

## Genesis 15. Out for the Count

If a boxer was knocked out by Dracula, what would he be? Out for the Count. We use the expression "out for the count" for a boxer who has been knocked out and is unable to get back on his feet in a 10 second period. In Genesis 15 Abram is "out for the count" in two quite different ways. First, take a peep at verse 5: *"He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them.'"*, God took Abram outside to do some counting. As I said, he was "out for the count." Next, look at verse 12: *"As the sun was setting, Abram into a deep sleep."* There you have it again, Abram "out for the count", sound asleep.

### Out for the count - the first time

The first time Abram is "out for the count" is when the Lord takes him outside and gets him to look up at the stars and try to count them. Why does the Lord do this? Well, the Abram we meet in this chapter is an anxious man. He is worried about the future. Abram has just effected the daring rescue of his nephew Lot. He has cause to fear reprisals from the four invading kings and also from the king of Sodom, after snubbing him and refusing to accept his bribe. Is there a person who causes you anxiety? Someone who can cause you harm, either physically or psychologically? God's words in verse 2 apply not only to Abram but to every child of Abraham: *"Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."* To Abram God is saying, "Don't fear what those kings may do to you. I will protect you from them. I know, you gave all the booty you captured back to the king of Sodom. Be assured, I am your very great reward you will not miss out."

However, God's words of reassurance to Abram address a much deeper level of anxiety in Abram's heart. When God says to Abram, "Do not be afraid" he is addressing the very anxiety to which Abram immediately gives voice in verses 2-3:

*But Abram said, 'O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I will remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, 'You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.*

God has already promised Abram on two separate occasions that he will give the land to Abram's offspring. And he has promised Abram that his offspring will be like the dust of the earth. But the years are passing by. Abram is no longer a young man and his wife is aging too. Abram is feeling very frustrated and getting very desperate.

I can identify with Abram. From the age of 22, when I fell for a particular girl in New Zealand, I longed to get married. The years passed by and I moved closer to my goal of training to be a missionary. At the age of 29 my relationship with that girl in New Zealand came to an end - we parted as good friends, but it was a time of great anguish. I came to Moore College to prepare for a Bible teaching ministry in India. I went out with a few girls but it seemed to me that I was going to end up going to the mission field as a single man. I had lost all self-confidence when it came to finding a wife. I know we joke about these sort of things and in another setting I'll joke about them too. But let me tell you I was a very frustrated and anxious man. I longed to be married. Some friends told me the important thing in dealing with God is to get to a point where you can accept either being married or not being married. They said when you do this you'll experience the Lord's peace. Well, I'd get down on my knees and I'd

say to the Lord, "If it's your will for me to be single then I'll accept that." But I never experienced peace about it. I continued to feel deeply frustrated and anxious. Some of you may be experiencing anxiety about the future in a very different way. Abram could not conceive of living his life without a son: *"what can you give since I remain childless?"* *"Lord, that's all I want,"* he cries.

I could not conceive of living my life without a wife. One verse stood out for me in those days: *"For the Lord God is a sun and shield. He bestows favour and honour. No good thing does the Lord withhold from those who walk uprightly"* (Ps 84: 11). God's identity as a shield is associated with his identity as one who bestows favour and honour. Similarly, God says to Abram, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward."

Do you see how "shield" and "reward" go together? We can paraphrase what God said to Abram in this way: "Do be anxious about the future, Abram. I will cover your life like a shield and not let anything prevent you from experiencing how generous a God I am." It is God himself who is Abram's "very great reward." Abram doesn't know it yet, but God is going to give Abram the son he longs for. Yet before God offers Abram the son he yearns for, God offers himself to Abram. "I am your very great reward", he tells him. "Abram, the greatest thing I can give you is not a son but myself. Abram, I give myself to you."

It's hard to see this in the midst of pain and anxiety. When I'm longing for a wife and am despairing about ever being married it's hard to see that all I need is the Lord himself. When your heart is filled with anxiety about some deep unmet need it's hard to see that what you need is the Lord himself. When Abram longs with all his being for a son it's hard to see that all he needs is the Lord himself. God says to Abram, "I give myself to you." Abram replies, "What can you give me since I remain childless?" There is an issue here. But God bides his time. He will revisit this matter. At the end of the day Abram needs to decide who matters more to him: God or a son. When we get to Genesis 22 God brings Abram back to this issue.

If you are a child of Abraham, know that the Lord Jesus Christ has given himself to you. Is he your very great reward? We sing, "He's all I need, he's all I need, Jesus is all I need." Is he? The Lord is kind and patient with us. But he'll keep bringing you back to this issue. Is Jesus really all you need?

God is very kind and patient with Abram. God replies, "Your servant, Eliezer of Damascus will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." He tells Abram, "I will give you the son and heir you long for." And that's when he takes Abram "out for the count". Look at verse 5: *"He took him outside and said, 'Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them. ' Then he said to him, 'So shall your offspring be.'"*

A medieval astrologer prophesied to a king that his favorite mistress would soon die. Sure enough, the woman died a short time later. The king was outraged at the astrologer, certain that his prophecy had brought about the woman's death. He summoned the astrologer and commanded him: "Tell me when you will die!" The astrologer realized that the king was planning to kill him immediately, no matter what answer he gave. "I do not know when I will die," he answered finally. "I only know

that whenever I do die, you will die two days later.

Remember where Abram came from? Ur, a city in ancient Mesopotamia, later inhabited by the Chaldeans. Ur was famous for moon worship. Abram's father was Terah and his name means "moon worshipper." It was the Mesopotamians who made a science out of astrology. They believed that by studying the stars you could tell the future. God is the master of irony. He says to Abram, "Look at the stars and let me read your future for you." Immediately after this, in verse 7, he says: "*I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.*" Here "Chaldeans" probably refers not so much to the people that historians know as the Chaldeans, but, as in the book of Daniel, refers to astrologers. "I am the Lord, who brought you out of the place of moon worship, out of the place where they try to predict the future by reading the stars. I created the stars, Abram. Now look at them and I will tell you your future. I am all you need. Look to me alone." Have any of you in the past tried to find out about your future through studying horoscopes, Tarot cards, fortune telling or reading those cards you get in a Buddhist temple after you've shaken the incense sticks? If you are a Christian the Lord has brought you out of that kind of a world. If you have anxieties about the future, put them in God's hands. He is all you need. Let him be the one who controls your future.

God tells Abram, "Look up at heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them. Relax, Abram. I'm not just going to give you a son. I'm going to give you so many descendants it's impossible to count them." Abram looks at what God has created. He listens to the Creator speak, "So shall your offspring be." Then Abram responds in the only way a creature should respond to his or her Creator. He "believes." So simple, isn't it? That's precisely what we are told in verse 6: "*Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*" When Abram looked at the immensity of the heavens he began to perceive the immensity of God, the Creator. You don't say to the Creator of the universe, "Well, it's very nice of you to say you'll do that for me. How can I help? What can I do?" The Creator of the universe doesn't need you. He is all you need! There is only one right response Abram can make and he made it. He "believed." Abram's anxiety and agitation subsided. Abram put his trust and dependence in the Creator to meet the deepest longing of his heart. And God said in effect, "Here at last is a man who takes me seriously as Creator! Here at last is a man who is relating to me as a person should! Here is a righteous man!" What's the state of your relationship with God at present? Are you whingeing about something? Are you anxious about your future? Frustrated? Bitter? Resentful? Go outside - get in your car and go for a drive and find a quiet spot. Get out of your car. Look up at the heavens in all their immensity. Read Psalm 8 about the glory of God as Creator and, like Abram, put your life in the hands of the Lord.

#### **Out for the count - the second time**

In verse 12 we find Abram out for the count for a second time: "*As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep.*" What's all this about? It's all about Abram learning yet again that the future is in God's hands. Look at the rest of the verse: "*As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him.*" It was a "dreadful" darkness, a "horrificing" darkness, a "terrifying" darkness. As Abram fell into deep sleep he had an ominous sense that terrible things were going to happen in the future. His heart was filled with anxiety and dread about the future. And this sense of fear was justified, as God explains. In the midst of his

darkness of the soul, God says to him, *"Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years."* We all want the best for our kids. You would feel overwhelmed with dread if you knew for certain that your kids were going to experience terrible things?

It is significant that Abram is sound asleep. This underlines his impotence, his helplessness. There is absolutely nothing he can do to change the course of history. Just before this Abram has been very active. Look at the previous verses. Following God's command, Abram has brought before the Lord *"a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon"* (v9). In ancient astrology, the Zodiac came to be associated with animals such as the heifer, the goat and the ram. God has just been reminding Abram that he brought him out of that world. Maybe getting Abram to cut up these beasts is helpful to Abram in destroying any trace of dependence on astrology as he looks to the future. Maybe it's all by way of helping Abram to put his complete confidence in God to control the future.

When we put our confidence in God to control the future it's not all going to turn out exactly as we want it. I don't know what God has in store for you or for me. I know you can trust God. He is all you need. I know at the end of the day you will be thoroughly satisfied with what God has in store for you. But most of us are going to experience some very hurtful and tragic things as we live our lives. If we could sense what the future holds, like Abram, then a thick and dreadful darkness would fall upon our souls too.

The beasts Abram is called upon to bring before the Lord are all later used by Israel as sacrificial animals. The heifer was sacrificed for the priests, the goat and ram for the common people and the birds for the very poor people. God has just indicated that he is going to give Abram innumerable descendants. In fact, as he promised earlier, he is going to make Abram into *"a great nation."* The Abrahamic nation, Israel, will need sacrifices for priests, the common people and the very poor. So the very nature of the sacrifice Abram now offers up to God is by way of providing a tangible, visible symbol that God will raise up this great nation through Abraham. So Abram does what he's told. Except for the birds, he cuts up the animals in two and creates a corridor between the halves of the animals. But then he has a problem. Look at verse 11: *"Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away."* What does this all mean?

The key is to note the contrast between the active Abram - bringing and cutting up the animals and driving away the birds of prey - and the passive Abram, lost in sleep amidst great darkness, helpless and impotent. Abram's sleep is associated with the future concerning his descendants that he can't control. His activity is associated with his own life. For the course of his own life Abram succeeds, as it were, in driving away *"the birds of prey."* There are threats to the covenant promises God has made with Abram but he comes out of it all pretty well intact. Note the contrast in verse 15: *"You, however, [in contrast with your descendants] will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age."* While Abram lives the birds of prey are kept at bay. But when he dies (and *"the thick and dreadful darkness"* is like the darkness of death) there is absolutely nothing he can do to keep away the birds of prey. So God speaks of Abram's descendants being enslaved and mistreated for 400 years by a foreign nation, namely Egypt. God doesn't want Abram to be a racist and so he doesn't tell *"him*

which nation it is. But when Abram dies the falcons of Egypt will swoop down and try to destroy the covenant between God and his people. However, they will not succeed. Look at verse 17: "*When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot [or furnace] and a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces.*" Smoke and fire anticipates what happens later when God gives the law to Israel at Mount Sinai. God himself, as symbolised by smoke and fire, passes between the pieces. In this context, "the smoking furnace" may also anticipate the suffering of Israel in Egypt which elsewhere is called "the furnace of affliction." But the point, anyway, is that when the sun is gone and all seems to be in darkness, never forget that God himself is with his people in the darkness. God controls the future. He passes between the pieces. He is not only the shield of Abram but of Abram's descendants as well. He will punish Egypt and he will bring the Abrahamic nation back into the land of Canaan.

There is much more in this passage than we can deal with in one sermon. But let us finish with this thought: whatever darkness may face you in the future do take to heart this one truth - God will be with you in the darkness and in the end he will safely bring you into his eternal kingdom. God was Abram's shield and very great reward. Is he yours as well?