

COUNTING  
STARS  
*in an*  
EMPTY SKY

TRUSTING GOD'S PROMISES FOR  
YOUR IMPOSSIBILITIES

MICHAEL YOUSSEF



**BakerBooks**

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Baker Books  
a division of Baker Publishing Group  
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287  
www.bakerbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Youssef, Michael, author.

Title: Counting stars in an empty sky : trusting God's promises for your impossibilities / Michael Youssef.

Description: Grand Rapids : Baker Books, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018055814 | ISBN 9780801077876 (pbk.)

Subjects: LCSH: Abraham (Biblical patriarch) | God—Faithfulness. | Trust in God. | God—Promises.

Classification: LCC BS580.A3 Y68 2019 | DDC 222/.11092—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018055814>

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Scripture quotations labeled KJV are from the King James Version of the Bible.

19 20 21 22 23 24 25      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To John and Cindy Morris  
in deep appreciation  
for your faithful friendship and partnership  
in the gospel of Jesus

# Contents

Introduction: Counting Stars When We  
Can See None 9

1. Seven Promises 15
2. A Pilgrim—or a Drifter? 35
3. A Failure of Faith 51
4. God’s Promise Renewed 67
5. The God Who Makes Covenants 85
6. The Chapter of Failure 101
7. The Silence of God 119
8. The Friend of God 139
9. The Birth of Laughter 159
10. Abraham’s Stars 177

Notes 201

# Introduction

## *Counting Stars When We Can See None*

Have you ever wondered, *Has God abandoned me? Does He still keep His promises?*

Have you ever asked yourself, *What is God's plan for my life? or What is His plan for my children?*

Have you ever pleaded with God in prayer, then wondered, *Why doesn't He answer? Why does He delay, month after month, year after year?*

Have you ever thought, *Is it a sin to feel that God has let me down and forgotten me? Should I continue to trust Him?*

Have you ever tried to do God's will in your own way—with disastrous results? Have you ever tried to get ahead of God's will and speed up His timetable?

Have you ever wanted a child of your own so badly that you would do anything—anything!—to make it happen, yet the door to parenthood was slammed in your face and bolted shut?

If you can identify with any of these feelings and experiences, then the story of Abraham speaks to you. History changes, culture changes, technology changes, but human nature hasn't changed since the human race began. We are all the same under the skin. The story of Abraham is your story and mine.

What do you have in common with Abraham, this Old Testament man of faith? Not much, right? After all, Abraham lived four thousand years ago amid strange cultures and customs in a distant region of the world.

What does a man of his era have to say to people who use the internet and smartphones, who struggle with income taxes and credit card debt, who work in office buildings and get stuck in traffic, who worry about terrorism and nuclear war and the international debt crisis? What does a man of Abraham's era have to say to us in the twenty-first century?

And yet, as we study the story of Abraham and his wife Sarah, we find that Abraham's life speaks to us in surprising ways. In fact, the closer we look at Abraham, the more we realize that, in every way that truly matters, he's just like you and me. His story is the story of your journey of faith and mine.

Abraham was a man of faith, and we can learn how to live a life of faith by studying his story. He was a flawed man, just as you and I are flawed human beings. He sinned, he disobeyed, he tried to force God's hand and bend God's will—with disastrous results. Yet despite Abraham's sins and imperfections, he was called "the friend of God."

The pivotal moment in the story of Abraham—and the key insight for our lives—is found in Genesis 15:5. There, God takes Abraham outside at night and shows him the

heavens. “Look up at the sky and count the stars—if indeed you can count them. . . . So shall your offspring be.”

When God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans and promised to make of him a great nation, Abraham was seventy years old, his wife was sixty, and they were childless. When Abraham left Harran for the promised land, he was seventy-five. Ten years later, when Abraham was eighty-five, God renewed His promise to Abraham and told him that his offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the night sky. God invited Abraham to count the stars, and those stars not only symbolized Abraham’s descendants—they were also emblems of God’s promises and Abraham’s faith.

In years to come, Abraham would go through times of darkness, times when there were no stars to be seen. He would wonder, *Has God abandoned me? Will He still keep His promise? What is His plan for my life—and for my children? Why doesn’t He answer my prayer? Why does He delay?*

Yet Abraham would not give up on God, even though he had to wait for thirty years—past his hundredth birthday—for God to give him a son, the first of those “stars” God had promised him.

Despite his discouragement and the dreariness of those childless years, despite the mocking and derision of his neighbors, Abraham continued to look skyward. He continued to count stars—even when there were no stars to be seen.

In these pages, you will discover the rich life principles of Abraham’s story. You’ll learn to count God’s promises to you—the many promises He has given you in His Word. God has made more than three thousand promises to us in the Bible—promises of:

Abundant life  
Answers to our questions  
Assurance for our doubts  
Blessings for our lives and our families  
Comfort in our sorrows  
Compassion for our sufferings  
Confidence for our challenges  
Courage for dangerous times  
Defense from our enemies  
Deliverance from temptation  
Direction for the journey  
Encouragement for our weariness  
Everlasting life  
Faith for the future  
Forgiveness for the past  
Freedom from worry and anxiety  
Friendship with God  
Grace for each day  
Guidance for our plans  
Healing for our diseases  
Help in times of trouble  
Hope in times of despair  
Inheritance that will never fade  
Joy in times of sorrow  
Justice when we have been wronged  
Love that never fails  
Mercy that never runs out

Peace that passes understanding  
Pleasures everlasting  
Power for any problem  
Presence of God  
Protection from perils  
Provision for our needs  
Refuge in times of trouble  
Renewal of fading strength  
Rescue when we call for help  
Rest and restoration for our souls  
Rewards for obedient service  
Salvation by grace through faith  
Satisfaction that is soul deep  
Shelter in the time of storm  
Success for the plans He gives us  
Victory over obstacles and opposition  
Vindication before accusers  
Wisdom when we call upon Him

These are just a few of the promises He makes to us. These are the promises God has given us in His Word. These are the stars God has given us to count.

God told Abraham to count the stars even when he could see no stars. And God tells you and me to count the stars of His promises—even when the night is black and starless, even when our circumstances close in like a specter from a nightmare.

As we walk alongside Abraham through the journey of his life and faith, we will see his trust in God fail from time

to time, just as we so easily falter in our own faith. But we will also see Abraham learning and growing in faith and obedience. We will see God patiently lifting him up, brushing him off, and setting him on his feet again. And we will learn how to keep moving onward and upward with God, how to keep counting stars when we can see none.

What are the stars God is telling you to count today? You may not be able to see those stars in the darkness of your circumstances, but like Abraham, you can count them with eyes of faith.

Let Abraham's testimony be yours as well. His faith was not in vain, and neither is yours. As Hebrews 11:12 testifies, "From this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore."

What do we have in common with this Old Testament man of faith? Everything! Join me as we step four thousand years back in time and find a flesh-and-blood human being just like you and me—failing, growing, and showing us how we too, even in the dark times of life, can count the stars of God's unfailing promises.

# ✧ 1 ✧

## Seven Promises

Have you ever tried to count the stars?

The Greek-Roman astronomer Ptolemy, who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, in the second century AD, was the first scientist to catalog the visible stars in the night sky. His book, the *Almagest*, charts the location of 1,022 stars—all the stars Ptolemy could see.

About fourteen hundred years after Ptolemy, Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe discovered an error in Ptolemy's *Almagest*, and he decided to make a new and more accurate catalog of the stars. Tycho was a walking paradox—a scientist with a disciplined, logical mind who was also known for his emotional extremes. As a university student, he became enraged over a remark his cousin had made, and they fought a sword duel in the dark. The cousin struck a blow that creased Tycho's forehead and lopped off his nose—and Tycho wore a nose made of brass for the rest of his life.

Tycho began journaling his nightly observations of the stars in 1563. The telescope had not been invented yet, but he

used the most accurate measuring devices of his era to chart the precise location of every visible star. He completed his catalog of a thousand stars in 1597, thirty-four years after he began.<sup>1</sup> Imagine the dedication of Tycho Brahe, devoting nearly three and a half decades of his life to one task—counting the stars of the sky and charting their positions.

In Genesis 15, God uses the image of counting stars as an analogy for faith in His promises. God tells Abraham to count the stars—and He promises that Abraham’s descendants will be as numerous as the stars in the heavens. At that point in his life, Abraham was in his eighties and had no children. Yet God had promised him descendants, and Abraham believed God’s promise.

As you look closely at Abraham’s journey of faith, you see that it was not all smooth sailing. Abraham faced many challenges in his journey with God. He experienced doubt and fear. He battled his own inner demons. He went left when God told him to go right. He failed and he sinned. He was often tempted to give up his faith in God, yet God said, “Keep counting stars, Abraham! Keep trusting in My promises.”

The reason Abraham is the central figure in the Old Testament is because he persevered in his faith. He kept counting stars regardless of his circumstances. All Abraham had to go on were God’s words spoken into his own heart. Abraham didn’t have the Bible. He didn’t have a pastor or a Bible study group or a Christian website to help him understand God’s words. All he had were the words of almighty God, spoken directly to him, saying, “I know you have no stars right now but start counting stars anyway.”

The night God first took Abraham out of his tent and showed him the night sky, the canopy of stars overhead be-

came an abiding symbol of Abraham's trust in God. Those stars were the sparkling symbol of Abraham's shining faith in God until the day he drew his last breath.

## **Stuck in Harran**

The story of Abraham begins in the closing verses of Genesis 11. The name Abraham was given at birth was Abram, which means "Exalted Father" in the Hebrew language. God will change Abram's name to Abraham ("Father of a Multitude") when he is ninety-nine years old and receives the covenant of circumcision.<sup>2</sup> Throughout this book, to avoid confusion, I'll call him by his later name, Abraham.

He was born in the city of Ur of the Chaldeans on the south bank of the Euphrates River in lower Mesopotamia, the land now known as Iraq. His father was Terah and his brothers were Nahor and Haran (the father of Lot). Joshua 24:2 tells us, "Terah . . . lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods." Abraham's wife was named Sarai (she will later be called Sarah), and she was unable to conceive a child.

In Genesis 12, God tells Abraham:

Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation,  
and I will bless you;  
I will make your name great,  
and you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth  
will be blessed through you. (vv. 1–3)

So Abraham, his wife Sarai, his father, Terah, and his nephew Lot set off for Canaan—but something happens along the way. They stop in the Assyrian city of Harran in upper Mesopotamia. Today, you can visit the ruins of Harran, located near the village of Altınbaşak in southern Turkey. In Abraham’s day, Harran was a bustling and wealthy city, a site of religious, cultural, and commercial activity. Though God had called Abraham to the land of Canaan, he and his family stop and settle in Harran.

The Bible doesn’t tell us why they settled there, but the reason is not hard to guess: Harran is a worldly, exciting city, the ancient world’s version of Las Vegas. It probably wasn’t Abraham who chose to settle in Harran; that was almost certainly Terah’s decision. Abraham’s father, a man who “worshiped other gods,” was enticed by the worldliness, the people, and the nightlife in Harran. It was a city filled with temples and altars to many false gods. Abraham didn’t agree with his father, but he respected his father’s wishes. So, even though God had called Abraham to the land of Canaan, Terah and all his family settled in Harran.

Abraham and Sarai would remain stuck in Harran until Terah died.

## **A Place of Compromise and Confusion**

The life of Abraham is a mirror for your life and mine.

Like Abraham, every believer, every follower of the Lord Jesus Christ, has been called by God to come out of the old

country of sin and go to a new land, a promised land. We were all born in the country of sin. We were born with our backs turned toward God. We were born in a state of rebellion, with hearts that were indifferent and hostile to God. Our pre-Christian lives were our Ur of the Chaldeans.

God called to us and said, “Come and follow Me. Leave your life of sin, turn away from your old ways. Let go of your selfishness and stubbornness and rebellion, your confusion and lostness, and start walking in the way I will show you. I will forgive your sins because of the shed blood of My Son, Jesus Christ. I will heal your wounded spirit and your wounded soul. I will give you a new identity. I will give you a heart that desires obedience to Me. I will adopt you as My child, and you will become an inheritor of all that belongs to Jesus. That is My promise to you, more certain and reliable than the stars in the sky. From now on, I want you to count the stars, because the blessings I will shower upon your life will be more numerous than the stars in the heavens.”

When you made a decision for Christ, and you passed from death to everlasting life, from condemnation to forgiveness, that is the message God spoke into your life. You may not have heard that message in those words. You may not have understood what God was saying to you. But that was His message to you as He welcomed you into His forever family.

Perhaps you began your new life in Christ with a sense of joy and excitement. You may have thought, *What a thrill it is to know Jesus! What an adventure it is to belong to Him!* And you began counting the stars of blessing God was showering on your life. He had called you out of Ur and pointed your feet toward the promised land, toward Canaan. You were thrilled to be on your new journey with God.

But along the way, something happened—the same thing that happened to Abraham. After surrendering your life to Jesus and experiencing the joy of knowing Him, the excitement wore off. You found yourself bogged down in the middle of your journey. You found yourself in Harran.

What is Harran? It's a spiritual Las Vegas. It is a place of compromise and confusion and sin. It's a place of spiritual impediments and roadblocks, a place where you lose your joy and your will to move forward with God. It's a place of stagnation, a place where your spiritual journey comes to a standstill.

God saved you out of Ur so that you could live the victorious life in Canaan. He blessed you with all the rich blessings of Canaan. As the apostle Paul tells us, God's will is that you would continually grow and change "from glory to glory," with each new day becoming more and more like Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Yet here you are, stuck in Harran, stranded in a spiritual Las Vegas.

You began well when you said yes to Jesus. But before long, you began to mix the old with the new. Compromise set in. You began to settle for the mediocrity of a half-hearted faith.

How do you escape from Harran? How do you escape the clutches of your spiritual Las Vegas and get back on the road to Canaan? How do you get out of the ditch and get back on that higher plane of faith and glory?

## **Don't Compromise with the World**

When God called Abraham, he was steeped in the worship of false gods. Idolatry had sunk its claws deep into the soul and

flesh of Abraham's family. Many Christians assume that the people whose stories are told in the Bible were super-saints. Not true! They were flesh-and-blood people who failed and sinned, just as you and I do. This is certainly true of Abraham and his family.

In Genesis 29–31, we find the story of Abraham's grandson Jacob and his marriage to Leah and to Rachel, the two daughters of Laban, Abraham's great-nephew. Laban had tricked Jacob into working for him for fourteen years as a dowry for Rachel. Later, he coaxed Jacob into working six more years after the fourteen years had ended. Finally, Jacob decided he'd had enough, and he took his wives, his servants, and his possessions and fled.

Before Rachel joined Jacob, she went into Laban's tent and stole her father's idols—his false gods.<sup>4</sup> The Bible doesn't tell us why she stole the idols. Perhaps Rachel was an idolater herself and thought the idols would bring her good luck. But this scene shows that the sin of idolatry was embedded deeply in Abraham's family. There is nothing more offensive to God than when His children, whom He has redeemed and saved, begin to mix false religion with the truth, the old way of life with the new life.

In Revelation 3 the Lord addresses the church in the city of Laodicea, and He condemns that church for having one foot in the world and one foot in the Christian faith. "I know your deeds," He says, "that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth" (vv. 15–16).

That kind of lukewarm spirituality was what Abraham lived out in Harran. Halfway between Ur and Canaan, Abraham

had reached a point of halfway obedience to God—and there he stayed. God had to get Abraham out of Harran, because He is a jealous God. He won't share His children with the world, and He won't leave His children in a land of half-hearted faith.

Some believers compromise their faith because they want to be accepted by the world. They don't want to be hated and mocked for their obedience to Christ. They don't want to be accused of being sexist and waging a “war against women” for opposing abortion. They don't want to be accused of being bigoted and homophobic for taking a stand for the biblical definition of marriage.

It's a lie of Satan that Christians are unloving and prejudiced and don't believe in equality. We should not be surprised that the world hates us. Jesus said that the world would hate us because the world hated Him.<sup>5</sup> As Christians, we love homosexual people with the love of Christ, even though we do not support their behavior or same-sex marriage. Yet I've known pastors who were so desperate to avoid being called antigay that they sacrificed biblical truth on the altar of being accepted by the world. They compromised their faith and settled in Harran.

The world hates our righteousness, our biblical standards, and our gospel message. We should expect to be hated and persecuted, and we should not let the hatred of the world keep us from obeying the Lord. When we obey God, we follow the example of Noah. Hebrews 11 tells us, “By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith” (v. 7).

Noah didn't set out to deliberately condemn the world by living faithfully and obediently before God. He wanted to save the world and invite as many people as possible to join him and his family in the ark. But when his neighbors saw his faith and his obedience, they felt condemned. Their own sinfulness and guilt condemned them.

We don't even have to open our mouths to convict the people around us of their sin. Our obedient and moral way of life will enrage those who rebel against God. Don't be surprised by their vindictive hate. Instead, rejoice in their false accusations. That's right, rejoice! That's what Jesus tells us in the Beatitudes: "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Matt. 5:11–12).

### **A Sevenfold Promise: "I Will"**

After Abraham's father died, Abraham continued on the journey. Abraham had to leave his past behind. He had to forsake all that had been near and dear to him in Ur. He had to move to a place he had never seen—a place that was strange and unknown to him.

Abraham's trek toward Canaan must have been a lonely journey. Yes, Sarai went with him, and his nephew Lot. But did they understand the strange calling God had given him? Did they understand that when Abraham heard a voice they couldn't hear, when he received a summoning they couldn't understand, Abraham was in direct contact with Yahweh, the maker of the universe? I doubt it. I think Abraham must

have felt totally alone with this calling God had spoken into his heart and soul.

But Abraham wasn't alone. God was with him, and God was all he truly needed.

You and I have a great privilege as Christians. We never have to walk alone in our Christian lives. God is with us. Our brothers and sisters in the church are with us. That is God's promise to us, just as it was His promise to Abraham—we are never alone.

In the first three verses of Genesis 12, God tells Abraham: I will show you a land. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you. I will make your name great. I will bless those who bless you. I will curse those who curse you. God makes seven "I will" promises to Abraham. If you were keeping count, you may have noticed that I listed only six. That's because God gives Abraham the seventh promise later. God spoke the first six promises when Abraham still lived in Ur of the Chaldeans. He spoke the seventh promise to Abraham after Abraham left Harran and arrived in Canaan:

So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. (Gen. 12:4-7)

The seventh promise is, “To your offspring I will give this land,” the land of Canaan. Implicit in all seven promises is God’s promise to be present with Abraham. God promises His presence to everyone who repents of sin and turns to Him for forgiveness. We are His children, and He loves us with a strong, fatherly love.

It’s instructive to notice the contrast between these seven wonderful “I will” promises of God and the five rebellious “I will” statements of Satan. In Isaiah 14, Satan says:

I will ascend to the heavens;  
I will raise my throne  
    above the stars of God;  
I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly,  
    on the utmost heights of Mount Zaphon.  
I will ascend above the tops of the clouds;  
    I will make myself like the Most High. (vv. 13–14)

Because of Satan’s rebellious boasting, God expelled Satan from heaven. God’s “I will” statements are promises of love. Satan’s “I will” statements are boasts of hate.

When God makes His seven “I will” promises in Genesis 12, all He asks Abraham to do in return is to walk away from his past, with its idols and sin, and go to a new land that God will show him. If Abraham will do that, God will shower these sevenfold blessings on Abraham’s life. Whenever God says “I will” and we respond to His promise, He blesses us.

There is a natural progression to the promises God makes to Abraham. They progress from one glory to the next. The Christian life is not a static, motionless state of being. God didn’t design this life to be a waiting room. He designed the Christian life to be a journey, a progression, an adventure.

At times, it seems like an obstacle course. But as we go, we grow, and we move from glory to glory. You can see the progression from one glory to the next in the seven promises God makes to Abraham.

*Promise #1: I Will Show You a Land*

God's first promise to Abraham is "I will show you a land." God's seventh and last promise to Abraham is "I will give you a land." Abraham goes from seeing to receiving. First, God will show him the land; ultimately, Abraham will possess it. His total trust in God is the key to receiving the promises of God.

In the same way, God says to us, "I'm going to show you the great blessings in store for you as you walk with Me and serve Me if you keep Me foremost in your life." And a day will come when we reach the land He has promised, and we will possess that land and will rule and reign with Him forever.

But we must choose to walk with Him to the land He has shown us. We must choose to trust Him, obey Him, and go where He leads. Whenever I choose to go my own way, I get clobbered, I end up defeated, I lose my way. But whenever I go where He chooses, I am totally blessed. You can probably testify to that same truth in your own life.

God has given us the gift of free will, and we can use it to choose His way or to go our own way. Be careful about the choices you make. Yes, you can choose to go your own way—to settle in Harran after God has called you to Canaan. And God will let you have your own way—at least for a time. But you will find that when you do so, you nullify God's promise

to you. When you go your own way, you'll find there is no blessing at the end of the path.

But if you take His hand and go where He leads you, He will bless you in ways you can't begin to imagine.

*Promise #2: I Will Make You into a Great Nation*

God's second promise to Abraham is that he will become a great nation. This is the first of many unconditional promises God made to Abraham. It's just as well that it was unconditional, because if it was conditioned upon Abraham's faithfulness and performance, and that of his descendants, the promise would have been null and void very quickly. Abraham failed God miserably, and so did his descendants.

Again and again in the Scriptures, we see that there are conditional promises and unconditional promises. Many Christians confuse the two. They claim God's conditional promises without meeting the conditions.

When God chose us in Christ, that was an act of sheer grace. It was unconditional. It had nothing to do with us. We were lost in sin and incapable of meeting the demands of a just and holy God. Our salvation was a gift of His grace, not based on our works. We had nothing to do with our salvation except the decision to receive it. But now that we are saved, we find that there are a number of conditional promises in our Christian walk.

This is important to notice: When God made this unconditional promise to Abraham—"I will make you into a great nation"—Abraham was seventy years old and Sarah was sixty. When God told Abraham to start counting stars, he was past retirement age. He was drawing Social Security, he

had joined AARP, and he and Sarah qualified for the senior discount at Waffle House. It is impossible to comprehend the kind of faith it takes for a childless man of Abraham's advanced years to believe God's promise that He will make of Abraham a great nation.

Yet Abraham took God at His word and counted stars, even though he could see no stars. That is genuine faith in the pure biblical sense.

“But Lord, I'm old!” *Start counting stars, Abraham.*

“What if I wander away from Your will?” *Keep counting stars, Abraham.*

“But Lord, what if my descendants fall away from You?” *Keep counting stars, Abraham.*

“What if they become idol worshipers? What if they worship Baal and Molech?” *Keep counting stars, Abraham.*

Why could God make an unconditional promise to Abraham that He would make of Abraham a great nation? Because the greatness of that nation didn't depend on the faithfulness of Abraham or his descendants. God's unconditional promise to Abraham was not fulfilled by Abraham or his offspring. God's unconditional promise was fulfilled by “the seed” of Abraham. Who or what is “the seed” of Abraham?

The apostle Paul answers this question in his Letter to the Galatians: “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ” (Gal. 3:16; see Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 24:7). For centuries, Jewish scholars and teachers misunderstood what God's promise meant. They interpreted *seed* in a plural-collective sense, never realizing that God was using *seed* in a singular

sense, meaning not many seeds but the one seed—Jesus the Messiah.

Millions of people around the world today and billions down through history have worshiped the living God because of the blessings He showered on Abraham, blessings that are fulfilled in Jesus. As Paul writes in Galatians 3:

So also Abraham “believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.”

Understand, then, that those who have faith are children of Abraham. Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: “All nations will be blessed through you.” So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (vv. 6–9)

It’s no wonder that when Jesus said, “Before Abraham was born, I am,” the religious leaders picked up stones and wanted to kill Him.<sup>6</sup> They thought they were the seeds of Abraham, his promised descendants. But it was Jesus who was *the* seed, and through Him, countless people from every nation around the world would come to a saving faith and eternal life. And Jesus, the singular seed of Abraham, was also the preexistent and eternal Creator.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Promise #3: I Will Bless You***

Abraham didn’t ask God to bless him, but God graciously promised that He would bless Abraham’s life. God would bless Abraham in ways he could never imagine, much less expect.

Please understand, there is nothing wrong with asking God to bless you, nothing whatsoever. But I don’t believe

you need to ask. God has promised to bless you when you follow Him by faith and go where He sends you.

I can testify to the fact that over the past few decades, God has richly blessed me in ways I have never dared or thought to ask. In saying that, I'm not bragging about myself, because I fail Him all the time. But God knows that in my own fallible and failure-prone way, I seek to serve His kingdom with all my heart. I seek to glorify King Jesus. And to my utter amazement, God blesses me beyond anything I would think to ask. I do not expect God's blessing, I do not deserve God's blessing, I do not ask for God's blessing, but I receive His gracious blessing. That is how our loving God works.

I ask God to bless the ministry He has built in our church and in our global ministry, Leading The Way. I ask Him to bless His message as I teach and preach and write. I spend my time praying for others and praying for the kingdom of God, then seeking first His kingdom every waking moment.

And God, by His grace, blesses me beyond measure.

#### *Promise #4: I Will Make Your Name Great*

God tells Abraham, "I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing" (Gen. 12:2). For four thousand years, Jews have claimed Abraham as their father. Christians have claimed Abraham as their father for two thousand years. Even Muslims, who adhere to a works-based religion out of fear rather than faith, have looked to Abraham as their father for fourteen hundred years.

What does the name of Abraham stand for? It stands for immovable faith and trust in the living God. The name stands

for what God has promised. The name stands for what God has done. The name stands for God's faithfulness.

Abraham's original name, Abram, meant only "Exalted Father." But God changed his name from Abram to Abraham, "Father of a Multitude." This symbolized the fact that Abraham's faith in the one true God would one day be shared by multitudes of people from every tribe and language and nation. Abraham's descendants are Jews and Europeans, North Americans and South Americans, Black Africans and Arabs, Asians and Pacific Islanders.

Galatians 3:14 tells us, "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit." Abraham's greatest descendant by far is the Lord Jesus Christ. The world is blessed by coming to Jesus, the seed of Abraham. People all around the world are saved and redeemed and rejoicing, even in the midst of persecution, because of that one descendant of Abraham, the Lord Jesus Christ.

### *Promises #5 and #6: Blessings—and Cursings*

God promises Abraham, "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). Through the ages of history, God has made good on that promise countless times.

When Joseph, the great-grandson of Abraham, was sold into slavery in Egypt, the Bible said that God blessed Egypt because of Joseph. When Rahab the prostitute aided the spies who came into Jericho, God blessed Rahab and her

family for blessing the nation of Israel. There are many other examples I could cite.

I believe that one reason God has richly blessed America is because America has taken the gospel to the ends of the earth and has blessed many nations, especially Israel.

As a Christian, you don't go out of your way to make enemies. You don't try to antagonize people into cursing you. But if you stand up for your faith, if you simply say, "I'm a follower of Jesus Christ," you will instantly have enemies. If you don't make enemies, you are probably not taking a bold enough stand for your faith.

There is no one I hate or hold a grudge against. No matter what other people may do to me, from my perspective, they are not my enemy. They may see me as an enemy, they may hate me, they may wish me harm, but I will not hate them back. God has promised to fight our battles for us. If anyone curses us, God will be our shield, our defender, and, if necessary, our avenger. He will deal with anyone who curses us, and He will be more just and thorough than you or I could ever be.

I once had a conversation with an angry young man. He was bitter because of some injustice that was done to him. He wanted to take matters into his own hands. I told him, "The blessing I have of having lived a few years longer than you is that I have seen the Lord take care of these matters for me. I've seen God do a much better job of avenging wrongs than I could ever do. So be patient. Trust God. Leave this matter in His hands."

Sure enough, a few weeks later, God took care of the problem for this young man. God always proves His faithfulness, and He always keeps His promises.

*Promise #7: I Will Give This Land to Your Offspring*

When God said, “To your offspring I will give this land,” Abraham had no offspring and no land. He was counting stars when he could see none. Not only that, but Abraham and Sarah died in the land of promise without owning any land. More than four hundred years later, God fulfilled His promise to Abraham. Following the death of Moses, under the leadership of Joshua, the descendants of Abraham marched into Canaan and took possession of the land of promise.

God fulfills His promises to the third and fourth and tenth and hundredth generations. His promises are more real than the book you are holding in your hands. The same can be said for the promises that Jesus made to His followers in the New Testament, such as, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matt. 11:28–29).

You may be carrying the weight of a refrigerator on your back, feeling so weary you can’t take another step. Go to Jesus, tell Him about your burdens and sorrows, and He will take that weight off your back and load it onto Himself. He has already taken your heaviest burden—your sins—onto Himself at the cross.

The story of Jesus and the rich young ruler is told in Matthew 19, Mark 10, and Luke 18. A rich young man asked Jesus how to attain eternal life. Jesus told the young man to obey the commandments. The young man responded that he already did so. What else should he do? Jesus replied, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to

the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Matt. 19:21).

In other words, Jesus tells him, “Give up your idols—the wealth and possessions that actually possess you—and be my disciple. Then you will have treasures in heaven.” But the rich young man couldn’t let go of his idols, so he went away, sorrowing.

To follow Jesus, we have to leave our old country behind and go to the promised land as God commanded. Like Abraham, we must go to the land we cannot see, the land God has promised to us, the land He will show us.

Have you heard God calling you to the promised land? Have you taken the first step? Or are you still in Ur? Or maybe you started out for the promised land, but you’re stranded in Harran. What is keeping you from going all the way to the promised land with God?

If you have never taken that first step of faith, if you have never confessed your sins to God and asked Him to forgive you through the blood of Jesus, you can do so today, right now, before you turn another page of this book. You can be eternally saved and be blessed with the presence of God. You can be filled with the person and power of the Holy Spirit.

You know where you stand with God. If you have heard the voice of the Holy Spirit, if He has spoken to you through His Word, don’t wait another moment. Respond now.