forgiven? What can I do to know for sure I'm a Christian, that my faith is strong? Am I really God's person? How do I know? How do any of us know for sure?

There is an answer to those questions. For Abram, and for all of us too. And that answer is viscerally, beautifully displayed for us in what God does next. [READ verses 9-11]

For 21<sup>st</sup> century readers, these are probably some of the strangest verses in the book of Genesis. Abram cuts a bunch of animals in half and arranges the pieces. What in the world is going on?

When God instructs Abram to get those animals, he doesn't give any further explanation because Abram immediately would have known what the Lord was talking about. This is what ancient middle eastern people would do when they wanted to make a covenant, a binding agreement with someone.

We actually do something similar today. It's what you do every time you write your signature. Whether you're leasing an apartment, or buying a car, or a plot of land, if it's a big purchase just giving someone a handshake isn't

enough. You sign your name. You put it in writing. You legally bind yourself to do something for someone else, to uphold your end of the deal.

Thousands of years ago, if you wanted to make a huge, binding agreement with someone, ancient people wanted something more hardcore than a signature. If two powerful men were having a land dispute, and settled on a boundary for their property, they would literally act out the consequences of breaking that agreement. They took a number of animals, cut them in pieces, arranged the pieces opposite from each other, and then each person would walk the bloody pathway down the middle. The message? "If I break this agreement, may I be cut in pieces and become food for the wild animals just like these livestock are."

That's what Abram would have been expecting. He would have been waiting for God to give him the terms of their agreement. And then Abram would have been ready to walk between the pieces. But that's not what happens. [READ verses 17,18]

In a mysterious way, God really does appear. But he doesn't make a single demand of Abram. Doesn't tell him to do anything. Instead, God walks between the animal halves alone.

The point? This agreement, this covenant, is not 50/50. It's not a case of "God helps those who help themselves." It is completely one sided. Abram does nothing. God does everything.

As strange as these verses sound at first, they give the answer to every doubt you've ever had. When you ask Lord, have I done enough? He says "I do everything for you." When you say Lord, how do I make up for the terrible things I've done? He says, "You don't. You will not be cut to pieces, because I am sending someone in your place." When you ask, Lord, how do I know you will keep your promises, even to me? He says, "Watch this."

And he walks the path of blood alone.

That's the reason you can find any comfort at all this Advent season. At the start of the service, we heard that Advent means "Towards the coming." It's the time of the year where we look ahead to the arrival of King Jesus at Christmas. But is the King's arrival really good news? Are you worthy of Jesus? Have you always obeyed him? The answer is no. So when Jesus comes, what makes you think he'll be on your side?

It's because you know what your King came to earth to do. Jesus did not come to wipe us off the map. He didn't come to bring wrath and destruction. He came to bring forgiveness, peace. He came to go to the cross.

Jesus knew that no one – not Abram, not you or me, or anyone else – would ever be able to uphold their end of an agreement with God. So he kept the agreement in our place. He perfectly followed God's laws and commands. And all of your sinning, all of your law breaking? He paid the consequences for that himself. [READ Isaiah 53 verses]

How do you know that you are God's person? How do you know that you can trust God's promises, most of all the promise of salvation? Because Jesus was cut to pieces, cut off from the land of the living, not you. He was even cut off from the loving presence of God himself as he cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" The debt for sin is paid, the punishment is gone. Because of what Christ alone has done for you.

There are so many times in life where we feel overwhelmed. We believe the Lord, we're hanging on to him, but the doubts are still there. And truth is, those doubts linger despite our church attending and our praying and our Bible reading because our lives don't feel like they're getting any better. That loved one hasn't been healed, in fact it's becoming clear that they never will be. Your grandchildren still haven't called you. You worked up the nerve to go to that Thanksgiving celebration, but it didn't make you feel any less alone. Maybe you feel like Abram, a believer who loves God, wishes they trusted him better, but just doesn't see how all of this is going to work out.

Instead of spelling out the answer to every last one of those little problems, the Lord points you beyond the mess, beyond your outward circumstances. He points you to the same place he pointed Abram. To the One who walks the path of blood all the way to the cross. To the One who keeps the covenant agreement in your place. To the Savior who loves you so much he died for you.

How do you know you can trust someone? With God, the answer is easy. Just look to Jesus. He has already saved you, and already given you the peace that you need. Live in that peace as you trust him to be with you through all the messes of your life, as his forgiveness puts all of your worries to rest, and as you boldly proclaim God's free forgiveness to all people. Amen.