

*These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.*

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### Genesis 15:1-12,17-18

NRSV

God has called on Abram to leave Ur (now in Iraq) and to “Go ... to the land I will show you” (12:1). God has blessed him, and he, his wife Sarah and his brother Lot have migrated to Canaan. Famine has struck the land, causing Abram and his family to seek food in Egypt. Pharaoh has been attracted to Sarah, thinking that she is Abram’s sister, taking her into the royal household. When he has discovered that she is Abram’s wife, he has ordered them to leave the country.

Our reading is two stories of gifts from God: in vv. 1-6, a son and many descendants; in vv. 7ff, the Land. The formula “the word of the LORD came to ...” (vv. 1, 4) is later used of prophets; Abram is called a prophet in 20:7. God makes Abram his favourite; he will protect (“shield”, v. 1) him. Abram’s “reward” is really a free gift. Custom was that if a man’s wife did not bear him a son, his chief servant (“slave”, v. 3), here “Eliezer” (v. 2), might inherit. God promises Abram a son (“your very own issue”, v. 4) and he will have countless descendants (“stars”, v. 5). Abram puts his trust in God’s promise; in this way, he establishes a right relationship (“righteousness”, v. 6) with God.

God’s words in v. 7 are like those he speaks later at Mount Sinai. But this time, Abram is not so trusting: he asks for a sign or sworn oath (v. 8). From Jeremiah we know that the ceremony in vv. 9-10 and 17 is of ancient origin. Going between the two halves (“pieces”, v. 17) of sacrificial victims signified that if a party broke the agreement, he could expect to be dismembered. As in v. 1, Abram has a vision (v. 12): the descent of the sun, “deep sleep”, terror and great “darkness” express the awesomeness of supernatural intervention. God’s presence is symbolized by fire (v. 17). Only he has obligations under the pact, so only he passes between the “pieces”. The *deal is cut* (thus the Hebrew), as are the victims: David’s empire later stretched almost from the Nile to near the upper reaches of the “Euphrates” (v. 18). (In the other version of this story, God changes Abram’s name to Abraham to signify his new relationship to God.)

### Psalms 27

NRSV

The psalmist expresses his confidence in God. “Light” is linked with “life”. When “evildoers” (v. 2) try to destroy him (“devour my flesh”), they fail to do so. Even if they are many (“army”, v. 3), he is sure that they will fail. He has asked of God that he may worship in the Temple (“live”, v. 4) for as long as he lives, see the “beauty” of what God does, to know more of God; these things he intends to do. God’s “tent” (v. 5) is the Temple; it is the psalmist’s refuge; there God makes him unreachable by his ungodly foes (v. 6). So he will praise God. He pursues his request in vv. 7-12. May God allow himself to be seen (v. 9); in the past he has

seemed hidden from Israel. May God care for him (v. 10). May God guide him in godly ways so that he may not become subject to the “will” (v. 12) of his foes who tell lies about him (“false witnesses”, v. 12). V. 13 is the conclusion: he trusts that he will see the effects of God’s caring, throughout his life. Possibly v. 14 is a later addition: God does not act according to our schedule.

### Philippians 3:17-4:1

NRSV

Paul has written: “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death” (3:10). He has not yet fully understood Christ, but he *presses on* (3:12) towards the goal of being with Christ when he comes again. This is how “mature” (3:15) Christians should think: they have not yet achieved full understanding.

Now Paul offers himself as an example of centering oneself in Christ, in his sufferings. (At the time, Paul was in prison.) Observe those who follow his (*our*) example! He warns against “many” (3:18) who centre on other things: at the end of the age, sadly they will be destroyed. Who are they? Perhaps self-centred people, but more likely Christians who insist on keeping Jewish dietary laws (“belly”, 3:19) and on circumcision: to boast in this is to *glory* in an organ which should be modestly covered (“shame”). These are “earthly things”, made obsolete by Christ’s coming. Society looks to Rome for citizenship but we look to “heaven” (3:20).

Our bodies, now mortal, will enter eternal life in a changed form, to achieve union with Christ (3:21). Per Psalm 8, the Messiah will be sovereign over all (“subject to himself”); Christ is the Messiah. Do not deviate from the true faith! (4:1).

### Luke 9:28-36

NRSV

Jesus has predicted his suffering, death and resurrection to his disciples; he has called on them to “take up their cross” (v. 23), has warned that those who hear the gospel but fail to trust in it will be condemned, and has promised that some present will see the kingdom of God. Now he and the inner circle of disciples ascend “the mountain” (v. 28). In Luke, Jesus always prays before an important event.

An aura of unnatural brightness is linked with mystical appearances in Exodus and Acts; “dazzling white” (v. 29) is a symbol of transcendence. In Jewish tradition, both “Moses and Elijah” (v. 30) were taken into heaven without dying. Jesus’ agenda is in accord with the Law and the prophets; he is doing God’s will.

“Two men” also appear at the resurrection and at the ascension. Jesus’ “departure” (v. 31, *exodos* in Greek) is his journey to Jerusalem and his passage from this world. Peter clearly doesn’t understand; perhaps he thinks he is witnessing a super Feast of Tabernacles (“dwellings”, v. 33) – a time when the whole city was brightly illuminated. The “cloud” (v. 34) is a symbol of God’s presence; the words from it recall Jesus’ baptism, and add “listen to him!” (v. 35). They refrain from telling anyone what they had seen in order to avoid premature curtailing of Jesus’ earthly ministry.

