

A Conversation with God Genesis 15:1-18

Portions adapted from "Can We Chat" by David Owens @ SermonCentral.com

A long time ago, one year before I was born, Dr. Seuss published a classic children's book entitled "Horton Hears a Who." It's a story about an elephant named Horton who hears voices coming from a little speck of dust.

Horton places the speck of dust on a clover bloom and then does his best to protect the tiny residents living on that speck of dust from the other animals who cannot hear their voices.

As the story develops, Horton learns that the race living on that speck of dust are the "Who's," who live in a town called "Whoville" and they are in need of a protector to prevent them from being blown about by the wind, or destroyed by other means.

Of course, the other animals in the jungle, being unable to hear the Whos, give Horton a hard time about his belief that a tiny race inhabits a particle of dust. They even try to tie Horton up so they can destroy the speck of dust.

In desperation, all the Who's in Whoville join their voices together to shout in unison so they might be heard by the other animals who are tormenting Horton for his strange beliefs. When the very last and tiniest of the Whos finally adds his voice, the other animals finally do hear them, so Horton and Whoville live happily ever after.

There are two both very Christian lessons taught in "Horton Hears a Who,"

- First, that we should be kind to all people, even when others refuse to be.
- Second, that even the smallest of the small is an important person.

But you may be wondering what this has to do with Abraham who is the current focus of our "All the Stories in the Bible," series to which we are now returning. The answer is that like Horton, Abraham one day heard a voice which forever changed his life.

Do you remember the story of Abraham up to this point? Genesis chapter 12 opens with Abraham and his wife Sarah, living as a childless aging couple in an idol worshipping culture; their lack of an heir hinting that they were perhaps under a curse by one of the gods. When one day Abraham hears a voice – from "God Most High" – telling him to travel to a far away land where this God will bless him and make his into descendants both into a great nation and as uncountable as the dust on the ground. So at the age of 75 Abraham packs up his 70 year old wife and all their belongings along with a few family members and goes to where he was told.

Once in the land, God again assures Abraham that one day all this will belong to his offspring. But since there is a famine in the land, Abe and company keep on walking down to Egypt where his dishonesty with Pharaoh gets him escorted back to the border.

Chapter 13 finds Abe now settled in the “promised land” and prospering greatly as a shepherd; so much so that he and his nephew Lot have to part company in order to find sufficient pasture for their very large flocks. Unfortunately, Lot chooses good pasture land near the infamous city of Sodom which will soon land him on the losing end of a local war. After Lot’s departure, for a third time God repeats His promises to Abraham that this land would all belong to his descendants.

Chapter 14 then tells the story of Lot as well as all the other inhabitants and wealth of Sodom being taken as “spoils of war” by a marauding army. Hearing of his nephew’s capture, Abe raises his own army to rout the invaders and rescue Lot along with all the other people and possessions of Sodom. This event probably happened about 10 years after the now 85 year old Abe had been resident in the land.

Having won this local war, Abraham then does something which up until now would have seemed out of character. By rights he could have kept the war spoils while also claiming authority over all the land he had rescued, thus making himself into the local “king.” Had not God promised him all of this one day? Why not just keep it now? But rather, claiming that he had made a pledge to God not to profit in any way from this war, Abe gives back all the war booty except for a tithe which he pays to King Melchizedek of Jerusalem thus acknowledging him as the current and rightful high king over the land.

Abraham had a chance to speed up God’s land promise, but he doesn’t. So why does this next chapter now open with him complaining to God about not yet fulfilling His other promises?

Chapter 15 indicates that for some reason Abraham has now become “afraid.” So God comes to assure Abraham that God himself will be his shield and his great reward.

- But what is Abraham afraid of?
- that the marauding army might return to seek revenge?
- that the King of Sodom might now view him as a threat and try to eliminate him?

No. What Abraham is afraid of is coming to the end of his life still without having a son. Apparently even as an old man, Abraham had at first believed God’s original promises of giving him both the land and a son to inherit it. But now as an older man, thinking he might soon die, apparently Abe is beginning to doubt even God’s ability to give him this heir.

Up until now, Abraham has supposedly heard and obeyed just a voice in his head telling him where to go and what to do (three times in about ten years if you were keeping track). But this fourth time, perhaps noticing the depth of Abe’s fear, God decides that the two of them need to sit down for a chat, and those things which God shared that day concerning His long term plans for both Abraham, the land, and his heirs changed Abe’s life forever.

The Bible is clear that God is still **our best shield** and tower of refuge. As the Psalmist says,

Those who dwell in the shelter of the Most High
will rest in the shadow of the Almighty"
Psalm 91:1

And what **reward** can be greater than having a personal relationship with God? *If God is for us, who can be against us?! (Romans 8:31).*

Today like Abraham, we still need to be trusting God's promises but also listening for God's voice and allowing it to also change our lives. So let's see what came out of Abe's conversation with God?

God opens the conversation by assuring Abraham, as promised that He has given him everything needed to live securely and successfully in this land. To which Abraham replies - respectfully - yes but where is my personal heir? I am now making plans to pass all my inheritance on to someone else. What has happened to Your promise that my descendants would possess this land?

Abraham basically says: *"You keep promising offspring, but I'm closer to death than ever before, still without an heir to whom I can pass along Your promises, so exactly what reward do You mean?"*

Now if God were some power-hungry dictator or small minded employer, He might respond with *"How dare you question me! How many more promises do you need?!"* Thankfully, that is not who God is or how God responded.

The Psalms teach us that,

As a father has compassion for His children,
so the Lord has compassion for those who fear Him...
Psalm 103 13-17

For he knows how we were made; He remembers that we are dust...But the steadfast love of the Lord is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him (Psalm 103 13-17).

Thus sympathizing with Abraham's fearfulness, for the fourth but not for the last time God repeats both His promise of the land and descendants; this time making it an official contract between Himself and Abraham; while also telling Abraham just when he will die and a fairly detailed account of how all the rest of the promise will come to pass for his descendants.

God replied: *'This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.'* [then] He brought Abraham outside and said, *'Look towards heaven*

and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ ‘So shall your descendants be. (Genesis 15:4-5).

How many of you enjoy star-gazing? Growing up in Atlanta, even on a clear night I could only see perhaps the Big Dipper and a scattering of other stars. I thought that the Milky Way could only be seen with a telescope. But then I moved to rural Minnesota, where on a clear moonless winter’s night one can still safely ski cross country just by the light of the Milky Way and its countless myriad of stars, right overhead reflecting off the snow.

How many stars could Abraham see? The very same ones that we can see, perhaps even more; too many to count. That’s the point! God used the vastness of the night sky to illustrate how many future descendants would come from Abraham’s body, his own flesh and blood.

As Abraham looked up from our own little speck of dust in this immense universe it probably made him feel as small as one of the Whos in Whoville, but he got the point: God was saying, *“I am God, and even though you feel like the smallest of the small, you can trust that I am going to give you countless descendants. Trust Me; I’ve got things under control.”*

Looking back from our vantage point in the 21st century, we can see that God has fulfilled all His promises to Abraham to the letter. So, as they say here in the South, *“Nuff said!”*

Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD credited it to him as righteousness. Genesis 15:6

Why did God’s word settle the matter for Abraham? Because no one can argue with the One who made the stars!

Now here’s a question worth pondering:

- Did Abraham’s faith suddenly change him into morally flawless person?
- Did Abraham’s behavior now conform completely to God’s perfect standard?

Far from it! What changed was not Abraham, but God’s declaration about Abraham. God, acting as the supreme Judge, applied all the rights and privileges of righteousness to Abraham despite Abraham’s own inability to be righteous. God declared him to be righteous.

That is why this is perhaps the most important verse in the entire Old Testament. It is also the theme of all the Gospels, the point in Paul’s letter to the Romans and always a part of his other church letters as well. All throughout Scripture we are assured that, *by God’s grace we are saved through our faith, not by our works... so the one who is righteous will live by faith* (Ephesians 2:8-9, Romans 1:17)

What this verse also assures us is that the Law-giving God of the Old Testament is the same as the loving, forgiving God of the New Testament. From the first book of the Bible to the last, God presents only one way of salvation – the way of faith. From Adam and Eve, to Abraham, to King David, to you and me... we have always been "saved" the same way; simply by trusting that God is able and will do what He has promised us He will do.

As we have already seen in Abraham so far and as we will continue to see as we journey with him, Abraham was prone to the same failings and weaknesses as you and me. He sometimes struggled with knowing what was the right thing to do; he sometimes struggled with his faith. But God accepted his faltering faith as sufficient thus crediting him as righteousness. We are Abraham's spiritual descendants and God still does the same for us. That is why he is counted as the father of everyone who comes to God by faith; not just from his own biological descendants, but also from the whole world throughout all of time. Father Abraham did have many sons and daughters, and we are some of them having become as countless as the dust of the earth and as the stars in sky.

Once again, Abraham's faith was restored, but for some reason the conversation didn't end there. God then went on to "cut a covenant" with Abraham in which he described both how Abraham would end his days: *you shall die in peace and at a good old age*-- which turns out to be at 175 years old. Meaning that Abraham at this point had lived only half his life; so much for his worrying about dying (Genesis 25:7). God also described for Abraham the next 400 years of his descendants' difficult future but promised that after this time they would return with wealth to inhabit the land just as God had promised.

What reason did God give for waiting 400 years to complete His promise to Abraham? Basically because God had not yet finished his dealings with the local inhabitants. I presume that this means even in the worst of cultures God continues to patiently work at bringing as many people as possible back to a personal relationship with Himself. As proven both by King Melchizedek and even his wandering nephew Lot, Abraham was not the only person God had a relationship with in that place, at that time.

In our own fearful days of disease and cultural disruption, this is what fills me with great hope. We as a nation are not yet even 300 years old. Thankfully God is also being patient with us. But I do not want to try His patience. Which is why every Christian in this nation of ours needs to repent, seek God's face and keep praying for revival to sweep over our land ... so that God might as promised also forgive both our individual and collective sins, heal our land and we might again prosper as one nation under God (2 Chronicles 7:14).

What happens next in the story is a little unusual to us in our modern times, but not for Abraham and his time. God goes on to formalize His promise to Abraham by literally "**cutting a covenant**" with him. Today our agreements are preserved with ink on paper, validated by signatures, stamped by notary, stored in

courthouses, and are upheld by governments. Not so in other times and cultures for obvious reasons.

As instructed Abraham cut a prescribed number of animals in two, laying the halves a short distance apart and then God symbolically appeared, in the form of a smoking fire pot and blazing torch, to pass between the pieces thus putting his "signature" to the covenant He had now officially made with Abraham.

Now, traditionally, both parties to such covenants would have to walk between the halved animals together thus signifying, "*may the same thing happen to me if I break my covenant with you.*" But in this case God put Abraham to sleep and passed through the covenant ceremony alone, thus signifying that the entire burden of this covenant was His alone to keep; Abraham would have no other obligations in bringing these promises to pass, his faith alone had been sufficient.

Since we are already at home, what today should we be learning from this story of God's conversation with Abraham for ourselves. What lessons do we need to learn about our own relationship with God.

First, we should learn that

1. God understands our questions and wants to calm our fears.

God didn't begin the conversation by asking: "What's wrong, Abraham?" God already knew. God knows us.

2. that God knows when to bless and when to delay.

But like the stars of the universe which He made, God's perspective and His sense of timing is far greater than anything we can even conceive; yet He always delivers on His promises at just the right time. God knew the right time for Isaac to be born, the right time for Israel to return to the land, the right time for His son to enter and redeem our world, and yes even the right time to bring the history of this world to an end and begin that of another.

3. that God wants us to trust Him. Faith is most important component of our salvation

Which has been His constant message to us in our Bible from its beginning to its end.

**4. that God wants to communicate with us,
but we must learn to listen
and take what is said to heart**

Back in the 1920s, Broadway producer Jed Harris became convinced he was losing his hearing. He visited a specialist who decided to test his hearing.

The specialist pulled out a pocket watch and asked, "Can you hear this ticking?" "Of course," Harris replied.

Next, the specialist walked to the door and asked the question again, "Can you hear the ticking?" Harris said, "Yes, I can hear it clearly."

Then the specialist walked into the next room and repeated the question a third time. A third time Harris said he could still hear the ticking.

The specialist concluded saying, "Mr. Harris, there is nothing wrong with your hearing. You just don't listen."

Is that the case with any of us? Our hearing is just fine, but we don't use our ability to actually listen. You and I will probably live our whole lives and never hear voices coming from a speck of dust - at least I hope that is the case. Abraham heard a word from the Lord; he believed that word and it forever changed his life.

I believe that God also has a word for our lives, but are we listening?

- God speaks to us in many ways, but He first and foremost speaks to us through His written Word, the Bible and through the Living Word, His Son, Jesus.
- Additionally, God speaks to our hearts and minds in prayer through the Holy Spirit.
- God also speaks to us through the counsel of fellow believers.

God is speaking...are we listening?

- Has the Lord spoken to some need in our lives this morning?
- Is there some battle we need peace about?
- Is there some storm we need calmed?
- Have we believed and done what the Bible says we must believe and do to be saved
- Have we dealt with our sin Biblically: repenting, confessing, and *drawing near to God so that He might draw near to us* (James 4:7-8)
- Are we striving to live up to the righteousness that He has credited to us?

If God has spoken to your heart today, then I pray that you will listen and follow God's directions; for just like Abraham He also has wonderful plans for your life.