

BELIEVING IS SEEING

Genesis 15:1-6

They are all over the internet--scenes with people arguing over religion. The ones produced by Christian groups show how some expert debater “destroys” some unbeliever through logic and word twisting. But on the same internet we can see scenes of intellectual atheists making devout Christians look like fools. With the influence of non-Western culture where tradition and emotion can be more important than evidence, there is an acceptance that we can believe what we want. Yet as Westerners we like black and white, true and false, right and wrong. So, there is still the emphasis on proof and evidence. After all isn't that what enabled us to develop things like air conditioning for our houses, transistors that allow us to have computers that we can hold in our hands, and medicines that cure from disease? Seeing those things happen makes us believe those things will work.

So, what are we left with in terms of God? Jesus told us clearly, “No one has ever seen God.” Yes, there is the evidence of creation, but don't we see clearer evidence in what science reveals to us about how nature makes and destroys things on its own? People will tell us there is much clearer evidence that Jesus rose from the dead than that William Shakespeare wrote his famous plays. Yes, but my future and like now doesn't depend on whether or not Shakespeare wrote his works. Jesus calls us to put our lives in His hands. I don't see people coming back from the dead. I don't see peoples' sins forgiven. I don't have a crystal ball to look into the future and see if life after death is true. Wouldn't it be better to see before believing. We might buy a ticket from a neighbor kid selling it to raise funds for a little league shirt without really knowing what the ticket is for. But would we buy a car, much less a house sight unseen?

Abram believed. But what did he see? He saw the stars in a way most of us never see. The climate is a lot dryer in Palestine, so there is less humidity and clouds than we have at night. But even more there was no electricity, so no light pollution. When we looked at the Milky Way he saw not a few stars twinkling in the night, but a mass of stars that were all too clear and way too many to count. It was a great sight, but it was just symbolic of what God promised him—descendants as many as those stars.

But what did Abram see as reality? He was already old and had no children, much less a son to continue his line. He had left behind his relatives and ancestors to go to a land where he owned no land. That might not seem like a big deal to us today. During the farm crisis of the 1980's many families mourned the loss of their family farms. It wasn't so much the loss of income, but losing the land that their fathers and grandfathers farmed. It was seen as kind of a betrayal of their forebearers. Those feelings were much greater in Abram's time. Your family land was not only important for farming; it was the land where your ancestors were buried. The way you lived on after death was through your descendants. That is why they could trace their family lines so far back without needing ancestry.com or the Mormon church to do it for you. To lose that land was to so great disrespect to your ancestors, the ancestors that many people worshipped. And you worshipped them in the hope that you would so live on among your own descendants.

Abram left that behind to stake a new future not with his ancestors, but with God. The book of Hebrews says about Abram (11:8-10):

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

Abram did not first see; he believed, then he could see.

St. Paul says in 1 Timothy that “women shall be saved through childbearing.” Jesus talks about “having to hate our parents before we can follow Him.” Jesus tells the rich man that he has to give up everything to follow Jesus. Doesn’t that mean we have to as well? There are so many things we read in Scripture that confuse us. As I just heard from someone, “The more I read of the Bible, the less I seem to know.” We might think that it is because Scripture contradicts itself or that it is so cryptic or that it was written in another language for a different culture and time. But truly what makes God’s Word unclear to us is sin. Sin takes our very accomplishments and twists those to block our vision of God. In Abram’s time they saw a great connection between their very survival and a deity or deities. You survived because God or the gods gave you rain for your crops, wind to blow away the clouds of locusts, and health to your crops and animals. Today even if we cannot control the weather, we can raise specially developed hybrids that are drought resistant and we have a country-wide agriculture in which drought or disease may lead to a bad harvest and less income, no one has to starve. Most of us don’t raise the crops or animals. Instead, we are insulated by layers of grain elevators, processing plants, distributors, grocery stores, and our own refrigerators before we eat the food. This puts us farther and farther from the reality of the God who made us and sustains us.

So, we look to the evidence we want rather than what God puts before us. We see people die, but none rise from the dead as Jesus did. We get a lot more news about conflict and war than about peace and harmony. We don’t see the sky filled with stars as Abram did, but see all the other lights, all those things that distract us from God. We may thank God for our meals, but we are more likely to trust in what is in our refrigerator than in God to satisfy our hunger. We may pray to God when we get sick, but our thoughts are turned a lot more towards what the doctor will say. We may pray to God to help with a test or business deal, but we are much more attuned to what our own instincts tell us. Since we don’t see, it is hard for us to believe.

But Abram believed. Why? Because he had clearer insight than us? Because he was closer to God than us? Because he was a better person? Joshua told the people of Israel as they were to enter the Holy Land that God had so long ago promised to Abram, “Your ancestors worshiped other gods across the river (that meant the Euphrates River, so what is now modern-day Iraq where Abram was born). But God called Abraham.” God called Abram, not because

he was good, but simply because He did. By talking to Him, He gave Abram the faith to believe. And because Abram believed, he could see.

Our modern “evidence” can cloud of sight of God and His Word. How can we believe God created the world in six days when we see evidence of light from things in space that are billions of light years away? How can we see evidence of age in the earth beneath us that goes back millions and millions of years? We forget that 250 years ago science told us that chemical reactions take place because of a substance called “phlogiston.” Then a Frenchman named Lavoisier discovered oxygen and defined how things burn. 150 years ago science said infectious diseases were caused by vapors called “humors.” Then another Frenchman, Pasteur, discovered the microorganisms we call today germs. Today what science accepted about the “Big Bang” as the cause of the creation of the universe has been discredited by the data received from the advanced telescopes and sensors we have put in space. Our desire to control things rather than to put things in God’s hands, what made Adam and Eve take that forbidden fruit, clouds us from trusting God. So, no amount of evidence will ever convince us.

But God and His Word produce faith. We can see evidence of this in how Christianity, despite persecution, spread throughout the Roman Empire. It caused the start of hospitals and orphanages. It affects how we value life. And it continues to make a difference in our world. Which country, by percentage, has the most rapidly growing community of Christians? It is Iran. The very place seen as the source of so much radical Islam. The most Christian continent on earth is not Europe or North or South America, but Africa. Yet, far bigger is the reality of Jesus’ resurrection on Easter. We cannot prove it, but the power of that message gives us faith, as Abraham was given it. That faith leads to us to see, as Abraham did without the evidence to prove it, that God’s promise of a great nation descending from him to bless all nations would come true. We have that faith; we believe. Therefore, we can see.