

2. Abraham, Man with a Vision

Abraham's Growing Faith
Genesis 15

Warm-up Question: Share a memory of a view that stands out to you. Was it stunning, remarkable, or memorable to you for a sentimental reason? What made this view special to you?

¹After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision: “Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.” ²But Abram said, “Sovereign LORD, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?” ³And Abram said, “You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.” ⁴Then the word of the LORD came to him: “This man will not be your heir, but a son who is your own flesh and blood will be your heir.” ⁵He took him outside and said, “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” ⁶Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:1-6).

One of the most stunning sights I can remember happened one night while I was working as a commercial fisherman on the East Coast of England on my father's fishing boat. At the time, I was working the boat alone during the night. Way past midnight, more than 8 miles from land, I set the boat to automatic pilot and turned off all the lights on deck. Then I went out on the deck, laid down flat on my back on one of the unused nets and looked up at the stars. Have you ever been away from civilization where there are no lights and looked at the stars on a clear night? It is one of the most stunning sights of this world. There wasn't a cloud in the sky that night, and no artificial lights to hinder the view. I sensed the Lord telling me that there was more to my life than spending most of my waking hours working in solitude away from others on my father's fishing boat.

The sight of that night sky will always stick with me. It was a moment when I became convinced that the future held something different for me and that God would teach me a different kind of fishing. Instead of using a net, I would learn to use the Word of God. Instead of catching fish, I would learn to fish for men; a call that Jesus made to His early disciples. I felt that I just had to be faithful to learn from Him and do what was at my right hand to do in the meantime (Ecclesiastes 9:10). In our study today, we will see God taking Abram outside of his tent and granting him a vision he could hold in his mind; an image that would enable him to persevere in his faith through many challenges. As I mentioned in an earlier study, God changed Abram's name to Abraham later. At this point in the account of his story, his name was still Abram, which means *exalted father*, which at this point in his life, he had still not become.

God our Shield and Reward

In the previous chapter, Abram had to intervene in the life of his nephew Lot, captured in a battle in the valley of Siddim (The Salt Sea—now called the Jordan Valley or the Dead Sea Valley). Abram by this time had a small army of 318 trained men who were born in his household (Genesis 14:14). Five kings to the north of Abram had invaded the valley where Lot chose to live near the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abram's small army battled with the army of the north,

and God gave Abram the victory. After the battle, the Lord came near and spoke to Abram in a vision, saying:

“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward” (Verse 1).

After this battle, Abram was afraid and, of course, God knew his fears. How did this statement answer Abram's fears? What fears weigh on your mind, that maybe this word would be a comfort to you?

Abram had secured the release of Lot and his possessions, and it appears there was much plunder as well (Genesis 14:21). The Lord knew what was on Abram's mind. It is likely that Abram was worried that the five kings might exact revenge on him and try to regain the plunder. He also may have worried about Pharaoh to his south, whom he had deceived. Just as the Lord knew all of Abram's thoughts troubling him at the time, He also knows the thoughts that weigh heavy on your mind. Cast all your cares on Him when you are troubled and heavy-laden with fears and worries (1 Peter 5:7). The Lord reassured Abram that He is his shield and the One who watches over His people to protect us from harm (Psalm 91).

The Lord went on to tell Abram; "I am your shield, your very great reward." This thought that God is our reward is something we can also take to heart. If you have entered into a covenant with God, He is your shield. That means He is your protector. The shield sometimes carries on it a mark of identification or ownership. If we belong to Him, and carry His identity, He promises not only to protect us but also to be our reward. The victory God has won becomes our victory, too. God is our great reward. The Lord saw that Abram refused to take a cut of the booty after the battle. He did not want any compensation except the return and safety of his relative Lot. Here is the picture of a faithful friend that would enter into battle for no other motive than to save his family member. God grant us friends like this, who will not allow an enemy to walk all over us without standing up in our defense! His eye is on you to protect, defend and reward you. The Lord was teaching Abram that He alone is sufficient reward. When you have Christ in your life, you have everything.

He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all— how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? (Romans 8:32).

For the first time in his walk with the Lord, as far as we know, Abram responds to God and enters into conversation with the Lord. Until this point, Abram had heard God speak but had never replied. Or if he had, there is no record of it up to this point. When he realized that God knew his thoughts and what weighed heavy on him, he brought up his concern about having no one to inherit his estate. There is nothing like going through a battle to make one think about a will. If you have ever come close to death, then you know that certain things come to a person's mind. There is often the thought of what lies beyond death, whether or not there is an afterlife. Another thought is how you will care for those you leave behind. Abram's concern is that he does not have a son or heir to inherit his estate in the event of his death. By this time, his estate had grown quite large, and he had a large company with him along with 318 servants born in his household and trained for battle. Three times in the past, God told Abram that he would have a multitude of descendants. But at this point, Abram still has no son. He only has God's promise

that he would have descendants. The first time God spoke to Abram was at Ur of the Chaldeans (Genesis 12:2), the second time was when he arrived in Canaan at Shechem, where he built an altar (Genesis 12:7), and the third time was after Abram had taken a step of faith and allowed Lot to choose what land he wanted. Abram promised Lot he would go in the opposite direction, again showing his faith in God to look after him by giving Lot the first choice of the land. After that decision to part from Lot, the Lord spoke to Abram, saying:

¹⁴“Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. ¹⁵All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. ¹⁶I will make **your offspring like the dust of the earth**, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. ¹⁷Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you” (Genesis 13:14-17).

God gave Abram a picture in his mind, a vision, so to speak, that would sustain him while waiting for the image to be fulfilled. He told him to walk through the length and breadth of the land and imagine his descendants filling the area like the dust of the earth in number. All the ground he walked on and saw would be given to his descendants. What a ‘wow moment’ that must have been for Abram! All he could see at that time was dust. But he was promised that as many grains of dust that he could see, to the same amount would be his descendants. That may have been hard for him to grasp since he did not have one descendant yet.

We don’t know how many years later it was from the parting with Lot, but when Abram brings up his chief servant, Eliezer of Damascus, as a possible heir to his estate, God reminds him again that there will be a son who would come from his own body that will be his heir (Genesis 15:4). At this conversation, the Lord took Abram outside his tent and told him,

⁵“Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” ⁶Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:5-6).

This vision of the stars in the night sky gave Abram a visible picture in his mind to keep him going on in faith. What vision sustains you while you wait for God’s promises to be fulfilled? If you do not have one, ask Him for a vision for your life.

What is a Vision?

Abram had a vision of how the future would look. When God calls a man or a woman, often He will provide a picture of how God wants to use him or her to accomplish God's will. Any leader worth his salt is given a vision in his mind's eye of how the future will look. After getting an idea in one's mind of the future, one must pray and think through how God wants to bring the vision into reality. I remember the things God used to envision me for my future. I want to illustrate how God "envisions us." It is not the same method for every person. Stay open to God and be alert to His promptings. For me, God used various things in my life. Soon after I left my father's fishing boat and the fishing industry, I had a strong desire for the rest of my life to be used to lead others to Christ and to instruct and build up the church. I did not know what form this would take, or what I could do to reach my goal. In hindsight, I would say that every job I had taught

me something of value and proved beneficial in my learning process. I am sure many of you would say the same about things you have experienced throughout your life.

Shortly after my fishing career ended, I worked for a while as a window cleaner, and as a painter and decorator. During this time, I became involved in leading a small group in our home, along with my wife, Sandy. At one point, I worked in a print shop for a Christian printing organization called Cornerstone Print and Design. This small printing company served missionary agencies as well as other churches and Christian organizations in England by printing all kinds of literature that would help them to reach the world for Christ. I remember they had a sign on the wall that said: “A drop of ink will make a million think!” At that time, I didn’t see myself as a Bible teacher; I was more of an evangelist that would share the message of Christ whenever I had the opportunity. But the sign on the wall grabbed my attention. God used my time at that printing agency to get a vision for spreading His Word to others, even in other countries. I could see the need for Christian literature that would help people understand the gospel of God’s love. One thing that was great to be a part of was printing tracts for Christians to use in other countries. These tracts explained the Gospel in their language. God began to show me His vision to reach the world, and that is what I am still seeking to do today.

What is a vision? I have heard it described as “foresight with insight based on hindsight.” We ought to look into the future and begin to see with the eyes of faith what God wants us to do. Vision also focuses on one’s present circumstances and asks the question: “how do I get to my vision from where I am at right now?” Also, vision takes into account the learning that one has accumulated from the past. A vision is a clear mental image of a preferable future given to a man or woman of God, to enable him or her to work toward that particular goal he or she has seen. When a person has obtained a clear vision of what God wants to do, then the man or woman of God goes to the Lord in prayer for practical steps to reach that goal or vision. Without concrete steps toward the preferable future, there is difficulty in stretching beyond the present reality. Abram is shown a picture in his mind’s eye of the future he is waiting for and holding onto in faith.

How does God give us vision, what methods does He use today? How can you tell if a vision is from God?

God will often use His Word, maybe through a speaker at church. It could be through a dream, through a song, encouragement from another, a mentor, or someone who inspires us to do what they are doing. It can also be a need, which we see that we want to meet, a strong desire to do something. It can be as simple as a natural God-given talent mixed with a strong desire.

If a vision is from God, it will always line up with Scripture. Test your vision to see if it matches up with the Word of God. Ask God to give you the first step in bringing your vision into reality, but also be ready to take steps of faith. Often, there is an excitement that happens when we look at what God has for us to do: **“for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:13).**

The Lord gives us a picture in our minds to sustain us during the waiting period, a faint glimpse of the result of our faith. For many of us, it could be the picture we read in the last two chapters

of the Book of Revelation, that of God's people living with the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb in the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21:22). The vision of God wiping away every tear from our eyes and all things made new, where we will finally see His face. We will see the Lord in all His glory, Jesus, the lover of our souls. May that vision grip your hearts just as Abram's heart was captivated as he looked over the land and considered the implications of what the Lord had spoken.

Abraham Believed the Lord

It is a possibility that Abram's vision of the stars and the dust of the earth represent the heavenly seed as well as the natural seed. The dust of the earth could be a picture of the natural seed of Abraham, the Jewish people. The vision of the stars of the sky could represent the heavenly seed, those who are born-again of the Holy Spirit, the church of the Living God. In this sense, we see an earthly and a heavenly seed. God often speaks to us in a natural and spiritual sense, as He calls out a spiritual truth.

Something happened within Abram's heart when he saw the vision of the stars of the sky. God said his offspring would be like the stars in number. **"Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (v. 6).** This commitment to walk with the Lord was before circumcision and more than four hundred years before the Law and the Ten Commandments. God saw that inside Abram's heart, there was a deep-seated trust and inner rest of belief he was resting in. The Lord imparted to Abram the gift of righteousness—and it was credited to his spiritual bank account. W.H. Griffith Thomas, in his commentary on Genesis, writes:

"The original Hebrew for 'believed' comes from a root whence we derive our 'Amen,' and we might paraphrase it by saying that 'Abraham said Amen to the Lord.' 'Amen' in Scripture never means a petition ('May it be so') but is always a strong assertion of faith ('It shall be so,' or 'It is so').¹

God credits righteousness in a similar way in the world we live in today. When we hear the gospel of the finished work of Christ and believe in our heart that God raised Christ from the dead, the gift of righteousness is credited to our spiritual bank account. No longer do we work at trying to please God by empty works, but we rest our souls on the finished work of God at the cross. The gospel (the good news) is that Christ has wholly restored the relationship between God and man through His substitutionary work in dying for us and as us on the cross. If you will place your life into His hands and merely believe (trust), just as Abram did, then you too will have the righteousness of God credited to your spiritual bank account. God gives us faith to reach out to Him and receive the gift of eternal life in Christ.

There is a gift of righteousness from God given to Abram upon his trust and belief in God's Word. This righteousness comes as a gift apart from anything Abram, or we can do to earn it. It is given to us apart from any obedience to a set of laws. Paul, the apostle, writes:

²⁰Therefore no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. ²¹But now **a righteousness from**

¹ W.H. Griffith Thomas, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1946) p. 138.

God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.
²²**This righteousness is given** through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe (Romans 3:20-22).

There is nothing that you or I can do to earn this gift; otherwise, it would not be a gift! A gift is easy to receive—God has made it so. It is man's thinking that wants to complicate things. Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little **child** will never enter it” (Luke 18:17). Go to your Father today and ask Him for the gift of righteousness. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and what He accomplished for you on the cross, and you shall receive the gift of eternal life. If you have not yet prayed this prayer, do not put it off. Do it today!

Prayer: Father, thank you for making salvation so easy that even a little child can come to you and place his trust in your finished work of the cross. Today, like Abram, I believe that you died for me to make me right with God. Grant us a vision for the future as I put You at the center of my life. Amen!

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