

O HOLY NIGHT

by Steve Zeisler

**"Lord, when I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers,
The moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained;
What is man, that Thou dost take thought of him?
And the son of man, that Thou dost care for him?"**

Perhaps these words recall one night when David stood looking at the heavens and felt the awful insignificance of ordinary humanity compared to the broad reach of the stars. Men and women have always looked at the heavens to make some sense of their purpose or place and have been caused to ask eternal questions. This week while watching their televisions Americans and indeed people all over the world looked to the sky and were faced with the questions of life, death and immortality as they observed the awful explosion of the space shuttle. Endless commentary has taken place: what does this mean for the future of the space program? Many have insisted that it is the destiny of man to reach the stars and beyond and that we will not be thwarted by any mishap or disaster along the way. But the question of people dying in the effort is harder to address. What does it mean that they have lived or died?

Just recently, another much less significant experience caused me to think of the sky. I spent a wonderful day skiing with some close friends. The day was filled with laughter, fun and bruises, and the snow was beautiful. At the end of the day, as clouds gathered on the horizon, we drove westward down the mountain toward home. And the most glorious sunset I have ever seen filled the skies. The clouds parted at beautiful intervals to reveal the vivid coloration of purple, gold, and orange. Brian Morgan, a fellow pastor and friend, and I were sitting in the front seat of our vehicle and had the best view. Both of us had the same reaction, "That sunset is the Lord's way of saying that this day had his approval." He sent us a love note at the end of a day spent in Christian fellowship. We looked at the sky and drew conclusions from what we saw—gratitude to God and a sense of his approval.

There are some who look at the sky and say it is our destiny to rule. They grow proud and self-reliant as they think of the challenge the skies offer. Some, like David, feel their insignificance: "What is man that Thou art mindful of him?" Occasionally, we have the experience as I described of realizing from what we see in the creation that God loves us and that we have his approval and his mercy showered upon us.

Similarly, Abram was taken out under the stars and taught a lesson which is recorded in the fifteenth chapter of Genesis. God directed Abram to look at the majestic night sky and taught him something. In fact, this chapter includes two consecutive nights and their events and import. The two lessons Abram is to learn are to be learned alone with God under the sky.

Genesis 14, describing public events, was filled with the action and the excitement of battle, the spoils of war, the freeing of slaves, and public enthusiasm for all that Abram accomplished. When two kings came to meet him in the Kings Valley, Abram publicly renounced the flesh and chose the Spirit in front of everyone. The account retold of a wonderful, active, public interaction with God. Some great lessons were learned and demonstrated about the need for us to be involved and to do what God calls us to do.

But suddenly, by way of balance, the scene shifts dramatically. In chapter 15 Abram is alone. There is no activity, no action to take, no battle to fight, nor any movement of the family from one location to another. Abram is left to wrestle with and question God in the most private interaction. Everything takes place at night under the stars between this one man and his God. He can do nothing and can speak to no one else. He simply must hear and wrestle with the word of God in order to be taught the things he should know. Thus, we move from the public

arena to the private arena of one man under God's sky learning to hear his word.

There are two sections in Genesis 15. Genesis 15:1-6 include an announcement of God, Abram's questioning of that announcement and his learning as a result of God's answer. Genesis 15:7 begins the second section which repeats the same pattern: God's announcement, Abram's question, and God's answer. In both cases, God teaches Abram through the response to his question. Look at the first section:

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great." And Abram said, "O Lord God, what wilt Thou give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Since Thou hast given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." Then behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who shall come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

As I have suggested, it is important to recognize that no one else was present. Throughout the chapter only God and Abram are present. It is also important to recognize that for the first time we see Abram admitting his struggles to God. In the privacy of their interaction with each other, Abram questions God. Every other time God has spoken, Abram merely responded in obedience to the action requested of him—to leave his father's household, to go to a land he did not know, and so on. Trusting God to make the choice between the high country and the cities of the plain, he did what he was told and moved. Even when he worshipped, he worshipped by leading others in public gratitude to God, building an altar for people to recall the promises and presence of God.

But this time when God spoke to him, Abram raised his hands and said, "Wait a minute! We have a problem. I believe, Lord, but help me in my unbelief." He recalled the earlier promise of God: "I will make your name great, and a great nation will come from you." In Gen.15:1, God made a similar promise, but Abram said, "We have been at this for years now, and I do not have a son." He was questioning God's announcement of the great reward because of his own inadequacy to fulfill it. Both Abram and Sarai were old and many years of marriage had not produced children. These words from God clashed directly with Abram's recognition of his own failure.

Have you ever had that conversation with God? You are aware of his intention to take ordinary human clay—broken, failing and guilty—and make something magnificent of it. You know that the very life of Christ is to be reproduced in you. It makes sense and seems to work for others, but your inadequacies are too great. You have been at this Christianity business a long time, and very little in your life has changed. Since you do not seem to be accomplishing what God said we should accomplish you wonder, "Maybe it works for other people because they haven't done what I have done; maybe they came from better families or maybe they did not have to suffer what I have suffered. They haven't failed as I have failed. Or they don't succumb to temptation the way I do. Lord, my inadequacies are too much for you to make anything of me!"

When the critical, necessary wrestling with God took place, there was nothing Abram could do in response. There was no place he could go, no adventure he could start. There was nobody else to talk to. He could not preach a message or build an altar. Finally, he reached the point when he called out to God, "It is not working! My inadequacies are greater than your ability to do something with me." This was honorable wrestling, a wonderful interchange. There is no notion that God was offended or angered by his questions. In fact, the reverse was true. This was Abram, the friend of God, honestly saying, "I can't continue without help. My experience contradicts your promise and I don't know what to do."

As a result of Abram's questioning, the Lord took him out under the sky and said, "I will wait here while you count how many stars are there." While staring into the sky, Abram realized he was speaking to the One who made the sky. Then, he realized he could believe the promises of God even before the reality came—before there was a son, even before there was a pregnancy. Finally, he was able to say, "Yes, indeed, I will bet my life that what you say is true even though I do not have any way of knowing how you will achieve it. Although I see no

evidence of it at this time, I believe you."

And the great announcement of the word of God is: "It was reckoned to him as righteousness" This phrase is amplified in dramatic beauty in the New Testament. The anxiety that Abram felt—the uncertainty, and the sense that his failure was too much for God to handle—had been reinforced daily. Walking into his home every day and seeing that the heir of his house was Eliezer of Damascus produced a sense of crushing inadequacy. Once he believed God, this feeling was replaced by righteousness as a gift of God. Righteousness is the opposite of the sense of failure, inadequacy, guilt and worthlessness. Being given righteousness as a gift is being given standing, hope, mental health, confidence and a willingness to get on with life. With his renewed outlook, he knew that God was in charge. The moral beauty and courage that go with this were given to Abram as a gift. Standing out under the sky, he believed God after he had wrestled with him and asked questions. Thus, he could conclude, "Yes, somebody like me can be made valuable." In Romans 4:19-22, Paul picks up this phrase:

And without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was about a hundred years old, and the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God, he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that what He had promised He was able also to perform. Therefore also it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

This passage includes a phrase that is as modern and contemporary as any I can think of: "Abram contemplated his own body." What is more characteristic of this age than the contemplation of our bodies? Has there ever been a nation or a culture of people more likely to sit around thinking about the bodies of its members than us? Frankly, it is a depressing thought. I have never met a single person who has been entirely happy with his or her body. Actually, even the most gorgeous, talented and capable people all know of some flaw kept secret from others which distresses them continually. Then there are the rest of us whose bodily inadequacies are clear to everyone.

Abram looked at his body, which would reach 100 years before he and Sarah had children. He thought of his wife's infertility and age. He looked at all the facts squarely. He stared at the inadequacies, but when he heard the promise of God he chose to believe it. This was reckoned to him as righteous. Abram thought about his physical frame and the facts that it presented, yet he laid alongside of those the promise of God and chose to believe the latter.

Think about all the things your body has done over the years—taking you places where you should not have gone, facing all the temptations, causing the hurt you have inflicted upon others either with your tongue or by some action.

There are probably some who believe themselves to be successes and who do not easily fit into the description I am making of human beings who know they are inadequate. There are some who rise to the challenge, compete at every opportunity, and win most of the competitions. Their problem is that even if reassurance comes from a life that brings more victories than defeats, this kind of life will not last forever. If you are a winner now, eventually you will be a loser. Someone younger and more capable will rise up to take your place whether it is in business, in relationships, or on the playing field. Eventually every human being in looking at his life and accomplishments, at what he has said and where he has gone, must face the realization that his inadequacies are great enough to make it thoroughly unlikely that anything worthy of God could be made of him. This was Abram's feeling as he boldly appealed to the Lord. And God took him outside under the sky and taught him, the two of them alone. And Abram believed God.

The second lesson begins with verse 7 and concerns not the possibility of greatness for a man like Abram but the greatness of God himself. Look at Gen.15:7-21:

And He said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess it." And he said, "O Lord God, how may I know that I shall possess it?" So He said to him, "Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon." Then he brought all these to Him

and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. And the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, and Abram drove them away.

Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, terror and great darkness fell upon him. And God said to Abram, :Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve; and afterward they will come out with many possessions. And as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. Then in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete." And it came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates; the Kenite and the Kenizzite and the Kadmonite and the Hittite and the Perizzite and the Rephaim and the Amorite and the Canaanite and the Girgashite and the Jebusite."

Abram asked a second question of God. How could he be certain that his descendants could possess the land of Canaan? That part of the world had always been subject to war and upheaval. Its possession by one family was complicated by the terrain, the hills and valleys, and by the wandering nature of its inhabitants. Abram declared to God, "It is unimaginable! How can I know such a thing is possible? One man's family could never be in possession of so varied, intricate and embattled a land as this." In effect, he was questioning the sovereign ability of God to do such a thing, to control history and order events.

Therefore, the Lord God produced another demonstration, not one as simple as going out to look at the sky but a much more frightening demonstration. He directed Abram to spend the day gathering birds and animals. Then he had to slash them in half, place them on either side of a pathway and protect them from vultures. Spending his whole day doing this, he was worn out by evening. The sun began to set, but it was no ordinary sunset. A great and terrible darkness descended. In his exhaustion, Abram fell asleep, and the terror of the Lord enveloped him.

In these circumstances Abram was taught an important history lesson, The Lord said, "Not only am I going to give you this land, Abram, but I am also doing many other things. I am in relationship with the Amorites and, I'm giving them an opportunity to repent. I am going to continue to wait for them to repent because I love them as much as anyone else. I will not act against them until their iniquity requires it of me. I am also in relationship with the Egyptians who will be the nation out of which the nation Israel will be born. They will be slave masters, but they will be punished for their infliction of slavery. And I am in a relationship with you and your family and will be for hundreds of years, generation after generation. I am going to bring about all that I say through means that are far more complicated than you ever thought. If it was hard for you to picture possessing this land under the current circumstances, let me tell you they are going to get more complicated. But I will remain in control for I am the sovereign God. I know exactly what I am doing. I am remaking the earth, and I am in relationship to all the peoples of the earth."

In the midst of learning this lesson, the response to the question of how God could do these things, Abram sensed the environment of fear. He felt the awful darkness of God, the smoke and fire of his presence. He watched as God created a unilateral covenant by mysteriously passing between the slain animals. The sun had gone down, the darkness had descended, and fear had gripped Abram's heart. The God whom he casually questioned as to his ability had announced that he was great indeed. Abram knew he would have the land from the river of Egypt to the great river Euphrates.

Have you ever questioned God's purpose for you, not only your ability to be known and remade by him but also his ability to determine the course of events of the world in which you live? What is he doing in all this swirling maelstrom of warring nations and competing economies? What is he doing with me and my family and where are we headed? The answer for Abram rested in learning of the greatness of God and his majestic, fearful presence—the smoky, burning, frightening presence. He learned his lesson.

Thus, Abram spent two nights wrestling with God, asking questions and getting answers. Being stretched by the first answer, he stood before God the next day to learn yet another lesson. He was not given anything to do—no action to take, no wars to win, no battles to fight. He was not given other people with whom he could talk. This was strictly a time for God and Abram to wrestle through the affairs of his heart and life.

Let me say of us, as a church, that we are not particularly good at learning lessons in intimate times like these with God. I would say of myself certainly and of this congregation, to the degree that I know it, that this is one of our weaknesses. We do not choose often enough to spend time alone with God. We do not actively wrestle with him and ask honest questions with a deep willingness to learn from him. By and large, we are an activist group. Our tendency is to fight the four kings from the east, to charge off in all directions, and to mount campaigns and call meetings.

I have just returned from our annual men's retreat which was outstanding. I am thrilled by what the Lord has done, but the primary benefits of the retreat were the opportunities to talk with other men, to get away from the crush of ordinary life, to make new friends, to ask questions, and to hear great teaching from the Word of God—learning, fellowship, brotherhood and conversation. All these things took place, but the time was filled with activities. There were meetings all morning, events all afternoon, more meetings at night, and incessant meals. We stayed up late at night and started early in the morning. This tends to be our style as activists.

Abram was an active too. It is not wrong to be active, In fact, it is proper. We need to be active, but the great balance being offered by chapter 15 is the balance to the activity of the war against the kings and the public renunciation of the king of Sodom. As important as those things are, it is also important for men and women who desire maturity in their walk with God to have times out under the night sky, alone with the Lord.

This is the time to raise the questions we have suppressed and pretended were not there. We can shake our fist at him if we must and say, "Look! Why is Eliezer of Damascus my heir? I am supposed to be different than this. Why haven't I learned the lesson other people seem to have learned? Why can't I succeed? Why am I still struggling with the same things I have struggled with all of my life?" Then we must wait long enough for him to answer and have the sense of well-being that comes from wrestling with God and learning from him. I am convinced that we cannot become everything God wants us to be unless we have times like these, just us and him, times with nobody else to talk to, nowhere else to go and nothing else to do except learn from him.

Remember David asked the question in Psalm 8:3-4: "When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained; what is man, that Thou dost take thought of him? And the son of man, that Thou dost care for him?" David was bringing his anxieties before the Lord. The next line is critical because he learned the same lesson as Abram: "Yet Thou hast made man a little lower than God, and dost crown him with glory and majesty! Thou dost make him to rule over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet."

Something great can be made out of people like us. The future of ourselves, our families and the world in which we live is part of the tapestry God is weaving. He is able to do these things. He is majestic and greater than we ever acknowledge. But we cannot learn this fully unless we have times with just him, wrestling, asking questions and waiting for answers. We should not eagerly be racing ahead to the next event, dashing to the next conversation, and attending another meeting—filling our lives with people and activities.

Remember Jacob wrestled all night with the angel of the Lord at a critical time in his life. Jesus, you will remember, often prayed all night. He regularly went off by himself to spend time with God to understand what was happening in his life. He had to spend time alone with God to make sense of his current history—what was to happen and upon whom he was to focus.

This is not the only thing that men and women of God are called to do. If it were, we would all run from the world and retreat into lonely isolation to live the life of Christian hermits. Clearly, I am not proposing this. But one element of a healthy life lived in the Lord is that we face him directly to ask our questions and learn from his

answers.

Abram learned that his inadequacies were not too great for God to make something great of him. Secondly, he learned that the Lord whom he served was more powerful, majestic and sovereign than he had ever suspected. And he learned these things by hearing the word of God, asking questions that betrayed what bothered him, and being willing to let God teach him, either by scaring him in one case or by showing him the heavens in another. We need to follow his example. Let me close with the words of Donald Grey Barnhouse:

Had Abram been living within himself? At all events he was away from the light, the air and the stars. But God brought him forth. God is always at work in His children and He expects to bless them, therefore He brings them to where they can see the blessing before they touch it. God can bring us out, even if it takes a war, the capture of Lot and the abandoning of property. Then we will see the stars, beyond the stars the promises and beyond the promises God himself.

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[Back to Index Page](#)

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