

# Star Struck

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell



Genesis 15:1-6

One of the benefits of living in this day and age is the amount of resources available to us – primarily through the internet – to help us fill out our family tree. Many of you have done this or perhaps someone in your family has done it for you – create this exponentially expanding tree of lines and boxes depicting your ancestors and descendants. There you are in the tree – this little box with your name and from your little box come some lines – lines that link you to your parents, your siblings, your spouse and your children. Over the past couple years I’ve put together the McConnell family tree. It’s a bit sketchy in every sense of that term. Sketchy most of all because of so little I know about each box and each line. Most of it is just names and birthplaces with lines connecting them. To think what each box has to tell and what each line has to tell. So and so had a son and the son took a wife and the two had three children. Just that one sentence has enough stories behind it to fill a library.

I think of this when I think of a letter I found buried deep within my family papers. It’s a letter between two of the boxes in my tree – a letter my mother wrote to her father, my grandfather, when she was in college. She was barely 21 and still had more than a year to complete her education. But she was in love. It had been a whirlwind romance just a few months long, but they were madly in love and they planned to get married. She would leave school and move to Boston after the wedding. World War II was still going strong. The young man for whom she had fallen was a seminarian – preparing to enter first the Navy chaplaincy and then the Presbyterian ministry. This letter she was writing my grandfather was in response to a letter she had received from him listing all the reasons why she should not marry my father.

It was pretty long list. My grandfather was a proud Scotsman, Campbell was the clan name. He was a Methodist. He was a successful businessman and he had high hopes for this his one and only daughter and apple of his eye. So the list was long. She was too young to do this. She had not finished school and probably wouldn’t graduate if she got married. She’ll be poor the rest of her life. She’ll be Presbyterian for God’s sake. And worst of all she’ll be a McConnell, and McConnell is just a different way of saying MacDonald – and there ain’t nobody Campbell’s despise more than the MacDonald’s. I’ll explain that another time.

And so the letter she writes to her father is a letter to explain to her father how much she loved him. And what a great father he was to her. And then to explain how much she loved this young seminarian and how she knew he was the one and how he would take care of her and that they would be happy and that all would be well.

I never had the chance to ask my grandfather about this moment in his life – he died when I was 12 – but I can only imagine all the feeling pulsing through his heart and all the doubts and worry filling his head. What, pray tell, would happen to his little girl? What will life be for her? In that moment my grandfather had no idea what the family tree would bring, what it would look like as it branched from that moment. Quite to his surprise, I’m sure, the two lovebirds made a go of it. Birthed and raised four sons. Established a healthy home. Never made a lot of money but never wanted for anything important. Maintained a happy marriage until my mother’s early death. And wouldn’t you know that my grandfather came to learn that there’s even such a thing as a decent Presbyterian MacDonald.

That’s one story on one line between two leaves on the tree.

Imagine the stories inside your family tree – inside the boxes and the lines. The joy, the triumph, the pain, the loss, the worry, the doubts, the love, the hurt. It’s all there inside those boxes and lines. Inside those

“Our presence in this world – our leaf on the tree – our box and its lines – is life-changing.”

branches and leaves. We have such an effect on each other. Imagine then taking an eraser to your family tree and rubbing clean your little box. And with your box, the lines connecting to the other boxes. The lines connecting to your parents, to your siblings and to your descendants. Actually there wouldn’t be any descendants if your little box was not there. Think how different the tree would be if your box never got drawn. Think how different the McConnell tree would be if somehow my grandfather convinced my mother that he was right? Of course the world would be a lot better, but it would be different.

Some of us might be tempted to humbly think that there wouldn’t be much of a difference if we were not here. But nothing could be further from the truth. Because of course it’s not just a family tree of which we are a part – but also the greater human tree. Our little box has thousands of lines that are connecting to thousands of other boxes of family and friends and co-workers and neighbors and acquaintances and even strangers. We are affecting hundreds of people a day just by being here. Just by being a leaf in the tree. Just by our random interaction with the human race. There is simply no way to overstate the case that your presence in this world is life-changing to thousands of people just by virtue of these lines that stem forth from your little box. Sometimes for good, sometimes for bad.

When I was in high school I took German. It was the longest year of my life. I am not a language person – so German was not my favorite class of the day. But I am so glad I took German because in about week three of the semester my German teacher asked

me to stay after class. It was seldom a good thing whenever the teacher asked me to stay after class. So I stayed after class and I am so glad I did because that was when my German teacher asked me if I had a brother named Trez. Trez is not a common name (actually it’s his nickname) and so I said yes. And with my yes came these tears in her eyes. And when she could finally talk she told me this story: Said she – “There was a time when I was really struggling with lots of things and feeling like life was too big and too scary – and I was working at the local drugstore and it was just before closing time and a young man came into the store to buy some deodorant – and he came to the counter and he saw the look on my face. And he said, “How are you?” and for some reason I told him the truth. And this young 22 year old man stood and listened to me tell my tale of woe for what seemed a half hour. He just listened. And he told me that he would pray for me and that he believed that somehow God would make everything all right. And somehow I believed him. And I asked him his name and he told me, Trez. Trez McConnell. I never forgot that name, Trez McConnell because in many ways,” she said, “I think your brother saved my life that night.” And brother Trez would have never known.

You cannot overstate the case – that your presence in this world – your leaf on the tree – your box and its lines – is life-changing to thousands.

So it gets me to thinking of a little boy named Scotty. Scotty was a 6 year old boy in my childhood church. He was about five years younger than me. He had two parents and a brother and a sister. And I remember the day as if it were yesterday when Scotty’s parents

came to my home to tell my parents that their little Scotty had cancer. And they were devastated with this news but there was a treatment for it and that they were all hoping for the best. And so I got to watch my parents, his parents and a bunch of good-hearted church people do their best to take care of little Scotty through his illness with every hope that he would live a long, long life. I saw people cook and deliver meals. I saw people visit the hospital. I saw people pray. I saw people hug and cry and laugh and do their best to take care of this hurting family all with the hope that Scotty would live a long, long time. But he didn't. Within a couple years little Scotty succumbed to the illness and breathed his last in his mother's arms. Now my little 11 year old brain could make very little sense of why little boys die. Frankly, my 58 year old brain can't make much sense of it. But the fact that 47 years later I am telling you a story about a boy and his short, short life – and about a family that loved him every day of it – and a congregation that brought casseroles and cards and hugs and tears – means that somehow through all that -- this indelible impression got impressed in me. All from the likes of a brief six year life. My life would be different if Scotty hadn't been in the tree.

Our presence in this world – our leaf on the tree – our box and its lines – is life-changing.

And so somewhere way at the beginning of your tree and mine is this old man and old woman. Abram and Sarai – soon to be Abraham and Sarah. Two little boxes who are wondering if this is all there is. How will the family tree carry on? They are now up in years and Sarah is beyond childbearing capacity and it doesn't look good that they are really going to make their little mark on the family tree. And yet they are working on this deep promise inside of them that God has them there in Canaan for something much larger than themselves. That somehow there is to be this human tree that extends and that somehow God will make of them a great people. And so as the story goes the good Lord brings Abram out of his tent so that he is standing under a star-filled sky and tells Abram to look into the sky and says count the stars. And Abram

says I can't count them they're too many. And God says you're right. "So shall your descendants be." And what does Abram do? He believes him. He believes that somehow, someday the good Lord is going to do something amazing with these two 90 year old boxes. Now the miracle in this story is not only that Abraham and Sarah have a baby – baby Isaac, but that somehow they were able to believe that somehow, someday God would let them have their part to play in the human family. That God would still alter the world through their presence. That by simply being who they were – and trusting in the promise of God – living in covenant with God – that God would alter the world through their presence.

Don't you wonder that about yourself? Whether you're nine or ninety? Whether you've got ten kids or no kids? Whether you've got 1500 friends on Facebook or 3? Don't you wonder what difference you're really making? Some people think that unless you've got your name splashed across the front page or hanging on some building somewhere – or unless you have some kind of life and death profession – or unless you are elected to some high office – well then you're really not making any difference. And if you don't think you're making much difference well then you might think that this story we're talking about – God's story – doesn't really matter either.

But you see that's the point – the point of the story – the point of Abram's story – the point of Sarah's story – is to hear this voice of God that says, "So shall your descendants be." What follows you and me is this infinitesimal succession of descendants, by birth and by every encounter that comes our way. We have this profound opportunity to make an indelible and infinitesimal impression for good. The Bible is this great story of person after person seeking to live a life in covenant with God and trusting that somehow God will use their little box to affect this huge human family. And trusting that even if we don't see it happening, even if we wonder what good can come out of my life --- somehow God is shaping the world through the likes of us.

So shall your descendants be. So shall every relationship be. Every box matters. It matters what you are, what you do and what you say.

So I count it only grace that allowed me to stumble a while back upon an old, old man who for most of his life had been an educator. A high school teacher and administrator. By God's grace I had been a student in his school. By grace I was given the chance to know the man and to be mentored by him. By grace I was led to learn from him what it meant to be a man and a Christian and leader. 30 years after high school there I am before him face to face. And I say what should have been said long before, "You need to know," I told the old, old man, "that you made a big difference in my life." I owe so much to you. Would that I had had a camera to take the expression on his face. Wonder, surprise, bewilderment – almost that he wasn't believing what he was hearing.

So shall your descendants be.

Every little box matters. Every single one of us stem into thousands of other lives. God is making of us an irreplaceable part of the tree. In ways we least expect. And in ways we'll never know. But to believe it. To trust it. Is to be overwhelmed with a sky full of stars.



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Church of the Palms

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