



STARS IN THE NIGHT

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 15:1-6

Sixth Message

Brian Morgan

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It is rather ironic that Advent, the season when we sing of “peace on earth, good will toward men,” is often the very time of year when many of us feel our deepest sorrows. As we are carried away in the rush of celebration we have scant opportunity to articulate our doubts and difficulties. I overheard one friend go so far as to say, “I just wish it were January.” One thing that exacerbates this feeling is the sound of the holiday music blaring in the shopping malls. These candy-coated offerings, completely devoid of the mystery of the incarnation, swell with syrupy sweetness and light-hearted frolic. Subjected to the constant barrage, we have little permission to feel truly human. By contrast, I came across an old carol written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow during the Civil War. Upon receiving news of the death of his son, just before Christmas, Longfellow wrote these lines,

*I heard the bells on Christmas day,
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat,
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*I thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom,
Had rolled along th'unbroken song of
Peace on earth, good will to men,*

*And in despair I hung my head,
There is no peace on earth, I said
For hate is strong and mocks the song,
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

That is the honest expression of a man of faith who felt free to express his doubts at Advent.

In our studies of Abram we are tracing the journey of this man of faith as a model for our own lives. Today we will examine his first reported words to God — actually, his first recorded prayer. Up to this point all we have heard is his silent obedience. What we are about to hear, therefore, will surprise us, for rather than expressing his delight and trust in God, Abram’s first recorded words are filled with doubt and sorrow. For him, there seems to be a great chasm between the promises of God and reality. If he is to speak honestly with God he must address this tension. This principle of bold honesty shapes much of the psalms, and is highly instructive on how we ought to pray. Abram teaches us the relationship between growing in *trust*, while still having the freedom to express our *doubts*.

I. God’s Gifts to Abram (15:1)

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying,

“Do not fear, Abram,

I am a *shield* to you;

Your *reward* shall be very great.” (NASB)

Having successfully fought a war of restoration, Abram walked away from the profit and praise of men. His interest was worship, not wealth. And he worshiped well, giving God the first and best of all that he had won. Alongside him stood a king-priest from Jerusalem, who gave a triune blessing to God Most High. This cameo appearance of Melchizedek would later give shape to Israel’s messianic hopes (Ps 110, Heb 7).

Following these events, God now appears to Abram. He has already spoken to him (12:1; 13:14), and appeared to him (12:7), and now he comes through a new medium — the powerful imagery of a vision. The narrator says, “*The word of the LORD came...in a vision.*” This is the first time this kind of language is used of anyone in Scripture. The next person to receive a similar revelation will be Samuel, the first of the “former” prophets. The terminology suggests that God is designating Abram, the returning war hero, as Israel’s first prophet. The term *mahozeh* refers to the visionary process in which an individual has the eyes of his heart opened to see supernatural realities unseen by others. Normally, the prophet does not *see* the vision with his eye, but *hears* it in his ear (“*the word of the LORD came*”) in an auditory experience that projects an image upon his psyche.¹ Visions, which usually occur at night, are distinct from dreams (Mic 3:6; 1 Sam 3; 2 Sam 7:4, 17). They are powerful tools of communication. There were no more awe-provoking experiences than the occasions when the prophets received their night visions. Though ephemeral to our scientific world, these experiences had a profound impact on the souls of the individuals who received them — and on salvation history.

God’s vision to Abram is timely, as our hero has just returned from routing a powerful global alliance. In the aftermath of his victory we can well imagine him being barraged by fears of the threat of retaliation. So God comes to him in person, by night. His opening words are, “*Do not fear Abram, I myself am your shield.*” “*Do not fear*” is the most common command in the Bible (repeated over a hundred times). The God who had just *delivered* him (Hebrew: *miggen*, 14:20), is now his permanent *shield* (Hebrew: *magen*). This is the first self-designation

of God in the Bible — the solid metaphor of a shield. A metaphor moves beyond literal language, saying one thing in terms of another and bringing two different worlds together in one image. As Edward Hirsch says, “it is a collision, a collusion, a compression of two unlike things.”² Metaphors can be like explosive meteors that grant flashes of insight to the mind and heart. This particular metaphor of a shield is also the first and favorite metaphor to describe God in the Psalms (3:3). It is one of the most popular designations of God in the Bible. What an amazing thought, to have the Creator of the universe, fully armed, as your personal protector!

But that is not all that God says to Abram. He adds, “your wages will be exceedingly great.” Abram has just walked away from financial gain, and now he is granted immeasurable wealth. Again we learn that in the kingdom of God we can never outdo God’s generosity. If we walk away from wealth in order to worship, we will acquire true wealth.

Once God has spoken these reassuring words we are prepared to hear Abram’s first dialogue with God. God’s confirming presence grants him the freedom to speak, and what we hear is rather surprising.

II. Abram’s Expression of Doubt (15:2-3)

Abram said, “O Lord God, what will You give me, since I am childless, (lit. for I am going (to die) stripped), and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” (lit. and the son *domestic* of my house is *Damaskan* Eliezer) (Gen 15:2)

Abram’s first speech to God is not an expression of fortified faith, but one filled with doubt and deep sorrow. God said he would give him wages, but what good are wages when he has *no heir* to give them to? Abram really wants something other than wages, but he doesn’t feel free to state that openly lest he accuse God of failure. So his request is hidden in the veiled, “What will You give me?” Though his request is vague, the expression of his inner turmoil is painfully honest. Most English translations render this, “since I am childless,” or something similar, but the Hebrew is more graphic. It reads, “for I am going (to die) *stripped*.”³ Abram feels he is at his end. He is going to go to his grave destitute. Then he emphatically states where all his wealth is going, and in so doing gives a hint at what he lacks, using a word-play around the word *son* (Heb. *son* = *ben*). But he still won’t come right out and say it. The text reads, literally, “the son *domestic* of my house is *Damaskan* Eliezer.” One can almost hear the alliteration of sounds rolling off the tongue in the Hebrew: *ben meshesh...dammeshesh... I wonder if the mention of the name Eliezer (“My God is help”) is, in fact, a subtle request to God, “Be my help, O God. I want a son.”*

Such is Abram’s first request of God, a veiled petition that emerges out of his deep sorrow. But God does not answer. Abram hears only silence. He persists, however, and probes deeper within himself. With greater clari-

ty he goes on to articulate his request.

And Abram said, “Since Thou hast given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.” (15:3)

Abram now repeats his prayer, but with some distinct differences. The prolonged silence forces him to go deeper than before and to express his doubts with greater clarity. Now he comes right out and expresses his deep longing, without reservation: “Behold to me you have given no seed.” The emphatic use of “behold” stops the action twice. It is as if he were saying, “Look, God, I can’t go on.” The word order is significant. “*To me...*” is in the emphatic position. Then he places the responsibility where it belongs — before the face of the Giver who promised him “seed.” Abram has mustered the courage to bring God right into the center of his doubts: “*It is you, you who promised seed, have given no seed!*” Finally, alongside his pain he reiterates his greatest fear: a slave will inherit everything he has, including his future. Sarna explains: “Numerous documents from Nuzi show that it was a well-established custom for a childless person to adopt a stranger, even a slave, as a son. He owed his adoptive parents filial respect, maintained the estate, took care of their physical needs, and performed the funerary rites at their death. In return, the adopted son became the heir to the property.”⁴

Here we can see the value of God’s silence are far as our prayers are concerned. Delay can have the effect of causing us to probe deeper and to articulate our doubts with greater clarity and honesty. This is a healthy thing in prayer. It becomes a standard pattern in the psalms. God has no trouble with our being honest. If we are not, our relationship with him will remain at a very shallow level.

Once Abram has been able to do this, God speaks.

III. God Addresses Abram’s Doubt (15:4-5)

Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, “This man will not be your heir; but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir.” (15:4)

In response to Abram’s honesty, God answers with a piercing clarity that rings like the sound of a bell. Nothing is veiled in these words: “An heir? You’re concerned about Eliezer being your heir? Make no mistake about it, *this* man will *not* be your heir.” Then God addresses Abram’s yearning for a son, uniting both concerns. In no uncertain terms he promises him a son, “one from your own inner parts” (ruling out adoption). And, make no mistake about it, that one “shall be your heir.” With the sound of those words still ringing in his ears, God takes Abram by the hand and leads him outside under the night sky.

And He took him outside and said, “Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” And He said to him, “So shall your descendants be.” (15:5)

In the blackness of the night, Abram is about to get a lesson in arithmetic. God tells him to gaze up into the heavens. Against that black canopy of sky he tells him to count the stars. Then God adds the challenge, “if you are able to count them.” Abram gazes upward and makes no reply. He has no words. God breaks the silence and ends Abram’s science project with an amazing prediction. In Hebrew, he speaks a mere three words, “*Thus shall-be your-seed.*”

This vision complements God’s earlier word to Abram that his seed would outnumber the dust of the earth. But this nighttime imagery is more lofty and impressive. It has a grand solemnity that was lacking in the mere statement he had uttered earlier. Is there something about the night that makes revelation more penetrating? Perhaps David had this text in mind when he wrote,

**The heavens are telling of the glory of God;
And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands.
Day to day pours forth speech,
But night to night reveals knowledge. (Ps 19:1-2)**

The poet is awed by what he sees in the heavens, whose glory seems more prominent at night. During the day, speech *pours forth* in a cacophony of noise (the verb to “*pour forth*” is used of a “*gushing*” spring and of the wicked who “*burst forth*” with a reckless utterance). But at night, noise gives way to silence and light recedes into blackness. This is the time for reflection. As man meditates under the countless stars burning bright against the blackness of the sky, a deeper knowledge of the holy penetrates his soul. We might consider both kinds of speech working on man in the following diagram:

day	night
light	darkness
noise	silence

literal **speech** (by day) + **metaphor** (by night) =
intimate revelation

IV. Doubt Gives Way to Trust (15:6)

Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

As Abram hears the word of God linking the stars with his seed, his senses are overwhelmed. For a moment, the whole creation draws itself into one focal point within Abram’s soul. The explosive power of this visual metaphor does its work, and he understands. The abundant wages which God said he would give him are now transformed before his very eyes and *redefined* in terms of his deepest longing: “*sons.*” Abram is submerged in a joy that defies words. But though there are no words, the narrator reveals that within the secluded silence of his soul a miracle of faith takes place. On this holy night, when the stars were brightly shining, doubt gave way and trust was born. Only two

words are required in the original to record the deed in holy writ. Perhaps this is what the psalmist meant when he wrote, “*Silence is praise to you*” (65:1). As Kidner says, “It may sometimes be the height of worship...to fall silent before God in awe at His presence and in submission to His will.”⁵

And the silence becomes antiphonal as the holy silence on earth is echoed in heaven. God does not speak. Instead, in an act of supreme holiness, he takes the book of life and opens it. Then, raising his pen, with all the authority of heaven he writes beside Abram’s name the word *tzedaqah* – righteous. With this act, Abram’s destiny is sealed, and with it the history of the world. Silence. No words are necessary at a time like this.

*How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift is giv’n!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heav’n.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still
The dear Christ enters in.*

V. The Divine Dance To Saving Faith

So we learn that faith is not a *one-time* action of believing an abstract doctrine. Faith is better understood as a dynamic dance with Deity. By walking away from the riches and praise of men, Abram walks by faith, and God responds with immeasurable riches. Because of God’s commitment and generosity, Abram then feels free to express his deepest sorrow and doubts in prayer. This provokes a deeper revelation from God to complement the word of promise with the metaphor of creation. Finally, the word of God and the vision of God work together to give birth to saving faith in the heart of Abram. He considers God faithful and gives him his full trust, and in response to his faith, God reckons him righteous. So we find the expression of doubt plays a crucial role in our walk of faith. As Paul wrote,

In hope against hope he [Abram] believed, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken, “So shall your descendants be.” And without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah’s womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform. Therefore also it was reckoned to him as righteousness. (Rom 4:18-22)

Paul goes on to say that this gift of righteousness will be given to all who follow the way the Abram. As we read of Abram in Genesis, standing under the stars, Paul invites us to participate in the promise:

Now not for his sake only was it written, that it was reckoned to him, but for our sakes also, to whom it

will be reckoned, as those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, He who was delivered up because of our transgressions, and was raised because of our justification. (Rom 4:23-25)

Like Abram, we are to contemplate our bodies, which are as good as dead because of sin. And we are to contemplate our Lord on the cross, placed there because of our sin, his body rent by a spear. Yet, though he was dead, God's power raised him as proof of our justification. That is the honest journey of the man of faith. We walk from faith, through doubt, to faith.

"For...the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith" (Rom 1:17). This makes Longfellow's carol, *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*, an authentic expression of our faith at Advent.

*I heard the bells on Christmas day,
Their old familiar carols play,
And wild and sweet the words repeat,
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*I thought how, as the day had come,
The belfries of all Christendom,
Had rolled along th'unbroken song
Of peace on earth, good will to men,*

*And in despair I hung my head,
There is no peace on earth, I said
For hate is strong and mocks the song,
Of peace on earth, good will to men.*

*Yet pealed the bells more loud and deep:
"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;
The wrong shall fail, the right prevail,
With peace on earth, good will to men."*

*Then ringing, singing on its way,
The world revolved from night to day
A voice, a chime, a chant sublime
Of peace on earth, good will to men!*

Amen.

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1. The most vivid description of such a vision is Eliphaz's experience in Job 4:12-16.

2. Edward Hirsch, *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1999), 13.

3. Alter explains, "The Hebrew says simply, 'I am going,' but elsewhere 'to go' is sometimes used as a euphemism for dying." Robert Alter, *Genesis*, (New York: Norton, 1996), 63.

4. Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, (New York: Schocken, 1966), 122.

5. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1973), 230.