

Behold the Lamb of God

Part 2: Number the Stars of Heaven

TEXT: GENESIS 15:1-18 (ESV)



(About the Art: by Abby Mangan, commissioned for Oak Hills Presbyterian Church's 2009 Christmas Celebration™)

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Patriarchs

We continue today as we approach Christmas by returning again to the Old Testament. The OT is not simply the archive of unconnected events that occurred before Jesus was born. It is the story of everything leading up to His birth. While redemption in Christ is very much set in doctrinal truths, they are anchored in an amazing and true tall tale. The aim of this series is to spend time telling that story.

Telling the stories of Scripture is not just an option believers have for proclaiming the Gospel. It is a necessity, an essential, an obligation. Scripture is mostly written in the form of narrative or story. The poetry of Scripture finds its context in that story, so to understand the poetry of the Bible—like the Psalms—you must be familiar with the stories. Even Jesus taught in parables—which are stories with power and with a point.

But another reason for investing such a significant portion of these sermons in story-telling is *pleasure*. Stories are fun, especially stories with a happy ending where the hero saves the day. Christmas is nothing if not that kind of story. I hope and pray that as we hear these stories from Scripture, we will all, young and old, enjoy the true tall tale of the coming of Christ and that our celebration of Christmas would be marked by our worship of Jesus. Today we move from the story of the fall of man and God's promise to restore all that is broken to the story of a man He would choose to be the father of the nation God would preserve as a remnant—Abraham. Here is his story.

Genesis 15:1-18

¹After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." ²But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." ⁴And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." ⁵And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ⁶He believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

⁷And he said to him, "I am the LORD who brought you out from Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to possess."

⁸But he said, "O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" ⁹He 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." ¹⁰And 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. ¹¹And when birds of prey came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away.

¹²As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram. And behold, dreadful and great darkness fell upon him. ¹³Then 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. ¹⁴But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵As for yourself, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age. ¹⁶And they shall come back here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete."

¹⁷When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. ¹⁸On 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."

Number the Stars of Heaven

From the time of the first man and woman, the world needed saving. God's promise was that the line from Eve to the Savior would be unbroken. Eve would have two sons, Cain and Abel, and then another son, Seth. Seth became their heir, the one on whom God's favor would rest. ^(Gen 4:25-26) Generations later, from Seth's line would come a man named Noah, father of the only surviving family of the earth's great flood. ^(Gen 6-8) Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. Shem, the oldest, was heir to his father's blessing, on whom God's favor rested. ^(Gen 9:26-27)

Generations later still, from the line of Shem would come a man living in Ur of the Chaldees, "Abraham the son of Terah, the son of Nahor, the son of Serug, the son of Reu, the son of Peleg, the son of Eber, the son of Shelah, the son of Cainan, the son of Arphaxad, the son of Shem, the son of Noah, the son of Lamech, the son of Methuselah, the son of Enoch, the son of Jared, the son of Mahalaleel, the son of Cainan, the son of Enos, the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God." ^(Lk 3:34-38)

Together with his wife Sarah and their servants, Abram, as he was called then, packed up and set out from the only home he had ever known, Ur. He had traveled over 1,000 miles along the rivers and across the deserts of Haran. And he had done it all because of a promise. The Lord had appeared to him, saying, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse. In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." ^(Gen 12:1-3)

Abram believed this promise from God, and though it'd mean a profound separation from everything he had ever known, he set out in faith. But it was an impossible journey. As for following the Lord, Abram had no Scriptures, no records of saints who had gone before him. Even his own father Terah was an idol worshipper. As for the Lord's promise of land and heirs, Abram was travelling to a place he couldn't locate on a map to become the father of a nation, though he had no children of his own.

Along the way, sometimes Abram's faith wavered. He thought about God's proclamation that he would become a great nation. But this was impossible without sons. He thought about God's promise that Abram would bless the world by making his name great. He was just a nomad who had uprooted his entire family from any semblance of security or name or place in this world, yet the words rolled around in his head, "*In you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed.*" (Gen 12:3) But how could this be?

Passing Between the Pieces

One night in particular as Sarah's husband sat with the weight of the world on his shoulders, the Lord came to him in a vision: "*Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.*" (Gen 15:1) Abram answered, "*O Lord GOD, what will you give me? You have given me no offspring.*" (Gen 15:2-3) The closest thing Abram had to an heir was his servant, Eliezer of Damascus. Maybe he would have to suffice. Maybe the Lord would settle for servants instead of sons. Maybe that was all God wanted anyway.

But no. In that moment the Lord God took this struggling man out beneath the desert sky at night, pulled back the blanket of self-doubt Abram had been smothered under and revealed a canopy of glimmering stars too vast to count. God answered Abram's inner fears with this spectacle of glory, telling him to look at them and to number the stars of heaven if he could. Under that midnight sky, the Lord God assured Abram that his descendants would outnumber and outshine these stars above him, and his descendants, *his heirs*, would take possession of the land the Lord had sworn to him—this Promised Land.

Could Abram keep trusting in what he hadn't yet experienced, or for that matter in something he could never do himself? If Abram was to trust at all, it would have to be a living, daring confidence that God would do what He said He would do.

"*Abram believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.*" (Gen 15:6, Rom 4:3) He understood that the Lord had not come to him merely to make him a wealthy land owner with many sons. This was *not* why God called him out of Ur. From Abram, this descendant of Shem, the son of Noah, the descendant of Seth, the son of Adam and Eve, all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God had said, "*I am your shield, your very great reward.*" (Gen 15:1) God wasn't calling Abram's future descendants primarily to land or power. He was calling them to *Himself*.

But what about the Land? "*How am I to know that I shall possess it?*" Abram asked. (Gen 15:8) Rather than simply tell him, the Lord would *show* him how he would know. God told Abram to prepare a sacrifice: a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, and a young dove and a young pigeon. Abram gathered all these things and with everything except the birds he cut them into halves and arranged them opposite each other. And then he waited for the Lord to come. As he waited, the buzzards came down on the carcasses, melding together the Holy with the common: a sacrifice prepared as unto the Lord attracts the hopeful carrion crows as the priest, waiting for the Lord to descend, drives them away with a stick. (Gen 15:11)

Soon Abram fell into a deep sleep and a thick, dreadful darkness came over him. The holy terror of the Lord filled the place where Abram waited with his bloody offering. It was the kind of darkness felt beneath the skin, teeming with all manner of powers that could turn a man inside out. (Gen 15:12) From the darkness came the voice of God, "*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 they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, 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.*" (Gen 15:13-16)

Abram wanted to know how he would gain possession of the land, so God told him the history of what would come, in terrifying detail. Abram's people would be enslaved and mistreated for four hundred years in a foreign land. But after those 400 years, the Lord would judge their oppressors and bring Abram's descendants back to the place Abram now stood, and they would possess that land. As for Abram, when the time came he would die in peace and be laid to rest with his fathers.

As God spoke, the earth shook. With Abram beside his sacrifice in the dreadful darkness before the presence of the Lord, a covenant was being cut (Gen 15:18)—a lasting promise, a binding oath, a bond formed in blood. "*When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.*" (Gen 15:17) When God passed between the pieces of Abram's sacrifice in the form of a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, it was to convey that if He did not keep his promise, He too should be cut in half. God was not ashamed to be called Abram's God. (Heb 11:16) God cut a covenant to be Abram's God, and to take Abram as His people. He Himself passed between the pieces while Abram watched.

A Line of Promise Unbroken

God promised one would come from Eve who would rise victorious over evil, redeeming this world. From Eden, God declared His divine purpose, and from then on the rest of the whole of Scripture traces His redeeming work through time and space. It covers thousands of miles and pages, hundreds of generations and characters, dozens of countries and rulers, but there is an unbroken line running through it all. It is the line of Seth and of Noah, the line of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Benjamin. It is the line of David and the Kings of Judah.

In Jesus Christ, it is finished. He is the impossible promise come true, the son of an unlikelier birth than Abraham and Sarah's son Isaac. The moment the Lord passed between the pieces of Abram's sacrifice inviting the same to happen to Him if He failed to keep His covenant was rich in sober irony because though God the Father would not fail to make Abram's name great and to bless the whole earth through Him, the greatest blessing He would give the world through Abram would be God's own Son, who would be sacrificed on the altar of God's redemptive will.

Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, and He does it is by taking the sins of those would believe in Him upon Himself as a sacrificial Lamb. He is neither an afterthought nor an accidental Savior. He is the Son of God, come in the flesh to make atonement for the sins of the people of God. He is the great blessing through which all the nations of the world have been and continue to be blessed. He is Christ the Lord. Behold the Lamb. Are you seeing Him? May your celebration of Christmas be marked by your worship of Jesus.