

ABRAHAM
THE FRIEND OF GOD

*Lessons from his life
and faith*

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ABRAHAM THE FRIEND OF GOD

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1. INTRODUCTION

Abraham is undoubtedly one of the most remarkable examples of a person with faith in God and of obedience to God. There is so much we can learn from his testimony. We are taught about his call, temptation, disappointment, fear, courage, generosity, times of success and failure, and the times of God's special visitation and promises.

His testimony is given for our instruction, warning and encouragement. His successes and failures are faithfully recorded in Scripture. They demonstrate the challenges and the blessings of walking with God by faith and obedience.

By studying his life we will be able to identify with the highs and the lows of his life. We will also learn how Abraham was directed, corrected, delivered and blessed by God.

We begin by reminding ourselves of key facts about this man of God. These facts will demonstrate the significance of his testimony for us.

- Abraham was chosen and called by God.
- He was called 'the friend of God'.
- He was called 'faithful Abraham'. Several times Scripture uses the words, 'The God of Abraham'. On the one hand God clearly intended that His name be identified with this man of faith, while on the other hand this statement is also used by believers to identify themselves with 'The God of Abraham' as being the true Jehovah God.
- Abraham is described as being the 'father' of all those that believe. He was the great example of true and living faith.
- Abraham was promised that in him all the nations of the world would be blessed. This was a Messianic Gospel promise pointing ultimately to Christ.
- Abraham is said by Christ to have rejoiced to see His day by faith and to have been glad (*John 8.56*).

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These are some of the reasons why studying the life of Abraham is important and helpful.

Note: Although these were not their names for the whole of the *Genesis* record we are looking at, for simplicity we will be referring to them as Abraham and Sarah throughout.

2. THE CALL OF ABRAHAM

Genesis 11.31-12.3

Context of the call

‘And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his son’s son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram’s wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there. And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years: and Terah died in Haran’ Genesis 11.31-32.

The account of Abraham commences shortly after the record of events at Babel. There the people of the Earth were scattered abroad in confusion of language under the judgment of God. They had departed from following the true and living God and given themselves to idolatry and arrogance.

But having dealt in judgment God now deals in grace. Abraham is called out of darkness into His marvellous light.

We first read of Abraham when he dwelt with his wife Sarah in Ur of the Chaldees. Ur was a very prosperous city with a highly developed infrastructure. It had a population of at least a quarter of a million people. It was an important and busy commercial trading centre with many different tradecrafts in action.

The city had a vast temple with a college and library. At its centre was a statue to the moon god. This was the principal idol worshipped among hundreds of other idols. The city was renowned for its idolatrous polytheism. Sadly this was a hallmark of the religion of Terah, the father of Abraham. Joshua confirms this fact later in Scripture:

‘And Joshua said unto all the people, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods’ Joshua 24.2.

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So it could not be said that Abraham was brought up in a believing home. In fact everything around him and in his family worked against any belief in the true and living God. This makes his call by grace all the more remarkable! The sovereign power of God impacted upon this one man according to His eternal Covenant of Grace. This fact gives us great encouragement in our evangelistic outreach.

A personal call

'Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee' Genesis 12.1.

It is important to note that this call was to Abraham alone; it was not actually a general call to all his family. This is confirmed by Isaiah:

'Look unto Abraham your father, and unto Sarah that bare you: for I called him alone, and blessed him, and increased him' Isaiah 51.2.

This is the point made by Stephen in his sermon before his death:

'And he said, Men, brethren, and fathers, hearken; The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, and said unto him, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee' Acts 7.2-3.

A separating call

'Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee' Genesis 12.1.

It is important that we note the depth of the separating nature of this call. Abraham was clearly told at the outset to leave his country and kindred. Notice also in Acts 7.3 Stephen brings our attention to the fact that Abraham received this personal call *before* he dwelt in

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Haran. This ties in perfectly with the opening verse of *Genesis 12*. It was a separating call from the outset in Ur of the Chaldees.

Look again at *Joshua 24.2-3*:

‘And Joshua said unto all the people, Thus saith the Lord God of Israel, Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods. And I took your father Abraham from the other side of the flood, and led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his seed, and gave him Isaac’
Joshua 24.2-3.

Here we see Joshua making reference to the separating nature of the call of God. Abraham’s call provides assurance to those called out of families following other religions – it is God’s powerful and sovereign call.

Notice also how Stephen described God in *Acts 7.2* as ‘the God of glory’. This is highly significant. Abraham must know that this call was from the one unique, true and living God. Abraham’s God was different from the gods of his father’s house and country. This God would not share his glory with another. The call from the only God was a separating call.

We are not told the reason why father Terah evidently took the lead in coming out of Ur. We do know that Abraham must have told him about his personal call from the Lord. Thus we read they left Ur of the Chaldees to go to the land of Canaan:

‘And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his son’s son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram’s wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there’
Genesis 11.31.

Terah decided to take the lead, as the family head, and go with his

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son as well. However, we know that Terah's actions were not in total obedience to the first call of God to his son Abraham.

Having come out of the ungodly city Ur, Terah settles the family in another ungodly city called Haran. *'Dwelt there'* has the meaning of settling down permanently. This was not a stopover in Haran, but a settling in Haran.

Now Haran was a city on a popular trading route, not actually in the direction of Canaan. It was a city like Ur, alongside the River Euphrates. Haran was a city whose people worshipped the same gods as those in Ur, so it was no different in some respects. It was a city of similar culture and prosperity, so it could be described as a comfortable home-from-home situation.

Settling down in Haran was partial obedience at best. It hindered Abraham in properly obeying his call from God. God's call rises above all family ties!

The name 'Terah' means 'delay' and the name 'Haran' means 'cross-roads'. It is calculated that for approximately five years Abraham lived in Haran with his father. While in Haran Abraham prospered in business and gained a number of servants.

It may have been that for a while Abraham justified his position: had he not left Ur of the Chaldees? In any case, he could reason, should he not look after his aged father? But a man of God cannot be comfortable unless he fully obeys God's commands. God had clearly told him not only to leave Ur but also his father's house. It was a call to separation from the idolatry of his family and culture.

Whatever our natural responsibilities are to our parents, the overriding responsibility is to obey God. God doesn't want us to neglect our parents, but if it is a question of loyalty to our family, who wilfully reject God or loyalty to God, then we must follow God even if it means separation and misunderstanding. God's call was a separating call.

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It is sometimes said that the first step of faith is separation. Haran was like a halfway house of separation in which, despite its prosperity, Abraham could not settle down permanently with a clear conscience. So we need to beware of stopping in the halfway house of Haran when God is calling us on to Canaan.

In the end God stirred up Abraham to full obedience again after the death of his father. The command and promise first given to him in Ur of the Chaldees must be obeyed fully by faith.

This separating call was undoubtedly costly for Abraham. It meant he must take on a different, nomadic lifestyle of travelling from one place to another, a pilgrim status. It meant leaving a profitable place of business and stepping out into the unknown, under the guidance of God, in the direction of Canaan.

But also remember that God called Abraham to follow Him knowing the future events. He called Abraham knowing about Haran; He still called Abraham to Canaan, knowing he would go down into Egypt in unbelief; He called him knowing that he would submit to human wisdom with Hagar.

It is true that Abraham's faith was sometimes trampled on by fear and unbelief. In response God lovingly corrected Abraham but did not give up on him. God, in His sovereign grace, was willing to work through Abraham, despite his failures, knowing that the gift of faith He had bestowed upon him would ultimately prevail and conquer.

So God didn't leave Abraham in Haran but stirred up his spirit to wholehearted obedience and faith. Abraham stepped out from prosperity in Haran towards Canaan dependent upon God's wisdom and will.

A promising call

'Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land

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that I will shew thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed'
Genesis 12.1-3.

We are reminded of something very important about the way in which God deals with His people. On several occasions in Scripture we see the partnership between a command and a promise.

'Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else' Isaiah 45.22.

'Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light'
Matthew 11.28-30.

'Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty' 2 Corinthians 6.17-18.

So here the command in verse 1 is in partnership with the providential promises in verse 2, and the Messianic Gospel promise of verse 3. Such a principle of command and promise is given by God for our assurance, encouragement and hope. Remember that God supports His commands with promises.

The promise given to Abraham was not only a promise to the future nation of Israel but, in addition and even more blessed, it is a promise to God's Church in Christ Jesus. We know that the promise in verse 3 is referring ultimately to Christ because of the teaching of Paul:

'And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying,

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In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham' Galatians 3.8-9.

The key issue in these verses referring to the promise given to Abraham, is faith. So now we move from the command and the promise to the required response of faith.

SUMMARY

We have seen Abraham's call in its context, to Abraham personally, its separating nature and the great promise attached to the call. The key to this call is the faith it produced in Abraham.

3. THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

Genesis 12.4-9

We now consider the faith of Abraham being exercised and tested in the land of Canaan.

Dependent faith

‘So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran’ Genesis 12.4.

God had promised that He would make of Abraham a great nation, yet his wife Sarah was childless (*Genesis 11.30*). Humanly speaking the fulfilment of the promise was impossible.

Firstly, there was no point having the promise of a future land inheritance for his family without a child. Secondly, how could he eventually become a great nation without a child? Thirdly, how could the Messianic promise be fulfilled through his lineage without a child? So this was a remarkable step of obedience in faith. Abraham moved out from the providential and material comfort of Haran towards Canaan land.

Remember also he was stepping out as the family head into the unknown way. When he left Ur of the Chaldees he walked with his father along the River Euphrates to Haran; water and vegetation were constantly nearby. However now in wholehearted faith, in very different terrain including desert, he stepped out towards Canaan knowing that he must take a day at a time in faith. Every day would be a trusting day, like it is for many Christians today.

Yet remember this way, while unknown before to Abraham, was not a step in the dark, but a step of obedience by faith into the unknown with God.

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'By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God' Hebrews 11.8-10.

We learn from the *Hebrews* account the secret behind Abraham's step of faith into the unknown with God: he looked beyond the things of this Earth to the things of Heaven.

Pilgrim faith

'And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came.

'And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. And the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the Lord, who appeared unto him. And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Beth-el, and pitched his tent, having Beth-el on the west, and Hai on the east: and there he builded an altar unto the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south' Genesis 12.5-9.

Abraham understood now that God required of him that he accept by faith his pilgrim status. Several times in these verses we are reminded of the reality of this for Abraham.

In the account in *Hebrews* this is confirmed:

'By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange

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country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise' Hebrews 11.9.

Persevering faith

'...and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came' Genesis 12.5b.

On his journey towards Canaan there were places in which Abraham could have settled down permanently. This journey would include desert areas, but also regular oasis stopovers. As he came nearer to Canaan Abraham would have travelled through Damascus. Even then Damascus was renowned for its beauty and luxury. Later Abraham employed Eleazer of Damascus, a trustworthy servant.

But Damascus was not to be another Haran for Abraham; he must press on to Canaan – no more long-term stopovers for Abraham before Canaan. So Abraham persevered by faith into Canaan.

Worshipping faith

'And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. And the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the Lord, who appeared unto him. And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Beth-el, and pitched his tent, having Beth-el on the west, and Hai on the east: and there he builded an altar unto the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord' Genesis 12.6-8.

Having been obedient to the call, God appeared to Abraham once he arrived in Canaan. The names of the places where God appeared are very significant to the encouragement of Abraham's faith. Sichem, or Shechem, means 'shoulder; the place of strength,' and Moreh means 'instruction.' Abraham is reassured by the God of strength and wisdom that his seed will inherit this land. It is thought that this event

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was one of the pre-incarnation appearances of Christ of whom it was prophesied that *'the government shall be upon His shoulder'* (Isaiah 9.6) and the One *'in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge'* (Colossians 2.3).

Notice that as Abraham fully obeys the Lord he enters into further spiritual blessing. Abraham responds by building an altar unto the Lord, an expression of his faith and adoration. He was a witness in Canaan to the one true and living God!

Later Abraham had to move on, and he built another altar between Bethel and Hai, or Ai. Once again the names of these places are very significant. Bethel means 'the house of God' and Hai signifies a heap of ruin. As a pilgrim Abraham worships God as a believer in a sinful, ruined world, knowing he is not yet in Heaven but not at home on Earth.

Here we can see how Abraham's worship was developing. At this place of worship Abraham was praying unto the Lord, calling earnestly upon His name. This was despite the fact that he was constantly on the move, in a hostile land, and had no place to call home. He praised and prayed unto God, calling upon His name!

SUMMARY

We can summarise by focusing on three characteristics of Abraham's experience and testimony: in fact these are principles of the Christian lifestyle.

- Tent: He pitched his tent. Remember our pilgrim status here on Earth.
- Altar: He witnessed to his trust in the Almighty God despite everything around him.
- Promise: He called upon God, reminding Him of His gracious covenant promise to him.

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These three principles are important for us as Christian believers: we are pilgrims called to witness for God and to constantly worship Him.

4. ABRAHAM'S FAITH TESTED

Genesis 12.10-13.4

Going down into Egypt

'And there was a famine in the land: and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was grievous in the land' Genesis 12.10.

A famine in the land of promise! This must have been a tremendous trial to Abraham's faith. He had left prosperous Haran, taken on the lifestyle of a pilgrim and travelled into Canaan by faith. God had promised him this land for his future generations but he himself had no place to call his own or home. He was obeying God fully yet now, humanly speaking, he faced starvation in the land of Canaan.

In addition to this, he was probably having to deal with very difficult and sometimes unanswerable questions, maybe put to him by his family or servants. Or perhaps Satan tempted him: What sort of God is this, Abraham, who would allow such an event to happen? Is He the God who is really in control? Is He really the God of creation, providence and grace? Had God really called Abraham or had he made a huge mistake?

The famine was grievous. This means the famine was category A; it was at the top end of the scale of seriousness. It was a great burden placed upon Abraham. How to respond?

Faced with such a crisis the question first of all is whether or not his attitude before God was right. Secondly, were his motives for God's praise? These are crucial questions in a crisis! How we go about making our decisions and taking action in a crisis is crucial. This governs whether the experience turns out to be a spiritual blessing or failure for us.

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This was the most important point here for Abraham. How was it he decided to go down into Egypt? In what attitude did he go down into Egypt? What did he do in Egypt? These are the real issues here.

With the benefit of seeing the before and after, many people jump on Abraham at this point saying it was wrong for him to go down into Egypt. Here, they say, you have the answer to the problem. It's obvious to everyone! But such an answer is, in my view, too simplistic. This is often the manner in which people rush to make judgments on other people's lives, after the event, in a way that lacks thorough consideration. For example, if Abraham had gone down into Egypt in a right spirit by faith, would we have said it was wrong for him to go? Was the very fact that he was in Egypt wrong? There were times in which God did actually send people down into Egypt. Joseph was brought into Egypt under the sovereign, permissive will of God. Many years later God said to Jacob,

'I am God, the God of thy father: fear not to go down into Egypt; for I will there make of thee a great nation: I will go down with thee into Egypt; and I will also surely bring thee up again: and Joseph shall put his hand upon thine eyes' Genesis 46.3-4.

Joseph of the New Testament was told to take Mary and Jesus and flee into Egypt, and stay there until God gave him further direction. So it is not as simple as to say going down into Egypt is always wrong. So what was the difference? The problem for Abraham was threefold: 1) how he decided to go into Egypt; 2) how he entered Egypt; and 3) how he behaved in Egypt.

1. How Abraham decided to go into Egypt

We do not read that Abraham was told by God to go down into Egypt but we do read that before he entered Egypt Abraham's faith was failing (*Genesis 12.10-13*). His fear was controlling him; pragmatism took over his decision-making. Abraham focused on the famine rather than God's faithfulness.

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The famine was grievous. It was an incredible burden of responsibility for Abraham, the head of the family, but instead of casting this burden upon the Lord he tried to carry his burden himself all the way down into Egypt. He made what seemed to him a common sense decision without recorded reference to God.

It was the obvious step to take. Food is scarce in Canaan – plentiful in Egypt: let's go to Egypt! In the same way, Elimelech led his family to Moab; it seemed the obvious step to take (*Ruth 1.1*). Such an attitude for Abraham eventually resulted in compromise with his wife and failure in both faith and witness. Humanly speaking he was making the right decision. There was corn in Egypt – to Egypt he must go! Common sense without God prevailed in a sinful manner.

In the account we read, *'And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south'* (*Genesis 12.9*). This may perhaps indicate symbolically a gradual weakening in Abraham's spiritual life at the time. He was heading all the while in the direction of Egypt. Worldliness is something which gradually takes us over step by step. In the end it was so easy to step over the border in the time of famine. It seemed the obvious thing to do! Was it not providential he should be so close to Egypt?

The slope of disobedience is made slippery when human reasoning becomes the king. So it was that on the way downwards, Abraham instructs his wife to be deceitful.

'And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon: therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife: and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive. Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee' *Genesis 12.11-13.*

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Abraham's priority now in his thinking is, 'I must protect myself. Self takes over! 'Sarah must tell the Egyptians she is my sister, otherwise I will be killed.' So through his actions Abraham involves Sarah in the cover up. He fails to protect his wife. Abraham may have rationalised the statement because Sarah was his half sister, but in the sense that Abraham set out to deceive by half-truth, thus covering up the fact that Sarah was his wife, his statements were dishonest.

Abraham may also have rationalised his deceit by misusing the promises of God given to him. 'How can God's promise be fulfilled if I am killed in Egypt?' So therefore he must preserve God's will by deceit. But God never needs us to take such action on His behalf!

A present-day illustration of this type of thinking might be applying for a job in a recession. Motivated by financial survival your CV includes half-truths which you intend the prospective employer to read in a certain way. Or you fill in the job application dishonestly rather than honestly, trusting in the Lord.

2. How Abraham entered Egypt

How we enter a place like Egypt is of vital importance. If we enter in our own strength without the direction of God, we will fail. In this way entrance into Egypt is like making an alliance with the world.

'Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord!' Isaiah 31.1.

Alternatively, if we enter Egypt under the sovereign providential timing and direction of God, in prayer and by faith, with the motive of being a witness for God, such an action can prove of spiritual blessing. For example, in the arena of politics, in God's sovereignty a Christian can be a witness.

Consider the difference between the witness of Abraham and that of

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Joseph. Abraham, having gone down into Egypt in his own strength, was thrown out by king Pharaoh in shame! What testimony of the Lord did Abraham leave behind in Egypt? But Joseph, with God's help, was promoted to be the Governor of Egypt, second only to the then king Pharaoh. Then later Joseph's father Jacob, in his frailty as an old man, stands before the mighty king Pharaoh of Egypt. He blesses the king in the name of the Lord. He is a witness! Jacob is before the mighty king of Egypt with humble dignity, concerned for God's glory.

3. How Abraham behaved in Egypt: the effect of compromise

The plan worked

'And it came to pass, that, when Abram was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair. The princes also of Pharaoh saw her, and commended her before Pharaoh: and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house' Genesis 12.14-15.

Sarah was taken into Pharaoh's house because of her undoubted beauty. She obviously obeyed her husband in the deceit, thinking that in so doing she was saving his life. This proves that neither Abraham nor Sarah at this point were walking by faith; they were walking by the sight of human reasoning.

The plan prospered materially

'And he entreated Abram well for her sake: and he had sheep, and oxen, and he asses, and menservants, and maidservants, and she asses, and camels' Genesis 12.16.

Here the Lord teaches us a salutary lesson about compromise. Never measure material benefits coming through compromise as a measure of God's favour. Humanly speaking it seems that Abraham went from famine to prosperity through deceit and disobedience, but Abraham prospered at the expense of his spiritual health.

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The plan sent leanness into their souls

We do not read of any altar in Egypt, any communion with God, or renewal of the divine promise in Egypt. I don't think Abraham, the friend of God, was really happy in Egypt. Remember later how the Children of Israel lusted after the food of Egypt. They despised God's provision of the manna in the wilderness. We read on that occasion, *'And he gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul'* (Psalm 106.15).

The plan had long term consequences

We need to remember that what we may gain materially through compromise can come back to haunt us. The wealth Abraham gained in Egypt with his nephew Lot ended up causing division and strife later on. Sarah brought an Egyptian servant up out of Egypt, called Hagar. Abraham's wrong relationship later with Hagar, resulting in Ishmael, caused strife and division. The legacy of this problem even remains today.

It may be that we can look back over our lives to a time when we have compromised. It seemed to have prospered at the outset but now that prosperity has turned sour in our lives.

The plan brought suffering to others

'And the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai Abram's wife' Genesis 12.17.

This is very significant. Under God's sovereign displeasure Pharaoh and his house suffered through the cover-up of a believer! Through their suffering as unbelievers, God protected Sarah. When we are not walking by faith, our actions can have ramifications for others. The point to remember is that if we are saved by God's sovereign grace, and yet compromise in our lives, God will deal with the situation and grant deliverance, but often in a way which affects others also. If Abraham had borne in mind more of the judgment and discipline of

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God, it may have served as a warning to him to avoid such a pathway in the first place. The fear of God motivates a godly philosophy of life, not a worldly philosophy one.

The plan brought just rebuke and rejection from an unbeliever

'And Pharaoh called Abram, and said, What is this that thou hast done unto me? why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife? Why saidst thou, She is my sister? so I might have taken her to me to wife: now therefore behold thy wife, take her, and go thy way. And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him: and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had' Genesis 12.18-20.

Pharaoh called Abraham to his throne room of judgment. He had three difficult questions to which Abraham has no defence:

- *'What is this thou hast done unto me?'*
- *'Why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife?'*
- *'Why saidst thou, She is my sister? so I might have taken her to me to wife?'*

With these accusations Sarah was returned to Abraham. They were both banished from Pharaoh's presence in disgrace. Yet for all this they both remained under the sovereign, providential care of God. It was a miracle that Abraham was not killed because of the suffering he brought upon the house of Pharaoh. Yet Pharaoh commanded his men, ensuring their personal protection and that of their property. So Pharaoh, for all his power, remained under the sovereignty of God. The hearts of all men are in His hands. Pharaoh's anger was restrained by God, so Abraham was rescued.

Coming up out of Egypt

'And Abram went up out of Egypt, he, and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the south. And Abram was very

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rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold. And he went on his journeys from the south even to Beth-el, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Beth-el and Hai; unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first: and there Abram called on the name of the Lord' Genesis 13.1-4.

Imagine how Abraham must have felt coming out of Egypt: the man of God was delivered – what a relief! But it was undoubtedly relief tinged with sadness and regret. His conscience would have been laden with guilt. He couldn't enjoy the providential riches from Egypt in the same way as if they had come as a result of faith. He would have been burdened with shame, embarrassment, failure and doubt. Maybe he asked himself, 'Does God still love me? Can God forgive me? Can my relationship with my wife be restored again after I have exposed her to such danger? Will our relationship be restored so that she respects my judgment again?'

We have the answers to these questions in the testimony of God's dealings with Abraham. God intervened to save Abraham and Sarah. God did not give up on them because of their lack of faith. It was not the scrap heap for Abraham but restoration under God's mercy!

So for us, there have been times when we have not served God as we ought. Fear and unbelief has overwhelmed us. Sadly we have been left to bring dishonour upon God through our actions and words. These verses serve as a remarkable picture of restoration. There are important principles here.

He came *up* out of Egypt. This is not just a geographical statement but symbolic of repentance – he went down, he came back up. He came back to Bethel where he had first made an altar unto the Lord. Abraham did not rest until he came to Bethel. Bethel symbolised fellowship with God; it was a place of former blessing. He had to go back to the beginning, to get back to proper fellowship with God through repentance and faith. This was his restoration.

Abraham's Faith Tested

All these events symbolise how we must go back to Calvary to be restored again:

*O Jesus, full of truth and grace,
More full of grace than I of sin,
Yet once again I seek Thy face;
Open Thy arms, and take me in,
And freely my backslidings heal,
And love the faithless sinner still.*

*Thou know'st the way to bring me back,
My fallen spirit to restore:
O, for Thy Truth and mercy's sake,
Forgive, and bid me sin no more;
The ruins of my soul repair,
And make my heart a house of prayer.*

*O give me, Lord, the tender heart
That trembles at the approach of sin;
A godly fear of sin impart,
Implant, and root it deep within,
That I may dread Thy gracious power,
And never dare offend Thee more.*

Charles Wesley, 1707-88

A helpful illustration here is the fire at Windsor Castle and the terrible picture of devastation to such a beautiful building. But the skilled craftsmen got to work, and from those ruins a beautifully restored building arose. I remember being impressed while observing such craftsmen at work in a documentary film about it. God is the Master Craftsman in Christ. He can rescue us and restore us to fellowship through His sovereign grace.

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SUMMARY

Going down to Egypt

- We do not read that Abraham was told by God to go down into Egypt but we do read that before he entered Egypt Abraham's faith was failing.
- How we enter a place like Egypt is of vital importance.
- Consider the difference between the witness of Abraham and that of Joseph.

The effect of compromise

- The plan worked and prospered materially, but it sent leanness into their souls.
- The plan had long term consequences – it brought suffering to others.
- The plan brought just rebuke and rejection from an unbeliever.

Coming up out of Egypt

- Abraham came up out of Egypt, and went back to Bethel where he had first made his altar unto the Lord. He had to get back to fellowship with God through repentance and faith.
- All these events symbolise how we must go back to Calvary to be restored again. Restoration for us with God can only be through Christ Jesus the Lord.
- God is the Master Craftsman in Christ so He can rescue us like He did Abraham, and restore us to fellowship through His sovereign grace. Past departures from the way of the Lord do not mean we cannot serve God in the future. God is able to restore just as He did the Apostle Peter.
- From his Egypt experience Abraham had to learn that a life of faith meant devotion unto God.

5. ABRAHAM AND LOT SEPARATE

Genesis 13.5-18

We will now consider some of the fruit of Abraham's faith in God.

A peacemaker

'And Lot also, which went with Abram, had flocks, and herds, and tents. And the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together: for their substance was great, so that they could not dwell together. And there was a strife between the herdmen of Abram's cattle and the herdmen of Lot's cattle: and the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelled then in the land. And Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren' Genesis 13.5-8.

Abraham and Lot by now were very rich men. Their substance is described as being great. But now, because the pastureland around them was inadequate to feed such vast flocks, there was strife between the herdsmen of Abraham and Lot. Such a state of affairs was not only damaging and divisive, it was also a bad witness to the unbelieving Canaanite and Perizzite peoples that dwelt alongside them. Abraham the man of God was not comfortable with such fighting and strife, so he made the first move as the head to bring about peace.

Here we see one of the fruits of living faith as being a desire for true peace. If we are walking closely with the Lord we will not be comfortable with division; we will be promoters of peace. Division will grieve us in the same manner that it grieved Abraham. Notice how he reminded Lot that divisions and strife should not be so between themselves as brethren.

On a number of occasions we are reminded of the importance of peace and a believer's part in pursuing it:

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'If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men' Romans 12.18.

'But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace' James 3.17-18.

'Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God' Matthew 5.9.

Being a peacemaker does not mean we have to compromise with sin, but it does mean we have to actively seek peace in a practical and God-honouring manner.

Here Abraham understood that the only way forward to overcome the strife was separation.

'Is not the whole land before thee? separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left' Genesis 13.9.

Abraham's testimony teaches us vital aspects of what is required of a peacemaker.

- Be prepared to lay aside your own rights. Abraham waived his rights in the interests of reconciliation. Human reasoning would consider Abraham silly, soft, naive, weak, or unwise. But Abraham was exercising his faith and was a man of courage trusting in the Lord. Living faith does not lead us to promote ourselves, our rights or our ambitions. When our rights are the sole measure of guidance, we blunt our spiritual insight.
- Hold the things of this life with a loose hand. Living faith brings forth the fruits of liberty and freedom from the bondage of selfishness. Living faith does not say, 'It is not fair!' but rather prays, 'Thy will

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be done, Lord, in Heaven and on Earth.' As Abraham waived his rights and took second place his faith in God enabled him to say in freedom to Lot, *'Is not the whole land before thee?'* This is not weakness but freedom!

- Always keep a high view of God in your life. Abraham's view of God was now so great he was able to let go of selfish interests and protectionism. He also knew Lot must prove God on a personal level for himself and not depend on his uncle. Abraham knew that his God was greater than Lot's God. By this I do not mean that they each worshipped a different God; rather that Abraham had a far deeper and higher view of God than his nephew Lot. Lot's view of God at this point of his life was weak and insipid. We will see that Lot's decision making reflected his inadequate view of God and His sovereign power.
- Be willing to take second place. The natural mind thinks of Number One, protects oneself, always wants to be on top, to come out the winner, to get the best for oneself. Here Abraham was willing to take second place to his nephew Lot in the interests of peace.
- Depend upon the sovereignty of God to overrule in your affairs. Abraham as the head and leader took the initiative and stepped forward to make peace. Then he willingly stepped back taking second place to effect that peace. In so doing he was placing himself by faith into the divine hand of God. His possessions were not his god; his great concern now was to walk with God by faith. Spurgeon used to say: 'Do what is right and leave the consequences with the Lord.' A potentially difficult future on lesser pastureland with God was better than rich pastureland without the presence and smile of God. So with freedom he was able to say, 'If you go to the left I will go to the right, if you go to the right I will go to the left.'
- Be ambitious for God's honour, not your own. Abraham realised that in the interests of peace and for God's honour, separation from

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Lot was a step that had to be taken. He also understood in the sovereignty of God he must separate from Lot to finally fulfil God's call to himself. While he would remain loyal to Lot his relative, and later rescue him from captivity, his first loyalty must always remain to God. His loyalty to God was more important to him than natural ties. It was not that God had no love or mercy for Lot. Indeed some years later in His mercy He rescued Lot from His judgment in a remarkable manner when He rained fire upon Sodom and Gomorrah. But God had called Abraham to walk with Him alone and separate from his family. In the end God's honour was more important to Abraham than even natural ties.

So these are some steps we must take in the interests of peace and to remain loyal first and foremost to God.

The disappointment and danger of weak faith

'And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar. Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan; and Lot journeyed east: and they separated themselves the one from the other. Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent toward Sodom. But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly' Genesis 13.10-13.

We know from the record in Scripture that Lot was what is described as a weak believer. It may be that Lot had put pressure on Abraham to go down into Egypt when there was a famine in Canaan. We certainly do not read of him objecting to the decision.

Lot's problem in his life at this time as a believer could be summarised as having an earth-bound mindset. This is apparent in his decision-making process and subsequent events in his life. At this

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stage Lot was more concerned about the God of providence than the God of grace. His viewpoint is similar to those who worship God only concerned to gain material benefits without a proper concern for their souls. Their decision-making does not include the question, 'How will my decision affect my walk with God and my spiritual life?'

Lot was not strong enough at this time spiritually to live near, and eventually in, Sodom. Young people: beware of thinking that you are strong enough to deal with temptation on your own!

Let's examine the downward spiral in Lot's life as a result of a decision taken on the wrong foundation. Decisions you may take in a wrong manner without considering the well-being of your soul will have serious long-term repercussions in your life. Lot's testimony warns us of this. He made his decision based upon material concerns alone.

'Lot lifted up his eyes' and looked in one direction only – to the plains of Jordan! The choice materially was obvious: he must go towards the east. Towards the south, west and north were imposing, bleak-looking hills, but if Lot had walked by faith and not by sight he would have realised in time that these imposing hills actually hid from view the fertile valleys between them. But Lot only had eyes for the plain of Jordan. He based his decision on what he could see now; he feasted his eyes on the rich pastureland and the thought of gain rolled along in his mind. So it was that Lot walked by sight and Abraham walked by faith.

He did not seek guidance from the Lord. We read that Lot chose for himself, not for God's honour. He did not choose for his spiritual well-being but his natural well-being. There is a clear connection here between the manner in which Eve viewed the forbidden fruit and the way Lot viewed the plain of Jordan. Neither of them tested their decision by the Word of God.

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'And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat' Genesis 3.6.

The Apostle John warns:

'For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world' 1 John 2.16.

Lot failed to understand the danger of Sodom. Significantly, Scripture records here that Lot pitched his tent *towards* Sodom. In so doing he showed his interest and desire to *enter* Sodom, a city whose inhabitants were exceedingly wicked and totally rebellious towards God. Lot saw his future in an earthly city, but Abraham looked forward to a city in Heaven whose Builder and Maker is God. Let us remember the danger of pitching our tent towards Sodom, of being open to assimilation into the world.

Lot was a city man at heart; had he not lived prosperously in Ur of the Chaldees and in Haran? Now the city of Sodom beckoned him in. Step by step Lot moved closer to Sodom until eventually he moved right into the city.

Such leadership had a devastating effect upon the family. Lot was eventually found sitting at the city gate as an elder in this ungodly and cursed city. Scripture records later that some of his daughters married unbelievers from the city. His sons-in-law had little respect for him. They thought he was mocking them when he warned that the Lord would destroy the city.

Undoubtedly Lot was a believer but was certainly not at this time a happy believer. He was rather a vexed believer in Sodom. Peter tells us that Lot was *'vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked'*. Only a mighty intervention of God delivered him:

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'And delivered just Lot, vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked: (for that righteous man dwelling among them, in seeing and hearing, vexed his righteous soul from day to day with their unlawful deeds)' 2 Peter 2.7-8.

Firstly, Lot's testimony reveals the folly of basing our decisions for life on material concerns alone, without paying due respect or concern for our spiritual lives. Beware of presumptuously pitching your tent towards Sodom while failing to take care of your most precious possession – your soul.

Secondly, Lot's testimony demonstrates the amazing mercy and grace of God in later delivering Lot, even while he lingered in Sodom after being warned to flee by the angels. In the end they had to take him by the hand and pull him away! (*Genesis 19.15-16*). We should never misuse the account of Lot by saying arrogantly that whatever we do as believers it will all turn out all right in the end; we should nevertheless marvel at God who is so longsuffering and who delights in mercy, despite our wanderings and failures.

The assurance and comfort of dependent faith

'And the Lord said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art northward, and southward, and eastward, and westward: for all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered. Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee. Then Abram removed his tent, and came and dwelt in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron, and built there an altar unto the Lord' Genesis 13.14-18.

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The first thing to remember here is that God always comes near to His separated ones.

‘Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty’ 2 Corinthians 6.17-18.

After Lot was separated from Abraham, God spoke again to Abraham. It was a promise that came at the time when Abraham was fully consecrated to the Lord. He now dwelt in the land of Canaan in total dependence upon the Lord. He had placed himself by faith in, and in obedience to, the sovereign will of the Lord. Now God confirmed again to Abraham His gracious purposes to him and his seed.

God commanded Abraham to lift up his eyes and view the land. Before, Lot had lifted up his eyes with his mind governed by selfish worldly motives. Abraham now lifts up his eyes to view the land with his mind governed by faith. The way God commanded Abraham to look reminded him of how he is surrounded by God’s gracious provision.

Remember how Lot looked only in one direction. Abraham is told to look all around him. All the land was to be his: the mountains, the valleys and the plains. Take it all in Abraham! Marvel at the wonderful provision of God. So the believer is called spiritually to wonder and marvel at the length and breadth and depth and height of the love of Christ, the love of Christ which passeth knowledge. What a comfort the promises of God are to believers!

We can notice also how the promises of God to Abraham were on an ascending scale. God said in Mesopotamia, *‘I will show thee the land’*; at Bethel, *‘This is the land’*; and now, *‘For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it’*. This reminds us that the depth and meaning of God’s promises grow in a believer’s mind on an ascending scale.

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'To thee will I give it, and to thy seed forever'. Canaan is a land for Abraham to travel and live in as a stranger. It is for his future seed in time to dwell and rule in as proprietors. However, the granting of it to Abraham and his seed forever shows that the promise had an even deeper fulfilment. Matthew Henry comments:

'The granting of it to him and his for ever intimates that it was typical of the heavenly Canaan, which is given to the spiritual seed of Abraham for ever.'

'Arise, walk through the land': Abraham must walk by faith as though he already owned it. He was to appreciate the promises of God for the future as being certain. So a believer is called to walk in the Canaan land of God's promises, looking forward to their fulfillment.

'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ' Ephesians 1.3.

The Word of God is like a garden, like Canaan land, which has many parts still to explore. Each new part we explore adds to our appreciation and assurance.

In verse 18 we see Abraham removed his tent and came to dwell *'in the plain of Mamre, which is in Hebron'*, which in Hebrew means 'fellowship'. This reminds us that those who trust in God and obey His commandments will enjoy spiritual blessing and fellowship with God.

Hundreds of years later Caleb's chief testimony was that he followed the Lord. He wanted the place of Hebron (meaning 'fellowship') as his inheritance.

'Hebron therefore became the inheritance of Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenezite unto this day, because that he wholly followed the Lord God of Israel' Joshua 14.14.

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SUMMARY

A peacemaker

- Be prepared to lay aside your own rights;
- Hold the things of this life with a loose hand;
- Always keep a high view of God in your life;
- Be willing to take second place;
- Depend upon the sovereignty of God to overrule in your affairs;
- Be ambitious for God's honour, not your own.

The disappointment and danger of weak faith

- Lot made his decision based upon material concerns alone;
- He did not seek guidance from the Lord;
- He failed to understand the danger of Sodom.

The comfort of dependent faith

- God always comes near to His separated ones;
- The way God commanded Abraham to look reminded him of how he was surrounded by God's gracious provision;
- The promises of God were on an ascending scale to Abraham;
- The granting of Canaan and his seed forever intimates that it was typical of the heavenly Canaan land given to the spiritual seed of Abraham in Christ for ever. Abraham had to walk through the land by faith as though he already owned it, and appreciate the promises of God.
- Abraham removed his tent and came to dwell in the plain of Mamre in Hebron, meaning 'fellowship'. Those who trust in God and obey His commandments will enjoy spiritual blessing and fellowship with God.

6. ABRAHAM THE RESCUER

Genesis 14

We will now consider more remarkable fruits of Abraham's faith given to inspire and encourage us to see the positive, transforming effect of sincere faith in God.

Compassion

'And there came one that had escaped, and told Abram the Hebrew; for he dwelt in the plain of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol, and brother of Aner: and these were confederate with Abram. And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them unto Dan' Genesis 14.13-14.

Before Abraham and Lot had entered Canaan, King Chedorlaomer of Elam had subdued the nations around forcing them to pay tribute. After some years the peoples of Sodom and Gomorrah, together with other tribal nations, rose up in rebellion. In his judgment and revenge King Chedorlaomer led a most powerful and fierce army of warriors. He totally overwhelmed and cruelly subdued the unwise rebellion. Abraham was informed that Lot and his family had been captured and taken prisoner.

Abraham responds with incredible compassion. He had not been caught up personally in the conflict and yet was ready to go and get involved. He remained concerned for the well-being of Lot and his family.

There are several significant aspects to the compassion of Abraham for Lot:

- He was not judgmental in his attitude towards Lot's captivity. He

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did not quickly and conveniently assess Lot's captivity as punishment from God for the earlier manner of Lot's departure to Sodom.

- He understood the blessing of compassion without compromise. There was no quick criticism of Lot for allowing himself and his family to be caught up in Sodom with its danger. There was no root of bitterness or self-satisfaction, saying in a self-righteous manner, 'Lot must now reap what he has sown'. Instead of a critical spirit there was a compassionate spirit.
- He looked upon Lot not only as a relation but as a brother in the Lord in trouble. As the Apostle Paul taught: *'As we have therefore opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith'* Galatians 6.10.

This attitude reminds us of the responsibility to help the Christian brethren in difficulties, not only practically but spiritually. When we hear news of a brother or sister backsliding, taken captive by their old nature, as Abraham armed himself so we should arm ourselves and join the army of prayer, so that in God's mercy and in God's time they may be rescued through repentance and faith in Christ.

'Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted' Galatians 6.1.

- Abraham's compassion did not mean he was condoning Lot's worldliness, but it did mean his compassion had legs; it was wholehearted, engaging the mind, heart and will. Abraham's compassion was active: he was willing to put himself out for Lot. Abraham realised he had a responsibility to do something to help his brother Lot in captivity, unable to help himself. This reminds us of the compassion of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, who is constantly seeking and finding lost sheep who are unable to save themselves.
- Abraham stirred himself and left the comfort of his home and went

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to battle with the enemy to rescue Lot. So our Saviour Jesus Christ, moved with compassion for needy sinners, left the comfort of His home in Heaven and came to this Earth and did battle with the enemy of souls, Satan. He accomplished a great and total victory over Satan. He satisfied the justice of God the Father, so rescuing billions of sinners from the captivity of sin.

Courage and commitment

‘And when Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he armed his trained servants, born in his own house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued them unto Dan. And he divided himself against them, he and his servants, by night, and smote them, and pursued them unto Hobah, which is on the left hand of Damascus. And he brought back all the goods, and also brought again his brother Lot, and his goods, and the women also, and the people’ Genesis 14.14-16.

As King Chedorlaomer and his conquering army began their long trek homewards along the Jordan valley in the direction of Dan, they no doubt felt totally secure. Laden with goods and captives they could relax and enjoy their homeward journey. However, unbeknown to this great army, there was one man of God with a small band of men pursuing them, who would not rest until his mission of deliverance was accomplished.

So it was on one fateful night as the army slept Abraham and his army came upon them catching them unawares and accomplishing a great victory under God. They chased the army out of the land of Canaan to Hobah, way beyond Damascus.

What an incredible difference faith makes in a person! Here Abraham was willing to go and do battle with the fiercest army of his day. He was willing to go with a very small army trusting in the Lord. His fellowship with the Lord gave him courage, commitment and compassion. So it will be for us in our own spiritual lives.

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These events show us that when living the life of faith we can accomplish great victories against the enemy. Our effectiveness is drawn from our fellowship with God. We are not called to compromise but combat with the enemy of souls, for the sake of the Gospel.

Abraham was a man God could use to rescue Lot, for he was already walking with God and ready for action. Abraham, the separated one, in the end was more effective in his witness to the king of Sodom than Lot who had been in the same city. Compromise led to captivity: what a great lesson this is for today.

Another example is Gideon, who later in history went to war with an army of similar size to that of Abraham, and proved the answer to success against the enemy was being on God's side. This is the secret behind any spiritual battles won.

Notice the commitment of Abraham to go as far as Damascus on his mission of judgment and mercy. He didn't leave the job half done, so risking the return of King Chedorlaomer to Canaan. Lot was not only rescued, but the enemy that caused his captivity was dealt with also. The problem of the evil must be rooted out.

Abraham's action in the strength of the Lord in dealing with Chedorlaomer reminds us of how diligent we should be to root out the sins which captivate our lives, to root out the problem in our lives like Abraham did.

Communion

'And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: and blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all' Genesis 14.18-20.

The reward for faithfulness and separation was to experience

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deeper communion with the Most High God. Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek bringing bread, wine and blessing was profound, for it had symbolic purposes of teaching and grace.

The timing and manner of the birth, death and burial of Melchizedek remain a mystery inasmuch as there is no record at all of his genealogy. This has left some to state that the visit of Melchizedek was in fact a pre-incarnation appearance of Christ. However, it seems more likely that Melchizedek is to be presented as a type of Christ, rather than the pre-incarnate Christ Himself.

Most well-known Reformed commentators, including Calvin, see Melchizedek as a type of Christ, here representing the unique and ultimate priesthood of Christ. Their interpretation is based more particularly on the teaching of *Hebrews 7*.

In *Hebrews 7.3* we learn that Melchizedek was '*made like unto the Son of God*'. Also that as a priest he represented a priesthood that was superior to any other, that would be eternal. Melchizedek is referred to in *Hebrews 7.7* as a great man who was to be respected having authority over Abraham.

Then later in *Hebrews 7.15* Christ is said to be a priest '*after the similitude of Melchisedec*'. Then in verse 17 Christ is stated as being '*a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec*' and finally in verses 24-26 as having authority over all. From this we can learn that Melchizedek's great purpose and work was to represent a unique priesthood order in his day, as a profound and sacred type of Christ, the eternal High Priest.

The timing of Melchizedek's ministry perfectly harmonised with the life of Abraham, the man who was under the everlasting covenant of faith and grace! As the intention of Scripture is to point us through Melchizedek to Christ, we must focus our minds on other ways this typology speaks of Christ and its relevance to Abraham and us.

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- King of Salem: Salem means 'peace': Christ the Prince of Peace.
- King of righteousness and peace: 'Melchizedek' means 'righteousness', so he represents peace through the righteousness of Christ. There is no peace with God without it. Notice the order again in *Hebrews 7.2*: 'to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all; first being by interpretation King of righteousness, and after that also King of Salem, which is, King of peace.'
- Priest of the Most High God: Melchizedek was a man without lineage or descent of a priesthood family, representing a unique, singular and superior priesthood. So Christ is the perfect fulfilment as the perfect, eternal, unique and only High Priest in Heaven.
- King and Priest: The subsequent Levitical priesthood never allowed the same person to be both king and priest. But Melchizedek, as a type of Christ, was symbolising in a profound manner Christ who is both King and Priest forever.
- Abraham, as a man of faith in the Most High God, looked to Melchizedek with respect and honour as being a priest of the same Most High God. Abraham demonstrated his respect practically through giving tithes of all. Love to God and living faith made Abraham serious about his tithing. Abraham demonstrated his submission to Melchizedek as having greater authority than himself. He bowed to the unique priesthood role of Melchizedek (see *Hebrews 7.6-7*).
- Abraham, the weary warrior, was given bread and wine by Melchizedek. Such sustenance was symbolic of Christ who is the Bread of Life. As Abraham was strengthened spiritually through his encounter with Melchizedek, so those who respect and trust and bow to the authority of Christ enter into spiritual blessing. There is always spiritual refreshment in His presence. The bread and wine used by Melchizedek remind us of the two emblems Christ the High Priest would use to symbolise His death. As Abraham fellowshiped

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with Melchizedek, a type of Christ, so in the ordinance of the Lord's Supper we enjoy fellowship with Christ.

- The priest of the Most High God blesses Abraham and praises God. Abraham's respect for Melchizedek shows his growing spiritual discernment and perception. His appearance to Abraham assured him in his faith and understanding of the coming Messiah event.
- The important role of Melchizedek in Scripture is to show the reality that Christ is superior in every way to any other priest and priesthood for all time.

Consecration

'And the king of Sodom said unto Abram, Give me the persons, and take the goods to thyself. And Abram said to the king of Sodom, I have lift up mine hand unto the Lord, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take from a thread even to a shoelatchet, and that I will not take any thing that is thine, lest thou shouldest say, I have made Abram rich: save only that which the young men have eaten, and the portion of the men which went with me, Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre; let them take their portion' Genesis 14.21-24.

Notice here how it is that Satan, directly after blessing, places temptation in front of Abraham. This is so often the case. It was so even with our Lord. Straight after the blessed time of His baptism, when His Father has said, *'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased'*, Jesus entered into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil.

So here Abraham is faced with a great test. The test was whether or not Abraham was solely concerned for the honour of the Most High God. He has this possibility to profit materially from the spoils of battle and at a stroke make himself the richest man in the land. But Abraham was now totally consecrated to the Most High God, shown symbolically in his statement, *'I have lift up mine hand unto the*

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Lord'. He was devoted to Him as the Most High God, the possessor of Heaven and Earth.

F B Meyer, writing of this event, comments on Abraham's so-called 'magnificent contempt' for a gift from a rebellious man of the world. He worshipped the Most High God and attributed the victory to Him and Him alone. The spiritual blessing he had received as reward for his faith was far more important to him than any material gain.

Several important issues for us arise out of Abraham's testimony here:

- Beware of becoming beholden to the world by their gifts to you. A favour received can so easily mean bondage ahead. Faith in God discerns the danger of what seems a reasonable offer from the world.
- Learn from past mistakes and apply that learning to the future like Abraham.
- Be clear, definite and polite in your stand for the Lord – do not deviate even a little!
- Do not become another man's conscience on practical decisions.
- Understand the opportunities for witness in the practical dealings of life.

SUMMARY

The events recorded in this chapter demonstrate the power of God to change both a person and his witness for good. From failure in Egypt, Abraham is remaining faithful in Canaan.

See how God takes the disaster of Lot's decision and subsequent captivity in hand. He works through Abraham, the man of God, to change the situation around for His glory.

He gives Abraham compassion, courage, commitment as he goes to war with the enemy on behalf of souls. Then as a reward for his faith Abraham enjoys deeper fellowship with God under the ministry of Melchizedek, who is type of Christ.

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As a fruit of faith and fellowship Abraham stands against temptation and makes a stand for God's honour so he returns to Sarah his wife with a clear conscience, having proved God and re-established his witness to his wife, his family and the world.

Don't ever let the devil tell you if you have failed in Egypt there is no further use for you in the Lord's service. Let us learn from Abraham's testimony. Go back urgently like Abraham with determination to Bethel, symbolising going back to God in repentance. Understand that the re-establishing of your fellowship with God is your first priority. Then when challenging divisions arise, place yourself in the hands of the Lord by faith as an unselfish peacemaker.

Then in renewed fellowship with the Lord when the call comes to serve, go forward like Abraham with compassion and courage, trusting in the Lord having learned from the past.

Do battle with the enemy on behalf of souls and as a reward of faith enter into deeper spiritual blessing with the Lord.

7. ABRAHAM BELIEVED IN THE LORD

Genesis 15.1-6

As we concluded *Genesis 14* we noticed Abraham was no longer fearful, as he was in Egypt, but standing up to a man of the world with integrity and truth. He was concerned only for the honour of the Most High God.

However as we move into *Genesis 15* it is evident that Abraham once more became overwhelmed with fear. It may have been that Abraham feared revenge and reprisal from the nation of defeated King Chedorlaomer. He may have been discouraged by the manner in which Lot evidently went back to Sodom with his family; Lot had not taken the opportunity to separate from this evil city and people and dwell as a pilgrim.

But above all this, deep down in his inner being was the grief of still being childless. As Abraham lay in his tent that night he was beset with doubts and fears. All the obstacles to the fulfilment of God's promises seemed to overwhelm him.

We will consider how the Lord God addressed Abraham's fear and inner turmoil, and see how relevant God's dealings with Abraham remain for us today.

1. God's faithful character

'After these things the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward' Genesis 15.1.

Notice how the two aspects of God's faithful character address the two issues relating to Abraham's fear. To the fear of reprisals God says, *'I am thy shield'*, and to the grief of being childless God says of

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Himself, *'I am...thy exceeding great reward.'* These are the first of the great 'I Am' statements of God. God's authority was stamped upon His promise.

Notice also here that it is the first time in Scripture that the phrase *'The word of the Lord'* appears. Abraham's faith must first depend solely upon the Word of the Lord. It does not matter what type of trial or testing we are going through; the Word of the Lord provides for the benefit of our faith and is to be trusted. Many times a particular aspect of His wonderful character is revealed that is applicable to our pathway. So it is here; God knew exactly how to address Abraham's fear. He revealed aspects of His character, which suited his situation and gave authority to His words, *'Fear not Abram.'*

When I was a small boy I was having a race with my older brother and was inching ahead, so he pushed me straight into a bed of stinging nettles. But near the stinging nettles were dock leaves that were able to give an immediate relief for the pain when applied to the sting. So it is with the Word of God. God has his 'dock leaf' promises to sooth and reassure. For the sting of every trial there is a suitable promise. Abraham must take comfort from the security and certainty of both God's character and His promises.

Firstly, for his fear of reprisals God said, *'I am thy shield'*. This phrase has the meaning of being Abraham's sovereign protector. The strength of the meaning is in the protecting power of God in front of Abraham, as a shield.

Secondly, as an antidote for his time of doubting, God tells him He is his *'exceeding great reward'*. This is undoubtedly an incredible expression of authority from God. A double expression 'exceeding great' is used to bring out the awesome wonder of God's reward. The word 'exceeding' refers to the power of the reward, while the word 'great' refers to the magnitude of it.

Why was it God spoke in such an expansive manner? Because this

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promise of an exceeding great reward given to Abraham has its ultimate fulfilment in all nations of the world being blessed in Christ.

2. God's condescension

'And Abram said, Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir' Genesis 15.2-3.

Here we learn that God is not only a promising God in times of fear and doubting but also a listening God in times of fear and doubting. Notice here how God gets to the heart of the issue, knowing Abraham's state of mind. The words *'I am thy exceeding great reward'* are given to encourage an honest response from Abraham.

We can see in Scripture how God lovingly provokes a response to ensure we respond wholeheartedly. This is apparent also in the New Testament. Christ, when restoring Peter, repeatedly asked if he really loved him to provoke a real response. Peter's heartfelt response was part of his restoration process. It made Peter realise how much he really did love his Saviour.

So with this statement from God, *'thy exceeding great reward'*, God touched Abraham's inner being, in particular regarding the issue of a son. God spoke in this authoritative way to bring forth the sincere and heartfelt prayer of Abraham.

Now in his response to God's reassuring promise Abraham first sincerely worships God and then confesses to the listening God about his doubts; then he goes as far as to reveal his suggestion as to how God could alternatively bring about His purposes.

Abraham is acknowledging three things here:

a. Despite his fear he worships the Lord God. He uses a double expression, 'Lord Jehovah,' to express his faith even in his fear. We

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can see here how Abraham, the man of faith, set down an essential principle in fear: never move away in fear from the reality of God and who He is!

b. He sincerely acknowledges his problem is not understanding the ways of the Lord. Abraham teaches us the answer to fear and doubts is not to bottle them up in our mind but to pour them out in prayer to God.

c. Abraham confesses his willingness to settle for a lesser fulfillment of the Lord God's promise. Why not make Eliezer of Damascus the heir? Doubts and fears often tempt us to settle for something less and alternative, not the real thing. Abraham didn't shock or surprise God in what he said: he only said what God already knew he was thinking. The Lord God in mighty condescension was the listening God to Abraham.

God spoke to Abraham first to make sure Abraham spoke honestly to Him as the listening God. Following his sincere confession of where he was on the matter, the Lord God then revealed Himself in a deeper way. Abraham came to understand that God's delays are not God's denials.

We see here the way of healing for Abraham and to greater faith and deeper belief in God: it came through worship, confession and openness before a gracious, longsuffering God.

But now he must simply trust in nothing but the Word and character of God, for in the end honest and sincere faith in God and His Word must prevail.

3. God's promise

'And, behold, the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be

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*able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be'
Genesis 15.4-5.*

Here it is that God, in His perfect timing, grants to Abraham a further reassurance and glorious promise. This promise ultimately points to the Messiah and His Church. To bring home the awesome nature of the promise, God uses His creation. This shows to us the significance of respecting God's creation as a voice to us of His Almighty power.

As Abraham lay in his tent thinking within himself, However can God's exceeding great reward come to me? God says in effect: 'Get up, Abraham, and look out of yourself to my greatness and majesty in creation. This will reassure your faith.'

There is a story of how one of the Presidents of the USA in the last century had an important meeting at the White House with a number of leaders of other nations. At the end of the meeting he took them out onto the White House lawn and asked them to look at the stars. It was a very clear night and the night sky was very impressive. After some while he said 'Gentlemen, I think we all are now small enough to go to bed.'

'Abraham, look at the stars and understand something of My greatness and majesty. Are you able to number the stars, Abraham? Even in that small part of the sky that you can see, the stars are innumerable. Abraham, you have My Word and the evidence before you in creation of My mighty power. Believe in my promise that your seed will be abundantly blessed. The Almighty God, who never lies, reveals Himself in word and in creation before you. Simply believe, Abraham.'

So it is for us. God has revealed Himself by His Word and by the power of His creation. We are called like Abraham to come to this point of total belief and trust in God. It is not a question of

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understanding everything about God's ways. It is rather about trusting in God's Word and His character. It is about being additionally reassured through the glorious power of His creation.

4. God's gift of faith in the Messiah

'And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness' Genesis 15.6.

Here in this verse we have one of the most wonderful statements in all Scripture: *'he believed in the Lord'*. This statement is not a mere assent to the fact that there is a God. No, this is a belief which rests solely upon God – His Word, His character, His will and His way. It is a faith which looked undoubtedly to Christ as Saviour.

Here Abraham has come to the point where the Messiah is more important to him than anything else. He sees here that the *'exceeding great reward'* is ultimately the gift of God to this world of a Saviour. He sees the significance of the meaning of the word 'seed' given to him by God. It has implications wider than his own personal family tree, but spiritually to the whole family of God in Christ. The promise pointed to Christ the Messiah, the Saviour of the world. As Paul said:

'Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ' Galatians 3.16.

But how can we be so sure as to the extent of Abraham's Christ-centred faith here? It is the first mention we have of the word 'believe' in Scripture. It is also given in connection with the first use of the two words 'counted' and 'righteousness'. Now if we consider these three words together in their context we can see their remarkable significance.

The word 'believed' used here has the meaning of the God-given faith of a truly converted person looking to Christ as their Saviour, for the words *'counted it to him for righteousness'* are given in connection

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with his faith, meaning righteousness imputed to him. The only way righteousness can be imputed to a person is by faith in Christ. So the belief Abraham had here was a Christ-centred faith.

If we turn to the New Testament we are taught clearly that this faith relates to the Covenant of Grace in Christ. This verse is quoted in three letters of the New Testament. First in Paul's *Letter to the Romans*. Paul builds his argument for justification by faith by using the testimony of Abraham and his faith:

'For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness' Romans 4.3.

He then explains how it is that Abraham's faith is the same in nature as true Christian faith:

'He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification. Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' Romans 4.20-5.1.

Then if we move to *Galatians 3* we can see again confirmation of the type of belief Abraham was exercising. Abraham's faith in God's promise looked forward to its ultimate revelation in God's Son, Jesus Christ:

'Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith,

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preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham' Galatians 3.6-9.

God's promise undoubtedly speaks to Abraham of His everlasting Covenant of Grace in Christ. As Abraham believed by faith in that everlasting covenant, the '*exceeding great reward*' of Christ's righteousness was imputed to him.

Why spend time on this? Why is it so important to us? This is important as it proves in Scripture that the Covenant of Grace was seen in both the Old and New Testaments. It is important because it shows that Christ is all the Scriptures. It is important because the Christ-centred faith that Abraham was given is the same as that for all believers. Jesus said, '*Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad*' (John 8.56). Calvin commented:

'There can be no reasonable objection to the opinion that the promise originally made to Abraham included the Messiah, and the promised blessings were to descend through him. This is so often affirmed in the New Testament, that to deny it would be to deny the repeated declarations of the sacred writers, and to make war on the whole structure of the Bible.'

SUMMARY

God's faithful character v1

Two aspects of God's faithful character are given to address the two issues relating to Abraham's problem: to the fear of reprisals from his enemies God says, '*I am thy shield*'; to the grief of being childless God says of Himself, '*I am thy great reward*'.

We noticed this is the first time in Scripture that the phrase '*the Word of the Lord*' appears, for Abraham's faith must depend solely upon the Word of the Lord.

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God's condescension v2-3

Here we learn that God is not only a promising God in times of fear and doubting, but He is also a listening God in those times.

We noticed how Abraham, despite his fear, worships the Lord God. He uses a double expression, 'Lord Jehovah' to express his faith, even in his fear.

He then sincerely acknowledges his problem is not understanding the ways of the Lord. Abraham teaches us the answer to fear and doubt is not to bottle them up in our mind but to pour them out in prayer to God but in a spirit of worship.

We can see here the way of healing for Abraham, and that greater faith and deeper belief in God came to him through worship, confession and openness before a gracious, longsuffering God. He must simply trust in nothing but the Word and character of God, for in the end honest and sincere faith in God and His Word will prevail.

God's promise v4-5

Now God in His perfect timing grants to Abraham a further reassurance and glorious promise. This promise in its fullest sense points to the Messiah and His Church. To bring home the awesome nature of this promise, God uses His creation. Abraham must consider the awesomeness of God's creative power and handiwork as seen in the stars.

8. GOD'S RATIFICATION OF ABRAHAM'S FAITH IN THE LORD

Genesis 15.7-21

'And he said unto him, I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it. And he said, Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it? And he said unto him, Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon'
Genesis 15.7-9.

Here we have our second 'I am' statement, God speaking with His authority: 'I am the One who makes and keeps His promises; I am the One who orders matters according to My will; I am the One Jehovah God, the divine Being, who is leading you to Heaven.'

In verse 7 God is speaking particularly about His providential land dealings to Abraham in a national sense, and the manner in which he would eventually inherit it.

Abraham has a question: *'Whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?'* God directs Abraham to make a ceremonial sacrifice symbolising solemn covenant. This ceremony would not only depict God's solemn commitment to fulfil the Canaan land promise; it would not only confirm the historic events leading up to the fulfilment of the Canaan land promise, but it would also symbolise God's Covenant of Grace in a profound manner. So the ceremony confirmed the sovereign God of both providence and of grace.

Abraham would have been familiar with this type of ceremony from his childhood in Ur of the Chaldees. At a time when legal documents in writing were rare, this ceremony was the equivalent of a legal document. The sacrifices were divided in half and placed in two

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rows, representing the two parties. Then both parties walked in the middle of the two rows. This denoted their unity and agreement to the covenant they were making.

Now in this event God instructs Abraham to sacrifice certain specified animals of three years old. This was the age at which they would have been considered to be in their prime.

Waiting for God

'And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another: but the birds divided he not. And when the fowls came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away' Genesis 15.10-11.

Having carefully laid the slain and divided animals in order and the two birds either side, Abraham must wait for the sign of the Lord's appearance to ratify the covenant. All day he waited, and all day in the heat of the burning sun he had to drive away the vultures. What a great test of faith and patience! How tempted he must have been to give up!

The revelation of God's purposes

'And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abram; and, lo, an horror of great darkness fell upon him. And he said unto Abram, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full' Genesis 15.12-16.

Exhausted, Abraham falls into a deep sleep and horror and great darkness comes upon him. Then God spoke to Abraham. The darkness

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depicted the future suffering of the children of Israel in Egypt for four hundred years. But that cruel nation shall be judged and the Children of Israel shall come out with great substance. Then, in the perfect timing of the longsuffering God, they would be used of God to judge the Canaanite Amorite people for their dreadful idolatry. Abraham himself would die in peace at a good old age.

This is an amazing prophesy from God who knows the past, the present and the future. History proves beyond all doubt that all these events came to pass exactly as God said. God rules over all: He knows the end of the matter from the beginning. He fulfils all His purposes.

The revelation of God's presence

'And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces' Genesis 15.17.

It is at this point that we have the deep symbolism of God's Covenants of Providence and Grace. God came to the man who waited for Him by faith. The smoking furnace and the burning lamp passing between the pieces symbolise God's presence graciously ratifying and confirming His covenant.

But why did not God invite Abraham to walk alone between the pieces, or let Abraham walk alongside the smoking furnace and burning lamp between the pieces as a partner? Abraham must understand his total dependence upon God for this covenant to be kept. Abraham must understand this is not a covenant between equals. This promise can only be fulfilled by God.

This is ultimately depicting God's Covenant of Grace, totally dependent upon God's faithfulness in Christ. In the great way of salvation, it is not some of God's work and some of man's work, but all of God in Christ Jesus for man to receive by faith. So only God could walk in between the pieces.

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The horror of darkness, then the smoking furnace and burning lamp, not only spoke of the bondage in Egypt and God's deliverance to Canaan land, this also spoke to Abraham of a day which he saw by faith. Christ the Messiah would enter on His own into awesome depths of suffering to deliver His people! The everlasting Covenant of Grace must be ratified and fulfilled by Christ through suffering and death. So the Lord's people are delivered to heavenly Canaan land.

On one side of the covenant was a perfect God; on the other side sinful man. Christ the Son of God, alone, walks between to make reconciliation and peace.

The confirmation of the family and land promise

'In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates' Genesis 15.18.

Abraham was now an old man and his wife Sarah was passed the age of bearing. However could this land promise covenant to his natural descendents be realised? Only by the sovereign and miraculous intervention of God.

That same day that Abraham believed by faith, the Lord said to him, *'Unto thy seed have I given this land.'* 'It is a gift of My sovereign grace to Abraham's seed.'

SUMMARY

The events in this chapter are truly remarkable to strengthen our faith in God. Here in this chapter we have been considering two covenants:

1. The confirmation of the existing everlasting Covenant of Grace in Christ to all who believe as Abraham did. It is interpreted in this way by the New Testament writers. Connected to this is the truth that Christ took on Him the seed of Abraham.

God's Ratification of Abraham's Faith

2. A providential covenant, which relates to a certain period of history for Abraham's descendents, a covenant resulting in their inheritance of the land of Canaan.

As Abraham was called to simply and solely trust in the Word of God to Him by faith, so God calls us today to that same faith.

9. SARAH TAKES CONTROL – ABRAHAM LACKS CONTROL

Genesis 16

In this next chapter we see how human reasoning takes over from the patient waiting for God. Sarah and Abraham allow human reasoning alone to become their guide, and their actions become governed by a natural desire to sort matters out in their own way.

God does sometimes allow us, in His permissive will, to follow a certain path and have our own way. But like Sarah and Abraham, sadly we sometimes lay up for ourselves a lot of trouble along the way.

The events we are to consider certainly brought great sorrow, tension and stress. They had a detrimental effect on the relationship between Abraham and Sarah, and on Hagar her maidservant. But we will see again how God appeared in His great grace to overrule and direct in the situation.

I would like to note five particular points in this chapter which speak to us about the negative hurt of sin and the positive healing intervention of God. It is a challenging chapter but we must deal with it faithfully; then I trust we will derive some real practical and spiritual benefit from its teaching.

1. Sarah takes control

‘Now Sarai Abram’s wife bare him no children: and she had an handmaid, an Egyptian, whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said unto Abram, Behold now, the Lord hath restrained me from bearing: I pray thee, go in unto my maid; it may be that I may obtain children by her. And Abram hearkened to the voice of Sarai’ Genesis 16.1-2.

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The problem being dealt with in this chapter, as in the beginning of the previous one, is that of childlessness, but this time the problem is considered from Sarah's viewpoint. We may imagine how this matter would have dominated her mind from day to day and night to night.

Sarah had left her homeland in submission to her husband's call from God. She was very loyal to her husband, even when told to lie in Egypt in an attempt to preserve his life. Sarah was also no doubt aware of the promises made by God to Abraham regarding their having a son. But as time went on the pressure of not bearing a child must have borne down on her severely, probably to such an extent that she felt totally responsible and downcast.

Maybe because she felt to be the cause of the problem, she must now attempt to sort things out. Was it not too late for her to have children? However, Sarah had lost sight of the sovereignty of God. She decided to take the matter into her own hand.

Sarai gave way to unbelief and opened her own agenda and campaign to Abraham by a statement containing only half the truth about the dealings of God. She said to Abraham, *'The Lord hath restrained me from bearing'*. Sarah acknowledged God was dealing in the past and present of her life. However her faith at this time did not move from the present to trust the Lord for her future life. Because she left out faith, she drifted into suggesting a course of action based upon human reasoning.

Directly we take faith out of our thinking for the future as Christians, human reasoning always takes over. Sarah considered that all hope was gone for the promise of a child to be fulfilled through her, so there must be another way.

It is also helpful for us to note that when speaking to Abraham about the matter Sarah does not speak specifically of a son and heir but rather of bearing children in the plural. It would seem that Sarah lost sight of the particular and mighty promise from God of a son, a

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son specifically for her and her husband Abraham, from whom would arise a mighty nation; a promise that God would fulfil. It had possibly also become to her more of a personal issue of the hurt of not bearing children rather than the pain of waiting for the fulfilment of a specific promise.

It was evident at this point that Sarah had taken faith out of the mix in her thinking. Something therefore must be done now. Sarah decided there was no point waiting any longer for God; the situation must be taken in hand. She must get this matter sorted, take control of the situation and find a way. In desperation she asks Abraham to go in to her maid Hagar (from Egypt), such was her desire to have children.

This was a popular cultural solution to the problem in Sarah's day. Hagar would become like a surrogate mother. After a child was born Sarah could take over the role of mother as he grew up.

Without faith, the fulfilment of God's promise was downgraded to her way not God's way. Sarah lost sight of the sovereignty of the faithful God in the matter. In her thinking God's particular responsibility became her own responsibility; therefore the burden of childbearing overwhelmed her.

She lost sight of the particular nature of the promise from God regarding a son, and of the providential and spiritual implications of that promise to the world. She also lost sight of her own self-respect as the faithful wife of Abraham by replacing 'us' with 'I' in the marriage: '*it may be that I may obtain children by her.*' She stepped aside and allowed her handmaid to take her place, so promoting evil that good might come.

Notice how it was that both Abraham and Sarah considered cultural ways of overcoming the problem. Abraham had previously thought of using his chief servant; Sarah thought of using her chief maid. However, the difference with the second suggestion of Sarah was

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that neither she nor Abraham brought this matter before the Lord. Abraham had confessed his suggestion to the Lord in the previous chapter, and then the Lord kindly corrected and reassured.

In this second instance they just went ahead in their own wisdom, and in the end Ishmael was born. The problem was that neither of them prayed over this second course of action, the ramifications of which are still being realised today in the nations of the world.

Application for us today:

a. We need to beware of making big decisions when we have become frustrated with God.

b. We need to beware of taking out the plural in marriage and replacing it with the 'I', the singular. This was a problem for both Abraham and Sarah (see *Genesis 15.2* and *16.2*). Instead of praying together here as one they came at the problem as two individuals.

c. We need to beware of running out of patience with God, trying to find a way to fulfil the purposes of God in our own methods and with human reasoning, thinking that the end justifies the means!

d. We need to remember the danger of downgrading the fullness of God's promises.

2. Abraham lacks control

'And Sarai Abram's wife took Hagar her maid the Egyptian, after Abram had dwelt ten years in the land of Canaan, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife. And he went in unto Hagar, and she conceived: and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes' Genesis 16.3-4.

The one thing Sarah needed at this time was reassurance from her husband; she needed comfort, leadership and spiritual support. This was the time when Abraham had to speak to Sarah and explain more fully the promise given to them. It was the time for Abraham to live up to his responsibility as the head of the home. Instead Abraham just

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did as Sarai said without any recorded resistance: *‘And Abram hearkened unto the voice of Sarai’*.

Note the leadership role reversal. This takes us back to the Fall when Eve led the way in eating the forbidden fruit: Adam showed no proper leadership or resistance. Here Abraham was not living up to his responsibilities to his wife, either spiritually or physically. He failed to lead by going to the Throne of Grace in prayer over the matter. He gave in to the temptation to commit adultery with Hagar. The suggestion had come from his wife: she was willing, so what was the problem?

This did nothing to strengthen their marriage. Ultimately it only placed great strain upon it, as Abraham capitulated to the plan and took another wife.

Abraham and Sarah’s actions now involved another person. Sarah took her maid to Abraham. Hagar had to do as she was told – was she not just a slave from Egypt? So Hagar lost the possibility of having a proper marriage in the future to another man. She was to become like a single mother as a tool of Sarah.

Application for us today:

a. Remember as husbands the duty we have to live up to our responsibility to protect, love and care for our wives.

b. We need to beware of justifying our actions just because our dearest one asks us to do something. If anyone but Sarah had come up with such a plan of action Abraham would probably have rejected it.

c. Remember also the danger of involving a third party in plans not governed by the spiritual mind.

d. Remember the root of the problem for Abraham and Sarah was a rejection of the sufficiency of God’s Word to guide them, resulting in a rejection of its authority to follow another ‘authority’ based on human reasoning. As believers we should submit to the Word of God

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as we follow God, which declares, ‘Whatsoever is not of faith is sin’ (Romans 14.23).

3. Hagar rejected

‘And Sarai said unto Abram, My wrong be upon thee: I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the Lord judge between me and thee. But Abram said unto Sarai, Behold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee. And when Sarai dealt hardly with her, she fled from her face’ Genesis 16.5-6.

So the plan went ahead: Abraham went in unto Hagar and she conceived. From being a maidservant serving Sarah, Hagar now had power over her. She despised Sarai; she had succeeded where Sarah had apparently failed. The temptation to despise Sarah was too great for Hagar. She remembered the fact that she herself had been taken out of Egypt as a slave. Her old nature said this was ‘payback’ time.

For Sarah her problem was now even more acute. Her failure, her sense of inadequacy, was now even sharper as she had to face Hagar. Sarah now realised she had made a mistake, she had done wrong, but her first reaction was to pin the blame on her husband. She was angry and hit out at the person she loved most of all: *‘My wrong be upon thee’*. Abraham, you must take the ultimate responsibility as the head for the fact that I am now despised.

His headship now came in useful for her. In her self-righteous indignation she irreverently calls upon God to judge between them on the matter. There is a danger among believers when in a tight corner to take the name of the Lord in vain, to claim He is on our side whatever!

Abraham’s reaction was again inadequate. He seemed to go for the easiest option. Instead of being a man and reminding his wife of her responsibility to Hagar – she had simply obeyed their plan – and their

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need to repent before God, Abraham simply hands Hagar over to Sarah's wrath. For the sake of a quiet life he took what seemed the easiest option to pacify his wife.

We can see the downward spiral of sin – one sin led to another. Sarah's anger and jealousy, Hagar's pride and Abraham's withdrawal from the situation, a false, neutrality wanting to wash his hands of the situation: anything for a quiet life – do what you want with Hagar!

Sin multiplies easily, but dealing with it properly requires repentance and humility.

Application for us today:

- a. We need to beware of blaming others for our own mistakes, turning on those we love.
- b. We need to beware of irreverently using God's name without humility and repentance.
- c. We need to beware of always taking what seems the easiest option, just for a quiet life.
- d. We need to beware of trying to wash our hands of a situation which is really our responsibility.
- e. We need to beware of damaging our witness as believers before others.

We now move onto the positive aspect of God's intervention in this chapter.

4. Hagar remembered

'And the angel of the Lord found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur. And he said, Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Return to thy mistress, and submit thyself under her hands. And the angel of the Lord said

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unto her, I will multiply thy seed exceedingly, that it shall not be numbered for multitude. And the angel of the Lord said unto her, Behold, thou art with child, and shalt bear a son, and shalt call his name Ishmael; because the Lord hath heard thy affliction. And he will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren' Genesis 16.7-12.

Sarah subjected Hagar to the full blast of her wrath and anger. Hagar became the punchbag for all Sarah's grief, bitterness and jealousy. Note again the awful effects of sin. Here were Abraham and Sarah behaving in a way totally different to God's way. Pride was ruling. So Hagar fled from Sarah's wrath: *'She fled from her face'*.

How sad it was that Sarah's anger and attitude in the situation now caused Hagar much grief and suffering. No doubt Sarah thought when Hagar ran away that she was well rid of her: out of sight, out of mind. She was only a slave in any case; she could be treated in such a manner and be taught a lesson not to despise her mistress. This was anger replacing longsuffering.

But in her rejection of Hagar Sarah was treating another person's life irresponsibly and that of the baby she was now carrying. Her raw emotions were controlling her decisions.

But GOD! The Angel of the Lord found out Hagar! What a beautiful picture this is of Jesus the Good Shepherd, the One who has come to seek and to save that which was lost. Hagar's life was a wreck; she had been rejected, ill-treated and used. She was helpless, homeless, despised and was also suffering because of her own pride.

But at the point of her need the Angel of the Lord found her in the wilderness by a well. Notice that God went to Hagar in her grief and rejection, not Sarah in her anger. Hagar, however abused and lowly in status, was remembered by the Lord compassionately.

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The Angel of the Lord asked, ‘Where have you come from and where are you going?’ Hagar answered, ‘I flee from the face of my mistress Sarah.’ The answer God gave Hagar is certainly not the answer the world would have given. Hagar would never find true comfort going back in Egypt. It was the Lord she needed. ‘Hagar, return to your mistress! Go back under the yoke of your oppressor. Don’t run away; return and submit.’

Running away is never the answer to complex personal problems. It was hard for her to ‘eat humble pie’ and return, but this was God’s will for Hagar. She was running off to Egypt for help; God was going to help Hagar personally in the difficult path before her, but she had to turn around and submit to the cross before her.

In some ways it may seem harsh for Hagar, and submission is not a word in vogue in our society at present. God delights to bring mercy, comfort and relief to the oppressed, but He also reminds us of our responsibilities. The right way in this situation was to submit to Sarah as her mistress, to go back, trusting in the Lord, in the right spirit, no longer despising her mistress. Her humble action and attitude would be used of the Lord in softening Sarah’s heart to receive her again.

Our freedom in trial is not found by running away from it, but by submitting to it. Real freedom is found in experiencing the gracious help of God in our life to aid us through that trial.

‘Who is this that cometh up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?’ Song of Solomon 8.5.

God encourages and assures Hagar that she will be safely delivered of a son. She is even told what name to give him. Note the compassionate care of God overruling the sinful actions of Abraham and Sarah. The name Ishmael means: ‘God hears,’ *‘because the Lord hath heard thy affliction.’*

Hagar would have told Abraham about her encounter with the

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Lord. So in verse 15 we read it was Abraham who actually called his son's name Ishmael. He submitted to God's choice of name first given to Hagar the slave, realising it was a constant reminder that God hears the cries of the afflicted. This truth no doubt governed the attitude of Abraham and Sarah to Hagar and Ishmael in the coming years.

5. Hagar's reverence for God and its fruit

'And she called the name of the Lord that spake unto her, Thou God seest me: for she said, Have I also here looked after him that seeth me? Wherefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered' Genesis 16.13-14.

Hagar no doubt repented of her own sins in God's presence. In her worship she called the name of the Lord: *'Thou God seest me'*. She recognised that God knew about her position and her need, and had found and helped her.

But then Hagar says: *'Have I also here looked after him that seeth me?'* In the original this has the meaning that Hagar recognised God's condescending grace. She acknowledged her own slowness in calling upon God for help in the first place. She had experienced an encounter with the Lord and not been consumed by His holiness. Forgiven and encouraged she returned according to His wonderful grace. She was amazed that she was not left on her own, but was saved by God in His mercy.

This points to the wonderful work of Jesus Christ our Saviour, Lord and Intercessor. The Lord appeared here upon Earth at times in the form of an angel before His incarnation. This is thought by many to be one of those occasions. In any event it speaks to us of the amazing condescension of God to visit Hagar in her place of great need.

Hagar was amazed: *'Have I also here looked after him that seeth me?'* Hagar recognised that this was a divine visitation from God and recorded the fact as she named the well Beer-lahai-roi, meaning, 'The

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well of the One who lives and sees me.' This was her comfort: the living God knew. God had made a special visit to her and had taken notice of her. She could now go back and submit to her mistress in the knowledge that God knew all about the situation. She obeyed and returned by faith because God was in control.

SUMMARY

We have sought to extract some practical lessons from the experiences of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar. We have noticed both positive and negative points. These remain as important warnings and encouragements to us in our own day and generation.

- a. Sarai takes control v1-2: God's roles in marriage reversed
- b. Abraham lacks control v3-4: God's rules for marriage rejected
- c. Hagar rejected v5-6: God's love in marriage despised
- d. Hagar remembered v6-12: God's grace magnified
- e. Hagar's reverence and its fruit v13-14: God's wisdom adhered to

10. THE PROMISE OF ALMIGHTY GOD TO ABRAHAM

Genesis 17

Thirteen years had passed since the Lord had appeared to Abraham by special divine revelation. During this period of time Abraham walked with God by faith. He walked trusting in the Word of the Lord, simply living and serving Him according to His divine will.

In these intervening years he must meditate upon God's Word, pray and practise the walk of godliness. He must keep pressing on, depending upon God. Abraham shows us by his example how we also must walk by faith and not by sight.

This chapter of *Genesis* should be understood as being especially God-centred. It contains no less than fifty authoritative statements from God. It is an account which breathes out the sovereign grace of God, and as such should be approached with due reverence and godly fear.

It shows that God is always in control and will undoubtedly always fulfil His promises. He always ensures His perfect will is accomplished in His way not man's way.

As we take a journey through the chapter we will see how it reveals to us so much of God's character and way, and Abraham's response of faith. It is a passage designed to fill us with a sense of awe about God's sovereign power and dealings.

God is telling Abraham at this time: This is what I am going to do; this is what I am telling you to do; this is what will take place; and this is when it will come to pass. God gives us these examples of His intervention and authority to study so that we can go out into the world

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again with renewed confidence in God and His way of faith.

Matthew Henry gives a helpful overview of this chapter:

The circumstances of the making of this covenant, the time and manner, and the posture Abram was in, and the covenant itself in the general scope of it: *Genesis 17.1-4*.

And, afterwards, in the particular instances, that he should be the father of many nations: *Genesis 17.4, 6* and, in token of this, his name was changed: *Genesis 17.5*

That God would be a God to him and his seed, and would give them the land of Canaan: *Genesis 17.7-8*

And the seal of this part of the covenant was circumcision: *Genesis 17.9-14*.

That he should have a son by Sarai, and, in token thereof, her name was changed: *Genesis 17.15-16*.

This promise Abram received: *Genesis 17.17*.

And his request for Ishmael: *Genesis 17.18* was answered abundantly to his satisfaction: *Genesis 17.19-22*.

The circumcision of Abram and his family, according to God's appointment: *Genesis 17.23-27*.

From this overview we can draw out several lessons of application our own day and age. Firstly we will centre on the covenant promise of God and circumcision. In the next chapter we will study the character of Almighty God and Abraham's response as His servant.

God's covenant to Abraham: providential application to Israel and the Jews

This is the second time God's Word makes reference to the covenant of God with Abraham. In this second instance we are given it in more detail and again we can make practical and spiritual applications. Following Holy Scripture we can make further observations relating to the teaching here in the chapter.

The Promise of Almighty God to Abraham

‘As for me, behold, my covenant is with thee, and thou shalt be a father of many nations. Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee. And I will make thee exceeding fruitful, and I will make nations of thee, and kings shall come out of thee. And I will establish my covenant between me and thee and thy seed after thee in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God unto thee, and to thy seed after thee. And I will give unto thee, and to thy seed after thee, the land wherein thou art a stranger, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God...And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him’ Genesis 17.4-8,19.

1. The Old Testament application, in its providential and practical sense, refers to God’s special dealings. Abraham and his seed would develop into a mighty nation under God’s sovereign purpose and goodness. They would inherit the land of Canaan and have a special ‘favoured nation’ status with God. If they obeyed God’s Word and remained loyal to Him they would be abundantly blessed in Canaan land. This all came to pass, for instance under the kingship of David and later Solomon; it was an abundantly blessed period.

2. The nation was privileged to be spoken to by word, sign and visitation from God Himself in Christ. The people of Israel also had many spiritual blessings granted to them throughout their history. They had unique visitations of God in Old Testament times pointing to Christ. These were typified in the manna, water from the rock, the brazen serpent, miraculous deliverances, and the Passover lamb. They had evidence above all other nations to believe and trust in God, following the faith of their father Abraham.

Through the lineage of Abraham and David, the Messiah, Christ

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the Lord, came as promised. It was undoubtedly a remarkable and wonderful privilege to be set apart and chosen of God in this manner.

It was in Bethlehem in Canaan land that Jesus was born and ministered; it was at Jerusalem outside the city walls He suffered and died and rose again. All that the Almighty God promised to Abraham was fulfilled, culminating in the coming of Jesus Christ as Lord. It was to the nation of the Jews that the Gospel was first preached.

But despite such favour, only a minority responded by saving faith and embraced such blessings, following the pathway of Abraham and his only beloved son Isaac.

God's covenant to Abraham: spiritual application

That there is a spiritual application to this covenant, centred in Christ Jesus for His Church, is clear in Scripture. Matthew Henry states:

All believers in every age should be looked upon as Abraham's spiritual seed, and that he should be called, not only the friend of God, but the father of the faithful. In this sense the apostle directs us to understand this promise. He is the father of those in every nation that by faith enter into covenant with God, and (as the Jewish writers express it) are gathered under the wings of the divine Majesty.

It is clear from Paul's teaching in *Romans 4.16-17* that the reference to many nations is meant to be understood spiritually as referring to God's one Church:

'Therefore it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed; not to that only which is of the law, but to that also which is of the faith of Abraham; who is the father of us all, (as it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who

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quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were' Romans 4.16-17.

In addition, the 'everlasting' references in *Genesis 17* point us to the eternal Covenant of Grace in Christ Jesus. This is confirmed by Scripture in the New Testament; for example:

'Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham' Galatians 3.7-9.

'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise' Galatians 3.28-29.

It is Paul who teaches us to make the spiritual application to the covenant of promise given to Abraham. It is the apostolic teaching that clarifies for us that, in its fullest sense, the everlasting Covenant of Grace relates to God's spiritual children of the faith of Abraham, who are saved according to God's sovereign grace. Ultimately their inheritance will be in the heavenly Canaan land.

Circumcision

'This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised. And ye shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin; and it shall be a token of the covenant betwixt me and you. And he that is eight days old shall be circumcised among you, every man child in your generations, he that is born in the house, or bought with money of any stranger, which is not of thy seed. He

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that is born in thy house, and he that is bought with thy money, must needs be circumcised: and my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. And the uncircumcised man child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he hath broken my covenant'
Genesis 17.10-14.

Circumcision was simply a token of the covenant, not a ceremony that guaranteed salvation in God's family. It was a reminder to the family of Abraham of God's promises to them and their responsibility to Him. It was given to, and undertaken by, Abraham as a token after he received the promise of God by faith.

It was also a reminder to the family of Abraham of God's providential promises to them and of their responsibility to obey God's ordinances. We must remember that the natural family of Abraham, even after circumcision, were not automatically God's saved people by physical birth, rite or ceremony. So this part of the covenant is not teaching salvation by nation or race. History proves this fact by the terrible judgment God brought upon Israel for their idolatry later on.

Now this has reference to us also. We are not born believers, even if our parents are Christians. We are not automatically Christians once we have been christened or baptised.

There is much confusion in this matter today in the politics of the world. A person who is born into a Muslim or Hindu family is considered a Muslim or Hindu by birth. However, biblically a person must be born again spiritually to be a Christian.

Remember there has never been, neither will there ever be, different ways of salvation for different races. We are saved in Christ or not at all, whatever race we belong to, not by birth.

We also need to be careful not to mix the physical with the spiritual, or attempt to show that an outward symbol – like circumcision – has any saving significance whatsoever. Nor should we, in our day,

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confuse the outward rite of circumcision with infant baptism, as though a baby is privileged by natural birth to automatically be in God's family.

This was the misunderstanding in Christ's day. The Pharisees said, 'We have Abraham to our father' (Matthew 3.9); in other words, 'We are guaranteed favour with God by birth.' Jesus clearly taught them that they were seriously mistaken. They needed to repent and trust in Him as the Messiah, Jesus Christ, just like other sinners of whatever race. They had no birthright to salvation!

This is an important point for us to remember. We are not Christians by birth, by baptism, by christening, or by what we state on our census form: we are saved by grace alone in Christ alone by being born again spiritually according to God's sovereign grace. Salvation is by grace and not by natural race or nation. This is supported in Scripture:

'And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise' Galatians 3.29.

Circumcision is an outward symbol only.

'For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love' Galatians 5.6.

'For he is not a Jew, which is one outwardly; neither is that circumcision, which is outward in the flesh: but he is a Jew, which is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter; whose praise is not of men, but of God' Romans 2.28-29.

'For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh' Philippians 3.3.

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SUMMARY

As we consider these verses outlining the nature and purpose of the covenant there are two aspects to it. There is a providential element, which refers to Abraham's family together with the land promise, Canaan. But then there is a spiritual aspect to the everlasting Covenant of Grace. This includes all chosen by God who are called by grace, of the faith of Abraham and who look to Christ.

John Calvin says:

‘But Moses in writing this account looked still further, because, indeed, the Gentiles were to be, by faith, inserted into the stock of Abram, although not descended from him according to the flesh: of which fact Paul is to us a faithful interpreter and witness.’

So when we consider these verses it is important for us to always remember God's two purposes, both for providence and grace. Not all Abraham's natural children by future generations were saved people; not all were under the everlasting Covenant of Grace. It was a covenant providentially, specifically for the Jews in terms of the land of Canaan. It was a covenant specifically for the Jews inasmuch as the Lord would be born into the lineage of Abraham. But spiritually applied it related only to those who, like Abraham, trusted by faith in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. These are from every tribe and nation – the many nations of which Abraham is the spiritual father.

11. ABRAHAM, THE SERVANT OF ALMIGHTY GOD

Genesis 17

There are a number of evidences in *Genesis 17* to strengthen our faith.

God's timing

'And when Abram was ninety years old and nine...But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year. And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham' Genesis 17.1a, 21-22.

The opening sentence in verse 1 and statement in verse 21 reminds us God works to His own schedule, not ours. Having divine knowledge of the past, present and future, in His perfect wisdom He brings His will to pass according to His time. He knows exactly when to act, and when to allow events to unfold to fulfil what He promised in the first place. This truth is perfectly displayed in the birth of Jesus Christ.

'But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law' Galatians 4.4.

God is never hurried or slowed down; God is never stopped or set back; God fulfils His will according to His predestinated timetable.

In the course of life, God's timing sometimes seems to roll along like the seasons in an ordered and steady manner. At other times God shakes us with the immediacy of His timing. For example, later on we see this in Abraham's experience on Mount Moriah. It was not until Abraham lifted his knife to slay his son that God called, with split-second timing, to stop him.

At other times, as it was for Abraham and Sarah, God's timing seems

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so 'out of sync' with our own. So we have to learn in quiet submission from what the prophet Isaiah says:

'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts' Isaiah 55.8-9.

In any event, God calls Christian believers to trust God for His perfect timing, and that He will apply His wise knowledge of the situation. Think of the thousands of times God secretly intervenes in providence to protect us!

God's authority

'...the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God' Genesis 17.1b.

On previous occasions God revealed Himself to Abraham as his 'shield and exceeding great reward' and as 'the Lord'. These were indeed special times of revelation and great encouragement. But here God develops His revelation as 'I am the Almighty God'. Abraham must now learn that God is infinite in power and authority. He must firstly direct his faith to trust in the truth that God is able to activate His power and authority in justice and in mercy according to His perfect timing.

Secondly, Abraham must accept by faith that the Almighty God is self-sufficient and infinite in His power and authority.

Thirdly, Abraham must know God does not need to source power from another. God is self-sufficient and has always been eternally the I AM, Almighty God. By faith Abraham must glory in this reality.

Yet who can fathom this? God has always existed as the Almighty, Triune, Eternal One! There are infinite truths about God which go beyond finite human understanding and comprehension, yet we are called to believe in these truths about God by faith.

Abraham, the Servant of Almighty God

The first priority in our Christian lives is to humble ourselves before the Almighty God, like Abraham in verse 3, who fell on his face in reverence, adoration and godly fear. Submitting wholeheartedly to God's authority is one of the greatest needs of our day. This is the starting point at which to listen and hear God speak to us through His Word.

God's command

'...walk before me, and be thou perfect' Genesis 17.1c.

Walk in God's sight wholeheartedly and in sincerity and truth, conscious of the truth that the Almighty God has called you by His grace and you are His child. This is the response the Almighty God of grace requires of Abraham and of us.

But the Almighty God, in setting the standard '*Be thou perfect*', not only means 'Be sincere and wholehearted'; He means His standard of life is perfect, as He is perfect. This standard has always been so from Eden.

Jesus said to believers while here on Earth:

'Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect' Matthew 5.48.

So Abraham must bear two things in mind here. Firstly he is commanded to walk before the almighty, all-seeing God wholeheartedly and in sincerity and truth. Secondly, the Almighty all-seeing God has an unchangeable, perfect standard to follow. The point here to remember is that God, in His command to Abraham, was not teaching a Covenant of Works, but rather what Abraham's proper response should be to His everlasting Covenant of Grace. This is God first, then Abraham's response; not God responding to Abraham.

As Abraham considered this, he understood that his proper response must be to exercise himself unto godliness, attending to God's

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Word, prayer, worship and service. He realised that his walking before the Almighty God could never be sinless in his own strength; he could not satisfy God on the basis of his own works. Therefore he was to be an obedient man of faith under grace, constantly looking by faith to the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

So Abraham, the Friend of God, lived a righteous life in that he obeyed the Almighty God willingly and wholeheartedly, walking by faith unto godliness, and trusting only in the righteousness of Jesus Christ the Lord.

The command to Abraham, the man of faith, was for him to be perfect. His response in exercising himself unto godliness, trusting in Christ, is the standard for all Christians today. We must walk in faith and obedience as Abraham did. As the Apostle Peter states to New Testament believers:

'But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy' 1 Peter 1.15-16.

God's power

'And I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly' Genesis 17.2.

As we consider these verses, they clearly manifest that God is establishing His covenant in His own power. Remember, this is not part Abraham's covenant and part God's covenant. God says it is *'my covenant between Me and thee'*, in terms of the everlasting Covenant of Grace given to Abraham.

God says to His bride, the Church in Christ for all time, *'I will'*. I will do this for you out of pure grace and love. Those two words are enough for us to rest upon by faith. They have the infinite power of the Almighty God behind them.

Abraham, the Servant of Almighty God

God's assurance

'Neither shall thy name any more be called Abram, but thy name shall be Abraham; for a father of many nations have I made thee' Genesis 17.5.

Abraham was chosen by God, and called by God, and his was name changed by God. His name change was a token to Abraham of God's sovereign purposes towards him. His new name meant 'father of a multitude', given at a time when humanly speaking a son and heir was impossible. His name change was a constant reminder of the assurance of God.

God's control

'But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year' Genesis 17.21.

Not only does God have the authority to promise but the sovereign control over when that promise is fulfilled.

These reminders of God's character serve to assure faith – the Almighty God is to be worshipped and obeyed. But how did Abraham respond to this visitation of the Almighty God speaking to him?

Abraham's worship

'And Abram fell on his face: and God talked with him' Genesis 17.3.

Abraham worshipped on his knees. God's greatness and majesty, and His command overwhelmed him. Here we have the secret to a proper relationship with God. It is not a relationship between equals but a relationship between the Infinite Being and a weak finite being. Humility in worship and dependence is the only right response to God.

Secondly, he rejoiced on his knees.

'Then Abraham fell upon his face, and laughed, and said in his

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heart, Shall a child be born unto him that is an hundred years old? and shall Sarah, that is ninety years old, bear?’ Genesis 17.17.

We know from Scripture that this was not a sarcastic laugh of unbelief. Rather it was a laugh of joy and amazement harmonising with God’s choice of name for his son. Isaac means laughter of pure joy! Joy from the Lord! God bringing hope into an impossible situation!

Abraham didn’t understand how it could be possible, but he believed nevertheless. It was a holy joy from a man created in the image of God to worship God.

We are reminded again of how Jesus said: *‘Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad’ (John 8.56)*. Abraham saw wonderful blessings in this everlasting Covenant of Grace. This was amazing grace to Abraham. He saw not only the family blessing for time, but the eternal spiritual blessing in Christ to all the world.

Remember what Paul teaches in his letter to the Romans about Abraham’s faith:

‘Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara’s womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform’ Romans 4.18-21.

Thirdly, he respected God’s commands.

‘And God said unto Abraham, As for Sarai thy wife, thou shalt not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall her name be. And I will bless her, and give thee a son also of her: yea, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of people shall be of her...And Abraham said unto God, O that Ishmael might live

Abraham, the Servant of Almighty God

before thee! And God said, Sarah thy wife shall bear thee a son indeed; and thou shalt call his name Isaac: and I will establish my covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. And as for Ishmael, I have heard thee: Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly; twelve princes shall he beget, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant will I establish with Isaac, which Sarah shall bear unto thee at this set time in the next year. And he left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham. And Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all that were born in his house, and all that were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house; and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the selfsame day, as God had said unto him. And Abraham was ninety years old and nine, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old, when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. In the selfsame day was Abraham circumcised, and Ishmael his son' Genesis 17.15-16, 18-26.

Notice here how God includes Sarah in the covenant promise. She also must have a name change like Abraham to signify the importance of the covenant blessing. God gives Sarah her dignity as a wife back again, after her failure with Hagar: '*Sarai thy wife*'. Her new name means 'my princess'. She is to be respected as the mother of the promised child. In a way, Sarah was like the Old Testament equivalent of Mary the mother of Jesus.

Twice God reiterates He will bless her, and that she '*shall bear thee a son indeed*.' This is an emphatic statement of fact. Notice how immediately Abraham respected God's command in calling his wife Sarah before the Lord.

Also notice how fully he obeyed God's command to be circumcised with all the men in his house:

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'And all the men of his house, born in the house, and bought with money of the stranger, were circumcised with him' Genesis 17.27.

Fourthly, he interceded for Ishmael. Abraham was concerned for his son of the flesh, Ishmael. Would God be merciful and remember him in some way also? God's reply to Abraham reveals His abundant providential mercy to Ishmael. However at the same time God reminds Abraham that Isaac is the son of the promise. Isaac must always have the pre-eminence over Ishmael, who represents the flesh.

'But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise' Galatians 4.23.

Isaac represented, miraculously and symbolically, the spiritual new man of grace, whereas Ishmael represented the flesh. There is then a picture here for us that teaches us how the spiritual must come first, represented by Isaac. Although the Lord is good and faithful, providentially pictured in His goodness to Ishmael, He has far more to give than providential goodness; He has spiritual blessing in Christ, represented by Isaac.

When it seems impossible for God to work in a situation we sometimes settle for an Ishmael in our life. 'Let Ishmael live before You, Lord', referring to something we have done. It seems reasonable, and we settle for less. It is easier and more convenient, but in the biblical picture it will not contain spiritual blessing for our souls. So although God does provide for His people providentially, He is not to be worshipped for this alone. God has spiritual blessings to provide in Christ, and He desires we should seek Him by faith for them.

There is nothing more wonderful than to be walking in the Spirit, being a spiritual child of God's everlasting Covenant of Grace. There is no greater blessing than to be in God's family of the faith of Abraham.

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There may be those reading this who as yet have not entered the kingdom of Heaven. You do not know these wonderful spiritual blessings in Christ, the wonderful privilege of walking in the Spirit as a child of the kingdom, but the door of the Kingdom of Christ is still open. It is not a matter of natural birth but of experiencing a spiritual birth in Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus said unless you become as little children in humility and dependence you shall in no wise enter the kingdom of heaven (see *Luke 18.17*). You can come into the kingdom in dependence upon Christ like a little child. You can come from any nation in the world, repenting of your sin before God and trusting totally in Christ as your Saviour, willing to follow Him like Abraham did in faith and obedience.

SUMMARY

We have seen much to strengthen our faith in God – His timing, authority, command, power, assurance and control. Abraham responded to this visitation of God through worship, rejoicing, respect and intercession.

12. ABRAHAM COMMUNING WITH THE LORD

Genesis 18.1-8

Life studies such as this are recorded for us in Scripture to provide us with spiritual and practical instruction, with both challenge and encouragement.

Abraham was ready to commune with the Lord

a. He was meditating

‘And the Lord appeared unto him in the plains of Mamre: and he sat in the tent door in the heat of the day’ Genesis 18.1.

Abraham was redeeming the time. Siesta for Abraham was devotion time; it was his way of life taught to his family (see *Genesis 24.63*). God communed with the man of faith who respected His Word and His will.

God speaks through His Word today to those who wait upon Him in faith.

b. He was receptive

‘And he lift up his eyes and looked, and, lo, three men stood by him: and when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed himself toward the ground’ Genesis 18.2.

Abraham was ready to receive and welcome the men into his home. He appreciated the honour of their visit. While it was siesta time for Abraham, it immediately became hospitality time.

c. Abraham worshipped

‘...and said, My Lord, if now I have found favour in thy sight, pass not away, I pray thee, from thy servant’ Genesis 18.3.

Abraham recognised one as being ‘the Lord’: it was a pre-incarnation

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appearance of Christ the Lord. We see how a differentiation is made in the text when referring to the One and to the other men. The singular is used in worship '*My Lord*', '*thy sight*' and '*thy servant*' in verse 3. In the following verses the plural is used in a practical way: '*your feet*', '*rest yourselves*' (verse 4), and '*comfort ye your hearts*', '*ye come to your servant*' and '*they said*' (verse 5), and '*they said unto him*' (verse 9).

Then the text reverts to the singular, referring to the Lord: '*And He said I will*' verse 10; '*And the Lord said unto Abraham*' verse 13; '*Is any thing too hard for the Lord?*' verse 14; '*I will return unto thee*' verse 14; and '*And he said*' verse 15.

Of the three before Abraham, One was the pre-incarnate Christ, appearing as a man together with two of His angels, who also appeared as two men.

Christ did not have a halo over His head so that Abraham could single Him out! We read in verse 1 that the Lord Himself, in His sovereignty, deigned to appear unto Abraham. So it was revealed to Abraham, the Friend of God, a man receptive to God's guidance and revelation, that one of the men before him was actually the Lord to be worshipped. So Abraham bowed himself toward the ground and said in faith '*My Lord*'. Later in the chapter we read that he also prayed unto Him as '*the Lord*' (verse 22).

This event foreshadowed the time when Christ would take upon Himself a body like ours, when He would be a Man among other men, looking like other men, albeit perfect in all His ways. It was not the physical body of Christ that attracted people so much as what He said and what He did.

In the New Testament record, temple police were instructed to arrest Jesus, but they came back to the religious leaders and said, '*Never man spake like this man*' (*John 7.46*). It was His words which made the impact.

Abraham Communing With the Lord

In this Old Testament account, Abraham ensured the three before him were all treated with the respect they deserved, but special reverence was due to the Lord. He was his Lord, believed in and worshipped by faith, so he addressed Him as *'my Lord'*. His concern was to commune with his Lord – *'Pass not away.'* He knew this was a special visit.

Abraham was willing to serve the Lord

a. Sincere hospitality

'Let a little water, I pray you, be fetched, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree' Genesis 18.4.

The first step practically in honouring his guests was the feet-washing ceremony and rest. Everything must be done to make the guests feel at home and welcome, wanted and cared for. Abraham, the man of faith, wanted the best hospitality to be given and his Lord honoured. Compare this with the Lord Jesus' words to Simon:

'And he turned to the woman, and said unto Simon, Seest thou this woman? I entered into thine house, thou gavest me no water for my feet: but she hath washed my feet with tears, and wiped them with the hairs of her head. Thou gavest me no kiss: but this woman since the time I came in hath not ceased to kiss my feet. My head with oil thou didst not anoint: but this woman hath anointed my feet with ointment. Wherefore I say unto thee, Her sins, which are many, are forgiven; for she loved much: but to whom little is forgiven, the same loveth little. And he said unto her, Thy sins are forgiven' Luke 7.44-48.

Valuing Christ, we will welcome Him as the chief guest into our heart and home.

b. Wholehearted providential hospitality

'And I will fetch a morsel of bread, and comfort ye your hearts;

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after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant. And they said, So do, as thou hast said' Genesis 18.5.

At this point Abraham introduces the heartfelt aspect of hospitality. His statement, '*for therefore are ye come to your servant*', refers to the fact that Abraham saw this visit as according to the sovereignty of God. So for Abraham the visit was to be both a comforting and heart-warming experience. Abraham recognised that this visit was not simply about practical hospitality; it was also about fellowship. There was a spiritual element to this visit.

Abraham shows that a person visiting our home should feel benefitted wholeheartedly. They should leave feeling refreshed in body and in soul having received our hospitality. Abraham was not only concerned for the body, he was concerned for the heart. He understood that believer's hospitality should affect the whole being. It should reach the parts of a person that an unbeliever's hospitality can never reach.

These guests knew that at Abraham's home they could expect wholehearted hospitality.

c. Diligent hospitality

'And Abraham hastened into the tent unto Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal, knead it, and make cakes upon the hearth. And Abraham ran unto the herd, and fetcht a calf tender and good, and gave it unto a young man; and he hasted to dress it' Genesis 18.6-7.

A cursory glance at these verses could leave you with the impression that Abraham was in a state of panic, seemingly rushing around. He tells Sarah to make cakes quickly. How would you feel if your husband came rushing into the kitchen telling you to make cakes immediately for guests who had suddenly arrived? Then we read of him literally running into the herd and getting hold of the best calf and telling his servant to dress it with all haste. Why the rush?

Abraham Communing With the Lord

His actions spoke of his respect for the Lord. There was nothing casual or laid back in Abraham's hospitality in the Lord's presence. He was prepared to put himself out in his efforts for the Lord even though this was not the normal time for food preparation. His actions showed he understood that every second in the Lord's presence counts.

A modern-day illustration of this concerns a student who commenced studies at Calvin Theological Seminary, Grand Rapids, USA. He had not met in person the renowned professor at the college, Louis Berkhoff. Early one morning he went for a walk in the grounds and was joined by an elderly man who had a friendly chat with him about the weather and the grounds. Later the student asked a fellow student if he knew the elderly man. After receiving a description of him his friend replied, 'You have just taken a walk with Louis Berkhoff!' The student was dismayed, thinking, 'I could have asked so many questions about theology, and I just chatted about the weather to him!'

Abraham's actions showed that the Lord deserved his utmost diligence and efforts. Quickly and personally he chose the best calf and showed the true desires of his heart. Only the best was good enough for the Lord. There was no question about it. This was decisive leadership. Abraham by his diligence wanted to show the Lord how much His visit meant to him.

This diligent hospitality is one of the hallmarks of a believer and is required of leaders. See *Romans 12.13*; *1 Timothy 3.2*; *Titus 1.8*; *1 Peter 4.9*; *Hebrews 13.2*.

d. Humble hospitality

'And he took butter, and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree, and they did eat' Genesis 18.8.

On this occasion it was Abraham who served the guests. He stood

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by as their servant ready to serve during the meal. It was Abraham, the man of substance and wealth, who humbled himself. Abraham, in the Lord's presence, became one who served. Image for Abraham was futility because humility reigned in his heart before the Lord.

I wonder what his own servants thought, seeing their master, whom they normally served, being so diligent to serve these guests personally. Abraham could not delegate hospitality at a time like this: the Lord had to be personally attended to. No doubt Abraham's humility in hospitality was designed to show his servants that a greater than Abraham their master was among them.

We can do the same in our homes by giving thanks at meal times and by including in our times of hospitality Bible reading and prayer. It is like saying the Lord is the Head of our home!

SUMMARY

- a. Abraham was ready to commune with the Lord – through meditation, being receptive to visitors sent by the Lord, leading to worship.
- b. Abraham was willing to serve the Lord – through sincere, wholehearted, diligent and humble hospitality.

13. SARAH'S LIFE- TRANSFORMING ENCOUNTER WITH THE LORD

Genesis 18.9-15

During the visit of the three angels to Abraham's home, one of whom was the pre-incarnate Christ, the Lord reaffirmed the promise of a son to Abraham and Sarah. When Sarah overheard the promise of a child, unbelief initially swept over her soul like a dark cloud.

The confirmation

'And they said unto him, Where is Sarah thy wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent. And he said, I will certainly return unto thee according to the time of life; and, lo, Sarah thy wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard it in the tent door, which was behind him' Genesis 18.9-10.

The general question as to Sarah's whereabouts and obvious concern for her welfare showed that she should be included in the events of the visit. The promise of a son is then reaffirmed by the Lord: *'And he said, I will certainly return.'*

Here is another of God's certainties. God always keeps His promises. He will certainly return to bless and ensure the birth of Isaac.

This statement, *'I will certainly return'*, reminds us of another time when the Lord will certainly return. This return is one for which we must wait with great anticipation:

'...which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven' Acts 1.11.

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The cynicism

'Now Abraham and Sarah were old and well stricken in age; and it ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After I am waxed old shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also?' Genesis 18.11-12.

Overhearing the statement, Sarah's old nature gets the better of her. She smothers her faith with a cynical laugh. It was not a laugh that could be heard audibly but an 'inner laugh' of unbelieving cynicism, known only to the Lord. It was as if all the pain of the wait, all the pain of the disappointment, all the pain of the humiliation, the impossibility of the situation, was poured into that cynical laugh within. All the bitterness locked up in her inner being manifested itself in that laugh known only to God. *'Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old?'* Has not God left it too late?

The challenge

'And the Lord said unto Abraham, Wherefore did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I of a surety bear a child, which am old? Is any thing too hard for the Lord? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son' Genesis 18.13-14.

The Lord revealed to Abraham that He knew exactly what Sarah was thinking. Her innermost cynicism, not heard audibly, was fully known to the Lord. It was as clear to the Lord as if she was speaking out loud.

This revelation of God's knowledge is undoubtedly a solemn truth to bear in mind. God knows all about us; our every action, our every thought, is known to God. The challenge of disappointment, delay, loss, or unanswered prayer, can lead to inner cynicism.

But notice here how God responds to Sarah's unbelief in long-suffering patience. He makes to Abraham one of the greatest

Sarah's Life-Transforming Encounter With the Lord

statements for faith in all of Scripture. This is not a statement that is meant to guarantee to us anything we ask of the Lord. This is not meant to be understood as a 'name-it-and-claim-it' type promise; rather it means that there is absolutely nothing too hard for the Lord to accomplish that accords, and is in harmony, with His perfect will in our life. However challenging and impossible it may seem to us, the Lord will most certainly accomplish it in harmony with His wise purposes.

Here in this unique and special occasion, Sarah was to bear a child at a time in her life when it is humanly speaking impossible! *'And Sarah shall have a son.'*

The conviction

'Then Sarah denied, saying, I laughed not; for she was afraid. And he said, Nay; but thou didst laugh' Genesis 18.15.

In fear Sarah denies laughing in such a cynical manner. Surely no one else in the world could prove she had laughed. Had she not laughed silently within herself? But the all-knowing Lord brings down His all-wise verdict: *'But thou didst laugh.'* Here came the conviction. Sarah was convicted of the awesome nature of the all-knowing Lord.

There may be issues in your life that no one else can prove as they have been done silently and in secret. But we need to remember that God knows. As with Sarah, God can deal with the matter in His mercy, by His convicting power.

It would appear from what we read further of Sarah's life, God's convicting Word of power accomplished exactly the objective God intended. The Word of God teaches us, *'for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth' (Hebrews 12.6).*

Here the Lord rebuked Sarah for her unbelief not to condemn her but to correct her, to bring forth the fruit of repentance and faith, and eventually to bring her to laugh in a believing way, not in an

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unbelieving and cynical manner, but with a God-given joy (*Hebrews 11.11* and see also *Genesis 21.1-7*).

From this positive outcome we learn the importance of the Holy Spirit's work of conviction. The Gospel trumpet first warns and then brings the joyful sound of the message of salvation. We will not appreciate the joy without first feeling the pain.

SUMMARY

In this passage we have seen:

- a. God confirming His promise, showing the certainty of His Word;
- b. Sarah's inner, cynical laugh of unbelief;
- c. The Lord's longsuffering response and challenge to Sarah's laugh;
- d. Sarah's denial lovingly corrected by the Lord, leading to repentance and faith with joy.

14. ABRAHAM'S INTERCESSION BEFORE THE LORD

Genesis 18.16-33

God's revelation

'And the men rose up from thence, and looked toward Sodom: and Abraham went with them to bring them on the way. And the Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do justice and judgment; that the Lord may bring upon Abraham that which he hath spoken of him. And the Lord said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous; I will go down now, and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto me; and if not, I will know' Genesis 18.16-21.

Notice how Abraham's hospitality extended to putting the men on the road towards Sodom. As they proceeded along the road once again the promise was reiterated. The Lord then spoke in an encouraging way of His confidence in His servant Abraham's commitment to lead his children and his household. This reminds us of the importance God places on godly leadership in our homes!

Then the Lord, knowing how Abraham would respond by way of intercessory prayer, revealed to him His intention to take a closer look at the terrible state of Sodom and Gomorrah, all according to His holy justice. God is omniscient and know all things, so why the need to go down to see the city?

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The Lord, in His wisdom, ordained that the two angels went ahead of him to the city to appear to Lot as men, as they had to Abraham. They came as the Lord's appointed messengers of both justice and mercy, being used by God in His sovereignty to deliver Lot (see *Genesis 19.13,16*).

So it was in this context of His sent angels, who had a specific mission to accomplish, that God said, 'I will go down to see the city'.

Abraham stands before the Lord

'And the men turned their faces from thence, and went toward Sodom: but Abraham stood yet before the Lord. And Abraham drew near, and said, Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?' Genesis 18.22-23.

Upon this revelation to Abraham, and after the departure of the two angels towards Sodom, Abraham stood before the Lord. This was holy boldness motivated by living faith. Here are important aspects to Abraham's intercession that teach to us the right approach to God in prayer:

1. It is the Lord that we pray to, not to angels or any other being – Mary or saints. It shows how we have direct access to God through the intercession of Christ the Lord and the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives. So it is that Abraham prayed to the Lord. He drew near to the Lord Himself by faith, in humility and dependence.

But Abraham had a question: *'Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked?'* Abraham was interceding for the righteous with his nephew Lot in mind.

2. Abraham boldly trusted the righteous character of God. We can see he has absolute confidence and trust in the Lord. This is the great secret to prayer. He knew and believed God is righteous in all His ways. This is faith at its best. As the hymn writer wrote in the context of the Gospel:

Abraham's Intercession Before the Lord

*I trust His righteous character,
His counsel, promise, and His power.
His honour and His name's at stake,
To save me from the burning lake.
On Christ, the solid ground, I stand;
All other ground is sinking sand.*

Edward Mote (1797-1874)

Abraham's plea

'Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?' Genesis 18.24-25.

Abraham continued his prayer before the Lord, developing his plea. He now depended not only upon the righteous character of the Lord, but he also extended his dependence to the just judgment of the Lord.

Note the knowledge of his faith, referring to the Lord as the Judge of the whole earth. This plea of Abraham has proved on many occasions a huge comfort to believers as they face desperate situations, or at the loss of a loved one and perhaps not being sure of their eternal standing. In the end we have to come to this plea with Abraham, casting ourselves by faith like him on the righteous and just character of God. This is the only safe ground on which to stand: *'Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?'*

Abraham's persistence

*'And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak unto the Lord, which am but dust and ashes...
And he said unto him, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will*

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...And he said, Oh let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak yet but this once' Genesis 18.27, 30, 32.

As Abraham went deeper into prayer before the Lord he recognised his own unworthiness and described himself as being '*but dust and ashes*'. The closer we get in communion and prayer before the Lord, the more unworthy we feel about ourselves. At such times the worthiness of the Lord is magnified in our minds.

Twice Abraham pleaded with the Lord not to be angry with him because of his persistence. Abraham knew that boldness in prayer by faith must not lead to presumption. It is vital we understand the need of reverence, respect and humility in prayer.

In the end the number in his dialogue with the Lord decreased to just ten believers. God said He would not destroy the cities for a witness of ten believers in their midst.

At this point Abraham realised that there had actually been no repentance in the city, even despite God's previous deliverance of them in the war with King Chedorlaomer. It had had no humbling effect whatsoever; no thanksgiving, and no turning to the Lord in the city. Abraham had hoped for at least fifty saved in the city but realised there were not even ten.

Sadly it turns out Lot had obviously been fruitless in his witness in the city. He had had no impact spiritually in a Gospel manner, or in his ministry in the ungodly city. The people had heaped up for themselves in a wilful manner the judgment of God. The most that could be hoped for now was the deliverance of Lot, together with those of his family who followed him in his faith by believing in God.

The day of God's longsuffering was at an end as it will be at the end of the world. It was God's will that the cities now be destroyed. His glory and His majesty was now to be revealed in judgment. They had crossed the invisible line of God's longsuffering mercy into judgment, a reality made clear later to Abraham visibly (*Genesis 19.27-28*).

Abraham's Intercession Before the Lord

The place and the plain so attractive years ago to Lot's materialism would become a chaotic waste. Nevertheless, God heard Abraham's persistent prayer and saved the righteous: He rescued Lot, the one man in Sodom '*vexed with the filthy conversation of the wicked*' (2 Peter 2.7). See Genesis 19.16.

The question may be asked, why was it so important for Abraham to pray if God's sovereign judgment on Sodom and mercy to Lot was preordained? It is true. God is not dependent upon us because He is omnipotent. He does not need us, but He does graciously use us.

God, in His wisdom, chooses to accomplish His will and work in partnership with His people's prayers. Prayer does not change the mind of God but it is His appointed means by which He involves us in His purpose, enabling us to share in its outworking.

God has committed Himself to answer the believing prayers of His people. These prayers, prompted by His Holy Spirit, unite with the outworking of His holy will. Belief in the sovereignty of God does not make us fatalistic but rather respect our role as privileged co-workers in prayer. God's will is accomplished here on Earth in His way in partnership with His people's prayers.

SUMMARY

This passage covers:

- a. God revealing to Abraham His sovereign judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah.
- b. Abraham's holy boldness before the Lord in prayer.
- c. Abraham's intercessory prayer for Sodom.
- d. His humble persistence, and acceptance of the Lord's sovereign judgment on Sodom.
- e. God's will is accomplished in partnership with His people's prayers.

15. ABRAHAM'S INDISCRETION

Genesis 20

We now move from Abraham's blessed encounter with the Lord, governed by his new nature, to his humanistic encounter with Abimelech, influenced by his old nature. This is a disconcerting, somewhat shocking event, and one most difficult to comprehend until we are made to realise something of our own proneness to wander.

'Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall' 1 Corinthians 10.12.

'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death?' Romans 7.24.

Here is the problem of his indwelling and besetting sin in an area not yet weeded out in his life – Abraham's old problem of the half-truth used down in Egypt over 25 years before.

This is the same sort of thing as a person at work using half-truths; for example, getting someone to say you are out when an awkward telephone call comes, when you are actually only outside the office door for a moment!

Gerar was a place of material prosperity, a fertile plain in the land of the Philistines. This was a place for Abraham to do business. A political and safe relationship with the people would be so crucial here. Having witnessed the destruction of Sodom and the fertile plain of Jordan under God's judgment, Abraham himself now enters this other place of material riches in the south – and he seems to relax!

He enters and forms the view that the fear of God is not in the place. Here, where his witness was so crucial, Abraham stopped looking to the Lord by faith. Like Hezekiah later on, Abraham had not learned the lesson of full dependence upon God (see *2 Chronicles 32.31*). We

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need to say with the apostle Paul, *'by the grace of God I am what I am'* (1 Corinthians 15.10).

Here Abraham, the great man of faith, lost his spiritual bearings. He is God's example to us of both failure and faith, and we should learn from him. We learn not to trust in ourselves, however long we have been in the way of faith.

Abimelech's fear – God's response

'But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, thou art but a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife. But Abimelech had not come near her: and he said, Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation? Said he not unto me, She is my sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother: in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this. And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her. Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine' Genesis 20.3-7.

It would seem that despite her age Sarah still commanded a striking appearance inasmuch as she was taken notice of. Certainly her maturity was undoubtedly admired. However, it may have been that Abimelech simply considered it a wise move to align himself in some way to Abraham and his wealth. In any event, Abimelech had no inhibitions about taking Sarah to his house. Sarah also must have entered his house complying with Abraham's request to say he was her brother.

Whatever the motives, Abimelech acted on the understanding Sarah was not Abraham's wife. In that understanding alone his conscience was clear. However, in the treatment of women as items to be used

Abraham's Indiscretion

for lust, he remained guilty. In verse 3 we see the dramatic revelation of God's justice on a mortal man: God hates adultery. Verses 4 to 5 show the defence of Abimelech and the fact that in his conscience he had some knowledge of the Lord of justice. This highlights to us the reality of man's inbuilt awareness that God does in reality exist.

Verse 6 shows us the sovereign, restraining intervention of God. God's people are mercifully, and often secretly, protected by the restraining hand of God.

In verse 7 we see the just command of God. Abraham, a prophet, would pray for his subdued enemy.

Abimelech's rebuke

'Therefore Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ears: and the men were sore afraid. Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said unto him, What hast thou done unto us? and what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done. And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing?' Genesis 20.8-10.

Abimelech did not hold back in giving Abraham a piece of his mind. He was undoubtedly in a state of shock having realised he was so close to the judgment of God. He would also be aware of the recent fate of Sodom and Gommorah for their sin. He was motivated by the fear of God, albeit not in a spiritually saving manner. He respected God but did not serve Him. Abimelech was like millions of people who recognise there is a God but do not truly repent of their sin and follow Him in a personal way.

One such example is the famous Gandhi of India to whom the world eventually looked up and honoured. His views on social ethics were in one way admirable, and his own example of living commendable.

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But in another way Gandhi's teaching was very dangerous because he taught that the power to walk uprightly was within oneself – one's self-determination. He did not look to God for holy spiritual life and forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

Despite his view of life, Abimelech's rebuke was still very humbling for Abraham. Abraham, the man of God who was known to be a believer in Jehovah God, was rebuked by Abimelech who prided himself in being the socially upright man, claiming before God to lead a righteous nation. It reminds us that unconverted people will not hold back from correcting hypocrisy when they see it. In some ways it provides a sort of self-righteous temporary comfort pillow to lie on.

Abraham's response

'And Abraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her, This is thy kindness which thou shalt shew unto me; at every place whither we shall come, say of me, He is my brother' Genesis 20.11-13.

In his response about the deal between him and Sarah, he missed the opportunity to set the record straight in a God-honouring manner. The statement, '*God caused me to wander from my father's house*', misrepresented the sovereign purposes of God. God had never made him wander aimlessly; he was in Canaan land for a purpose. Here it was almost as if Abraham was blaming God for the manner of his lifestyle to justify his agreement with Sarah. Abraham did not acknowledge that he had dishonoured God through his lack of faith.

The point for us here is that when we dishonour God before unbelievers, it is better for us to make it clear in our explanation that

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this was not God's way. If we have behaved wrongly, we must hold our hands up and take responsibility for our actions, acknowledging that such behaviour was not conducive to the faith we profess. This will ensure that God's name is not taken in vain.

Abimelech's recompense

'And Abimelech took sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and womenservants, and gave them unto Abraham, and restored him Sarah his wife. And Abimelech said, Behold, my land is before thee: dwell where it pleaseth thee. And unto Sarah he said, Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver: behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that are with thee, and with all other: thus she was reprov'd' Genesis 20.14-16.

Why did Abimelech provide such a generous recompense for Abraham? God had told him he was a prophet and as such he would pray for him. Abraham, therefore, was to be part of his deliverance under God. Abimelech recognised that, despite all, Abraham was still a man of God, a man of authority and a man of wealth having been protected and blessed of God. He was a person to be respected, otherwise he would be fighting against God who had warned him of death.

Sarah was restored to Abraham together with gifts. The silver was given as a reminder that Abraham was her husband and protector. Sarah was a married person and in that context should be veiled in public. A covering of the head was common in those days to signify the married state. There should be no more deception: Sarah must wear the veil.

This event reminds us that the world is watching the walk of the Christian, so our outward walk is important. There is, however, a deeper symbolism to this gift in its wider context. The word translated 'covering' is taken from the Hebrew word used later for the

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atonement by which sin is covered through the blood of the sacrifice. Here symbolically the wrong was being recompensed, the guilt was covered, and there was reconciliation between the parties.

As a result Abraham was free to live wherever he wanted in Abimelech's territory. For the next period of time Abraham was given a second opportunity to witness in the land of the Philistine. All was not lost: God's name was honoured later (see *Genesis 21.22*).

This reminds us not to give up when we have failed God but rather be men and women of courage, and in God's strength win the witness battle for Christ's sake.

Abraham's intercession

'So Abraham prayed unto God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bare children. For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife' Genesis 20.17-18.

Let us see the significance of Abraham praying for Abimelech. Abimelech had rebuked him for his hypocrisy, and had probably gained great inner satisfaction in pointing out the errors of Abraham. But how did God view Abraham? In the end this is the vital question.

God still viewed Abraham as being righteous before Him in Christ. He still saw him as His servant and indeed a prophet. Despite his failures, Abraham remained a child of God. He did not lose his salvation.

*The soul that on Jesus has leaned for repose,
I will not, I will not desert to his foes;
That soul, though all hell should endeavour to shake,
I'll never, no never, no never forsake.*

John Rippon, 1751-1836

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God did not forsake Abraham but used this experience for his sanctification.

So it was that God has the last word. His servant Abraham must pray for Abimelech! Despite all, God's sovereign grace and mercy shines again and God's servant Abraham goes on his knees. He pours out his heart in confession, supplication and intercession.

SUMMARY

Like a golden thread the faithful, sovereign mercy of God runs through the events we have considered. It shines like a rainbow against the dark cloud of man's sin and weakness.

God does not forsake us but still remains graciously pleased, as Paul says, to work through earthen vessels, *'that the excellency of the power may be of God, and not of us'* (2 Corinthians 4.7).

God's sovereign mercy should bring us to the point where we say:

- Why am I so favoured by God?
- How is it God can use me?
- Who has made me different?

Come to the seat of praise for the grace of God:

'The Lord is gracious, and full of compassion; slow to anger, and of great mercy. The Lord is good to all: and his tender mercies are over all his works. All thy works shall praise thee, O Lord; and thy saints shall bless thee' Psalm 145.8-10.

16. ABRAHAM RECEIVES HIS PROMISED SON

Genesis 21.1-21

We have in this chapter the fulfilment of God's great promise to Abraham and Sarah in the birth of a son. The apostle Paul summarises this remarkable test and experience in the life of Abraham and Sarah. He writes of it as one of the great examples of true and living faith:

'... (as it is written, I have made thee a father of many nations,) before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were. Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations; according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sara's womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification' Romans 4.17-25.

The faith of Abraham was based upon the Word of God to him by way of promise. Sarah, together with Abraham, also judged God faithful that promised.

'Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because

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she judged him faithful who had promised. Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable' Hebrews 11.11-12.

Now the Scripture tells us that *'they which are of faith, the same are the [spiritual] children of Abraham' (Galatians 3.7)*; that is, children who have faith in God and His Word. It is this utterly dependent faith upon who God is, on His Word and His promises that characterises the true children of God.

To encourage our faith this chapter reveals to us something of the faithful character of God who always keeps His promises. He always performs His will and always remains consistent to His way. It is, then, a chapter which both encourages and instructs true and living faith.

God's control

'And the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken. For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bare to him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac being eight days old, as God had commanded him' Genesis 21.1-4.

There is one vital point that faith must grasp and never let go: God, despite all that may seem to the contrary in the circumstances of our life, always remains in control.

Are we willing to submit by faith to the sovereign Lord of all? To His timing, His outcome, His wisdom, His open and shut doors? To the sovereign 'yes' and 'no' of God? Are we willing to submit to the Word of God, which directs and harmonises with God's will?

This has often been described as the greatest test of faith: believing and trusting that God never makes a mistake and that God never

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changes His mind, or has to alter His plan; believing that God is never forced into changing His schedule; that God always finishes what He sets out to accomplish.

There will not be one single iota of unfinished business with God. He is the unchanging, unflappable God whose will is perfect and who is in complete control.

This is the point that is brought out here in the wonderful conception and birth of Isaac:

- the Lord visited Sarah *'as he had said'*;
- the Lord did unto Sarah *'as he had spoken'*;
- *'at the set time of which God had spoken'*.

Against this background three times we are reminded that God always fulfils what He has promised. Notice the emphasis here that God puts upon His Word: He had said – He had spoken – God had spoken.

This reminds us that first and fundamentally that faith means trusting in the Word of God. D L Moody once said:

'I prayed for Faith, and thought that some day Faith would come down and strike me like lightning. But Faith did not seem to come. One day I read in the tenth chapter of Romans, "Now faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." I had closed my Bible, and prayed for Faith. I now opened my Bible, and began to study, and my God-given Faith has been growing ever since.'

Now in many ways the birth of Isaac is typical of the birth of Christ: everything turned out according to the Word of God. This is the point Paul made regarding Christ's birth in *Galatians*:

'But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law' Galatians 4.4.

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There are other similarities pointing to Christ the Messiah:

- Isaac's birth was a miracle of God;
- Isaac was the child of the promise;
- Isaac's name was specified before he was born.

The manner in which the birth of Isaac typified the birth of Jesus Christ the Son of God shows to us that Isaac's birth means far more than the development of one nation. Its greater meaning points to the everlasting Covenant of Grace which extended to all nations – the Church. The assurance of this is in the future birth of Jesus Christ through the genealogy of Abraham: *'in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed'* (Genesis 12.3) – in Jesus Christ.

The sovereign control of God seen here with Abraham, Sarah and Isaac has to be viewed in the context of His purposes to the Church of the living God. It is important that we discern God's control in this world, chiefly in the context of the building of His Church, against which the gates of hell cannot prevail. This is God's ultimate purpose – to build a Church of redeemed people in Christ for His glory, in the midst of this world cursed by sin. The Church evidences the unstoppable God.

God's control is most wonderfully seen in His determination to save all those ordained unto eternal life. It is with this confidence we proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

God's joy

'And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me. And she said, Who would have said unto Abraham, that Sarah should have given children suck? for I have born him a son in his old age' Genesis 21.6-7.

God is the source of all real joy. He is pleased to bestow times of real pleasure and laughter. Sarah says: *'God hath made me to laugh'*,

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or ‘God made laughter for me. God fulfilled His promise in such an amazing way that I am full of joy and praise!’ Sarah’s previous cynical laugh was replaced by God-given joy.

The Bible often speaks about joy. It is God’s great desire to fulfil joy in believers’ hearts. The faithfulness of God, assured by the promises of His Word, brings the greatest pleasure possible. Jesus said:

‘These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full’ John 15.11.

The birth of Isaac was a miracle performed by God beyond human expectations, causing great joy. ‘*God hath made me to laugh.*’ The birth of Jesus Christ was the greatest miracle beyond human knowledge and it caused great joy:

‘Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people’ Luke 2.10.

Whenever someone experiences the spiritual new birth by God’s grace, coming to faith in Jesus Christ and repenting of their sin, being brought into the family of God, there is great joy. We see this in the conversion of the Philippian jailor:

‘And when he had brought them into his house, he set meat before them, and rejoiced, believing in God with all his house’ Acts 16.34.

It was in the context of the parables of the lost sheep and the prodigal son that Jesus said,

‘I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, which need no repentance’ Luke 15.7.

The believer is encouraged to ‘*Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice*’ (Philippians 4.4). The word ‘rejoice’ here has to do with an inner joy within being brought about by serious contemplation of

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the Person, work and attributes of Christ recorded for us in His Word. It is to focus on the all-sufficiency and the wonderful grace, kindness and love of Christ, and to admire Him as the perfect Person *'in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge'* (Colossians 2.3). The fruit of this is that both in times of adversity and of prosperity you can be happy and contented in the Lord.

God-given joy is profound and true; it rises above circumstances; it is wholesome, fulfilling and pure; and it is eternal. Joy is a great characteristic of Heaven. God-given joy is known by the Christian believer, always returning glory to God.

God's separation

'And the child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned. And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking. Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac. And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son. And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called. And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed. And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba' Genesis 21.8-14.

Isaac had been born according to the perfect plan and timing of Almighty God. He had now been weaned, and this moment was celebrated with a great feast. Isaac was the centre of attraction, because

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he was the son and heir. Isaac was the fulfilment of the promises of God.

As Ishmael looked on he naturally speaking felt put out. He was a teenager and fast becoming a man. He now saw his own position taken, and all the attention given to Isaac. Ishmael felt rejected and took out his jealousy on Isaac, mocking him, making fun of him, and showing he despised him.

Sarah saw this mocking and demanded that both Ishmael and Hagar should be thrown out of the family household. Abraham was upset by this incident and felt emotionally torn. His natural love for Ishmael and care for Hagar was clearly felt.

God intervened in the situation, telling Abraham to listen to what Sarah had said: send Hagar and Ishmael away. God would care for them and keep His promise to protect and provide.

Here we are considering the pain of separation. This event is full of spiritual teaching for us. There was a undoubtedly a great deal of personal emotion and hurt for Abraham to send Ishmael away. This reminds us of the emotional pain of separation from the world, from the flesh, and from legalism, but this is God's way! Abraham fully obeyed the command of God, understanding the implications. He also trusted in God to provide for Hagar and Ishmael.

The Apostle Paul explains to us the spiritual meaning of this separation in *Galatians 4*. Each person in the event represents an aspect of either the old or the new covenants. Abraham represents true and living faith; Sarah as a freewoman, not a slave in bondage, represents grace; Isaac represents the miraculous new birth spiritually – the child of the promise, the child of faith and grace; and Ishmael represents that which is of the flesh, meaning doing something without recourse to God, an action that is not guided by the Spirit of God. Ishmael was a product of Abraham and Sarah walking in the

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flesh and not the Spirit. Hagar, as a bondwoman, represents works done in the flesh while in bondage to the law.

Now if we turn to *Galatians*, we read Paul's commentary on this event:

'For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free. Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage' Galatians 4.22-5.1.

What are the implications of this event and of Paul's teaching for us? There is a temptation for us to be wiser than God. We mix, but God says separate. Like Abraham we say, 'Cannot Ishmael and Isaac live together in the same household? Cannot the works of the flesh and God's work of the Spirit get along together?' God says the Mosaic Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace cannot live together.

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Salvation by works and salvation by grace cannot live in harmony together.

Abraham and Sarah tried to achieve the promise through works of the flesh and Ishmael was born – bondage. But when they walked and trusted by faith, Isaac the child of the promise was born – liberty. Ishmael represents the flesh in bondage under the condemnation of the law given by God to Moses at Sinai. Isaac represents the new birth in spirit, living under God’s Covenant of Grace, not under the bondage and condemnation of the law’s demands but under grace. Ishmael and Isaac under the same roof would therefore symbolise compromise.

Paul is reminding us of the work of the Spirit in comparison to the flesh. The bodies of Abraham and Sarah were dead to the possibility of a conception: so we by nature are spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. But as God physically quickened the bodies of Abraham and Sarah to give birth, so God quickens us spiritually from death to give spiritual life.

Also, remember the way in which the old nature, the flesh, persecutes the new man of grace. There is a conflict; the two cannot live in harmony with each other. Ishmael was quite happy until Isaac was born and then resentment flowed. So the old nature is quite content to rule and control the situation before the new birth. But when we are born again spiritually and the new nature takes its rightful place, then the old nature gets very upset. It despises and mocks the new man. Don’t be compromised to live by both the flesh and the Spirit!

God’s providence

‘And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs. And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bowshot: for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against

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him, and lift up her voice, and wept. And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation. And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink. And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer. And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran: and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt' Genesis 21.15-21.

We return to the account and see the compassionate and kind providential provision of God in hearing the cry of Ishmael. God always keeps His Word. Here the God of providence promises and remains with Ishmael to provide and protect. This reminds us of the faithful manner of God's common grace towards His Word. God provided abundantly in His providential goodness to Ishmael.

SUMMARY

As we consider God's fulfilment of His promise of a son for Abraham and Sarah, we can see:

- God always remains in control of our life, whatever our circumstances;
- God is the source of all real joy;
- the conflict between the old and new nature;
- God's common grace and kind providential provision.

17. ABRAHAM'S TESTIMONY AS THE FRIEND OF GOD

Genesis 21.22-34

In the *Epistle of James* we are assured that this description given of Abraham is accurate and true:

'And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, Abraham believed God, and it was imputed unto him for righteousness: and he was called the Friend of God' James 2.23.

Abraham, as the Friend of God, was a man of faith who trusted in the promises of God given to him. He was justified by faith in God as he trusted in the Word of God and in the Messiah Jesus Christ. James makes the point very strongly in his letter that living faith is evidenced by works. Here in the second part of *Genesis 21* we are given two particular evidences of this faith that works by love.

The Friend of God before man

'And it came to pass at that time, that Abimelech and Phichol the chief captain of his host spake unto Abraham, saying, God is with thee in all that thou doest: now therefore swear unto me here by God that thou wilt not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son: but according to the kindness that I have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me, and to the land wherein thou hast sojourned. And Abraham said, I will swear.

And Abraham reprov'd Abimelech because of a well of water, which Abimelech's servants had violently taken away. And Abimelech said, I wot not who hath done this thing: neither didst thou tell me, neither yet heard I of it, but to day. And Abraham took sheep and oxen, and gave them unto Abimelech; and both of them made a covenant. And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the

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flock by themselves. And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What mean these seven ewe lambs which thou hast set by themselves? And he said, For these seven ewe lambs shalt thou take of my hand, that they may be a witness unto me, that I have digged this well. Wherefore he called that place Beer-sheba; because there they swear both of them. Thus they made a covenant at Beer-sheba: then Abimelech rose up, and Phichol the chief captain of his host, and they returned into the land of the Philistines' Genesis 21.22-32.

Abimelech comes onto the scene once again. He had been observing the life of Abraham very closely. He had previously had some cause for criticism of Abraham having been deceived by him regarding Sarah. At that time God had had to intervene in Abimelech's life to prevent him from falling into sin with Sarah. Now, however, the ongoing testimony of Abraham had been faithful in the land of the Philistines.

Abimelech called a meeting with Abraham. He commenced with his own observation of God's dealings with Abraham. He realised and acknowledged in wisdom that God not only intervened to protect Abraham and Sarah his wife, but God had provided them with a son in their old age. God had also prospered Abraham significantly. Not only were these evidences apparent, but Abraham himself was known as a believer in God. God was with him as he followed Him, believed in Him and lived for Him.

What a contrast in this second meeting to the first time these men met together! Abraham had concluded that there was no fear of God in the place. Then, overwhelmed with the fear of man, he was tempted into deceit and failure. But now strengthened by God Abraham stands in the presence of Abimelech as the Friend of God.

Now Abimelech knew for certain that Abraham was a man of God and that God was on his side as Abraham was serving the Lord, living

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for the Lord, and the Lord was evidently with him in all he was doing, protecting, guiding, providing and blessing. However, Abimelech sought reassurance that Abraham would not deal falsely with him and his family.

This statement is significant as Abimelech realised that Abraham, left to himself, could not be always be trusted. The strength of Abraham's witness and integrity lay in his relationship with God. Abimelech did not want a repeat of the previous difficulties wherein he was shaken by God in a dream. So Abimelech clearly linked Abraham's relationship with God to the security of his relationship: *'now therefore swear unto me here by God that thou wilt not deal falsely with me'*.

The issue we are dealing with here brings us to the significance in our testimony of being trustworthy. Because of past difficulties Abraham was asked to swear by God that he would not deal falsely. Positively, Abraham's relationship with God was recognised as a reason to ensure integrity. Abraham now rightly entered into a solemn oath with Abimelech in the fear of the Lord. However, the need for such an oath reflected past failure on the part of Abraham when he had dealt deceitfully with Abimelech.

James taught that part of our witness for the Lord is that our 'yes' is 'yes' and our 'no' is 'no' – the issue of integrity.

'But above all things, my brethren, swear not, neither by heaven, neither by the earth, neither by any other oath: but let your yea be yea; and your nay, nay; lest ye fall into condemnation'
James 5.12.

It should not be needed for an unbeliever to ask a believer to assure them by an oath in God's name. Their testimony of integrity should already reflect their profession of faith in Jesus Christ. However, a past failure does not mean the end of our witness. In God's overruling the future strength of Abraham's integrity was identified with his

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relationship with God. So with us, if we have had difficulties in this area of integrity. By faith, with Abraham, trust in the Lord and realise in your weakness that the strength of your future witness is in your dependent relationship with God. Abimelech recognised this truth with Abraham; so today an unbeliever will recognise that a Christian walking with God can be trusted. So in the end God overrules and His name is honoured.

In the strength of the Lord Abraham, known as a believer, could now reprove Abimelech for a past problem. A well had been violently taken away from his men by Abimelech's men. Abimelech denied all knowledge of this.

Abraham set aside seven ewe lambs as evidence of the fact he had dug the well. The number seven in the Bible signifies completeness. Here a covenant is made between Abraham and Abimelech. In this covenant Abraham led as the man of God, the man of faith, the Friend of God, with authority. Abraham gives the place of the covenant a name – 'Beer-sheba', meaning 'the well of the seven'.

Abimelech was the king of the Philistines, Abraham a pilgrim tent-dweller whose strength was in his relationship with the Lord.

Application

From this event we can learn:

- that if we fail at first not to give up but serve and trust the God of grace to overrule (*Genesis 20.9; 21.22*);
- in God's strength Abraham could now make a covenant of integrity (*Genesis 21.23*);
- Abraham himself could reprove Abimelech in a gracious and timely manner (*Genesis 21.25*); and
- Abraham was no longer on the back foot in his dealings with Abimelech, but leading (*Genesis 21.27-30*).

Abraham's Testimony as the Friend of God

The Friend of God before God

'And Abraham planted a grove in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God' Genesis 21.33.

As Abraham contemplated the past and God's great mercy through the failures and successes, the adversity and prosperity, the unbelief and belief, the independence and dependence, Abraham, the Friend of God, could do no other than praise and pray. He planted some trees at Beer-sheba and treated this as a hallowed place of prayer. While we can pray anywhere, it is good to resort to a particular place for prayer. This is why we sometimes call a church building a 'house of prayer'.

But here we are reminded that true prayer is evidenced by whom we pray to and how we pray.

1. Abraham prayed to the Lord, the everlasting God

The Lord is not limited by time; He is not 'here today and gone tomorrow'. Here is one name in which we can trust – yesterday, today and forever. Abraham believed in the everlasting God. He looked forward beyond time to a never-ending eternity, trusting in the name of the Lord, the same yesterday, today and forever.

'By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God' Hebrews 11.8-10.

2. He prayed by faith trusting in the name of the Lord, the everlasting God

This means he put his trust absolutely and completely in who God really is. To help us understand the significance of this verse we can turn to *Proverbs 18.10*:

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'The name of the Lord is a strong tower: the righteous runneth into it, and is safe.'

Here we are taught that the name of the Lord, the everlasting God, is a refuge for us, a strong tower of refuge.

- The name of the Lord is gracious and compassionate.

'And he said, I will make all my goodness pass before thee, and I will proclaim the name of the Lord before thee; and will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will shew mercy on whom I will shew mercy' Exodus 33.19.

In the context of this statement of truth the Children of Israel had rebelled against God. Moses interceded before the Lord on their behalf. He realised that he could not go on without the Lord and pleaded for His presence. Having received the promise of God's actual presence, Moses was filled with spiritual desire and asked God to show him His glory. The Lord revealed His gracious character to Moses under the banner of His name.

- The name of the Lord is merciful, longsuffering, abundant in goodness and truth and full of justice.

'And the Lord passed by before him, and proclaimed, The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation' Exodus 34.6-7.

Moses is on Mount Sinai again to receive from God the Ten Commandments written a second time by God on new tablets of stone, the first having been broken as a symbol of God's wrath because of their idolatry. There the Lord descended in the cloud to

Abraham's Testimony as the Friend of God

meet Moses at the top of the mountain. Then He revealed to Moses even more about His character again under the banner of the name of the Lord.

- The name of the Lord is great, perfect, just and right.

'...because I will publish the name of the Lord: ascribe ye greatness unto our God. He is the Rock, his work is perfect: for all his ways are judgment: a God of truth and without iniquity, just and right is he' Deuteronomy 32.3-4.

Moses is now at the end of his life and his testimony of the Lord is all praise: *'I will publish the name of the Lord'*. Moses has learned through experience that the name of the Lord is gracious, compassionate, merciful, longsuffering, abundant in goodness and truth, great, perfect, just and right. Moses has something to sing about, and Someone to trust in!

Moses and Abraham were truly blessed because they took refuge in the name of the Lord by faith. Both Abraham and Moses were known as the Friend of God. We read the Lord spoke with Moses as a man speaks with his friend (*Exodus 33.11*); and as we have seen, Abraham was known as the Friend of God. From the testimony of these two men we learn they both had a living and deep faith in the name of the Lord. He was their refuge, their strength, their hope, and their confidence. Are you trusting in the name of the Lord?

John Kent wrote a beautiful hymn which expresses this truth:

*A refuge for sinners the gospel makes known;
'Tis found in the merits of Jesus alone;
The weary, the tempted, and burdened by sin,
Were never exempted from entering therein.*

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*This refuge for sinners his love did ordain,
In Jesus the Lamb, from eternity slain;
And if God the Spirit reveal this to you,
Take refuge in Jesus, though hell should pursue.*

*The soul that shall enter in safety shall dwell;
There's no peradventure of sinking to hell;
The oath of Jehovah secures him from fear,
Nor shall the avenger of blood enter there.*

*Here's refuge for sinners, whose guilt shall appear
As black as the confines of endless despair;
Who, stripped of all merit whereon to rely,
Are taught by the Spirit to Jesus to fly.*

*Should conscience accuse us, as oft-times it may,
Here's blood that can take its defilement away.
In Jesus the Saviour, the sinner shall view
A city of refuge and righteousness too.*

John Kent, 1766-1843

SUMMARY

We have seen and considered Abraham's testimony as the Friend of God in two ways:

- a.** Before man – in his trustworthiness in dealing with Abimelech in this second encounter. In spite of failure, we should not give up, but continue to serve the Lord.
- b.** Before God, in his prayer to the Lord and trust in the name and character of the everlasting Lord.

18. ABRAHAM'S GREAT TEST

Genesis 22.1-19

The account in *Genesis 22* is described at the outset as a test for Abraham from God; a test of faith, obedience, and love for God which superabounds all. In addition, it was an event that typified the coming death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Abraham's victory in this test of faith came as with his whole being he trusted and obeyed God's command fully. This is one of the greatest examples of faith and obedience this world has ever known.

The test for Abraham

'And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of' Genesis 22.1-2.

His fear of God and love for God are to be clearly evidenced in this act of total obedience. He had waited thirty years for Isaac; then he had later obediently sent Ishmael away. Everything now centred upon Isaac. Yet God was telling him to offer him up as a sacrifice!

This great test of obedience, would demonstrate his wholehearted consecration to the Lord. It would confirm:

- who came first in his life;
- his complete faith in the sovereign God;
- his faith in the power and promises of God, whatever the circumstances;
- that in the final analysis Abraham was willing to put God before Isaac.

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But when viewed from a human perspective Abraham's test of faith often troubles people. They ask questions such as: How could a God of love command Abraham to kill his son? What sort of test is this? What about Isaac's welfare in such a traumatic experience? What about Sarah? How should we respond to such questions, which arise in our minds?

The teaching in *Isaiah 55.8-9* is very helpful on this issue:

'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts' Isaiah 55.8-9.

We know that God is sovereign and perfect in all His ways. As in God's dealings with Job, He sees the end of the matter from the beginning for Abraham before He commands. It is helpful in this context to remind ourselves of the 'before' and 'after' words of the Lord.

Test

'And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of' Genesis 22.1-2.

Outcome

'And the angel of the Lord called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, and said, By myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess

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the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice' Genesis 22.15-18.

The test brought forth the fruit of deepening and profound faith

God was not playing a cruel game with Abraham. God, knowing His purpose, tested Abraham to bring forth further blessing. The Apostle Peter teaches the same principle:

'That the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ' 1 Peter 1.7.

One of the blessings coming from the testing of Abraham's faith was its refining under extreme testing, a faith when exercised that deepened under pressure. How deep and profound was the exercise of Abraham's faith! God, in His wisdom, has given us further light on this verse in *Hebrews 11.17-19*:

'By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.'

To help us understand the depth of Abraham's faith more fully we are told that Abraham actually believed that, even if he did have to go all the way and kill his son, God would raise him up again from the dead, even from the ashes of a burnt sacrifice.

The test brought forth the fruit of wholehearted obedience

'And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went

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unto the place of which God had told him. Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off. And Abraham said unto his young men, Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you...And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood. And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son' Genesis 22.3-5, 9-10.

Verse 3: Abraham's obedience was prompt: there was no prevarication, no debate and no delay.

Verse 3: His obedience was directed – he went to the land of Moriah, which was God's place of sacrifice, and later the scene of Calvary itself.

Verse 3: It was a practical obedience, not a presumptuous faith. He provided and prepared what was necessary.

Verse 4: Abraham's obedience was patient. He walked the three day journey God ordained for them.

Verse 5: His was a discreet obedience. Solemn experiences with God require discernment.

Verse 5: Abraham's obedience was believing. Despite the command, Abraham believed he and Isaac would return.

Verses 9-10: It was a total obedience. Father and son were completely committed to God's command.

The test was a profound type of Christ's work of salvation at Calvary

'...accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure' Hebrews 11.19.

Here is another reason why *Hebrews* is so helpful in understanding the events recorded in *Genesis 22*. It clearly shows us that we must

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also look at this event as typical of a far greater transaction. 'Typology' means to see a greater picture of Christ in an event. Abraham received Isaac again understanding by faith that the events were a picture of the future death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is one of the most powerful passages demonstrating the significance of typology. Jesus said, '*Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad*' John 8.56.

So we move on to consider the way Abraham's faith at Mount Moriah speaks to us about the transaction between God the Father and God the Son, culminating in the death and the resurrection of the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. We turn back to *Genesis 22*.

a. The love of the Father to the Son

'And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of' Genesis 22.1-2.

As Abraham started on his journey to Mount Moriah it was his beloved son he was leading to the altar! Note also this point was made in *Hebrews 11*: Isaac is described as his only begotten son, meaning the only child of the promise. Therefore how deeply this command of God must have affected Abraham! Nevertheless in worship he bowed in submission to God's will and obeyed. Abraham knew that each step drew them closer to an awesome transaction. No wonder his faith in God's resurrection power was so helpful to Abraham.

This is a picture of how God the Father would eventually lead His only beloved Son to the cross. Each day of His life from birth, each hour, each second, was drawing Christ closer to that awesome transaction between Himself and His Father at Calvary.

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This is the first time the word ‘lovest’ is used in the Old Testament. Note it refers to love between father and son. Abraham took his son, his only son Isaac, to Mount Moriah, trusting in the perfect will of God while at the same time he continually loved his son. This seems contradictory yet it is true.

Now the love between Abraham and Isaac was precious, but the love between God the Father and His Son is something absolutely precious, perfect and powerful. It is impossible for us to understand more than a tiny part of the wonders of that love. We may not understand the depths of that love but we can admire the wonders of it.

No love ever stood the test in a greater way than the love of God the Father and His Son. But at no point in the awesome transaction at Calvary did the Father ever stop loving His Son, or the Son ever stop loving His Father. The Father’s will for His Son in leading Him to the cross did not mean His love for Him had changed.

Christ’s love in His obedience to His Father’s will, whatever it might be, never faltered either. There at the cross at Calvary was this awesome, amazing and yet mysterious aspect to the love of God which allowed such a transaction to take place.

*‘In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him. Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins’
1 John 4.9-10.*

God was not telling Abraham to do something that He was not prepared to do Himself!

b. The burden laid on Isaac

‘And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son’ Genesis 22.6a.

Abraham laid the burden of the wood upon Isaac his son to carry

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it to the altar. So God the Father placed upon Jesus the burden of the iniquities of all His chosen people.

All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all' Isaiah 53.6.

c. The judgment in the father's hand

'...and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together' Genesis 22.6b.

The fire and knife were carried by the father. As he walked up the mountain Abraham carried in his hand the symbols of death and of judgment. So God the Father controlled the fire and knife of judgment bringing it to the cross and laying it upon His only Son, Jesus Christ.

'Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted' Isaiah 53.4.

d. The unity of the father and son

'...and they went both of them together...so they went both of them together' Genesis 22.6b, 8b.

Twice we are told in this account that Abraham and Isaac went together. This reminds us of how the Father and the Son are perfectly united together. As the love between the Father and the Son is truly amazing, so also is the unity between the Father and the Son. In this transaction between the Father and the Son they were perfectly united.

'I and my Father are one' John 10.30.

e. The provision of the sacrifice from God Himself

'And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering' Genesis 22.8a.

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This statement by Abraham speaks so powerfully about the nature of the sacrifice God provided for the atonement of our sin. God provided *from* Himself on behalf of helpless and needy sinners so as to provide *for* Himself a way of satisfying His pure justice.

'The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world'
John 1.29.

f. The submission and obedience of Isaac

'And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood'
Genesis 22.9.

Here is something amazing! Isaac allowed himself to be bound. Abraham at this stage would have explained to Isaac the command of God to him. He would have assured Isaac of God's power to resurrect him from the dead. By faith Abraham put his son on the altar and willingly Isaac lay bound on the altar. His submission to the altar signified the binding of Christ to the cause of His people.

'He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth: he is brought as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is dumb, so he openeth not his mouth' Isaiah 53.7.

The submission of Isaac spoke of his complete trust in his father's command whatever was being asked of him. So Christ obeyed His Father's will perfectly and willingly.

g. The raising up of Isaac

'And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I. And he said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto

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him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me' Genesis 22.11-12.

As far as Abraham was concerned, as he raised the knife his son was a good as dead, but now God calls from Heaven and Isaac is taken off the altar. In Abraham's mind the transaction symbolised death and resurrection as *Hebrews 11.19* explains.

This speaks to us of the resurrection of Christ from the dead. But on that great day at Calvary, God the Father actually brought down the knife of His wrath upon His Son, slaying Him on the cross. Then He raised Him again on the third day.

h. The substitute

'And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son' Genesis 22.13.

Here the type of Isaac changes. We are reminded of another aspect of the death and sacrifice of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The ram was provided as a substitute for Isaac. As the ram provided the substitute for the natural sinful man Isaac, so the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is the substitute upon the cross for sinful men. He suffered in the stead of His people.

'For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him' 2 Corinthians 5.21.

i. The Lord will provide

'And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh: as it is said to this day, In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen' Genesis 22.14.

Here Abraham makes one of the greatest prophetic statements found

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in the Old Testament. Here at Mount Moriah the city of Jerusalem was built and then the Temple.

'Then Solomon began to build the house of the Lord at Jerusalem in mount Moriah' 2 Chronicles 3.1.

Here in this land of Moriah, the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ was crucified two thousand years later. As Abraham stood on Mount Moriah with his son he saw by faith into the future when Jesus Christ the Messiah would die and then be raised again on behalf of sinners. In Abraham's journey of faith he has climbed to new heights in his understanding and fellowship with God. This is a remarkable picture of the harmony between faith and works:

'He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform. And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness. Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him' Romans 4.20-23.

SUMMARY

God confirmed, under the authority of His Person, the promise that in Abraham's seed all the nations of the world would be blessed, clearly pointing us to Christ in the Old Testament. This confirms to us why it is important for us to remind ourselves of the typology of Christ in the Old Testament. It proves to us that Christ is the central theme of all Scripture.

The test brought forth the fruit of a profound and deepened faith. This faith inspired Abraham to total and wholehearted obedience to God's wherever, whatever.

The test, faith and obedience were designed by God to be typical of Christ. This event confirms to us the Christ-centred nature of God's Word.

19. ABRAHAM'S GOD-HONOURING TESTIMONY

Genesis 23

'And Sarah was an hundred and seven and twenty years old: these were the years of the life of Sarah. And Sarah died in Kirjath-arba; the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan: and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her' Genesis 23.1-2.

Abraham and Sarah had been blessed together in their marriage union for a great number of years. Sarah was 127 years old when she died, so the marriage union could well have lasted over one hundred years. They had been through a great deal together and, above all, proved God's great faithfulness towards them. They could truly say God's mercies *'are new every morning: great is thy faithfulness'* (*Lamentations 3.23*).

They had lived as heirs together of the grace of life, in a pagan land where they were known as believers in God. They lived as God's children by faith willing to be different in their lives from the idolatry around them. They had endured a life of upheaval and change, yet were abundantly blessed providentially and spiritually.

The crowning joy of their married life was the birth of Isaac. This gift served as a remarkable testimony of God's power and faithfulness in the world in which they lived. Their household and neighbours around them would know this gift of a son was according to the power of God. Abraham and Sarah would not have wasted the opportunity to praise the God who keeps His promises. Had not aged Sarah, when naturally past bearing, borne Isaac? The world around them had seen nothing like this before.

But now Sarah had passed away and gone to be with the Lord, which

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is far better. Abraham was left here on earth to mourn and weep for the loss of his dear wife. While Abraham could bury Sarah in sure and certain hope of a future glorious resurrection in Jesus Christ, he nevertheless naturally and emotionally quite rightly felt her loss very deeply.

Sincere weeping inwardly or outwardly in a time of bereavement is a sign of the value of the loss to you. While some may be able to hold their emotions outwardly, there are undoubtedly inner tears and grief. It is stated very clearly that at the loss of his dear friend Lazarus Jesus wept (*John 11.35*)! There was no lack of faith here in Abraham's grief, but rather respect for the value of his loss.

Abraham's humble and honest testimony

'And Abraham stood up from before his dead, and spake unto the sons of Heth, saying, I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a buryingplace with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight' Genesis 23.3-4.

Now Abraham was actually an extremely wealthy person, having been abundantly blessed of the Lord. But in his prosperity Abraham never lost sight of his real status here on earth: he was a stranger and sojourner.

Evidently this term is the inner meaning of the word 'Hebrew'. Nationally speaking he was a foreigner in the land; however his expression 'stranger' means more than this. It means he was a stranger to their idolatry, to their worldliness, to their aggression and to their ungodliness. Nevertheless he must live as a sojourner, meaning he was called of God to dwell in the land of Canaan. He was resident, a dweller in the land, but not a citizen of the land as a born-and-bred Canaanite.

Another way to express the meaning here is that Abraham dwelt in Canaan land as a lodger. Abraham could not hide away and live like

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a hermit or in a monastery. No, God had called Abraham to dwell in Canaan land as a stranger and a pilgrim. In *Hebrews 11.9-16* we see how this reality was worked out in their life of faith, what it meant to them. As a dweller in the land he never lost his pilgrim status, nor his pilgrim principles of a temporary dwelling place.

A life governed from Heaven

What does this mean to us in the 'here-and-now'? It means as a Christian our citizenship is not on Earth but in Heaven.

'For our conversation is in heaven' Philippians 3.20a.

A Christian is highly favoured having a God-given dignity as a citizen of Heaven. The Apostle Peter wrote that we are saved:

'To an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time' 1 Peter 1.4-5.

Christians, as citizens of Heaven, are born from above. They are given a spiritual birth from Heaven direct from the Throne of God. They have their names on God's register in Heaven, inscribed indelibly from eternity by the sovereign will of God Himself:

'To the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel' Hebrews 12.23-24.

Christians are governed by God who is in Heaven, and governed by heavenly standards which are pure, true and sure. Their eternal well-being is secured in Heaven; their interests are represented by Jesus Christ, Son of God. All their hopes are centred in Heaven and their prayers ascend right into the epicentre of Heaven. Their comforts

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are from Heaven from whence also has come the Holy Spirit of God and His inspired Word. Their inspiration for life has its source from Heaven in Christ, and they are no longer earthbound in their thinking.

'If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God' Colossians 3.1-3.

In Heaven dwells the glorious Saviour, the Head of the Church, who is not ashamed to call us brethren. A Christian is really a stranger and a pilgrim on this Earth: this is the lifestyle he is called to have. They desire a better country: this is the mindset they are called to have, to focus on the eternally better place.

Now we live in a world driven by people's desire to better themselves and their possessions. It is obviously not wrong to want to better ourselves in a healthy hardworking manner, but by nature we are actually enslaved to the never-satisfied 'better' demands. So people get into debt. In fact, material goods sales rely upon the drive of the 'better' in life. The telephone shops are full of people trading in nearly new phones because a 'better' is now available.

But this lifestyle leads to a life of constant discontent. The drive of the 'better' is a hard taskmaster, it is costly to the pocket, and it never satisfies. How much more meaningful, valuable and secure is the eternally 'better' of Heaven (*Hebrews 11.16*)!

The Christian believer joins with Paul and says, *'For our conversation is in heaven.'* There is no depreciation in Heaven, no wearing out, no breakdown, no out-of-date. There is no disappointment in Heaven, no getting tired of something – it is always 'better' in Heaven. It is the place of eternal contentment where it always seems better and better, the place of eternal fullness. See how the Apostle John describes Heaven in *Revelation 7.9-17*:

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'After this I beheld, and, lo, a great multitude, which no man could number, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues, stood before the throne, and before the Lamb, clothed with white robes, and palms in their hands; and cried with a loud voice, saying, Salvation to our God which sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb. And all the angels stood round about the throne, and about the elders and the four beasts, and fell before the throne on their faces, and worshipped God, saying, Amen: Blessing, and glory, and wisdom, and thanksgiving, and honour, and power, and might, be unto our God for ever and ever. Amen.

'And one of the elders answered, saying unto me, What are these which are arrayed in white robes? and whence came they? And I said unto him, Sir, thou knowest. And he said to me, These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes'.

A life of blessed anticipation

'...from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ' Philippians 3.20b.

This verse provides us with an important touchstone as to where we are in our spiritual lives. This is speaking of the Second Coming of Christ. It has the meaning of an earnest and yet patient waiting for the Lord, being ready for Him. We assess things from a different, heavenly perspective.

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'And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure' 1 John 3.3.

The Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour will appear in glory and every eye shall see him. What a sight that will be! For believers He will be their mighty Saviour. On that great Day He will be their refuge and righteousness; He will deliver from the wrath of God; He will pronounce His saved people just and righteous altogether. He will separate eternally the believers and unbelievers, never more to dwell together.

For unbelievers He will be the mighty Judge who will bring the perfect, unanswerable justice of God. Then, in the ultimate creative act, even more glorious than the first Creation, He will by His mighty power, together with God the Father and the Holy Spirit, create the new Heavens and the new Earth wherein dwells righteousness (see *Revelation 21.1-8*). Here we are given the awesome divide in this final creative event.

A life to come of absolute glory

'Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself' Philippians 3.21.

This body that has been subject to corruption and the Fall will be transformed. Here is the ultimate conforming to Christ, to be truly in His image. This was something which Paul was striving towards, a glorious body conformed to Christ's glorious body; the body of His glory.

But while here on Earth a Christian is a stranger and a sojourner – this is our calling. When we submit to this reality and live accordingly, like Abraham did, the Lord will use our testimony.

Abraham's exalted status in the world

'Hear us, my lord: thou art a mighty prince among us: in the

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choice of our sepulchres bury thy dead; none of us shall withhold from thee his sepulchre, but that thou mayest bury thy dead'
Genesis 23.6.

The Word of God teaches us that God exalts the humble. Here in the testimony of Abraham he has gained incredible respect among the Canaanites. Every compartment of Abraham's life was now lived as a believer in God – God was Number One. His family knew this, his servants knew this, his neighbours knew this, and his business associates knew this.

This is an encouraging point to remember. The Canaanites did not like what Abraham stood for as a believer, but nevertheless they did respect him. Furthermore, Abraham had come through a tremendous trial on Mount Moriah testing the sincerity of his faith in God. In the latter part of his life it is apparent Abraham's testimony was like the golden leaves on a tree in autumn.

The expression used by the sons of Heth to address Abraham in Canaan land is one of real respect. Abraham, as he came to the end of his life, was assuredly known as a believer in God, a man of integrity, a man you could trust and a man with authority. In the original the term 'mighty prince' means 'prince of God'.

Notice here greatness in the land was clearly identified with his relationship with God. Here again we can see the heart of true, effective witness. It is only as it is identified with God that it will be honoured by God. Here was a man who was very rich – the world looked on and saw God had blessed him. He had been blessed with a son in his old age – the world looked on and saw God providing for him. He had been protected – the world looked on and saw that God was protecting him. Abraham proved all the promises of God to him as being faithful and true.

Here again the promise of God in *Genesis 12.2* is evident. When our

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witness is identified with our relationship with God it can be truly effective for God's honour.

'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven' Matthew 5.16.

'...having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation' 1 Peter 2.12.

Abraham's dealings in the world

'And Abraham bowed down himself before the people of the land. And he spake unto Ephron in the audience of the people of the land, saying, But if thou wilt give it, I pray thee, hear me: I will give thee money for the field; take it of me, and I will bury my dead there. And Ephron answered Abraham, saying unto him, My lord, hearken unto me: the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver; what is that betwixt me and thee? bury therefore thy dead. And Abraham hearkened unto Ephron; and Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the audience of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant' Genesis 23.12-16.

Firstly, even though Abraham was known to be a mighty prince among men, he remained humble. Here we can notice Abraham showing cultural politeness in presenting his case. Part of our Christian witness is being polite, being courteous, and being of a friendly disposition.

Secondly, we can see how Abraham did not take advantage of another's generosity unadvisedly. Ephron was offering to give Abraham more than he asked, both the field and the cave. There are those who, despite being wealthy, remain so miserly that they still delight in getting something for nothing. Such would have jumped

Abraham's God-Honouring Testimony

at this gesture and, despite the need for cultural politeness, taken advantage. This is a type of oppression when a person who can well afford to pay takes advantage of another in an unworthy manner.

Abraham does not want to be indebted to the world in any way and insisted on paying the full price. There is an important principle here in our testimony as believers. Abraham felt it dishonouring to God for an unbeliever to think he had made him rich (*Genesis 14.23*).

Thirdly, everything must be done decently and in order and not behind closed doors. The transaction was done in public before witnesses to ensure the integrity of the deal. Abraham was determined to be above reproach and honourable in all his dealings.

Fourthly, Abraham came through another test of his faith and integrity as a believer. We can see that silver and gold was proven not to be where Abraham's treasure was. Ephron, realising Abraham was willing and insisting to pay, probably now asked top price for the land and cave. Ephron's argument was '*what is that betwixt me and thee?*' After all, it is only silver Abraham, and your testimony tells us your treasure is in Heaven, not on Earth!

Here Abraham did not negotiate or barter down according to the culture but paid the asking price. He was to pay for both the field and the cave but did so as a matter of honour knowing he could afford it. Abraham considered this action part of his witness.

Abraham was looking to the future for his family. Here his grandson Jacob would be buried 170 years later. Abraham was also telling a pagan world he had the greatest love and respect for his wife and honoured her memory.

SUMMARY

To summarise the God-honouring testimony of Abraham we can move into *Genesis 24.1*: '*And Abraham was old, and well stricken in age: and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things.*'

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'All things': here is one of the great secrets of following God in your life. When Jacob met Esau after many years, Esau said to Jacob, *'I have enough'* – my material goods are enough for me. Jacob said to Esau, *'I have all things'* – I have blessing for the body and the soul – *'all things'*! This was Abraham's testimony in old age: God has blessed me in all things.

'All things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose' Romans 8.28.

What a comfort and assurance this is for life! Every aspect of my life spiritually and providentially is under the sovereign will of God – *'all things'*. That was the God-honouring testimony of Abraham: God had blessed him in all things.

20. ABRAHAM – BLESSED BY GOD IN ALL THINGS

Genesis 24

There are many profitable lessons we can learn from this chapter in the *Book of Genesis*. For example, there is the lesson about direction dictated by a desire to do God's will; the lesson about diligence in duty; and the lesson about devotion to the God-given institution of marriage.

Direction with a desire to do God's will

'And Abraham said unto his eldest servant of his house, that ruled over all that he had, Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh: and I will make thee swear by the Lord, the God of heaven, and the God of the earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell: but thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac' Genesis 24.2-4.

Abraham was seeking God's provision in a wife for his son Isaac. The first thing we can notice is how serious Abraham was in desiring to do what was right in God's sight. His eldest servant must be bound under a promise made before the Lord to do what was right in His sight. Abraham recognised that marriage was a solemn and yet blessed ordinance instituted by God. It was to be for the mutual benefit of a man and a woman, and especially so if they married as two believers. Therefore great care must be taken to use discernment and wisdom in this matter.

We can also notice that Abraham, in seeking God's will, sought a wife for his son in the right direction. He sought a wife for Isaac his son from a family of believers of his own kindred. The Canaanites among whom he dwelt were an idolatrous nation of unbelievers. The

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Word of God tells believers not to be unequally yoked together with unbelievers (2 Corinthians 6.14). A believing man must seek a wife who herself is a believer that they may be *'heirs together of the grace of life'* (1 Peter 3.7).

The next point we can notice is that Abraham was confident in the provision of the Lord in this matter:

'And the servant said unto him, Peradventure the woman will not be willing to follow me unto this land: must I needs bring thy son again unto the land from whence thou camest? And Abraham said unto him, Beware thou that thou bring not my son thither again. The Lord God of heaven, which took me from my father's house, and from the land of my kindred, and which spake unto me, and that sware unto me, saying, Unto thy seed will I give this land; he shall send his angel before thee, and thou shalt take a wife unto my son from thence. And if the woman will not be willing to follow thee, then thou shalt be clear from this my oath: only bring not my son thither again. And the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham his master, and sware to him concerning that matter' Genesis 24.5-9.

He based his assurance on the promise of God towards him and on the fact he had laid down the right foundation in prayer and dependence upon God. To know guidance from the Lord we need to first lay down the right foundation:

- a. We are seeking to do what is right in God's sight;
- b. We are serious about doing what is right in God's sight;
- c. We submit to God and depend upon Him and His Word;
- d. We engage God in prayer and by faith in the matter at the outset, not halfway down the line.

There is further teaching in the matter of guidance as we move to the testimony of Abraham's servant. We have noticed that prayer was

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at the outset of Abraham's desire to do what was right in God's sight. Now we can see that prayer remained a key element of seeking the will of the Lord in the matter:

'And the servant took ten camels of the camels of his master, and departed; for all the goods of his master were in his hand: and he arose, and went to Mesopotamia, unto the city of Nahor. And he made his camels to kneel down without the city by a well of water at the time of the evening, even the time that women go out to draw water. And he said, O Lord God of my master Abraham, I pray thee, send me good speed this day, and shew kindness unto my master Abraham. Behold, I stand here by the well of water; and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water: and let it come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say, Let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink; and she shall say, Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also: let the same be she that thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac; and thereby shall I know that thou hast shewed kindness unto my master' Genesis 24.10-14.

Abraham's servant asked the Lord to guide him to the right lady through the ordinary course of life; a positive, polite and kind response of the lady coming to the well would indicate God's pleasure in the matter.

Continuing on this essential matter of guidance we can notice the patient wisdom of Abraham's servant:

'And the man wondering at her held his peace, to wit whether the Lord had made his journey prosperous or not' Genesis 24.21.

To know the will of the Lord will require patience of us that we do not run before the Lord. He waited until Rebekah had responded fully in accordance with his request, for this would indicate true guidance from the Lord.

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In the providence of God the prayers of Abraham and his servant, and undoubtedly also Isaac, were answered. The first priority for Abraham's servant was to worship the Lord. His praise to God centred on the wonder of God's guidance:

'And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his mercy and his truth: I being in the way, the Lord led me to the house of my master's brethren' Genesis 24.27.

'I being in the way': the way of prayer, the way of obedience, of submission, of dependence, of wisdom and of God's Word. With these principles in mind we can with confidence expect God's guidance in our lives.

Diligence in duty

We will now spend a short while on the subject of work and our diligence in duty. Abraham's servant was a trustworthy man:

'And the servant took ten camels of the camels of his master, and departed; for all the goods of his master were in his hand: and he arose, and went to Mesopotamia, unto the city of Nahor' Genesis 24.10.

Abraham's servant was a faithful ambassador of his master. His priority was to speak well of his master. So we, as the Lord's servants, are to prioritise our commitment to speak well of the Lord.

'And there was set meat before him to eat: but he said, I will not eat, until I have told mine errand. And he said, Speak on. And he said, I am Abraham's servant. And the Lord hath blessed my master greatly; and he is become great: and he hath given him flocks, and herds, and silver, and gold, and menservants, and maidservants, and camels, and asses. And Sarah my master's wife bare a son to my master when she was old: and unto him hath he given all that he hath' Genesis 24.33-36.

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Abraham's servant was diligent in his duty in working for his master:

'And he said unto them, Hinder me not, seeing the Lord hath prospered my way; send me away that I may go to my master' Genesis 24.56.

Abraham's servant worshipped the Lord in being diligent in his duty. Work is an institution ordained of God:

'And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it' Genesis 2.15.

Work is good; the Fall of man has made it wearisome and toil. However the principle of work is from the Lord; it is an institution of the Lord. Please remember, as believers you have a God-given opportunity to bring glory to God through work. Children at school – work to the best of your ability; students at college or university – work to the best of your ability; adult believers – work to the best of your ability as unto the Lord. Whether you are keeping the home or in employment outside of the home – work as unto the Lord. Work is a high calling from the Lord!

Abraham's servant demonstrates these principles regarding work and duty. As we have seen he was faithful and dependent, he worshipped God, and testified of Him, and he was diligent. With these principles in mind we will find wisdom in the way to serve the Lord in our work.

Devotion

Rebekah was asked a vital question before she left her home:

'And they called Rebekah, and said unto her, Wilt thou go with this man? And she said, I will go' Genesis 24.58.

She had to come to that decision herself as she considered the way ahead. This decision meant leaving her home and family to set up a new home as Isaac's wife. She was to be devoted to her husband Isaac.

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Rebekah understood the implications for her and she went forward, believing the union to be of the Lord.

As she neared the home of Isaac she saw a man evidently meditating in the field. This was Isaac, a man of prayer, a believer, a man of God, a man who would truly love his wife as a gift given to him by God.

‘And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah’s tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother’s death’ Genesis 24.67.

True marriage is the devotion of two people to each other for better or for worse for life.

Rebekah: a picture of the bride of Christ – Isaac: a picture of Christ

The account of Rebekah being led to Isaac willingly is sometimes used as a picture of Christ and the Church.

a. The call was personal. We will call the young woman and ask her, Will you go with this man?

b. The call spoke of separation. To follow the servant to go to Isaac she had to leave all.

c. The call teaches us about the nature of faith. Rebekah followed the servant by faith. She believed all the servant said about Isaac.

d. The call teaches us about the guidance of God’s Word and His Holy Spirit. The servant guided her on her journey to see Isaac; so the Holy Spirit guides the Church to Christ through His Word, the Gospel.

e. The end of the journey speaks to us of coming to Christ and ultimately seeing Him in Heaven. There came a time at the end of the weary journey when she saw Isaac as he was; so at the end of our earthly journey we will see Jesus as He is.

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*When by the gift of His infinite grace,
I am accorded in heaven a place,
Just to be there to look on His face,
Will through the ages be glory for me.
O that will be glory for me,
Glory for me, glory for me,
When by His grace I shall look on His face,
That will be glory, be glory for me.*

Charles H Gabriel, 1856-1932

A personal, everlasting union between Christ and the Church will be glory, glory for me. This is the ultimate end of having the faith of Abraham – blessed by God in all things.