**17th February 2013**

**Genesis 15.1-5**

We continue our look at the life of Abraham and God’s call and promise to him. This week god reiterates his call and promise to Abram that he will have many descendants. God shows him the stars in the sky and says so many will your descendants be.

Many people have been looking up at the skies in r4ecentg days wondering if something is going to hit us. An asteroid the size of an Olympic swimming pool had a near miss with planet earth on Friday – well 20,000 miles. A meteor crashed into Russia causing a sonic boom that smashed windows and caused hundreds of injuries. It’s a good time to bring out those ‘end of the world’ ‘prepare to meet thy maker’ placards. Certainly looking up at the night sky can be awe inspiring. I remember being out in Uganda in the middle of the bush with no light pollution at all and looking up and seeing a night sky filled with stars – it is an amazing sight.

I see the stars, I hear the mighty thunder, and thy power throughout the universe displayed, and then sings my soul my saviour God to thee – as the hymn goes. The marvels of creation naturally induce a sense of awe and wonder, glimpsing something beyond the purely material world. For some people a sense of the divine presence behind all of creation: the force, the power that makes the universe turn. Sadly we in Britain seem intent on censoring that sense of the divine presence. Despite the fact that the proportion of scientists who believe in God hasn’t declined in fifty years, the only scientists you get on TV presenting nature programmes are godless ones. There is a little bit of a bias I think in broadcasting and media against people who have faith in God and media of course shapes culture, wider held beliefs. But the God question is still there – hence the title of my first discussion evening in the Old Spot this week.

Scripture tells us of a God who is there and who encounters us in our everyday lives.

 A god who helps us dream of what could be. A god who helps us face our fears about what could be. A god who shields us and rewards us with good life. This is the God that Abraham encountered and how it changed his life.

What are you hoping for?

What dream has God given you? Can you see God helping you overcome your family problems, your financial problems...do you have educational dreams for your self or your children? Is there a dream for your job that lies unfulfilled? Do you dream of God using you in a bigger way? Do you long for family and friends to come to faith in Christ?

Believe these great words of God today: "Don’t be afraid, I am your shield; your reward will be great.

William Carrey, considered by many to be the human catalyst behind the modern missions movement, used to say, "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God."
If you once dreamed big for God but have become discouraged about whether or not those dreams can still be realized, this story of Abraham should help you dream again.

Our text verse is unique because it contains the first mention in the Bible of two very important words: "vision" and "reward".
Genesis 15:1 (NLT) "After this the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision and said to him, ’Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield, and your reward will be great.’"

This verse contains FOUR ESSENTIAL ATTITUDES FOR FULFILLING YOUR GOD-GIVEN DREAM:

**1. Realize that your dream will need to be tested.**

The first word of our text verse deserves further investigation. "After this". After what? What had been happening in the life of Abram up to this point? Let’s quickly review the three preceding chapters of scripture.

In Genesis chapter twelve God calls Abram to leave his home at age 75. So he sets out, not even knowing the precise location of the Promised Land to which God is sending him. Shortly thereafter Abram finds himself in the midst of a famine. He’s forced to take his family, servants, flocks and herds into Egypt. While he’s there he lies about his wife being his sister so that Pharaoh won’t kill him. Pharaoh takes Sarai into his harem but God protects her in spite of Abram’s deception and she is returned to Abram.

This character flaw of Abram’s is not covered up in Scripture. One of the many reasons we know the Bible is trustworthy is that it "tells it like it is".

Abram was weak. He lied. There’s no excuse for his lying. Yet Abram did not stop his journey to obey God because of his own sinful failure.

So we see in Genesis twelve that Abram’s dream was tested by FAMINE and FAILURE.

In Genesis chapter thirteen, Abram separates from his nephew Lot because of a conflict between their herdsmen. There wasn’t enough grazing land for both their sets of herds and flocks. So Abram lets Lot take his pick of land on which to graze and Lot chooses foolishly. Sure, he picked the lush land, but it was also connected to the wicked city of Sodom. Eventually, Lot inches his way into the city. His family life is devastated because he chose the wrong priorities in life.

Abram could have taken first pick due to seniority. Instead he was selfless.

Don’t be so sure that just because you can do something that you should do the thing.

So in Genesis thirteen we see that Abram’s vision was tested by CONFLICT.

In Genesis chapter fourteen Abram rescues Lot from being taken captive. The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, where Lot and his family had been living, lost their battle to a group of Babylonian kings. As a consequence Lot and his family were among the people taken hostage - probably to become slaves.

Uncle Abram puts together an army of his servants and rescues Lot and his family and all the other people and goods claimed by the heathen kings.

The King of Sodom offers for Abram to keep the spoils of the battle he had just won. (v.21) (It seems rich to me that this king offers Abram something he lost in battle and Abram regained.)

 Abram refused the offer because he did not want the King of Sodom to ever be able to say, "I made Abram rich." (v.23)

Abram wanted everyone to know that it was his God, not any man, that blessed him. He was able to refuse material goods based on principle.

So we see, Abram’s vision was not only tested by FAMINE, FAILURE, and CONFLICT, but also by WARFARE and PROSPERITY.

That’s the stuff that comes before the AFTER THIS.

(AFTER THIS, the LORD spoke to Abram in a vision...)

Do you see the pattern?

AFTER Abram stepped out by faith and left his homeland.

AFTER he’d been through the famine.

AFTER he’d embarassed himself by lying to the King of Egypt.

AFTER he’d had the dissension with his family member, Lot.

AFTER he’d fought and won the battle with the Babylonian kings.

AFTER he passed the test with his possessions.

AFTER THOSE TESTS...God appeared to him in a vision.

A lot of us would have given up AFTER having gone through just one of these tests.

And that is the reason why many dreams from God never materialize - we give up too soon.

When we realize our dreams must be tested we can have a better attitude about those tests and a positive attitude is essential for realizing our dreams.

Those who see their God-given dreams fulfilled are the ones who persevere through tough times. They are the people who refuse to quit. Their tenacity and perseverance win out. They’re like Jacob wrestling with God, refusing to quit until they’ve received God’s blessing.

This is the biggest difference between winners and losers in every field. In business, sports, marriage and family life - many succeed because they have a right attitude about their tests.

People who fulfill their God-given dreams aren’t always the most brilliant, not always the most talented, not always the better skilled. They don’t always have the best resources at their disposal. They’re just people who refuse to let go of their dream.

God’s will through the Patriarchs or any other saint, was not realized overnight. It took years of testing and moulding and refining.

But why do I have to be tested to realize God’s dream?

Maybe God can’t give his dreams to people whose minds are cluttered with other things. Our tests and trials are not meant to discourage us - they are meant to draw us closer to God – to sort out our priorities, to refine our faith.

Tests can be God’s pruning shears.

John 15:1-2 (CEV) "Jesus said to his disciples:’I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts away every branch of mine that doesn’t produce fruit. But he trims clean every branch that does produce fruit, so that it will produce even more fruit.’"

It’s tempting when the road is smooth and the sun is shining to think you’re doing it all without God’s help. But of course, you’re not. Without Him we couldn’t do anything. Having our dreams tested helps us remember that.

Abram was to the point where God could say, "Abram, I want to talk to you about something", and Abram was prepared to listen.

It was AFTER THIS. After the storms of life.

A young naval student was being put through the paces by an old sea captain. "What would you do if a sudden storm sprang up on the starboard?"

"Throw out the anchor, sir."

"What would you do if another storm sprang up aft?"

"Throw out another anchor, sir."

"And if another terrific storm sprang up forward, what would you do?"

"Throw out another anchor."

"Hold on", said the captain. "Where are you getting all your anchors from?"

"From the same place you’re getting your storms, sir."

You don’t have to worry whether or not God has enough anchors for your storms!

Abram passed the tests so God gave him vision.

The first attitude to realizing your God-given dream: realize your dream will be tested. And then...

**2. Remember that God offers reassurance. "The LORD spoke to Abram in a vision."**

"No one has ever seen God." (1 John 4:2; John 1:18)

"God is Spirit." (John 4:24) He is not contained in a physical body - except, of course, for the time Jesus took on human form. So when God spoke to people in Bible times He often had to do it in vision fashion.

Besides, there wasn’t a Bible available in Abram’s day. He couldn’t turn to the book of Genesis. So God speaks to him through a vision.

Don’t ever forget how much God wants to communicate with humanity. He communicates to us through creation and conscience. (Romans 1) And He communicates through the Word of God, both written and Living.

Some object that they can’t be visionaries because God hasn’t spoken to them in a vision like he did Abram.

In many ways we have it better than Abraham had it? God will speak to you every day if you will read His Word! You have much more revelation from God than Abram ever dreamed of having.

And what will happen when you hear from God? Many great things, one of which is, you will be able to face your fears. Fear is the greatest enemy to realizing your God-given dreams. Fear is a dream killer.

That’s why God’s communication to Abram included this next attitude.

**3. Replace fear with faith. "Do not be afraid, Abram, I will protect you."**
What might Abram be afraid of at this point in his life?

The retribution of the Babylonian kings he had defeated in battle? The wrath of the King of Egypt for lying about his wife? No, Abram had already survived those tests.

The greatest of Abram’s tests was the test of his faith.

God had promised to make him great and make him the head of a great nation. (Gen. 12:2) You know the problem...Abram and Sarai were old and childless. How could God possibly hope to fulfill His promise to Abram now?

Abram believed the Lord (Genesis 15:6), but he still wondered "how" God was going to fulfill His promise.

Abram suggested to God that his trusted servant Eliezer of Damascus become his heir. (Genesis 15:3) Sarai’s plan was for Abram to father a child by her Egyptian servant Hagar. (Genesis 16:1-2)

Both plans missed the mark. Both alternatives were motivated by fear.

But God wanted Abram’s child to be a child of faith, not fear.

"Don’t be afraid, Abram. Just because it is humanly impossible doesn’t mean it is Divinely impossible!"

So, the third essential attitude - replace your fear with faith.

The fourth essential attitude for realizing your God-given dreams...

**4. Recognize that a great reward awaits you.**

Genesis 15:1 this way, "I am your shield, and your reward will be very great." (Which, in itself is a great truth - our reward is getting to have a relationship with God, not just the realization of our dreams!)

The Hebrew word for "shield" is often translated figuratively to denote protection - which, of course, is what a shield is for. Specifically, it is for protection in battle.

But once again, the battle in which God wanted to protect Abram was not a physical one - it was spiritual.

Ephesians 6:12-13 (CEV) "We are not fighting against humans. We are fighting against forces and authorities and against rulers of darkness and powers in the spiritual world. 13 So put on the armour that God gives. Then when that evil day comes, you will be able to defend yourself. And when the battle is over, you will still be standing firm."

And what is the shield in our God-given armour?

Ephesians 6:16 (CEV) "Let your faith be like a shield, and you will be able to stop all the flaming arrows of the evil one."

In order to win the spiritual battle involving the realization of our God-given dreams we will have to believe what we cannot see.

Hebrews 11:9-10 (Msg) "By an act of faith, he (Abraham) lived in the country promised him, lived as a stranger camping in tents...10 Abraham did it by keeping his eye on an UNSEEN city with real, eternal foundations - the City designed and built by God."

Walt Disney’s widow was being interviewed after the completion of Disney World in Florida. The reporter remarked, "Isn’t it a shame that your husband never got to see this?" Mrs Disney quickly corrected him. "He did see it. That is why it is here!"

People who keep their eyes on the prize get to see what others cannot see.

Abraham was one of those people.

Will you be one?

1. Realize your dream will be tested.
2. Remember God offers reassurance. You’re not in this thing alone!
3. Replace any fear you might have with faith.
4. Recognize the great reward that awaits you for fulfilling your God-given dream.

What dream has God given you? Do you long for family and friends to come to faith in Christ? Never stop dreaming that dream!

Can you see God helping you overcome your family problems, your financial problems...do you have educational dreams for your self or your children? Is there a dream for your job that lies unfulfilled? Do you dream of God using you in a bigger way?

Believe these great words of God today: "Don’t be afraid, I will protect you; your reward will be great."

Never give up on your God-given dream!

Using material from Brian Atwood, ‘fulfilling your God given dream’ www.sermoncentral.com