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The Beautiful Mind

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Genesis 15

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For the last several weeks, we've been preaching about Abraham. You'll remember that God promises to bless Abram with a simply outrageous blessing, which includes seed, land and all the families of the earth. But as soon as God announces this blessing, He sends Abram on a journey – a journey on which all the circumstances, all the data, seems to imply just the opposite of the promised blessing. Abraham's life is really weird and the trauma has just begun. It's a miracle that he didn't go totally insane. By the time he walks up Mt. Moriah, I bet many though he had. Sometimes Abram must have walked out of his tent, into the dark night, lifted his eyes to the heavens and those million points of light and just screamed out, "What does this mean? What does it all mean?"

Psalms 8:3-4 "When I look at your heavens, and the works of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?"

Have you been there under the stars with Abram? Lost your job? Lost your husband, wife or maybe a child? Lost your bearings? Lost your sanity? Your life is a mystery? And you stand under the stars crying out, "What does it all mean?"

Psychologists tell us that from the youngest age we try to make sense of nonsense; we try to find a pattern in things; we try to give things value or meaning (*logos* to use the Greek term). John Nash was especially good at that. In 1994 he won the Nobel Prize for his theories in mathematics. The Academy Award winner for Best Picture in 2002, was a movie based on his life, titled *A Beautiful Mind*. In this scene, as a young genius, he assigns value and meaning to mystery. He assigns his meaning to the stars, like God.

A Beautiful Mind film clip

I don't believe in luck.

Do it again! Do an octopus.

Well Abram stood under those same stars and thought, "What does this all mean? Am I insane?"

Genesis 15:1 "After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision..." That phrase "Word of the Lord Yahweh," only appears here in all of Genesis. *Word* in Hebrew also means "thing" or "matter."

Genesis 15 “After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, saying, ‘Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.’” This Word is his shield. And this visible Word is his exceedingly great reward. Abram’s problem is not that his hopes are too big, but far too small. Your problem is not that your hopes are too big, but far too small (small as Hell). So God needs to prepare a place in Abram and prepare a place in you to receive the promise blessing: faith. The Word says, “I am your reward.”

“But Abram said, ‘Lord God, what will you give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?’ Then Abram said, ‘Look, you have given me no offspring (seed) indeed one born in my house is my heir!’ And behold, the word of the Lord came to him, saying, ‘This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir.’ Then He brought him outside and said, ‘Look now toward heaven, and count the stars if you are able to number them.’ And He said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed the Lord, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.”

Faith in this Word of God... faith in this promised seed... is what God wants. It is counted as righteousness. In God’s equation, it equals righteousness.

A few years ago I was at the Holocaust Museum in Israel. I was sitting on the sidewalk just outside of the Children’s Memorial, listening to a Jewish youth leader speak to a crowd of youth. The had just exited a dark and rather horrifying room, in which one hears the names of those that have died, and watches as simulated stars suddenly light up overhead. The youth leader said, “It reminds you of God’s promise to Abraham: descendants as many as the stars of Heaven.” But then he said, “How many Jews are there in the world?” The kids guessed. He said, “There were 12 million; now there are 8 million. That’s less than 1/3 of 1% of the population of the earth (it’s actually less than that).” And then he said, “That’s not as many as all the stars in the Heavens.” What does it mean?

You see 4,000 years later, and it’s still a mystery. Israel still doesn’t, and never did, occupy all the land promised to Abram. And you can ask the Palestinians, but all the families of the earth do not yet feel blessed by the Jews. The problem is not that their hopes are too great. Their hopes are too small, for they have massively underestimated the promised blessing, and settled for so much less, because they have not yet come to faith in the promised seed.

Well, the youth leader said to his students, “I asked Rabbi about this mystery and he said, “But when did God promise this to Abraham? It was the day.” Then the youth leader said, “How many stars can you see in the day?” A kid said, “None,” and the youth leader said, “No, one – the sun.”

I got so excited. Malachi 4:2 “The sun (S-U-N) of righteousness will arise with healing in his wings.”

Numbers 24:7 “A star shall come forth out of Jacob.”

Revelations 22:16 “I, Jesus... I AM the root and offspring of David, the bright and morning star.”

Then the youth leader said, “We may never be many, but we light up the world wherever we are.” So close, and yet so far. He gave his meaning to the stars and missed the Word. The Word is Jesus; the Seed is Jesus; the promise and blessing is Jesus; the star is Jesus, and through Him and in Him, Abram will have more descendants than the stars of Heaven and the sand of the sea, and they will shine. But it all

means Jesus, and Jesus is the meaning God gives to all things. He is the Word through whom everything that is made is made. And He is God's Word through everything to you. So what does it all mean? It all means God loves you... Abram. Abraham had faith and yet he still doubted.

"Then He said to him, 'I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to inherit it.' And he said, 'Lord God, how shall I know that I will inherit it?'" It sounds like a great question to me: "You say it all means blessing, grace and love. But all my data is barrenness, homelessness and pain. So how will I know?" It reminds me of this scene in A Beautiful Mind.

A Beautiful Mind film clip 2

Need proof...

If I want to marry you.

John Nash thinks he knows everything about the universe (which is an illusion), and yet he doesn't know how to know love. He can't make sense of it, but maybe it will make sense of him. For what he cannot know is fixin' to know him.

Well Abram wants to know and we know what he wants. He wants explanations, verifiable data. He wants proof... proof that what this Yahweh says is true. That's what he wants. Because after all, he doesn't really know who this Yahweh is, so how can he trust His heart. .. His word? How do we come to trust God's word? Is it rational arguments? Apologetics? Philosophies? Psychologies? Programs? Monuments? Explanations? Miracles? Verifiable data? How do I come to trust God's word? How do I know?

Abram wants to know. Eve wanted to know, so she took fruit from the tree of knowledge. God wants us to know, so He gave us His word, crucified on that tree. Abram wants to know.

"The Word of God said to Abram, 'Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.' Then he brought all these to Him and cut them in two, down the middle and placed each piece opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when the vultures came down on the carcasses, Abram drove them away."

This is not what we were hoping for, is it? This is not the thing to convince your father-in-law that you're not crazy, and your atheist neighbors that Christianity is the logical choice. Not what we hoped for, but it's what we get, and was what the Israelites got. This short list of animals covers all the species that would be sacrificed in the temple on Mt. Moriah.

Hebrews 10:3 "In these sacrifices there is a remembrance of sin year after year." They would remember, "There is no forgiveness of sins without the shedding of blood." So things in this world aren't made right and don't make sense without the blood. The life is in the blood and someone must give it.

They remembered and were re-minded. The ritual was how they made sense of reality. They were reminded and were re-membered. The ritual brought all their members together. Reminded, remembered, and they remembered with all their members, I mean all their being.

At Passover they remembered the Exodus from Egypt, and the sacrifice of the spotless Lamb that saved from the power of death. And they didn't just remember with their minds. They watched the blood run; they felt the darkness; they smelled the bitter herbs; they ingested the Lamb, and they drank the wine. They remembered and then they knew, but not just the way Eve knew in the Garden; not just the way a mathematician knows a sum; not just the way a seminarian knows Theology or a Pharisee knows the Law... They knew the way a bride knows her groom; the way a son knows his Father. They didn't understand an explanation, they knew a person. That means they experienced a mystery. They couldn't make sense of the mystery, but the mystery made sense of them. The thing they couldn't explain was the explanation of everything else: the bondage, the pain, the horror, the darkness and the light in the darkness, like stars in the dark night sky.

Genesis 15:12 "Now when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and behold, horror and great darkness fell upon him. Then he said to Abram: 'Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and will serve them and they will afflict them four hundred years. And also the nation whom they serve I will judge; afterward they shall come out with great possessions. Now as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall return here, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.'"

Did you get that? God will give the Amorites time to complete their sinning (even that is part of His purpose) then into that darkness and horror, He will speak something new. But now Abram feels horror and is paralyzed in darkness. Throughout Scripture, like at creation, like at Sinai, like at Golgotha, God reveals Himself through great darkness. And yet God Himself is light. So if you wonder "Why the darkness?" Scripture says, "The light shines in the darkness." I could tell a thousand stories from my own life from encounters with Satan to confessing my sin and seeing grace. A thousand stories... but suffice it to say, "I'm falling in love with the light, because I've seen it shine in the darkness."

My heart needs to know that God knows rejection, pain, loss, bondage and darkness – the void that is my own sin. My heart needs to know that God knows and will speak His word into the darkness and make something new... make me new. My heart needs to know the light in all my darkest places, for then I can truly know, it all means love and He is love.

"And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. (This is a pillar of smoke and a pillar of fire.) On the same day the Lord made (literally "cut") a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river Euphrates.'"

From Jeremiah 34 and other ancient manuscripts, it appears that in Abram's day, when two parties entered into a covenant, they would cut an animal or animals in half, lay the halves on the ground, then walk between the pieces, reciting the terms of their covenant, and invoking a curse if it was broken. Saying, "May it be done unto me as it was done unto this animal, if I break the terms of this Covenant."

In five hundred years on Mt. Sinai, the children of Abraham (the Israelites) will enter into another Covenant and the terms of that Covenant are the law. It's what theologians call the "Covenant of Law." Law is what Eve took from the tree. Law is like religious mathematics. It's all about what can be explained and what you can supposedly do. So it's very attractive to our flesh and yet in the end, it drives

you insane. Insane, for you think you understand everything, but you don't know love. But if you don't know love, you understand nothing. In fact, you're lost in the little dark universe of yourself.

Well, through the Covenant of Law, God reveals our darkness so that He might shine His light. That light is eternal. So you see five hundred years before the Covenant of Law, God revealed this covenant to Abram. The Covenant of Law is superseded and contained within this covenant. And that is Good News; it is Gospel. For it means that although we cannot keep covenant (cannot fulfill the law), God Himself is covenant love and although we are faithless, He is faithful. You see, at Sinai, there were two sides to the covenant: God's side and Israel's side. But five hundred years before, God made this covenant, while Abram did nothing. Nothing.

But now don't get me wrong, God had Abram cut the sacrifice. He had Abram smell the blood and watch the sky grow black. He had Abram feel the horror and know the cost of this covenant. In a few years on Mt. Moriah, he'd know even better. God wants Abram to know it, and yet God Himself will make it. He puts Abram to sleep as though dead, so Abram can do nothing but watch.

Abe wanted to know, "What does it all mean?" And the Word of God said, "The stars and all things mean: I love you Abram." And Abe said, "How will I know?" And God says, "Watch. Abram, I'm cutting a covenant and keeping all sides. I will, I will, I will, I will bless you. And nothing, nothing, nothing, including you, can stop me."

We wanted to know, "What does it all mean?" And the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us. He taught it all means love, so all that is mine I give to you. And we said, "How will we know?" And on the darkest night in the history of our world, the Word of God, the Seed of Abraham, the Passover Lamb, the Promised Blessing, the Son of Righteousness, the Bright Morning Star – Jesus... took bread and broke it, saying, "This is my body." And He took the cup saying, "This is my blood of the covenant." The covenant – it is newer than new and older than old. It is eternal.

In the morning on Mt. Moriah, we broke His body with our sin. And as the sky grew black and the horror fell, He would make the Eternal Covenant with His own flesh. And He would fulfill all the Old Covenant Law on our behalf. He made a covenant and is keeping all sides. It's the Covenant of Grace. His body would be broken and His blood would flow from the ancient tree. It is the knowledge of God, who is love and His love is life. We took it and yet it was forgiven to us that we might know what He means. We might trust his heart, knowing who He is. He said, "Take and eat. Take and drink."

Some gospels say New Covenant. Hebrews calls it the Eternal Covenant. You see it's always new and it's older than old. Jesus is the lamb slain from the foundation of the earth. So no wonder He said, "Abraham saw my day and was glad." He said, "Take and eat. Take and drink." And He said, "Do this in remembrance of me."

Listen closely: We don't come here on the 7th day for information and explanations, for an informational and motivational lecture on how to raise kids or how to make a business work, on how to fulfill some law so you can make your world work. We come here confessing, "We can't make our world work, we can't manufacture the blessing." We come asking, "So what does it mean?" The barrenness, darkness and pain. And the Word answers, "It all means I love you. I will bless you." And when we wonder, "How will I know?" Don't move a muscle. Don't intend a thing. Don't you dare make a promise. But watch

God and His Word make the promise and cut the covenant. You come here every Sabbath, not to hear what you must do, but what God has done. You come here every Sabbath to be re-minded by the mystery of God. To be re-minded by the mystery is faith. And it's faith that turns all this insanity into God's sanity.

G.K. Chesterton wrote:

Mystical imagination does not breed insanity. Exactly what does breed insanity is reason. (And by that he means one's own reason.) Poets do not go mad; but chess players do... mathematicians go mad.

You'll remember in the movie A Beautiful Mind, the great mathematician John Nash goes mad. He ascribes his value, his meaning, his reason, to the stars and all things. At Princeton, he lives alone and refuses to be taught by another. It's not that he is unreasonable. It's just that there is no room for another in his world of his reason: a world of pride, then loneliness, then horror.

Chesterton writes:

...The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason... Perhaps the nearest we can get to expressing it is to say this: that his mind moves in a perfect but narrow circle. A small circle is quite as infinite as a large circle; but, though it is quite as infinite, it is not so large.

Actually a circle can be small as hell. You know the whole world has gone mad and is trapped in the lie that makes Hell - the prison of one idea: "I must trust myself, for God cannot be trusted."

We stole knowledge from the tree, trying to be God, and so crucified God, who is the meaning of all things. We crucified love, and love is the meaning of all knowledge. You see? We crucified "the reason" and went insane... like John Nash. But amazing grace: John Nash had someone that loved him, who entered his insane, self-centered little world, and although it hurt her and broke her, she loved him with covenant love. She was his bride.

This is a scene in the movie where Nash has realized that he's trapped in the prison of his own mind. He doesn't know what anything means, and he doesn't know how to tell what's real.

A Beautiful Mind film clip 3

You want to know what's real. This.

I need to believe that something extraordinary is possible.

Do you want to know what's real? He touches body and blood.

Do you want to know what's real? And the Word says, "This is my body. This is my blood. Take and eat. Take and drink." We crucified love on the tree of knowledge and went insane. For love is the meaning of all knowledge. But amazing grace – someone loves us... the some one that we crucified. And something extraordinary did happen! We took but God gave. He turned our sin into his Covenant of Grace. The tree of knowledge becomes the tree of Life. For there, He gives us His body broken and blood shed. So that we would trust His heart, for until we trust His heart, we cannot know Him or truly know anything, for He is the meaning of everything... the mystery that gives meaning to everything.

Unless you are God, at least one thing must remain a mystery... A mystery that you cannot explain, but through which everything else is explained. That mystery is God and His Word has made Him known.

Chesterton writes:

Mysticism keeps men sane – the whole secret of mysticism is this, that men can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand.

We have not understood the love that is God. He would not fit into the small patterns of our insanity. Yet He has made Himself small and entered our world to make Himself known: Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Jesus Christ and Him crucified is the mysterious equation of love that is the very logic of all reality: the meaning of all things and how you are to know.

Well John Nash gave meaning to his own reality and went insane. Yet one reality snuck in, which he could not comprehend or explain: a mystery that would not be integrated – his bride. He was liberated by the one thing he could not comprehend. He surrendered all his meanings to her, he put his faith in her, and she told him what was real, and what was shadow and lie. She gave meaning to all his reality. She was his new mind, his beautiful mind. In the end, he received everything back and more, but by grace through faith. This is his acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize:

A Beautiful Mind film clip 4

I ask, What truly is logic? Who decides reason? My....

One day you'll give a speech like that. But you won't look at your bride; you'll look at your groom. He is all your reasons. He is the reason, the logos, and He is love.

So what does it all mean? He loves you like this. And how are you to know? By faith. By the one thing you can't explain, but through which everything else is explained. By the one thing you can't comprehend, but that has comprehended you. How are you to know? By faith. His body broken and His blood shed in you.

Honestly this life is so strange, something I just think I'm losing it... until I meditate on this, until I chew on this table. So surrender your insanity and receive God's sanity. Surrender yourself and receive the mind of Christ – The Beautiful Mind. Come to the table and be re-minded. The mystery becomes my story, then everything starts to make sense.

Communion.

Benediction:

Lord God we praise you and we thank you for entering our world and giving us yourself. And I pray that we would be so reminded that one day, we would say this and mean it: It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. Everything you do is good. In your name, Amen.

And so on the night that Jesus was betrayed, He took bread and He broke it, and said, "Try really, really hard to understand this."

No, that's not what He said, did He? And yet for over two thousand years, people who call themselves believers have been killing each other over understanding this, the mystery. Catholics have transubstantiation and essence... I come from a Calvinist tradition which says Jesus is spiritually present, but not physically present in the bread... Lutherans say consubstantiation, which is in-between... a lot of Baptists say it's just a remembrance. But Jesus didn't say, "Understand this." He said "Eat it!" And it will change you from the inside out. And you are His body. So believe the Gospel, and you'll live the Gospel. In Jesus' name, Amen.