

Where are we in the story of Abram and Sarai? Well, God had made some great promises to Abram. But still no Abram Jr. Presumably, Abram and Sarai have been doing their part to create an offspring, but it would seem that God hasn't been doing his part. So it's no wonder that Abram begins to doubt God's promises and asks for a little proof.

God responds to Abram's doubting God's covenant promise by taking Abram outside, pointing to the stars, and making another promise. That's not exactly proof. Yet, the Scriptures say that after that, Abram believed, *“and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.”*

Did you notice in verse 5 of the story that the Lord said to Abram after bringing him outside, *“Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.”* Astronomers are still trying to count the stars today, of course. A *New York Times* article written last March by Dennis Overbye was titled, “A Mysterious Flash from a Faraway Galaxy.” A mysterious flash of X-rays was detected by NASA's Chandra X-ray Observatory. This source likely comes from some sort of destructive event, but may be of a variety that scientists have never seen before. It was a spark in the night. A flash of X-rays from a galaxy hovering nearly invisibly on the edge of infinity.

Astronomers say they do not know what caused it. The orbiting Chandra X-ray Observatory, was in the midst of a 75-day survey of a patch of sky known as the Chandra Deep Field-South, when it recorded the burst from a formerly quiescent spot in the cosmos. For a few brief hours on Oct 1, 2014, the X-rays were a thousand times brighter than all the light from its home galaxy, a dwarf unremarkable speck almost 11 billion light years from here, in the constellation Fornax. Then whatever had gone bump in the night was over and the X-rays died. Another star counting mystery from nature's repertoire.

What was God trying to show Abram by this star counting exercise? And what is it that God most wants from us? Is it belief? The Heidelberg Catechism agrees that all of the good, moral, ethical, sacrificial, and socially responsible things that we do don't please God unless they are motivated by belief. But belief in what? Belief that God is who he says he is. Belief that God keeps his promises. Belief in the promise that God makes to Abram and his descendants in the latter half of this chapter by the cutting of the covenant.

This was a familiar picture to early readers of Genesis, so they would have noticed that there's something very unusual about this version of covenant-cutting. Usually both parties walk between the animals. Both subject themselves to the curse, if the covenant promise is broken. But here in verse 17, only the smoking firepot and the blazing torch walk the walk. Only God makes the promise. Only God offers to accept the curse. God is saying that if the covenant is broken, he himself will die. If the covenant is broken, Abram's descendants can cut him up and kill him like an animal.

Jewish scholars and commentators get stuck here. Because for them, God cannot die. But we Christians eat bread and drink wine today because Abram's descendants did break the covenant, again and again. And God did die, just as he promised Abram.

R.C. Sproul* is founder of Ligonier Ministries and he is known for communicating deep truths of the Christian faith through his writing and speaking. He wrote in one of his books: I don't know when it became a custom for American Christians to ask conference speakers to sign their Bibles, but I get that request frequently when I speak. In many instances, the people asking me to sign their Bibles will request that I write my “life verse.” This request took me by surprise when I first began to encounter it. I did not have a life verse; I suppose I wanted to have the whole counsel of God as a banner over my life. But since

people wanted a verse, I began to write down this verse or that. The one I have given most frequently is Genesis 15:17, which says, “When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.”

Sproul says: You may be scratching your head at this moment as you ponder why I would choose to share this verse. Let me assure you, you are not alone. When I write Genesis 15: 17 in people’s Bibles, invariably, before the conference ends, someone comes up to me and asks, “Did you mean to write Genesis 15: 17 in my Bible?” When I assure the person that I did, he or she often says, “That verse doesn’t make sense to me.”

I admit that Genesis 15: 17 would make a very unusual life verse. Apart from its context, this verse is nearly impossible to understand. But it is because of the context that I love this verse so. I often tell people that if I were marooned on an island and had only one book, the book I would want with me, of course, would be the Bible. If I could have only one book of the Bible, I would want to have the book of Hebrews because of the way in which it so richly summarizes all the teachings of the Old Testament and relates them to the finished work of Christ in the New Testament. But if I could have only one verse of the Bible, I would want Genesis 15: 17.

Why is that? In Genesis 15, we see God making promises to Abram. He called to Abram and said, “*Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great*” (v. 1). Abram was a little befuddled and asked, “*O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?*” (v. 2).

Sproul goes on to explain: Abram was one of the wealthiest men in the world. He had every material blessing he wanted. However, Eliezer of Damascus, a servant, was Abram’s designated heir because he had no sons. That prompted God to reaffirm an earlier promise by telling Abram that he would have multitudes of descendants, as many descendants as there are stars in the sky (v, 5). Abram believed this promise of God, and God counted it to him for righteousness (v. 6). It is this text that the apostle Paul uses in his letter to the Romans to show the Old Testament foundation for the doctrine of justification by faith alone (4:3).

Then God reaffirmed another earlier promise—Abram would inherit the land of Canaan (v. 7). But Abram struggled with the weightiness of this promise. He asked, “*O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?*” (v. 8). So God commanded Abram to get a number of animals, to cut them in two, and to arrange the pieces in two rows, marking out a path (vv. 9-10). It was a bloody mess, a carnage. When Abram was finished, God put him in a deep sleep and gave to him a vision. That vision is described in verse 17: “*When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces.*”

The fire pot and the flaming torch were “theophanies,” which means, they were visible manifestations of the invisible God. Abram saw a divine manifestation passing between the animal pieces and immediately understood the significance. God was enabling Abram to know for sure that his promises would come to pass. God said, as it were: “I’m giving you promises, and I cannot swear by anything higher than myself. I cannot swear by the mountains. I cannot swear by the seas. I cannot swear by the angels. Therefore, I swear to you by myself. If I fail to keep my promises to you, may I be cut in two like these animals. May I, the immutable God, suffer mutation. May I, the eternal Lord, become temporal. May I, the Infinite [One], become finite.” We know that God was saying these things because the author of the book of

Hebrews tells us so: *“When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, I will surely bless you and multiply you.”* (6: 13-14).

What we see in Genesis 15 is a covenant ceremony that was quite typical for Abram’s time. When two parties made a covenant, they split animals and passed through the pieces, thereby declaring that they deserved to be torn apart should they violate the agreement. In this case, only God passed through the pieces because he alone was making promises. He was instituting his covenant with Abram and sealing it with a sign, just as he had done when he promised Noah that he would never destroy the world again through a flood, and God set his rainbow in the sky.

What exactly was God trying to show Abram with the star counting exercise and with the covenant-cutting ceremony? Here’s what I think. That what God most wants from us is our faith; our trust; our belief in him. To believe that God is who he says he is; and to believe that God keeps his promises—always. Amen.

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