

CHOSEN BY GOD

Genesis 15:1-6

You're lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, listening to cars go by. You have no idea how long you have been like this, but it must be a few hours, at least. *Go to sleep*, you tell yourself. *Just close your eyes and: Go. To. Sleep.* You shut your eyes tight, force your body to relax, and wait for the blissful slumber to come. But, nothing happens. More minutes pass and... nothing happens. It's 3 a.m., and you're still staring at the ceiling.

We have all been in this situation. Try as we might, it is nearly impossible to consciously *will* yourself to sleep. Sleep comes to those who let their mind wander and focus on anything other than sleep itself. Count sheep, control your breathing, listen to an audiobook, or whatever — so long as it turns your mind from wanting to sleep.

This is a common and familiar example of the “law of reversed effort,” proposed by Aldous Huxley, who wrote:

“The harder we try with the conscious will to do something, the less we shall succeed.

“Proficiency and the results of proficiency come only to those who have learned the paradoxical art of doing and not doing, or combining relaxation with activity, of letting go as a person in order that the immanent and transcendent unknown quantity may take hold.”

Think of when you first learned to ride a bike—or roller or figure skate. In our effort to figure out all that has to be done in doing those things, we overreact and our muscles fatigue in no time. But as we practice, our body learns how to move in just the right ways so we don't try to do those things, but simply do them.

In Huxley's words, it's “*combining relaxation with activity.*”

On a spiritual level people can see this as what faith gives. The Chinese call it, “Wu Wei.” It is not some lazy torpor or an excuse for a day off and Netflix binge. In fact, it is often the very opposite. Wu Wei is to appreciate, recognize, and accept the pull of forces far greater than us. It is to walk the path that opens up and push the door that gives. Call it gut-feeling, intuition, fate, divine calling, or whatever, but Wu Wei is to stop doing what you *think* is right, and to let yourself be pulled by some *other* power.

The word “surrender” comes laden with negative connotations. Surrender is cowardly or weak. Heroes are ones who never back down, and no great story begins with the good guys just giving up. And yet, there is a lot of arrogance in this.

To surrender to a greater power — or a nobler, righteous one — is not an act of cowardice. It is an act of profound wisdom. There is nothing praiseworthy about swimming in a

storm or punching a bear in the face. There is wisdom in knowing our limits, in embracing humility, and even in being pushed around.

But is that faith? Is that what Abraham had as he looked at the stars in the sky and trusted that his descendants would be as many as the stars in the heavens? Is that what Hebrews 11 means by faith? Is this what Jesus means by not worrying?

The idea of surrendering to a higher power is wise. It is recognizing the way the world really is. Alcoholics Anonymous is based on the principle that you need help from a higher power. This is what St. Paul talked about in Romans 1 when he said, “They all know God.” But what leads people to do so—to put themselves in the best possible situation like a reed blowing in the wind? It is wise to surrender to a higher power, but it is not faith.

Faith involves first and foremost a relationship. Jesus was not just talking to anyone. He said, “Fear not, little flock.” He was talking to His disciples who saw God as their Father. Faith was not a logical choice to make do with what they had, but the result of their relationship first as God’s children, then more specifically as the flock-disciples of Jesus.

Abraham was not the only person who knew God existed. But he was the one called by God to go to a new land and trust that God would make his descendants a new nation. This wasn’t just a matter of Abraham being smart, but of him receiving the faith to trust in God, even when that led him to leave his homeland.

Why did God choose Abram? Was it because God saw how faithful he would be? This was the same Abram who almost let his wife Sarai commit adultery with the king of Egypt because he was afraid the king would kill him if he knew Abram was her husband. Abram has told Sarai to lie and say Abram was her brother. And in Joshua 24 we learn that Abram used to worship other gods before God called him. Why did God call Abram? He just did.

God goes on to tell Abram to take a heifer, a goat, a ram, a dove, and a pigeon and sacrifice them, splitting them in half and setting them on the ground. In Abram’s world when you made a legal agreement, you would literally “cut a covenant.” Animals would be cut in half and the two parties would walk in the blood between them. This signified that your blood would be shed if you didn’t keep the covenant. After Abram cut the animals, he fell into a trance. Then God came to him and Abram saw a smoking firepot with a blazing torch pass through the animal halves. This was God walking through them. God was sealing His promise to Abram. He would keep His promise even if it meant shedding His own blood. This showed Abram that he could believe in God.

We look to the cross and see God shedding His blood for us. God sealed His promise to us. We can know as Abram did, that God has chosen us. Abram saw all those stars in the sky. But do we? Because of all our electric lights, our sky is not so dark. Drive out into the country and perhaps you can see the night sky as Abram did, a sky so filled with stars that you can almost walk from one to the next.

It can be hard to see all the “stars” God promises to us because of all the “lights’ in our lives. So what we are “chosen”? It is like a competition in school where everyone wins. How hard is it to say that everyone is a winner?

That is where the cross comes in. Death, death by crucifixion, is a big deal. And the death of God’s own Son is an even bigger deal, the biggest of all. God chose Abram, but Abram also saw how costly it was that God chose him. God was willing to shed blood to make it true. God did shed the blood of Jesus so that you and I can know that it is a big deal that we are chosen.