

Genesis 15:1-6

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After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward."² But Abram said, "Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?"

³ Then Abram said, "Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!"⁴ And behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir."⁵ Then He brought him outside and said, "Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."⁶ And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

What did Abram see, exactly? Well, on a clear night in Canaan, assuming he still had good eyesight at his age, Abram would have been able to see perhaps 4 or 5,000 stars in the night sky. Although, as a practical matter, actually counting those stars was completely out of the question. And yet we now know that those innumerable stars visible in the night sky are really just a drop in the bucket. Using advanced telescopes, we're able to look towards heaven and see much more. Our galaxy contains, as far as we can tell, about 100 billion stars. That's a number that's almost impossible to imagine. Think of it this way. If you were to count the stars in our galaxy, one star per-second around the clock, 24/7, it would take you well over 3,000 years to count all those stars. There are a lot of stars in our galaxy. And our galaxy is not nearly all that there is to look at. Looking to the heavens with better telescopes, astronomers now estimate that there are about 200 billion *galaxies* in the universe. Get the picture?

When we look at the heavens, we ought to get a deep sense of wonder and amazement at the grandeur, the complexity, the sheer beauty of the creation of which we are just a small part. That's how King David felt when he wrote in a Psalm, ***"When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?"*** (Psalm 8:3-4) As inconceivable as that might seem, God is mindful and does care! While using the brush of His fingers to create an infinitely wide universe, God kept his focus on this tiny pinprick called earth, with His special attention given to the even tinier people that inhabit the small plots of land here. In comparison to the innumerable stars of the heavens, this loving attention that God pays to sinful human beings is even more impossible to comprehend than the number of stars in the sky.

And in a very special way, God used this very picture of the innumerable stars in the sky as a wonderful object lesson to show one individual, Abram, just how much He loved him. Showing Abram stars without number, God assured him with a promise, ***"So shall your descendants be."*** Like the stars without number. And we're a part of that. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul quotes from our text and writes: ***"Abraham 'believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'. Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham."*** (Galatians 3:6-7) Yes, that means you and I are also recipients of this very special love and attention of the Lord, as we are numbered in that host of saints that only God can count. Stars without number, descendants without number, and if we look closer at our text, we'll see other things without number as well. In the words of our theme:

They Are Without Number:

- I. Our faithless declarations of self-focused independence
- II. God's faithful responses on which we can depend

Any time a text starts with, **“After these things. . .”** you need to pay attention, because those things that happen before instruct you about the things that are going on at the moment. **“After these things. . .”**—what are those things? Well, Abram went into the land that God had given him, and he divided it up with His nephew Lot. He told Lot he could have his choice of the land, and Abram would take the rest. And Lot looked around and noticed that the land over by Sodom was rich and fertile, a great place to settle down and raise a family, or so the appearances seemed to indicate.

But of course, we know that didn't work out so well. Later on, the towns where Lot had settled would be destroyed by God's fire and brimstone, of course, but there were some earlier troubles as well. The King of Sodom and the King of its sister-city Gomorrah and three other nearby feudal kings decided that they were going to rebel against Chedorlaomer the King of Elam, who had these five kings under him as vassals. This had been the arrangement for twelve years now, but now those feudal kings had had enough. They rebelled against the King of Elam, and he rose up against them and crushed them all. He wiped out their armies, destroyed their cities, and then he took the people and their possessions—including Lot and his family—carrying them away as his prisoners.

Well, word eventually gets to Abram that this has happened, and Lot was the only family he had! So, he mustered up an army, if you could call it that. He could only gather 318 servants to fight for him as they went up against a King who had just destroyed five armies. No matter, the Lord was with them. Abram wins the battle and saves Lot and brings back all the people and their possessions and returns them all to their own lands. Then Abram returns to his own land, and the events of our text happen.

Clearly, there are some lessons that we can glean from these prior events. Where had Lot gone wrong? He was following the appearances. He looked around, and all he could see was the wealth and abundance and made his choice based on those criteria. What *looked* to be the logical decision turned out horribly for him and his family. Abram then goes to save him, an aged Abram and 318 men, a tiny force compared to the mighty King of Elam. But despite the appearances, Abram succeeds and wins the day. Because, of course, we know that appearances don't mean all that much, especially when the Creator of the universe is involved. But I'm not sure Abram was picking up on those lessons.

God comes to Him in a vision and says, **“Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.”** What was Abram afraid of? It could be that he was afraid of some form of retribution from the King of Elam for what he had done, although based on the conversation that follows, Abram's most prominent fear is that he's going to die childless, without an heir. Now, God had already promised Him earlier, in Genesis 12, that He was going to bless Abram and make his household great, that He would give the promised land to his descendants, and that through him all the families of the earth would be blessed. And yet, Abram is afraid that it's not going to happen. Why? Because look around! The appearances just seemed to indicate that this was impossible. Quite some time had passed since that first promise; he had been about 70 years old then, and now he's in his early 80's, still childless. He couldn't have a son now, could he?

Abram was very similar to us, wasn't he? Like Lot, like Abram, we depend so much on the appearances of things. We know the promises that God makes to us in Scripture, promises that **“for those who love God all things work together for good.”** (Romans 8:28) Promises that **“He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how will He not also together with Him freely give us all things?”** (Romans 8:32) And yet, sometimes, those promises don't matter to us.

We'd rather trust our own ideas, our own solutions. We map out the plan for our own lives and when things don't go according to plan, we wonder why on earth God wouldn't follow *our* plan? We imagine ourselves to be independent, and yet when those times arise that prove we are actually completely dependent on God, we bristle at His care for us. And yes, this was Abram's problem too. After God had finished declaring that wonderful truth, "**Abram, I . . . am your exceedingly great reward,**" Abram responds, "**Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? . . . Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!**"

Part of the reason Abram was so upset here is that he wasn't listening. First of all, Abram would not have won that battle if not for the first part of that promise: "**I am your shield.**" God is essentially saying, "You got out of this not because you suddenly turned into a skillful general in your old age. You won that battle because I AM your shield." "Oh, and by the way, your kicking and screaming about not having a son yet—I AM your very great reward."

Oftentimes, I marvel about myself, how I will attach such meaning to things that are nearly meaningless. The temporary things of life, we treat them as if they should be eternal, as if they are of utmost importance. We invest our hope and trust and our confidence in *things*. And yet they can't do anything for us! *God* is the one who is our shield, God is the one who has been by our side, God is the one whose promises to us are maintained! "**I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward,**" He told Abram and He tells us too.

That just wasn't good enough for Abram. And so often we treat God the same way. Yes, it's sad, but it's true. **They are without number:** namely, **Our faithless declarations of self-focused independence.** God has promised to be our shield, and that's just not good enough when it's not on our terms. God has promised Himself to us, and we want stuff! How is it that we so regularly are ready not to receive *Him* but to receive anything else *from* Him? How is it that we so often forget that the *real* reward is not the stuff of this life—the real reward is the One who comes to us that brings eternity with Him, who brings the forgiveness of sins and righteousness, who brings hope and peace and joy. This is your reward! That the almighty God is your shield against Satan and his accusing darts! That the all-knowing Judge of all is also your protector against hell and damnation! He rewards you with Himself, promising all of His effort to bring you out of this world of fear to eternal life together with Himself.

And the truly amazing thing is that in spite of our own faithless declarations towards God, God still gives us Himself anyways. Yes, **they are without number:** that also includes **God's faithful responses on which we can depend.** For God is the shield and the great reward, He gives of Himself freely, and NOT TO PEOPLE WHO DESERVE IT! Abram did not deserve it. He had been blinded by His own sight, doubted God, and tried to take things into His own hands so many times. But God took him outside anyways. "**Count the stars if you are able to number them.**" And He said to him, "**So shall your descendants be.**"

Abram certainly didn't deserve it, but that was not why God kept His promises. God kept the promise because that promise saved the world. God kept that promise because included in that promise was the Son of God who would die for the sins of the world. God kept that promise because you were included in it along with a world of sinners. And even if *only* you were included in this promise, God still would have kept that promise.

You see, when God says, ***"I am your very great reward,"*** He means that gives Himself to you, just as He gave Himself to you in Holy Baptism, just as He gives Himself to you through His Word, just as He gives Himself to you in the Lord's Supper, just as He gives Himself to you today when He puts His name upon you and calls you His own, forgives your sins, and credits even your most mundane acts as things that will be rewardable in heaven and ignores everything else. What could be better this day than this promise: "I give myself to you"?

You know, Abram would go on, and He'd continue to mess things up. Only in the next chapter, Abram would waiver on this promise once more, this time fathering a son with a woman other than his wife—trying to take the matter of his descendants into his own hands. But, as He continued to mess things up, He had a Savior who continued to give Himself to Abram. God's promise to Him remained, just as Paul confesses, ***"If we are faithless, he remains faithful-- for he cannot deny himself."*** (2 Timothy 2:13) And Abram believed the Lord who came to Him, Abram believed the Lord's promises, and *that* was credited to Him as righteousness. That faith which clung to His Savior who forgave His sins—because of that, God declared that it was as if Abram had never sinned, had never wavered. And we also believe the promise that this Savior was given for us, and this is credited to *us* too as righteousness, as if *we* had never sinned.

It's important to recognize then that it's not about the strength of faith, or the level of faith—it's not only if we have this unshakeable, unwavering confidence in God that *then* we are forgiven and saved. No! That wasn't Abraham at all. And that's not us either. Faith is the simple trust of a sinful person that clings on to a perfect Savior. Faith places us in the shadow of Jesus' cross so that when God looks at us, He doesn't see us, He sees His Son *for* us. It's not about how strong your faith is, it's about how strong and how faithful and how unwaveringly dependent your *Savior* is.

Yes, Jesus is the promise on which you can depend. Having come to you, He will not change His mind. Not now, not ever. Not even after your bones are laid to rest. After all, as Jesus declared, ***"And as for the dead being raised, have you not read . . . how God [says] 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not God of the dead, but of the living."*** (Mark 12:26-27) Yes even today, God continues to give Himself to Abraham, for Abraham is not dead, not really. For He has a Savior who is risen! And the same goes for you, and for all who have died in Christ. That's because Jesus declares, ***"Because I live, you will live also."*** (John 14:19) Knowing that, what else could cause us to tremble? What else could cause us to fear? What else could possibly cause us to shake our fists at God? He has given Himself *to us* into death, He has been raised from the dead *for us*, and now we have been delivered from this vale of tears with all of its sorrow and all of its disappointment and all of its doubts and fears. All these things are temporary. Eternity—that has been set apart for you.

Hear these promises then, and go outside tonight. Look towards heaven and count the stars if you are able. Let those innumerable stars overwhelm you with the Creator's power, and let them remind you that God's promises include us, Abraham's children, who like Abram believe God and are counted righteous for Jesus' sake. Thanks be to God, in Jesus' name. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:7) Amen.