

“Count the Stars...”

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18

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Today we turn to the Old Testament, to one of my favorite passages; indeed, to one of the most important passages in the Old Testament for understanding the New Testament concept of *faith*. There is one pivotal verse in this passage is quoted four different times in the New Testament – three times in the letters of Paul, and once in the epistle of James. I’ll talk about some of those New Testament passages in a few minutes. First, let’s set the stage. We are talking about a man named Abraham.

Abraham was a middle Eastern man who lived more than 15 centuries before Jesus. The precise year doesn’t really matter. The Bible says that Abraham was born in Mesopotamia, in the city of Ur, on the Euphrates River, a little bit north of the Persian Gulf, in what is now the country of Iraq. Some ruins from the ancient city of Ur still stand, including this impressive ziggurat, which has been partially restored. Ur was a significant metropolis for its day, an ancient city-state of enormous importance.

Genesis says that Abraham’s father Terah set out from Ur for the land of Canaan, bringing with him Abraham (who was then called “Abram”), Abram’s wife Sarai (later called “Sarah”), and Abram’s nephew Lot. To get from Ur to Canaan, one first had to travel northwest, along the river Euphrates a very long ways, and then turn west and then south. The direct route from Ur to Canaan is blocked by the massive Arabian desert. So the four family members head north. We don’t know what motivated Terah to head for Canaan in the first place, nor do we know why he decides to stop midway, in the city of Haran, in what is now the southeastern corner of the country of Turkey. The family settles in Haran.

After Terah dies, Abram receives a clear message from God: *go to the land of Canaan*. God promises Abram that he will become a “great nation.” Abram goes, taking his wife and his nephew with him. Abram was 75 years old — 75 is not too old to hear God’s voice and respond to God’s call!

Abram arrives in Canaan, wandering through the land, setting up altars to God in various places. There’s a famine; they take refuge for a time in Egypt; then there’s a war, in which Abraham rescues his nephew and helps bring about the defeat of the enemy forces; afterward, Abram is blessed by a remarkable priest of God Most High, who prefigures Jesus. But through it all, Abram and his wife Sarai have no children. It’s a little hard to become a father of many nations if you don’t have any children!

God senses Abram’s anxiety. We’re now at the part of the story we heard a few minutes ago. Abram is very worried that he will never have any children, and that when he dies he will have to leave all he owns to his chief servant, a man named Eliezar. But God says, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” God then invites Abram to step outside and look up at

the night sky. God says, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.”

Now you have to remember that all our city lights make it very hard for us to see the night sky as the ancients would have seen it. If you’re in a big city like Chicago and you look up at the night sky, you can probably only see about 35 stars on a clear night. If you’re in the suburbs, or a small city like Mason, you might be able to see as many as 450. But if you can get far away from modern civilization, far away from any man-made light sources, on a dark night, you could see as many as *four and a half thousand* stars in the night sky. When God said to Abram, “Count the stars, if you are able to count them,” Abram saw *thousands upon thousands* of stars. God says, “So shall your descendants be.”

Okay. Think about this. Abram is at least 75 years old; he’s probably somewhere around 80 by this point in the story. Men’s fertility begins declining around age 35. Abram’s wife Sarai was ten years younger than Abram, so she’s about 60. Women’s fertility begins declining around age 30; most women past 45 are no longer able to bear children. Simply put, the odds of their having a child were *not good*. But God says to Abram: “Count the stars, if you are able to count them. So shall your descendants be.”

Here it comes, one of the most significant events in the entire Bible; Genesis 15:6, which is quoted four times in the New Testament: “And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Set aside the second clause for a moment and focus on the first: “*he believed the Lord.*” This is Abram’s great moment of *faith* and *trust* in God. He has a choice: whether to believe what the evidence seems to be suggesting – that he and Sarai will never have a child – or whether to believe the word of God. He chooses to believe God. The apostle Paul, commenting on these verses in his letter to the Romans, says: “Hoping against hope, he believed that he would become ‘the father of many nations,’ according to what was said, ‘So numerous shall your descendants be.’ He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was already as good as dead..., or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, being fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.” Simply put: Abraham *trusted* that *God was as good as his word* – that *God would do what God had promised*. Even when the evidence suggested otherwise. That is called *faith*.

This is a watershed moment. It’s what makes Abram *our spiritual father*, even though most Christians are not biologically descended from him. In the epistle to the Galatians, Paul says it like this: “those who believe are the descendants of Abraham.” Our faith in God makes us children of Abraham.

But to complete the story: Abraham did have children. First there was Ishmael, the son of Sarah’s Egyptian maid, Hagar, who got pregnant after Sarah gave up hope and told her husband to sleep with her maid. Then there was Isaac, who was born to Abraham and Sarah. Isaac fathered Jacob, who fathered twelve sons, who gave rise to the twelve tribes of Israel. The Jewish people trace their ancestry back to Abraham through Isaac. But Muslims also trace their ancestry back to Abraham, through Abraham’s first son Ishmael, who also had twelve sons, and gave rise to a different set of tribes in the Arabian desert. Muslims believe Muhammad was descended from one of those tribes. So both Jews and Muslims view Abraham as their biological ancestor – and we Christians see Abraham as our *spiritual* ancestor, our ancestor *in the faith*, because of his absolute faith and trust in God here in Genesis 15:6.

But there’s more! Look at the second half of Genesis 15:6: “the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.” What does that mean? The King James Version translates that clause like this: “he counted it to him for righteousness.” The Hebrew verb has to do with *counting* or *reckoning*. It’s like

when a baseball umpire calls a ball fair and credits the batter with a base hit, or maybe even a home run. Somebody is looking at what somebody else has just done and said, “That counts.” In this case, *God* has looked at what *Abram* just did – had faith in God’s promise, despite any evidence to the contrary – and said, “That counts.” But counts for what? Not a base hit or a home run, but something else: it counts for *righteousness*. God looks at Abraham’s faith, and credits Abraham with *righteousness*.

This is important, and not all translations of the Bible get it right. The Common English Bible, which is what we have in the pews, gets it wrong. It says: “Abram trusted the Lord, and the Lord recognized Abram’s high moral character.” No. That is *not* right. This has *nothing* to do with Abraham’s *morality*. It has to do with Abraham’s *faith*. Those are two very different things! The CEB is a paraphrase, and paraphrases are useful for getting a broad sense of the overall story, but they often miss some details that are crucially important. This is a detail that is crucially important! We’re talking about *faith*, not *morality*. God credits Abraham with righteousness *because* of Abraham’s faith.

This is the point that matters the most in the New Testament. In Romans 4, Paul says: “For this reason, it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants.” Paul is saying that there is something *we* receive, when *we* have faith like Abraham, when *we* place our trust in God, like *he* did. Something that has to do with *grace*. He explains: “Now the words, ‘it was reckoned to him,’ were written not for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.” What is he saying? Pay attention; this is *so critically important*. “*It will be reckoned to us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.*” Just the same way God gave a credit to Abraham when *he* had faith in God, *so too does God give a credit to all of us, when we have faith in God*. What kind of credit did *Abraham* receive when *he* had faith in God? The credit of righteousness – which is the same thing as *justification*. What kind of credit do *we* receive when *we* have faith in God? The *same thing*. The credit of *righteousness*. *Justification*.

Does that matter? Does the credit of righteousness matter? Good heavens, *yes!* Because – let’s face it – is *your* life righteous in all its aspects? Are you a *perfect example of righteousness*? Do you never, *ever* do anything wrong? Anything that you have to apologize for? Anything that is different from what *God* wants you to do? Do you follow God’s will *one hundred percent of the time*? Do *any* of us? Heavens, *no!* *None of us are perfect*. All of us sin and fall short of the glory of God. Oh, sure, there are some people who *think* they don’t sin. There’s a sin called “pride” that *those* people are guilty of! There is *not one of us* who has reached *perfection*, not one of us whose life is *holy* in every single aspect. And yet, when we place our faith and trust in God, *God does something for us*. Something very *special*. God credits us with righteousness. *Absolute* righteousness. Righteousness in the eyes of *God*. That doesn’t mean that we suddenly do everything perfectly. It certainly doesn’t mean we never sin again. What it *does* mean is that, when *God* looks at us, what *God* sees is our *faith*, and that faith is pleasing to God – so pleasing, that *God credits* us with a point, a very special point, a point called *righteousness*. God smiles, and treats us *as if we were fully righteous*, even though we are not! God grants to us the precious gift of *salvation*. God grants to us the fruits of all the *promises* that *God* gives to the people of faith – the promise of eternal life, the promise of the forgiveness of sins, the promise of amazing grace.

You see, we don’t *earn* salvation. It’s a *gift*. We are given it when we have *faith* like Abraham. That faith results in a credit from God, a credit called *righteousness*. And *that* gift leads to all the rest....

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