

“I Brought You”

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Abraham couldn't sleep that night. It was a dark, really dark, not only outside of his tent, but in his mind, in his heart. It was darkness that surrounded him. He sat up while Sarah quietly snored at his side. He looked over at her. He loved her. They had come so far, yet, that one thing they wanted, a son, they did not have, despite the promise.

The promise often came to Abraham in the night, when he woke up. He remembered when this God, this Yahweh came to him long ago and told them to leave their homeland and to go to a place God would show them. They followed God, not even sure who Yahweh was, and then, ten years before this night, God had promised them a son. Abraham was 75 years old, but, well, he could see that it might happen.

Now it was ten years later, and here he was, 85 years old, his wife younger, but not by much, and, well, there was no son in their tent. The promise. Hmm. And then there He was again. Yahweh came to him in a vision, and Abraham had this sudden awareness of...what...of Light; of Peace; of Love?

And God spoke to him, as he sat there on the floor of his tent, the sounds of the night-time animals suddenly no longer heard. God said, 'Do not be afraid.' SLIDE "Do not be afraid." Of what? Of the presence of God? Of the future? But God doesn't just say, 'Do not be afraid', he says, 'do not be afraid, Abram.' (I am calling Abram by his later-given name, Abraham, but this Abram is the one we know in the rest of the Bible as Abraham, as God gives him a new name, later, as he likewise renames Sarai to Sarah).

But I want you to think of a different name to put in that blank. Maybe it is your name. Maybe it is the name of someone you love. Maybe it is the name of a child starving in Venezuela, or a grandmother burying her daughter and grandson in New Zealand. Put in someone's name, and imagine you or them hearing Yahweh speak to them, 'Do not be afraid Francis.' 'Do no be afraid Francesca.'

SLIDE 'Your reward is very great.' What is the reward? For Abraham was it the biological heir he wanted, or was it something else? What is the reward you seek? Are you sure that is it, or might it be something else, something you haven't yet imagined, something even better?

Abraham speaks back to God. Now, how do you talk to God? That is the question our Bible Study is exploring, right? How do we pray to a Holy God who is also far and near, both at once and always? How should we talk to God? With pious and ponderous words? I am sure there are times for holy words to speak to a Holy God, but sometimes the holy words sound like this? 'Sovereign Lord, what can you do for me? You know that promise of children you made to us? Well, as you can see, I have no children! So, what exactly can you give me since I have no children?'

Would you talk to God like that? Notice that it begins with a holy recognition, "Sovereign", meaning, you are in charge of this world and my life and no one competes for your glory. "LORD", when spelled out in all caps, is the name of God, Yahweh, meaning the personal God who is "I AM." It is always good to begin a prayer with the recognition that God is God and we are not: "Our Father who art in heaven", Jesus teaches. That is what "Sovereign LORD" is saying. So, start like that.

But then, in the darkness, it is perfectly fine to tell the God of Glory, 'where have you been?' 'How are you going to give me a reward?' 'I made my own arrangements and moved on because you have been so slow, God, in making good on your promise that, well, I decided to fix the problem. I took a child of one of my servants to be my heir.'

God can take it. Amazingly, God not only can take it, he welcomes our responses that cry out to him. Prayer is learning how to cry out to God in honest words. Just be ready for what comes next.

God invites Abraham to step outside of the tent. Abraham grabs his robe to put over his night clothes, and he steps out into the chilled desert air. Now perhaps God will explain why he hasn't given us our son. But, no, God doesn't explain a thing. God says simply "Look up...count the stars...so shall your offspring be."

How do you imagine Abraham responded to that? He is 85, and not necessarily a picture of male virility. Sarah, bless her soul, is not seeming to be in child-conceiving, much less child-bearing condition. And, God, in case you haven't noticed, if you didn't hear me before, we don't have a son! The one you promised. And now I am to believe, now, this night, you want me to believe that I am going to have as many descendants as these billions of stars?

What happens next changes the history of God and humanity. The millennia to follow this night in the stars become the story of salvation, which culminates in the sunrise of Resurrection morning. From starlight to sunlight happens because of what happened in that moment.

(SLIDE) 'Abraham believed the LORD.' I can say it no better than Dorothy Baldwin:

"This is Abram's crowning achievement, that he understood what the Lord was teaching him through his perversely impossible circumstances, continued to believe nevertheless, and so became 'the father of all who believe.'"

Abraham becomes your father in the faith, and my father in the faith, not because he now suddenly understood how God was going to make the biology work, but because he believed that, though it seemed impossible, even ridiculous to him, God would do it. "Do you believe it, Abraham? I believe it."

In our humanness we want to approach God as we approach a math teacher. Prove to me that $2 \times 2 = 4$. Then, when she lines up the four apples, we get it. We believe. Prove to me that there is gravity, Newton. Oh yeah, Sir Isaac, look at that apple fall right on your head. Prove to me how you are going to give me descendants as many as the stars starting when I am 85 years old. No, that line never gets spoken.

That is why it is called faith, not knowledge. We would like religion to be knowledge, like math or science. Prove it. But here is what I have learned. I have never been able to talk anyone into believing in God with logic and proofs. As much as it might persuade me, or other people of faith, our apologetical arguments for God's existence and providential care persuade not one

non-believer unless they first come to a point where, in their hopelessness, in their darkness, they first believe God is. Only the Spirit can make that transaction happen.

So, we don't prove God with math or science. We convince ourselves we are right, but if we want to prove God we say, "Look at the stars." Those are the blessings God has in store for you. How can God do that? I don't know, but, like Abraham, I believe it.

(SLIDE) But, more than that, God tells us that he is the God who brought us out for a purpose. God brought us. We don't bring ourselves. God brought us. We walked the path, but God brought us to and through it. Why? To give us this land.

In the Bible, Land is a metaphor for God's blessings. The people of Abraham's day had no concept of Jesus Christ or eternal life. This all had not yet been revealed. What they conceived us as the ultimate blessing was the land, the earth, the soil, and its fruits. More on that next week. But, think of the great promises of God: to Noah-I will not destroy the earth again with a flood. It is about the land. And now to Abraham-I have brought you out of what you thought was home to this land.

Now, Abraham's response is a classic statement of humanity's response to God: (SLIDE) how am I going to know that you going to do that, Sovereign LORD? In other words, I hear what you are saying God, but, could you maybe, you know, just like, prove it God?

And this is from the Father of our Faith, the first one who believed the God of the Impossible! So, let your questions flow, folks.

What happens next is one of the great mysterious events of the Bible. God tells Abraham to set up this bloody scene of animals cut in half and two birds, with a path in between them. It is daytime now, God and Abraham having spent the entire night talking. The sun shines as Abraham goes through the bloody sacrifices. Who knows what Sarah must be thinking as she watches this man talking to God?

But what is important to know is that this was a known ritual to make a contract in Abraham's days. We just sign our names. And then we break the contract and some lawyer sues us. Maybe we need to go back in time, and then we can get rid of the lawyers! What happens is

that the blood of the animals is flowing on the path between them, and each of the two people who make an agreement, a contract, walk down that path. The blood covers their feet and the symbolism means this: if I do not do as I promise, let what has happened to these animals happen to me. Now, that is one way of saying, yes, I really, truly mean what I say.

So, do you see what is so absolutely amazing about this covenant ceremony? Who passes through the blood-stained path? Only the torch of fire which represents the presence of God. Abraham sits by and watches. It is nearly 24 hours now, this encounter with God, and Abraham may not be sure if he is dreaming, but he sees a smoking firepot, holy fire, with a torch, the flame of truth, pass through the blood.

One of the most memorable phrases of my seminary education was spoken by my evangelism professor who was teaching themes of the Bible, and in one of the first classes he said, "There must be blood." Jesus bleeding on the Cross is necessary because it is God's way of saying to humanity, "I make my covenant, my contract with you. I am doing it. Not you. I, God, am passing through the blood of the covenant for you."

And it all is for one purpose: God wants to prove (SLIDE) to Abraham: "To your descendants I give this land." What is God's reward promised to Abraham and his children, which he still doesn't have? The land!

The children are being given, but they are not the reward. The reward is the land. But the reward of the land has meaning only if there are people to occupy it, because Abraham is going to die before he even gets to see it. That is centuries away. But on this night, the night in which Abraham believed, God made the passed through the sacrificial blood to say to us, that (SLIDE) God has a plan for your journey: to bring you to a land full of blessings, a place we call Home.

Go out today, believing this promise, given to you, sealed with the blood of Christ.

Do not be afraid. God has brought you out of your Egypt to bring you to the Land of promises. This is the promise which carries us through the Land, all the way Home.