

Discovering Jesus in the Old Testament: Abram Counts the Stars

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith
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Readings

Genesis 15:1-6 (Kempton Translation, modified)

¹ The word of Jehovah came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am a shield for you. Your reward is multiplied exceedingly."

² And Abram said, "Lord Jehovih, what will You give me, since I go childless, and the son, the steward of my household is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "Look, You have given me no descendants, and behold, a son of my household will inherit from me."

⁴ And behold, the word of Jehovah came to him, saying, "This one shall not be your heir; for he that shall go out from your own body shall be your heir." ⁵ And He brought him outside, and said, "Look now toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."

⁶ And [Abram] believed in Jehovah, and [Jehovah] counted it as righteousness for him.

Arcana Coelestia 1806-1807

"He brought him outside" symbolizes the sight of the Interior Self, which sees internal things from external things. Internal things are "brought outside" when we contemplate the starry sky [or the heavens] with our physical eyes and allow it to direct our thoughts to the Lord's kingdom. Our interior sight – the sight of our spirit or soul – is "brought outside" whenever we view something with our eyes and it essentially disappears as it leads us to "see" or think about things having to do with the church or heaven. The eye itself is really just the sight of the spirit itself "brought outside." In fact its main purpose is for us to see internal things from external things. In other words, the aim, as we look at objects in the world around us, is for us to reflect constantly on everything that exists in the other life, since that life is the goal of our life in the world. That is how the earliest church looked at things; that is how the angels with us look at things; and that is how the Lord looked at things.

When people who see internal things in external things look at the sky, they do not think at all about the starry sky but about the angelic heaven. In fact when they see how vast the sky is, they do not think about its immense size but about the Lord's vast, infinite power. When such people see the sun rise they do not think about the dawn but about the way everything rises out of the Lord, and the way wisdom advances day to day. Again, when they look at gardens, orchards, and flower beds, their eye does not cling to any tree, or to its blossom, leaf, or fruit, but to the heavenly attributes these represent. Nothing beautiful or enjoyable can possibly exist in the heavens or on earth that does not in some measure represent the Lord's kingdom.

Luke 12:22-31 (Kempton Translation, modified)

²² And He said to His disciples, "On this account I say to you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat, nor about the body, what you shall put on. ²³ Life is more than food, and the body is more than clothing. ²⁴ Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds? ²⁵ And which of you by being anxious can add one cubit to his stature? ²⁶ If you then are not able to do the least thing, why are you anxious about the rest? ²⁷ Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; but I say to you that Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. ²⁸ And if God so clothes the grass in the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will He clothe you, O you of little faith!

²⁹ "And do not seek what you will eat, or what you will drink, and be not unsettled. ³⁰ For all these things the nations of the world seek after; and your Father knows that you need these things. ³¹ But seek rather the kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you."

Introduction

- In the brief moment of Abram's life that we are focusing on today we find him struggling to believe in the future that Jehovah had promised him.
 - He had been promised that he would be the father of a great nation and that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed (Genesis 12:2, 3).
 - But, at this point in the story, he is rather old and still has no children, let alone the beginnings of a great nation.
 - And so he is experiencing doubts and anxiety about whether these good things he's longing for will ever actually happen.
- On it's own, this story might not seem particularly remarkable.
 - In the history of the world, there have been countless other people who have struggled to have children; and there are many other hardships that people have gone through that are equally hard, if not much harder than what Abram experienced.
 - However, the incredible thing that the teachings for the New Church reveal is that, in this episode and in every detail of the whole story of Abram, we are actually given a window into the internal experience of our Lord, Jesus Christ, while He was on earth, including the doubts and anxieties that He experienced.
- It is always a privilege to be invited into someone else's inner world – for them to have the vulnerability to share something of what is on their mind and heart with us.
 - The same is true here with what the Lord is offering to us in His Word.
 - It will take work for us to try to understand our Lord better, just like it always takes work for us to listen carefully enough to really grow in our understanding of another person.
 - But the reward of doing that kind of work is that you feel more connected to the other person and that you gain a richer sense of what it is to be a human being going through life.
 - This certainly applies with growing in our understanding of the Lord's experience.

Discovering Jesus in the Old Testament

- This is the second in a series of sermons on discovering Jesus in the Old Testament.
- And throughout this series we will regularly remind ourselves of the reality that there is only so far that our puny little brains can go in trying to understand God's infinite experience based on our own very limited experience.
 - And yet, any progress that we can make in understanding our God is worth it.
 - Even a poorly drawn sketch is better than nothing.
 - And once we have a poorly drawn sketch, we can work on improving it, and gradually come to have a better and better picture of our God.
 - Let's see how much we can improve our sketch by working our way through this story of Abram counting the stars.

Abram and Jehovah in Jesus

- The simplest way to discover Jesus in an Old Testament story is to look at the different parts of the story and say, "Something like this happened to Jesus or something like this happened inside of Jesus."
 - The book *Arcana Coelestia* often does tell us what the different characters in a given story represent in Jesus.
 - Abram means one thing; Isaac another; Jacob another; Joseph, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, etc. – they all have specific meanings.
 - Sometimes in this series we will dig into those specific explanations, but, if you don't remember what the specific explanation is or you can't really make sense of it, remember that you can also use the shorthand of saying, "Something like this character was in Jesus."
- In this story from Genesis 15, there are two main characters: Jehovah and Abram.
 - Something like Jehovah was in Jesus and that part was in communication with something like Abram in Jesus.
 - Jesus called these two aspects of Himself "the Father" and "the Son."
 - *Arcana Coelestia* 1815 explains that there was the part of Jesus that was "Jehovah in Him" because He was "conceived from Jehovah." That part was Divine.

- There also was part of Him that He received through Mary.
 - And that more external part was going to be united with Jehovah within Him, but it wasn't united yet and so "it could not help seeming to Him as though He was talking to another person when he talked with Jehovah, despite the fact that He was talking to Himself..."
- Another passage says that Jesus had "a perceptive sensation and knowledge of all things that were taking place in heaven, and... a continual communication and internal conversation with Jehovah" (*Arcana Coelestia* 1791).
- So Jesus had this Divine part within Him that was Jehovah and He also had the external part that He had received from Mary that was like Abram.
 - And those two parts of Himself were in continual communication and He was working to unite them, but before they were united, they seemed to be separate.
 - This is why Jehovah needed to talk to Abram and why Abram needed to talk to Jehovah.

"I am a shield for you."

- The first piece of communication between Jehovah and Abram in this chapter is word of Jehovah coming to Abram in a vision saying, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am a shield for you" (Genesis 15:1).
 - *Arcana Coelestia* explains that a shield protects a person's chest; and a person's chest contains their heart and lungs which symbolize the goodness and truth with them.
 - And so Jehovah saying that He is a shield means that He is protecting the goodness and truth with a person from the attacks of evils and falsities.
 - Store that idea away for a minute and we'll see why it's significant a bit later.

Why Abram and Jesus Were Anxious

- Next in the story we learn why Abram is anxious and within that we can learn about why the Abram part of Jesus was anxious too.
- Abram says to Jehovah, "Lord Jehovih, what will You give me, since I go childless, and the son, the steward of my household is Eliezer of Damascus?"
 - As an aside, "Lord Jehovih" is just a term for Jehovah that is used when a person is going through a temptation or crisis (*Arcana Coelestia* 1793).
 - The thing that Abram is upset about is that, when he dies, his Syrian steward will be his heir instead of a child of his own.
 - What Jesus was upset about is something much deeper.
- The Abram part of Jesus was worried that there would be no internal church (*Arcana Coelestia* 1794).
 - He was worried that there would only be people who were going through the motions of religion, and nobody taking it to heart.
 - The rituals and practices of religion, and looking after buildings and things like that are all fine and good, if they are in service of the real purposes of religion: repentance, salvation, loving the neighbor, loving the Lord (*Arcana Coelestia* 1795).
 - Doing judgment, loving mercy, and humbling ourselves to walk with our God (Micah 6:8).
 - That's the internal church, where the teachings of the church are inside of a person, changing their heart and behavior for the better.
 - When Jesus was on earth, the religions of the day had so atrophied that people were just going through the motions, trying to do things to appease God or please God so that God would give them something they wanted in response.
 - Like employees whose heart is not in their work, have no investment in what they're doing beyond making a buck.
 - But the Lord wants children of God, not just selfish hirelings who only care about themselves (John 10:11-13).
 - This was what He was concerned about.
 - Was there a future in which people would take the church to heart or was that a naive dream, like a man in his seventies or eighties still hoping to have children?

We Might Have Similar Anxieties

- We might also worry and feel anxious about similar things.
 - We also might worry about the state of the world or the state of the church.
- We might long to have a good marriage or a good relationship with family members but sometimes feel like all we can manage is going through the motions.
- We might long to be useful but feel like we spend most of our days doing pointless things.
- We might long to be good people but not feel sure that that's actually possible, given all of our flaws and mistakes.
 - Can we become genuinely good and loving people or are we going to be stuck faking our way through for our whole lives?
- "Do not be afraid.... I am a shield for you," says Jehovah (Genesis 15:1).
 - "You don't have to be anxious," says the Lord, "I am a shield for you: I will protect the goodness I put in your heart and the truth I put in your lungs from the evil and falsities of hell."

"And He brought him outside...."

- The word of Jehovah came to Abram and told him that his servant would not be his heir but a son born of his own body.
 - To Jesus this meant that the church would have people in it who were born again, who were regenerated, whose hearts were made new by the Lord.
- To reinforce this promise, Jehovah brought Abram outside.
 - The meaning of this bringing outside was explained in the lesson we read and that's printed in the worship pamphlet.
 - To be brought outside is "whenever we view something with our eyes and it essentially disappears as it leads us to 'see' or think about things having to do with the church or heaven" (*Arcana Coelestia* 1806).
 - The passage even says that the main purpose of our eyes is "for us to see internal things from external things."
 - Our eyes can do this: we can think about heavenly things when we look around the natural world, but we have to let the Lord bring us outside so that we can see what He wants us to see.
 - It's hard to see the stars if we refuse to leave our dark little rooms.

- It's also hard to see the stars if, when we go outside, there's too much light pollution from the things and priorities of this world.
- We need to let the Lord get us away from that so that He can show us something different.

"Look now towards heaven and count the stars...."

- Once Jehovah had Abram outside He said, "Look now toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be."
- Abram looked at the stars and thought of his thousands of descendants.
 - We can look at the stars in the sky and think about heavenly things.
 - *Arcana Coelestia* says that Abram's descendants being like the stars of heaven means all the countless goods and truths that make up the wisdom, intelligence and happiness of every angel (1810).
 - If you're feeling like there's not enough goodness or truth in you, look up at the night sky on a clear night, think about the immensity of the universe, and think of every point of light in the sky being another good love or true belief that the Lord wants to give you.
- We don't have any stories in the gospels about Jesus looking up at the stars, but we do have plenty of examples of Him seeing heavenly things in the natural world around Him.
 - "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed...." (Matthew 13:31).
 - "The kingdom of heaven is like leaven...." (Matthew 13:33).
- The passage from our lessons said, "Nothing beautiful or enjoyable can possibly exist in the heavens or on earth that does not in some measure represent the Lord's kingdom."
- What about if you were feeling anxious and wanted to be reassured of the Lord's providence and care, what could look at in the natural world?
 - Jesus told His disciples to, "Consider the ravens...." And "Consider the lilies how they grow...." (Luke 12:24, 27).
 - These are familiar words and even some of people's favorite teachings of the Lord, but they take on a different significance when we think of the Lord Himself considering the lilies as a way of being reassured when part of Him was feeling anxious.

- We know from the teachings for the New Church that the Lord experienced the worst possible temptations, including terrible doubts, anxiety, and despair (*Arcana Coelestia* 1787, 1820).
- And we know from the explanation of this story about Abram that part of how Jesus found reassurance was by being brought outside to see heavenly things in the natural world around Him.
- So, when Jesus told His disciples to consider the lilies, He was not telling them to do something that He had never done that He thought maybe might be helpful to them.
 - He was telling them something that He knew from difficult experience was actually helpful.

"He believed in Jehovah...."

- After Abram looked toward heaven and counted the stars it says simply, "And he believed in Jehovah, and [Jehovah] counted it as righteousness for him" (Genesis 15:6).
- Somehow, in our current world, belief in God can seem like something that doesn't really matter, that doesn't make that big of a difference.
 - But that is not the way *Arcana Coelestia* talks about what believing in Jehovah meant for Jesus.
 - It says, "The love from which a person fights reveals what faith that person has" (1812).
 - When we're going through something hard, what makes us choose to keep fighting for what we want anyway? Love.
 - Because what we love is at stake we believe that it is worth continuing to fight for it.
- In the Lord's case, He fought "from Divine Love, that is, from love toward the whole human race, whose salvation was the only thing He desired and burned for in His conflicts" (*Arcana Coelestia* 1813).
 - So this was not a flimsy, meaningless belief.
 - It was a belief that came from the infinite Divine love of God that was present in Jesus and flowing through Him and out of Him to the people around Him.
 - It was the light that comes from the warmth of a million suns.

- We are not the Lord, but we can and should try to follow His example in our own small ways.
 - When we are experiencing anxiety and doubt about the future and things that matter to us feel under threat, we can try to look at the flowers, or the birds, or the stars in the heavens and be reminded of our Creator's love and care at the largest and most minute scale.
 - And we can try to believe in Jehovah – to connect with His Divine love as our reason to keep fighting.
- What is it that you love that feels under threat?
 - Does the Lord care about that thing too?
 - Connect with His love for it.
 - For example, if your marriage is feeling under threat, you might feel anxious because you care about your marriage.
 - Your love of your marriage is rather puny.
 - See if you can connect with the Lord's love of marriage and the Lord's love for your marriage and keep fighting from that.
 - Maybe you being a good person feels under threat.
 - Your love of being a good person probably feels kind of puny and maybe somewhat self-centered.
 - Try to connect with the Lord's love of your salvation and the Lord's love for having you be a useful angel in His heavenly kingdom.
 - Keep fighting the good fight from that love.

Conclusion

- It is such a privilege that the Lord has given us this window into His inner life, and it's amazing that it's all laid out in the stories of the Old Testament.
- I pray that we may be worthy of this knowledge and that we do not just file it away as more religious knowledge, but instead use it as motivation to live differently – to follow His example, to see heavenly things in the world around us, and to face our doubts and anxieties with a steadfast faith that is grounded in His infinite love for the whole human race.
- *Amen.*

If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org.