

Part 16: Hot Takes and Strong Faith

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February 15th, 2025

Jalen Hurts is overrated. Oxford commas are unnecessary. Sweet Peaks is better than Big Dipper. You don't really like coffee, you like cream and sugar. A Dave's Double from Wendy's is better than a Double Double from In-N-Out.

Those are some hot takes—and they are my hot takes. If you and I were to get in a discussion about them you would think that they might just be the most important truths I hold dear. Yet, if you watch my life you'd see that these claims have very little impact on anything that matters.

Hot takes are just that. Like a flash in a pan they can provide us some heat but they can never keep us warm. But I wonder how many of us treat faith in Jesus Christ as nothing more than a Christianized hot-take. Ask us about it, and we'll tell you about it. We've got bold statements: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me," "God works all things for good for those who are called according to his purpose," "For when I am weak, then I am strong."

But when the conversation around these die down—what remains? Do they shape us? Do we really believe them? Do we trust them? The answer to those questions have less to do about the words themselves, and more to do about the one who gave us those words.

The title of our sermon today is "Hot Takes and Strong Faith," and the story of Genesis 15 is a story of bold statements believable only because of a big God. In the Biblical story, all roads lead to the cross. And yet I think it can be said that all roads to the cross begin their journey in Genesis 15.

Here, we see the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But it's not the nature of faith that stands out to Abram—it's the nature of his great God. If you would want to understand what real, true, biblical faith looks like—you've got to understand Genesis 15. Biblical faith isn't blind to the difficulties of what we believe, but it learns to see more clearly the God in whom we believe.

Our main point today is this: **Strong faith believes a strong God.** We will see the nature of faith and the power of God in three ways today. First we will see **faithful doubting**, then we will see **faithful believing** and lasting **faithful seeing**.

Let's begin with what seems like a contradiction: **Faithful doubting.**

God had given Abram some amazing promises about having a child, and building a nation. And Abram had been faithfully obeying God's word. He moved to Canaan, returned out of Egypt, trusted God when Lot left, he just defeated the greatest military force on the planet and was blessed by the priest-king of Melchizedek.

Yet it was in the midst of this ground for worldly confidence that the Lord says, **Genesis 15:1**, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward will be very great."

Have you ever had a moment where someone came up to you and said, “I want you to listen to me carefully, and please don’t panic”? Nothing causes us to panic like the assurance that we need not panic. Why? Because it generally means there’s something panic worthy behind us. But the Lord often moves towards us because he wants to deal with the subtle panic within us.

Biblical faith is like a river—it always flows onward yet beneath the surface there’s the diverse currents and challenges of the human heart. Despite the way Abram has seen God’s faithfulness—he’s still without a child and Abram’s answer to God’s affirmation reveals the backup plans and contingencies that his heart had been quietly mulling over.

And Look how Abram responded. **Genesis 15:2-3**, “What do you mean Lord. I’m not afraid, what would I have to be afraid of? Do you think that I thought that you forgot that you said you were going to give me a child and yet still I have no child? I haven’t even considered it’s culturally acceptable for barren families to adopt one of their servants as a child. That servant would be their caretaker as they aged and in return would receive the inheritance. It’s not like you’ve given me so many, many servants from whom to choose. I mean, even if you did, it’s not like I would catalogue the athletic attributes of each male and determine that Eliezer of Damascus scores high in both the 40 yard dash and the plowing of the field. Because if I did that I would have readily concluded that he would be a suitable heir in the rare, but probably likely event that you forgot about my childlessness.”

There should be a holy gasp when we consider Abram’s opening question, “O Lord God, what will you give me?” Would any good Christian, who knows they have the promise of God in the gospel dare ask that to God?

But notice how the Lord himself draws Abram’s whirlpool of concern out into the open. Abram really believed, but his belief was not at peace. He kept pace on the outside, but on the inside he couldn’t help look at his life and wonder how in the world God was going to make this work when there was nothing humanly speaking that seemed to indicate he would have a child. They had done the things. He had believed. He had made mistakes. He had come back. He had done things he never thought able. And yet—Sarai’s womb was barren and their hearts were burdened.

Brothers and sisters, the promise of God is easy to believe on the onset. But over time faith in what isn’t seen has to be considered in light of what is seen. And when that happens we might have doubts. But Abram models for us what faithful doubting looks like. Abram doubts the capabilities of his circumstances, but he’s not doubting the character of God. This is an important distinction.

It is reasonable for us to hear that God loves us, that God works all things for our good, that God has given us new life in Christ Jesus. But if we are honest, when we look around we see a lot of bad, a lot of death, and a lot of confusion. But remember, the nature of faith is hoping in what is *not seen*. Faith itself assumes you’re believing something otherwise unbelievable. Faith isn’t merely a belief in something you don’t see, but a belief against something you do see. Faith doesn’t stop us from being human. We still see barrenness and brokenness, problems and pain, trials and temptations.

Which is why James says this: **James 1:2-4**, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”

That's a hot take. How in the world can he mean that? Dear Christian, have you really considered the outrageous nature of that claim? Have you taken the time to hold the snapshot of James 1:2-4 up against the x-ray of your own heart? How in the world can we make ourselves see things this way?

James continues: **James 1:5-6**, "If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind."

Faith gives us a relational context in which we can safely doubt the capabilities of our circumstances but it protects us from doubting the character of our God. Did you see how James put that? He assumed you will doubt the work of faith. Suffering as joy, trials as treasure. And when you doubt that, run without doubt to the Lord who wants to help you find stability in him and him alone. He's not disappointed when we find ourselves with tough questions. Instead he calls us to run without reproach and with no doubt to the Lord who shows himself faithful time and time again. Who, like a Father fits us with his affirmation, helps us see things differently, and sends us back out into the world with renewed vision and wisdom.

This is what the Lord does with Abram in **Genesis 15:4-6**, "And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." And he believed the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness."

Abram believed the Lord. Nothing changed. Sarai was still barren. Abram was already believing. And yet when the Lord brought him outside and pointed him to the stars, Abram was reassured even if he didn't see in that moment the fulfillment of the promise because Abram's hope wasn't in the promise. It was in the promise giver.

It's not seeing the fruit of the promise that gives us faith. It's seeing the God of the promise who sustains our faith. When the promise of God seems far off, draw near to the God who has promised to be near us. The Lord has sent his son into our world, to occupy our heart through faith, so that through faith we might constantly take our fears and concerns to him and find the life we need to continue the road of faith.

If you find yourself wrestling with doubt, drawn near to the God who in Jesus has already drawn near to you. Wrestle with him and find him faithful. Experience him in his word. Worship him in the presence of his people. Our problems will be big—you'd better make sure your view of God is even bigger.

There are some of us here who need to repent of sinful doubt. We have doubted the character of God. We do not believe him. To be honest, we consider him to be a liar, or even worse, a deceiver. If that's you, repent and believe. Humble yourself, let the Lord take you to the foot of the cross and point you to the promise held out for you in Jesus.

Faith doubts what it sees in order to trust in whom it believes.

This leads us to our second point: **Faithful believing**.

Despite what he saw, Moses tells us this: **Genesis 15:6**, "[Abram] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness."

I mentioned early that Abram was already believing in God. It was in faith, by belief he left Ur. It was in faith by belief that he left Egypt. It was in faith by belief, he called upon the name of the Lord, opened up his land to Lot, and turned down the riches of Sodom.

And yet here we see that biblical belief is a process of constantly aligning our heart and our actions with who the Lord is. When Abram's experience seemed out of line with the Lord's promise, his belief aligned his experience with the Lord's promise. In other words, biblical faith doesn't let the conditions of this world shape what we believe about God. Instead, what we believe about God reforms and rearranges what we think and how we live in this world.

Biblical faith isn't merely a belief in God—faith is believing God. It takes his promise seriously and aligns our attitudes and actions with what we believe about him.

And when we align our lives with God—something amazing happens: Did you see that? **Genesis 15:6**, “Abram believed in the Lord and it was counted to him as righteousness.”

When by faith Abram saw the Lord differently, the Lord saw Abram differently. Abram believed in the God who was always faithful, always true, never failing. Abram was none of those things. Abram doubted, Abram ran from the Promise in Egypt, Abram was about to make a big mistake in Genesis 16. And yet by Abram's faith the Lord counted Abram as righteous.

Faith solves our greatest problem. By faith, sinful, doubting, short-sighted believers are declared righteous. Not because of who we are. Not because of what we've done. But because of who it is in whom we trust. Before the sun rose, before Sarai conceived, before circumcision, before the law, Abram was counted as righteous by God because of his faith.

The New Testament authors pick up this verse as the key to the doctrine of salvation. We are declared righteous not because of who we are—but because of who God counts us to be only by nature of our faith in him.

That's why Paul says this in **Philippians 3:8-9**, “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.”

Faith reshapes our problems. Our biggest problems can't be solved in this life. Abram would not be saved by his offspring. But he would be saved by faith in the one who promised him offspring. There will be days where, like Paul, we need to remind ourselves that while the fullness of God's promise might be reserved for the next life—it is what we gain by faith in this life that assures us that we have been saved. By Jesus' righteousness counted to us by faith.

Your standing before the Lord, your promise of joy in the midst of trials and life eternally in heavenly joy depends on one thing: Christ's righteousness counted to you by faith.

Now pay attention to what Paul and Moses said. This righteousness is what theologians call, “declarative” righteousness. That is to say that while we will one day be made finally and fully righteous,

as of right now—the saving righteousness we have by faith is only by declaration of God. The salvation we believe in is not that we are made savingly righteous. It's that the one who is savingly righteous and without sin has lent us his own. That righteousness will grow—but it's never enough to save.

Saving righteousness is only in Jesus, and it's given to us by faith alone. This means that your own sins, the tests of the Devil and the trials of life will constantly challenge your assurance of salvation by pointing your eyes to the failings of yourself. They will want you to doubt that you have God's promise, or that you can ever change. But biblical faith believes that we are saved by what God says about us in Jesus. Our feelings matter. But what matters more is that we believe what God says about how we are saved. It is only by faith in Jesus. Believe in him—draw from his mercy, his power, his salvation.

The history of redemption is those who are made righteous by faith in Jesus. Which means that we need to be prepared to see Jesus clearly because the world will always try to draw our eyes away.

This is what leads us to our last point: **Faithful Seeing**.

Again, the Lord opens his mouth to draw out of Abram, the man of faith, more faithful doubts so that he can provide faithful assurance. Here we read **Genesis 15:7-11**, "And he said to him, 'I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess.' But he said, 'O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?'" He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." And he brought him all these, cut them in half, and laid each half over against the other. But he did not cut the birds in half. And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away."

How is Abram to know that he will possess the Land? That's the question. Every parent knows how hard it is to fight for dominance a home full of toddlers, let alone a land filled with armies of men. Abram believes that God will do this—and yet he wonders how he himself will be able to do all that God is calling him to do in the Promised Land. Abram knows failure is a real option for him and he wants to be reassured that he's got what it takes to get it done.

The Lord prepares to answer this question with a ceremony that, while common to Abram, is strange to us. The Hebrew word for covenant is often translated as "cutting a covenant," and what we just read is why it was spoken of as such.

The two parties entering into a covenant would recite the terms of the covenant, split animals in two, and then walk between the animals as a sign of what would happen if one of them didn't keep their end of the bargain. One ancient source records a similar treaty which says, "As this beast is cut up, may the gods do to me and more."

Besides the fact that this is a covenant with the Lord, this would have been normal for Abram. But this is where things get odd. Nothing happens immediately. Abram's waiting for instructions, and it's taking so long that he's having to fend off the carcasses. He does this all night and then we read this: **Genesis 15:12-21**, "As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. Then the LORD said to Abram, '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. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is

not yet complete.” When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.”

So here is what we see, the Lord himself gives the terms of the covenant. Abram doesn’t speak. Abram is spoken to. And in this covenant agreement, the Lord tells Abram how all of this is going to happen. He predicts Israel’s sojourning in Egypt, and their restoration to the land. He predicts the boundaries of the Promised Land that wouldn’t be fully realized until the days of King David.

But there’s two real kickers in here. Kicker number one: Abram won’t see any of this. Abram was going to not see the judgment or the establishment. He would see his offspring and the land to a certain point—but he would die before he saw the promise fulfilled in full. And yet notice how he would die: “in peace, buried in a good old age.” That’s important for us—put a pin in that.

But here’s the second kicker: the Lord walked through the animals alone. Represented in fire and incense, the Lord passed through the animals. We know it was a manifestation of the Lord because it says, “on that day the Lord made a covenant.” But it was not a bi-lateral covenant. It was a unilateral one. It didn’t involve two parties of equal importance and responsibility. There was one party who was the beneficiary, and one party who not only provided the benefit—but who would bear the penalty for a breach of covenant.

How would Abram come to possess the land? Because God would do it. And even if Abram failed to live up to it—God would both fulfill the promise and pay the penalty.

Now, let me remind us of where we are in redemptive history when Genesis was written. Moses wrote Genesis—and he did so as the people of Israel, redeemed out of slavery in Egypt, fresh of a desert wandering due to sinful doubt, stood on the banks of the Jordan River looking into the Promised Land once more.

This promise would have been hard for Abram to believe. He has God’s word—but he has no record of God’s work besides his call out of Ur to where he was that day. But Abram believed. And what happened? Abram would die in peace. He would be happy in seeing the promise fulfilled to the degree he was able, and he would see his offspring in his land.

Abram saw God’s goodness despite his sin. Sin which will become clear in the following chapters. But what did the Israelites see in Moses’ day? They saw God’s word about occupation, oppression and deliverance come to fruition. It was them and their parents who were redeemed out of sin—just as the Lord promised he would do.

And now, looking into that land where all those nations still were, they had to go on faith—but it was a faith that had already seen God’s faithfulness in their own lives. They saw the plagues, they saw his judgment, they saw the new pillar of fire that led them through darkness and delivered them. And they were faced with a choice—would they trust the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, these people possessed the land—but even they failed. But God still held out the promise for them. The author of Hebrews says it this way: **Hebrews 11:39-40**, “And all these, though

commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” All these OT saints who hoped—hoped in a promise yet to come. A promise in which we today would be made perfect.

What is that promise? The author goes on: **Hebrews 12:1-2**, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Our promise looks beyond the land and looks to Jesus. We have seen the greater covenant ceremony. We have messed up time and time again. We have doubted, been deceived, and done wrong. We have broken the trust, and we have sent God’s own son to the cross. And yet he took the punishment for us. By his wounds we are healed. He walked through the fire and the flame because we were covenant breakers. We can believe in the promise of faith because on the cross Jesus dealt with our greatest problem of sin.

Now remember that pin. Abram, the man to whom the promise was given, was going to die as a sojourner in a land in which he owned only his burial plot. He wasn’t going to see the fullness of the promise in his life. And yet he would die in peace.

Why? Because he’d see his offspring. He’d see the sign that God really would keep his covenant. He didn’t need to see the promise to fullness in this life because he realized that the promise of God is not fully realized in this life—but in the next. He saw all he needed to die trusting in God’s promise.

Brothers and sisters, the Bible calls us to faith alone, but it doesn’t call us to blind faith. Abram saw a part and it was enough. The Israelites saw another part and it was enough. King David saw the land come to its fullness. The prophets saw the people return after Babylon. But more than that, the early Christians saw Jesus’ ministry, they witnessed his death, his burial and his resurrection. And the church has proved God’s faithfulness for millennia.

There is much faith left to live out—but there is much proof of faith that lay in our past. We have a God worthy of a strong faith because he has worked a mighty salvation—and he’s continuing to work it out even in you.