

# ABRAHAM

## Friend of God

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## Chapter 1 — FATHER OF THE SEED

In Luke's genealogy of Christ Abraham is named twenty-first in order after God. This in itself was sufficient to guarantee him mention in scripture along with all the others who were progenitors of Jesus. Matthew, writing with different emphasis, and starting from a different point, places Abraham's name second to David's. Luke's purpose was to reveal Jesus as the Son of Man, and he heads his genealogy with Jesus and roots it in God. Matthew's commission was to write of Christ as the chosen King over God's people Israel, and he commences with David the royal son of Abraham.

Commencing to read the Gospels, the thoughtful student finds it impossible to avoid the feeling that, through Abraham, God is wanting to show us something new. Twenty generations of men had lived before Abraham, yet none of these are mentioned by Matthew. From this the impression could be gained that they had never existed. Why is this so? Why does Matthew commence his Gospel with the words, 'The book of the generation of Jesus Christ the son of David the son of Abraham', and go no further back into history? Why is Jesus not spoken of as the son of Noah or Methuselah or Enoch or any other man of the godly line? There must be a reason for this.

The answer almost certainly lies in the fact that Abraham was probably the greatest man of the Old Testament. Together with him, David and Moses comprise the trio of Old Testament worthies most frequently referred to in the New Testament. Of the three, Moses' name occurs the most times, but only because the writers report or make reference to the same incident more than once. David's name occurs the least of the three. Abraham finds mention slightly less frequently than Moses, but he is referred to in connection with a greater variety and range of events and subjects than any other; thus his importance is stamped upon the pages of the New Testament with unmistakable significance.

The author of the book of Hebrews gives up a whole chapter to writing about the elders of the faith; it is the greatest section on faith in the whole sacred canon. In it he mentions the particular things these people did whereby they became famous, leaving their names and deeds for a legacy upon the sacred page. By far the largest section of the chapter is given over to an account of God's dealings with Abraham. Quickly the writer passes from the creation of the world and the dovetailing of the ages, gives a sentence or two to the antediluvian saints and their works, and then comes to Abraham. The writer immediately becomes more expansive and detailed here — it is as though he has reached the main point of the story and that everything has been building up to this, and so it has.

In a few verses the creation of matter from invisible substance by God's word has been declared, the ages have been fitted together, the excellent sacrifice and the gospel resulting therefrom has been revealed, and the translation to heaven of him who walked with God and the following condemnation and judgement of the world have been shown. The old creation God made was finished, an age was ended, whole generations were wiped out with the terrible flood. In process of time God started again with Abram, and from him produced another race of people, the Hebrews: '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'.

This is Abraham's chief claim to the fame he never sought but shall ever have. Speaking of him with reverence, Paul said, "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". Abraham, not Adam, stands before God as our first father. He was the first man to whom God made promise concerning the seed, and the first man who believed God concerning it.

The Lord had committed Himself once before about the seed. The promise was then uttered as judgement upon the serpent in Eden, as well as being a statement of intention. In the presence of the man, the woman and the serpent the Lord said, 'I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head and thou shalt bruise his heel'. He was not then addressing either human being, but the serpent; He was not making a promise to Eve, but stating a fact to the serpent. Eve took it in of course, so also did Adam. What the man thought about it we are not told, but one thing he did know: there was no reference made to his seed — only to the woman's. As far as God's plans for the earth were concerned, He had finished with Adam, the man who knew God's will, heard His word and acted contrary to both; the promise God longed to give was not given to him.

Centuries ran their course and generations passed away before the man to whom God made the promise was born, and it is with him that our study is concerned; the seed must be both woman's and man's. When Eve bore her first son to Adam she thought the promised seed had come; probably Adam did as well. They called him Cain, which means 'acquired', and Eve said, 'I have gotten a man from the Lord'. He proved to be anything but the seed; instead of that he was a murderer, killing his own brother Abel.

Jealousy seemed to be the motive for the murder: Cain was a proud man. When his offering was not accepted by the Lord, he was 'very wroth, and his countenance fell'. The Lord came and spoke to him about it — 'Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen?', He said. Cain made no reply; instead he resolved to kill his brother. He lay low awaiting his opportunity, and when it came he rose up and slew Abel in the field. We are not told why he did so, and can only conjecture as to the thoughts that were filling his

mind. It may be that Adam and Eve had brought him up to believe that he was the chosen seed, and that he thought he and his offering, whatever it was, should have been accepted by God for that reason. If so, he was wrong.

The likelihood of this is suggested by Christ's reference to the devil in John 8. At the time He was speaking in context of Abraham's seed and His own murder, which the Jews had by then decided upon. 'Ye are of your father the devil', He said, 'and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him'. The Lord connected the seed and Abraham and 'the murderer from the beginning'. Certainly the first murderer of man is mentioned right at the beginning of the human story. Spiritually the seed of man and woman was the seed of the murderous devil.

In his first epistle, John brings out another important lesson from this incident. Again the context is the seed, only this time it is God's seed abiding in those who are born of God: 'Cain ... was of that wicked one, and slew his brother', says John, 'And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous'. The seed is now entirely of spiritual character. The human element and heredity have now ceased to have any importance — man is either the seed of the devil by first birth, or the seed of God by the second.

Abraham first appears in scripture under his given name — Abram. He was the first of the three sons of Terah, a descendant of Noah through Shem; he lived in Ur of the Chaldees. But although they were blessed with the distinction of belonging to the godly line, the family were heathen; they did not know God and were idolaters. Perhaps this is not to be wondered at, since Noah, the one seed God had preserved to repopulate the renewed earth, last appears as a drunkard, whose nakedness was exposed by his own son Ham, whom his father cursed for this transgression. Abram was the eleventh generation from Noah, and by this time the knowledge of the one true God had almost entirely vanished from the earth.

Paul, speaking of those days, says there was no excuse for this. Observation of nature, he says, reveals two things about God, namely His eternal power and Godhead. But, 'professing themselves to be wise, they became fools', and turning from God they made images of Him and adopted them as their gods. They did not like to retain God in their knowledge, and made unto themselves substitutes for the true God. The inevitable happened: God ceased to strive with men by His Spirit, and gave them up to uncleanness and vile affections, as grotesque as their effigies. They dishonoured God and soon dishonoured their own bodies also — perverted men and women lived in communities of anti-natural sin, of which Sodom and Gomorrah are notorious examples.

### Chosen of God

Those were dreadful days of almost unparalleled spiritual darkness, meriting retributive judgement. God had made promise to Noah however, therefore he restrained His hand and dealt with the world in grace; instead of inflicting further universal punishment, He appeared to Abram in Ur of the Chaldees, a district (possibly a town) in Mesopotamia. He did not reveal Himself to the whole family but to this one man. It is often said, and in fact the letter to the Hebrews records, that God called Abram, but there is no evidence of a call in the original words God spoke to him: 'Get thee out', He said. It was a command. The Lord wanted a man, and out of the whole world of men He chose Abram.

Quite clearly God's commands are His calls; they are effectual — God calls to commandeer. There is no record of the Lord calling Abram by name; He may have done so, but we may be sure that if He did, the omission from the text is not accidental but quite deliberate. Between them the two records disclose one of God's secrets, namely this: every time God gives this kind of command He is tendering an invitation and intending a calling as well. All God's calls must be regarded as commands and, if accepted, obeyed, for by them the Lord intends to completely command the person He calls. Besides the command and the call, God also committed Himself to Abram by wonderful promises: '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'. The promises were contingent upon obedience to the command; if that were refused the promises were forfeit.

God was committing Himself to a covenant of blessing. There was no doubt about that, and perhaps it was this that made the call so powerful to Abram, for who does not want to be blessed? But God left him under no delusion about the matter; the promises were not made unconditionally. God's terms were clearly stated: 'Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house unto a land that I will show thee'. The New Testament writer says, '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'. What a glowing tribute to a man of faith; but it reveals nothing of the inward struggles that went on in the man before he finally accomplished it.

In so many things the New Testament is a commentary on the old, and this is especially true of Hebrews 11. Whenever the Spirit touches on the lives and activities of His people, unless there is any need to reveal any uncomplimentary things about them He never does so. There is great breadth of meaning and depth of mercy in the saying, 'Love shall cover the multitude of sins'. How gracious God is, and that my soul knoweth right well. God called Abraham His friend, and you don't say unkind things about your friends. Instead you say all the nice things you know about them, complimenting and praising them, drawing love's kindly veil over any of their mistakes or lapses, and even more serious things they may have done. A friend is made for adversity as well as for companionship or pleasantries; he doesn't say adverse things about you or become an adversary when you fail.

God never becomes a man's foe because he does not immediately respond fully or wholly, or cannot rise at once to the highest; He loves and understands him. He knows how far a man can go at any time, and when he has had enough for the moment. The thing He caused to be written down about Abraham His friend was, 'Abraham ... when he was called ... obeyed'. Just how it all was done or in what degree or order and relationship the command and call came to Abram we cannot be certain; what we are sure about is that God chose him with a purpose. The purpose was far greater than could then be fully revealed to Abram; it had to do with the eternal purpose He had purposed in Jesus Christ before the foundation of the world, but He did not tell Abram that.

God revealed one little part of it to Abram, that is all, but that was the real purpose for the call, and the basic reason for the command He gave him, 'I will make of thee a great nation'. The Lord said other things to him that had relevance then and referred to Abram personally — 'I will bless thee', 'I will make thy name great', 'thou shalt be a blessing', and so on. Each of these were words of great personal benefit to the man, but before any

of them were mentioned, God stated the thing He wanted for Himself: He needed a new nation on the earth exclusively for Himself, in which He could fulfil all His will among men. God needed someone He could make something of, more than someone He could do something for.

In all His dealings with men this is of far greater importance to God than anything else. A man must be the right material, the right substance, a suitable quality, for God to work with. Was Abram of the right quality? The thing for God to do was to find out. God, who knows the end from the beginning, has to test a man before He knows that a man really fears Him. This He makes plain following the final test of the man on Moriah: Abraham came through that ordeal in triumph with knife in hand. 'Now I know', said God. It is God's statement of supreme confidence in a man; He was satisfied, utterly satisfied in Himself with Abraham. That is why in the beginning, before He could work with or by or through him, He knew He must work on him.

### A Limited Obedience

Three things vital to God's plan were absolutely necessary to Abram: (1) he must own God's Lordship; (2) he must be obedient; (3) he must understand that he must leave everything and everybody for God. These were the only conditions in which the Lord could work His works through him. If Abram obeyed this first great command he would show himself to be a man of faith and the right material. God must find faith in a man or He cannot work with him. 'Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God', says Paul, so God spoke to the man, 'Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house into a land that I will show thee'. That was the word and it was a command.

What happened at that point is not clear. It seems as though Abram told his family of his experience and that the results were not quite what God wanted; instead of Abram and Sarai doing precisely what the Lord had said, something quite different happened. Terah took the initiative away from Abram his son and Sarai his daughter-in-law and set out from Ur towards Canaan with Lot his grandson also. God did not want that; He wanted them to be left behind. He had commanded Abram to leave them, but apparently he had either been unwilling or unable to do so.

More than likely Abram was conforming to custom. In those days the father of the family was the acknowledged head — he gave all the commands and was obeyed by everyone. Probably therefore, when Abram spoke of his experience and stated his intention to leave for Canaan, Terah promptly took command and said, 'If you're going, we're all going', and that was the end of it. It was he who led the little expedition; he took the rest along with him. Abram, knowing what God had said, would most probably not have taken him, but he took Abram. The result of this was as to be expected: they made some progress in the general direction of the promised land, but did not get there. Stopping short of it they came to Haran and dwelt there. How long the heir of the promise languished in Haran we do not know, but it was too long. He had made a move in the right direction, but he had by no means answered the call of God properly; tradition had foiled him; Canaan was still a long way off from Haran, nor could he enter there while Terah was alive — all the time he lived he controlled Abram. God was not going to allow Terah in Canaan — all the time Abram persisted in staying with him he could not enter the promised land himself.

With no intended disrespect to Terah, at this point of the story of Abram's journey to Canaan, Terah must be defined as 'the old man'. Terah linked Abram with all his

progenitors right back to Adam. See how naturally and boldly this old man presumed to appropriate the promises of God to himself when they were made neither to him nor for him. He assumes the leading role, hinders the saint of God, pretends to obey, makes a great show of doing the will of God and appears to enter into the blessing of the Lord. He pretends to be so dutiful and eager: 'God has spoken to me' he puffs, but does not say 'directly'; nevertheless he 'believes', and sets out. He leaves some of his kindred behind as though leaving all. He forsakes his home, leaves his property and his son's grave; with determination he uproots his family, leaving Ur, that place of wickedness. He forsakes that culture entirely, but he never reaches the promised land. Instead he comes to Haran, the city that bore the name of his son — how strange. Did Terah found it and name it after him? Despite his apparent forward move, was he forever looking back, wrapped in sentiment and sorrow? In Haran he stays and forces Abram to stay with him — and there Terah dies — in his dead sons's city.

The old man heads a dynasty of death, and leaves a legacy of death to his heirs. He can only stay with the dead; he cannot go on with the living. The old man, as well as his seed, must die — before he could go any further Abram had to learn that. In the end he knew he would never take one more step forward till Terah was gone. He discovered what we all must discover — that the old man will seemingly go part of the way but he neither will nor can go all the way; he is not capable of it. In any case God will not have him. He had not called him and has provided nothing for him; he is not the right material; he has no faith. He cannot be of faith, for God has neither commanded nor even spoken to him. The old man is a pretender, an impostor, a hypocrite and a liar. In the end Abram must have realised that he was best rid of him; he had only been a hindrance to him. With Terah's death Abram is at last free to move, so, burying his father, he prepares to move on further south.

### Into the Land ... They Came

Whether or not the Lord renewed the call or repeated the charge, or whether He stirred up Abram's memory and reminded him about the promises and blessings attendant upon obedience we do not know. Whatever it was, we read that 'Abram departed as the Lord had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him'. By this time Abram was seventy-five years of age, the senior member and unchallenged leader of the family; he could please himself what he did. What loyalties or factions may have warred within him we do not know. God had said leave all, but he did not — tradition was too strong for him. Instead of obeying God only, he did the thing everyone expected of him and took Lot with him.

It was the usual thing to do; no-one thought he was wrong; in the eyes of others his behaviour was right and very commendable. Lot's father was dead, so was his grandfather, Terah. Abram was Lot's uncle, Terah's only remaining son, therefore he naturally took on Terah's responsibility; it was normal procedure. Lot was in agreement and went along with everything as expected, and all seemed well; besides, Abram had no children of his own. So, gathering together all the substance they had accumulated in Haran, they set out for Canaan, and at last, 'into the land of Canaan they came'.

What length of time had elapsed between the original call of God and the acceptance of the challenge and the final entry into the land we cannot tell, but we can see how greatly traditional belief and family habits had hindered Abram. There is something wonderful about the phrase, 'and into the land of Canaan they came', even though it was an achievement under handicap. From Ur to Haran the handicap had been forced upon him

by Terah, but from Haran to Canaan he handicapped himself. True, he almost certainly did not realise this, or consider what the result of his over-generosity towards Lot may be. He was certainly creating trouble for himself though. He may have included his nephew in the party from mixed motives, doing his duty according to family tradition and national culture, very sincerely wishing to include Lot in the promised blessings.

There may have been something else though which prompted his actions; maybe it was a sound common-sense precaution: Sarai his wife was barren — they had no child. Should he die childless, who would inherit the cumulative blessings promised by God? To the natural man it was not only a family obligation and a generous gesture to take Lot along with him, it was wisdom. But the natural man no more understands the things of the Spirit of God than the old man. Abram was wrong; it was still contrary to the will of God and to the command He had given him. He was in Canaan, but only in limited light, and in a very formative, infantile condition. He did not yet know that this was the land of God's choice for him; in His wisdom God had not yet told him of His final choice.

Many things about Abram which are otherwise obscure are explained when this is understood. This is the reason why he later said to Abimelech, king of Gerar, 'God caused me to wander from my father's house'. Abram did not walk securely at first — he was not conscious of being led, only of being under command. God never told him where to go, only to go: 'he went out not knowing whither he went'. This also explains why, when he reached the promised land, he did not stay in it, but continued right through it down into Egypt and into trouble.

Abram did not know which land God had promised him: was it Haran and its environs? Was it Canaan? Did it include the Negeb? Was Egypt also part of the promise? Which country was it? A lengthy process of elimination commenced. He couldn't live in the Negeb as there was a grievous famine in the land. He couldn't live in Egypt, though he tried; they wouldn't have him there, but turned him out. Where was he to settle? He went up again out of Egypt and wandered back to Canaan, still not knowing where to go or settle. He knew by this time that God had promised him Canaan, but he did not know the bounds of his possession, for God had not defined them; the degree of uncertainty was most unsettling. Where would he live? Why did the Lord not tell him at the beginning where to live? Did he want Abram to endure famine in the Negeb and go down to Egypt and into the world? If not (and it is to be presumed He did not) why did He not define Abram's borders earlier than He did?

Only when He cut the covenant with Abram later did God tell him the extent of the land He had given him. When Lot was separated from Abram at Bethel a little later, God did tell Abram a little more about his territorial possessions, but not all even then. Until then Abram, though already blessed, had not been completely obedient to God, and it is this incident which provides the key to the many questions Abram needed settling in his mind.

Sadly, so often that which appears to be obedience on our part is only an act of partial obedience to God, and He has to unmask the deception. Abram's obedience had been incomplete. He had finally left his father's house in two senses, but not completely; certainly not in the third sense so vital to the experiencing of the full blessing. He did as he was told quite literally in Ur at the beginning. He did not leave his father's house though — he kept the father of the house. This he repeated later at Haran; on neither occasion could he bring himself to make that complete, final break which God demanded.

At Haran he was more thorough than at Ur; he stepped right out of his father's house, leaving both the actual home in which he had dwelt with Terah and all the rights, claims, obligations and inheritance of the house of his father as well; it was total renunciation. But although he left all those things behind and never returned to them again, he did not break all links with his family; he took part of it with him — Lot. He did not leave his kindred, but God had demanded that he should — that too.

### Called to Separation

The lesson for all to learn from this is clear: whatever the reason be, incomplete obedience to the original command results in delayed, if not lost blessing. Inevitably uncertainty, confusion, lack of guidance and loss of direction will follow as a natural consequence. As soon as Abram broke the final link with his former life and commitments, the Lord began to show him his possessions. None must miss the importance of this; by it a principle of divine procedure from which God never departs is revealed.

God wanted to make Abram a great nation, no one else. He did not want any thing or anyone from the past to have part in it, or to be in any way involved in His plan. He must have complete separation from them. He was going to make a new start with Abram; this was the most important part of the whole plan. Besides this, God wanted to bless Abram in himself, and to make his name great above all others. This He did, but it was going to be Abram alone; God was determined to reduce human nature to the minimal necessity which He required for His plans. A man of Abram's stature and calibre could most probably have made a name for himself among his contemporaries equal to any the world has ever known. But the Lord was not going to allow that.

Men are always trying to do that, no less then than now. The very same chapter which introduces us to Abram also includes a demonstration of this; the tower of Babel was built by men who said, 'Let us make us a name'. They did, but not the name they imagined. The plain on which they built, the materials with which they built, as well as the building itself, were named after their folly — 'scattering or casting out', and 'confusion'. They wanted to become famous for building a tower to reach to heaven. God scattered them in confusion — their motive was contemptible. Nimrod, a name of reputation among men to this day, was connected with Babel; his kingdom began there. It is said of him that he was 'a mighty one in the earth', and his hunting prowess passed proverbially into everyday use as a standard of comparison: 'Even as Nimrod the mighty hunter before the Lord'.

However, God did not choose him or any of them; He preferred Abram above all. He built no city and raised no tower nor was he a mighty hunter, but before the Lord whom he believed he is 'the father of us all', says Paul. Could any man ask for more? God made his name great, that through him He might make His own name great. He did not tell Abram that. Abram must not be misled into thinking that by responding to the Lord he was in any way doing God a favour. On the contrary he believed whole-heartedly that God was doing him the favour. The sevenfold promise of God to him was full of blessing, not only to him but also to the whole world: 'I will bless thee ... and thou shalt be a blessing, and I will bless them that bless thee ... and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed'.

By blessing Abram particularly God was blessing everybody potentially; it was a wonderful prospect for the man, a most glorious series of promises from God to him.

Although Abram may not have known to which land he was travelling when he left home, he was sure he was going into blessing. What a great God we have; how He encourages the trusting soul, giving us every incentive to obey His commands and answer the call. The person who does so is so blessed that, as a result, he or she becomes a blessing from God to others. With these high hopes Abram entered Canaan, wondering how it was all going to be accomplished.

## Chapter 2 — A LAND THAT I WILL SHOW THEE (Genesis 12)

Abram entered the land of Canaan and journeyed on until he reached the plain of Moreh, where God appeared to him again. This must have been very reassuring to Abram; he knew he was right. He knew God chose when and where to speak to him, but he must also have begun to see that man's responsibility is also a vital factor in the divine-human relationship. He had begun again to obey, and God had not stopped him in his journey or tried to correct his direction. It was reasonable therefore to assume that it was safe to continue on his way, so onward he went. If the Lord was so concerned about him as to appear to him and charge him to do His will for the purposes stated, He would surely see he arrived in the land of which He spoke. Abram truly believed what he had been told and though belatedly had set out again to obey, sure of God. This was the trustful attitude in which he continued along the path he had chosen; he proved to be right.

Unto Thy Seed Will I Give ....

At Sichem the Lord again visited him and this time said, 'Unto thy seed will I give this land' — that was all; it was a cryptic statement but it was enough. God's words were an enlargement on the first clause of the sevenfold promise and blessing He had originally given to Abram. It was just the word he needed, it completely answered any questions he may have had in his mind. God had said, 'I will make of thee a great nation', and Abram had no children. There was no likelihood of his having any either, for Sarai his wife was barren — naturally it was impossible. God had made him a promise though. That was enough, and He had come again to him and filled out that original promise — O what joy. The Lord met him at the right moment and at the very place where it was needed. In one short statement he was assured of a seed and of his inheritance, and also of the land of God's choice. It was wonderful.

The promise was all the more surprising because the land was already inhabited by the Canaanites. These were Noah's descendants through Canaan the son of Ham, one of Noah's three sons. They were children of a curse; this man Ham was cursed by his father Noah because of his inexcusable behaviour towards him one day when he was drunk. As a result of the curse, all the tribes which inhabited the land which God gave to Abram were destined by the prophetic word to be servants of servants. As is the way with men, they venerated their cursed fore-parent by naming the land after him; either they did not know or did not believe the power of the curse. They did not own the country; it had not been theirs by divine command, though doubtless had they lived in these days they would have claimed squatters' rights. It must ever be borne in mind that the earth belongs to God its creator, and there is no record therefore that He had given any of it to any nation of men. At that time, following the confusion of language at Babel, people were dwelling in segregated groups according to their ability to understand one another's speech, but they did not own the land as by divine gift.

Up to this point of time Abram was the only man on earth to whom God had given, or even promised, any part of His creation, so in making the gift God was not robbing others, nor was Abram usurping anyone else's place. But in the day that God made commitment to Abram 'the Canaanite was in the land'. They were heathen idolaters, as Abram had himself once been — they did not know or worship God. Since the flood there had been swift and terrible declension in the race. This may seem surprising in view of the fact that possibly Noah and his sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth, with their wives and children, were alive on the earth at the time of Abram's birth. It is also within the bounds of possibility that Noah's death coincided with the call of Abram and his departure from Ur. If this were indeed the case, it would have been a remarkable example of the fact that God does not leave Himself without witness on the earth.

Even though idolatry and error abounded at that time, God kept clear the testimony that there is only one true and living God. Besides this He was moving towards the fulfilment of His purposes on the earth; when God does that He is unstoppable. His word to Abram was not absolutely clear though. He did not say 'this land only', nor did He at that time define the borders of the inheritance. So although he knew he had arrived in the promised land, Abram was not sure of the exact extent of the possession. Nevertheless he was grateful to the Lord, for as far as he knew God had not done anything like this before. To no other people had He given any part of the earth.

Since the time of the flood tribes and families had settled wherever they pleased and their presence was regarded by all as right of possession. But now God was giving land rights to Abram. It seemed an impossibility, for the land was already inhabited. Canaan's descendants were of a different tribe from Abram and spoke a different language, so he could not communicate with them. Even if he could have done so, how could he have told them what God had told him? He could not have expected them to believe him in any case, or to hand over their land to him. He could produce no evidence satisfactory to them that God had visited him. How could he prove it? He could do nothing but believe God. This he did with boldness; he built an altar at the exact spot where God appeared to him to prove it, and trusted the Lord to work everything out.

#### An Empty Altar to an Unknown God

Onlooking Canaanites might have wondered what it was all about. There was no visible god to be seen; as far as we can tell there was no sacrifice either. It would have all appeared very strange to them. Imagine it: a man building an altar, standing beside it, perhaps with head, eyes and hands uplifted to heaven, but no god, no fire, no blood, no sacrifice. Why, had it been one of their altars, all these would have been very much in evidence; but not so with this man — he was different. Abram had received no word from God about sacrifices; he did not know what to do; in worship he bore testimony to his own ignorance as well as to God's wisdom. He was a pilgrim as well as a pioneer: he was not only seeking a land; he was also seeking the God who had sought him and brought him there.

Abram did not yet know God. He knew God had called him and he had already learned certain things about Him, but he did not claim to know Him; that he wanted to do so was certain. The call and command of God to any man is always given so that those He calls may discover the one who is calling. He is wishing to make Himself known. Abram trusted God and was content to leave with Him everything of which he was yet in ignorance. What he knew he acted upon; the rest he left — that is the way of faith. One of

his great secrets was careful avoidance of making false claims; if God did not tell him what to sacrifice, then he would not presume to offer anything. Instinct told him that sacrifice was involved and he wanted to give, so he built an altar to God who, though unseen and unknown, was nevertheless there. Let all other people all over the earth offer gifts and make sacrifices to their gods if they wished, but not he. When he lived in Ur he, like all the others, had made sacrifices to gods he did not know, but he was finished with all that. He had known the kind of offerings he had been expected to bring to their altars, but he did not know what the true God wanted.

At last he had discovered the one true God (though not by his own searching), and he was most grateful to Him for that. What mercy and grace it was that God had revealed Himself to him by His word. Abram was most thankful, but he knew that very much more yet remained to be discovered. What these things were he did not know, and he determined to find out; he wanted reality. Either in actuality or in promise some of his dearest wishes were already being fulfilled. Already he was in his possession — the land was his, and now God had promised him a personal seed. Dearest of all, he had found God, or rather had been found of Him — it was wonderful. What more could he ask? He had everything.

#### He Looked for a City

Nevertheless, deep down in Abram's heart, and as yet entirely unspoken, there lay another desire, perhaps third in order of his dearest wishes: he was looking for a city. To know God was first, to have a son was second, to find a city was third. He did not know the name of this city, or where it was, but somehow he felt that within the bounds of his possession there must be a city.

He had not been told by the Lord to look for one. There was nothing about it in the original call. God had not committed Himself to give Abram a city, but Abram wanted one; he was looking for a city which had (certain) foundations whose builder and maker is God. It seemed to Abram that God, who had called him out of Chaldea to Canaan, must surely also have prepared for him a dwelling-place, somewhere to live permanently, a home more specific than 'a country'. He had come from Ur — to where? He constantly looked for that city.

Perhaps Abram thought that the Lord's call was to His own country, a heavenly place where His seat was and where He resided and reigned; in that case there must be a city and a temple surely. He would almost certainly have heard of the garden which the Lord had planted in Eden, but that earthly paradise had long since vanished. Noah, and perhaps his sons, had most likely seen it from the outside, guarded by angels with flaming swords preventing everybody from entering it; but the flood had destroyed all traces of that. Most probably it had altered the contours of the land as well, so even Noah, if he had been still alive, would have found it impossible to locate the garden with any degree of certainty; but there had been no talk of a city in Eden. Had there been one? There was no answer to that, but if one did exist anywhere Abram was determined to find it — the city of God. He felt that if it existed at all, it would be wonderful above all others and easily recognised; the foundations of that city would be everlasting.

He had not heard any stories of a city being built by God since the flood, so if it existed at all it was antediluvian. That was astonishing, for it meant that it would have been founded for ever like the eternal mountains. If not it would not have been able to withstand the awful floods and the terrible deluge. The avalanche of waters swirling around and

overflowing it, the battering of trees torn up by the roots to be hurled against its ramparts, and the weight of shifting silt, built up by the turbulent waves, would have smashed it. Any city surviving that terrible flood, which shattered every civilisation on earth, would be the one and only eternal city of God on earth. Its foundations must be most wonderful, unshakeable, immovable. He, Abram, would live there. If it existed at all it must be in this promised land, and he would find it.

Leaving his altar Abram moved on, travelling south. Soon he was among the mountains, continuing his search there. At one point he pitched his tent on a mountain which gave him a view of two settlements. One, he was to discover, was Bethel and the other Hai; each of these later became famous in the history of his people. One lay on his left hand and the other on his right, east and west of his camp, but neither of them appeared to him to be the place he was looking for. Whether or not he inspected them closely we are not told, but they did not suit his ideals, and he never settled in either of them. Abram preferred to continue his nomadic life rather than sink back into anything less than the best. He was always sustained by the vision of his heart; neither Hai on his left nor Bethel on his right could be 'his' city. In some way they could tell the story of his life, for Hai means 'heap of ruins' and Bethel 'house of God'; but he wanted the city of God, not the city of Abram.

Bethel, the House of God

Those two cities were a kind of parable of Abram's life. Ur of the Chaldees was a city of sin and devilry; spiritually it was a heap of ruins. His sun had risen there, and was now near its zenith (he had lived about half of his life), and soon it would begin to sink towards the west, where it would set in the house of God — lovely thought. Something stirred him again, and he builded another altar to the Lord. For him that was quite a new venture, for (until this time) he had not builded an altar without first waiting for a word from God. At Sichem he had built the altar following God's promises to him that He would give the land to his seed. God had initiated it. Not so this time — without a word being spoken to him, Abram initiated the move; he felt in touch with God; communion and communication had been established and he called on the name of the Lord. What he said is not recorded. Much is left to the imagination, but how instructive and encouraging this is. Abram was using his privileges and discovering God.

He was the one solitary soul in the whole of Canaan learning of God, and how he learned! Not a word came to him from the Lord; He did not speak. If Abram sought some kind of direction from God, a word of assurance or confirmation, or even of encouragement, perhaps he was disappointed. He had moved from his heart, but God left him standing in the silence waiting; nothing came. Imagine his dilemma. What should he do? Where should he go from here? Which direction should he take? The land was his; it belonged to him and his seed. He believed that, but how much of it? To what lengths could he go? Where had God set his limits? Should he go east or west, or continue southwards? It could not be back up north; He knew that, for he had recently travelled from there. The precise location of the boundary northward he did not know, but he knew if he travelled in that direction he would be back where he had started.

There was no going back; he was determined not to return to his father's house or to his kindred again. He was finished with them and their land for ever — that link was broken completely. He knew what not to do, but was not so sure of what he had to do, so, in the absence of directions he determined to keep going. It seemed reasonable enough to

continue in the general direction in which he had been travelling, so he moved on towards the south. His altar he left behind to bear its mute testimony to his presence and passage.

Another factor he had to take into consideration at that time was the food shortage — there was a famine in the land. It may well be that altruistic motives made him move on. How could he stay there when his herds and flocks were eating the pasture which the Canaanites needed for themselves? They had been there long before him; he was a stranger; it would not be right for him to stay. It would be of no use trying to persuade them that the land belonged to him, and that he had a right to the position. It was a real test. God had given him everything, but what would he do? Would he assert his rights, be greedy and grab all? Possessions, even from God, are a test of character. Was he greater than the gift? Could he handle it properly? God waited. Abram moved on. His dearest wish was to have a son; his definite aim was to know the bounds of his possession, and his deepest desire was to find the city; but his immediate need was to survive. He had the same instinctive urge to survive that is in everybody, and the same natural fears. Self-preservation was a primary urge with him as with anyone else, and he was journeying into the unknown; he had to provide for his own or deny his faith. Abram was a great man. He had much to learn of God and about himself though; his lessons had scarcely begun.

#### Towards the South

Way down south and west of the Negeb lay Egypt, and as Abram drew nearer to that land in search of food and some answers to his many questions, he took a certain decision. He did not know the Egyptians, or how he would be received by them, and he did not trust them. He was under no illusions; Sarai his wife was a very attractive and beautiful woman, and he knew men. Grave misgivings filled his heart — what might happen he dared not imagine. Fear gripped him as he thought of the possibilities and probabilities of their reception in Egypt. Whether or not the Egyptians had a reputation for murdering men for their wives we do not know; Abram seemed utterly convinced of the probability though; he felt sure they would kill him in order to steal his wife, so he decided upon a subterfuge. Happily for them both Sarai was not only his wife, she was his half-sister also, so they together connived in a half truth. They agreed that when they reached Egypt they should say she was his sister — the fact that she was his wife was not to be mentioned.

On the face of it this seemed the sensible thing to do; it was true, partly, but it was not the whole truth. Poor Abram, he had temporarily lost the vision of God and His word; it is very sad. Maybe he did it because in his heart he knew that he was moving out of the land of promise. Abram was not entirely to be blamed for that, for God had not yet defined to him the full extent of his possession; somehow though he was pretty sure that Egypt was not included in it. He might also have reasoned that although God had committed Himself to do certain things in the land, His promises did not necessarily cover other lands. Had Abram been reasoning rightly he would have known surely that God had no intention of allowing him to be slain in Egypt. Besides he had not yet begotten the promised seed, and God had said, 'to thy seed will I give this land'.

Had Abram such a short memory? Somehow he seemed to have lost his faith; senses always become blurred when that happens. It was bad while it lasted; thank God it was only a temporary lapse though. Abram took his eyes off God and His promises, and placed them on himself and Sarai and the situation. God's word and God's power faded

away; he used his own wits: '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'. What a sad blunder for a man of such great faith as Abram. He who had stepped out so bravely in the beginning, venturing all on God's eternal word and faithfulness, is now making his soul's welfare dependent on a woman's half-truth. Fear in a man's soul works havoc. Although the Lord had appeared to Abram, he did not yet know Him. Had he known God, he would have known he need have had no fear. Dear Abram, great though he had already proved to be, he was only slowly learning. What a gigantic lesson lay ahead for him now.

What Abram had to discover in Egypt was not the most important thing in his life; it was one of the many things he had to learn though. He may have thought that the most important thing at that time was to discover the whereabouts of the city, but if so he was greatly mistaken. What we are to discover, be it great or small, is never as important as Who we are to discover. Be it a land or a city or the will of God or anything, whatsoever it may be, whether great or small, nothing is as great or important as discovering God — who He is, what He is like, what He thinks, how He acts, His disposition, His tastes, what He likes, what He dislikes, what He will do or not do under certain circumstances, His love, His grace, His power, His faithfulness. Abram's call was not to discover a land or a city, or to beget a son, but to know the God who had called him. He knew that God was and is, that had been revealed to him, but he had to discover who God is. Abram knew He was there, but he did not know Him — yet.

Had he known Him he would not have reasoned the way he did. He would have known that his soul's safety did not rest upon Sarai's love and faithfulness, but on God's; nor would he have constrained Sarai to support him in a subterfuge so unnecessary. Had he known God, he would have known that He who called him out of Ur of the Chaldees would not let him be slain in Egypt. God does not do things like that. When He makes up His mind to do a thing He does it. When He begins something He finishes it. Let us remind ourselves that God's word did not come to Abram as a call but as a command. Abram was not invited; he was commanded — God was determined to do something with the man.

God fill us with this knowledge of Himself and His sovereignty; we are under orders and are His charge, and because of this relationship no one can set on us to do us harm. When Abram finally arrived in Egypt God did wonderful things for him. He must have wished he had trusted himself more completely to God; if he had done so He would have done yet greater things for him. Since Abram did not yet know God, perhaps his action is to be excused, and in his favour it may be said that so far the Lord had not defined to him the borders of his inheritance; He had certainly not forbidden him to go to Egypt. Abram had no Bible to read, nor had he opportunity to learn from God's dealings with other men. He did not know any among his contemporaries to whom he could turn for help or instructions; there was no church.

Reading later of Melchizedek and the easy way in which he and Abram consorted, and how readily Abram rendered him his tithes, we may wonder if they had met before, but we do not know. Abram was a pioneer; he did not only lead the way in discovering and exploring the promised land, he led the way in discovering God. When he set out for Egypt, he did so primarily because necessity demanded it — he and his family and flocks must find food in order to survive. That he descended to the land, which was later to take on typical significance of, and be regarded as 'the world', seems to us a pity, but he

learned lessons there which he never forgot, and proved the mercy and the sovereign will of God.

### A Grievous Separation

Egypt proved to be just such a place as Abram thought it would be; exactly as he anticipated, Sarai's beauty attracted the attention of all who saw her, and the inevitable happened. The princes of the realm informed Pharaoh of the fair stranger in the land, and she was promptly taken away from Abram and brought into the king's household — undoubtedly with a view to becoming one of his concubines. Great sorrow must have flooded Abram's and Sarai's hearts. What were they to do? Their subterfuge had worked, Abram was still alive, but they had lost each other. Sarai's name meant 'my princess'; that just about describes how much Abram thought of her, and now she was gone. They had succeeded in saving Abram's life, but O the grief! The prince and the princess were separated, perhaps permanently. Had they not anticipated this? Surely they must have considered the possibility of it. What recriminations must have filled their hearts.

In his own land Pharaoh was a law unto himself; in those days every man did that which was right in his own eyes. Abram knew the risk he was running; it was later to be written that a man's sin would surely find him out. Soon, too soon, Abram's deviation from the strict truth rebounded upon him; he saved his life but lost Sarai. Had not God stepped in, it might have been written of him that he gained the world and lost his soul. What questionings must have filled his mind. What was to happen to the promises now? How could the promised seed be born now? Would he be able to find his city? Would he ever know his land and live in his possessions?

Pharaoh, who had moved in complete ignorance of Abram's and Sarai's true relationship, had treated Abram royally. In all innocence, not knowing God's will, he had given Abram all kinds of gifts in return for his favour in allowing Sarai to live in the palace; everything seemed to be going well, but nothing was going according to God's plan. He was totally against what was happening and showed His disapproval in no uncertain way: He smote Pharaoh and his household with great plagues. It was a tragedy; the suffering was terrible: without knowing it Pharaoh was interfering with God's plans. God had committed Himself to do certain things, and He was not going to allow His purposes to be prevented by a heathen king: Sarai was the chosen mother-to-be of the chosen seed of the chosen man.

Somehow Pharaoh at last realised that his troubles were connected with Sarai, and to his credit, when he realised it, he returned her to Abram without further ado. More than that, he loaded them with presents and hastily sent them both away. It was only by the mercy of God that he did not kill them, for he must have felt that they had dealt very treacherously with him, and dealt him evil for good. By his standards he had been more righteous than they: they had come into his land as wanderers and strangers seeking food for themselves and pasture for their flocks, and he had granted them the favour. It had been a generous gesture on his part, for Egyptians in those days detested sheep and shepherds — they were an abomination to them. Nevertheless Pharaoh had allowed them to stay.

All that was involved in the installation of Sarai in Pharaoh's palace we do not know. Perhaps, believing her to be Abram's sister, and being supported in the error by both Abram and Sarai, he had bought her with over-generous exchanges of servants and gifts of animals. It would have seemed to him that he had taken Sarai in a proper manner, and

had brought nothing on himself but plagues. They had not told him the truth; his action had been straightforward enough. They had lied to him and no one would have blamed him if he had avenged himself on them in the expected manner. There can be no doubt that the fear of God came upon him and prevented any act of revenge, for he neither killed them nor demanded that Abram should restore his gifts; instead he limited himself to reproving them, and sent them away.

### God of All the Earth

The unseen truth of it was that the Lord preserved Abram and Sarai. Later Abram realised and said, 'He is the God of the whole earth'; the lesson of the flood was still fresh in his mind no doubt. Already it was passing into tribal legend, and he would have been aware of the story. As already noted, God had not at that time given any portion of the earth to anyone except Abram. The Egyptians had not been given Egypt; like the rest of the people on the earth in those days, the Egyptians had simply established themselves in that part of the world. Having done so they named it after themselves and claimed it for their own, but they had no licence from God to do so. Among men it may be an agreed thing that certain parts, lands, countries, continents, call them what you will, belong to certain people, but by what right the claim is made who can say? The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof.

That He did later allocate certain lands to certain people other than Hebrews is clearly stated in scripture, but Paul tells us that implicit in the promise made to Abram by God was an even greater promise, namely that he should be heir of the world. This presupposes the possibility that all God had said to Abram is not recorded in Genesis, and that under the power of God Moses wrote only selected things, leaving out much conversation and certain incidents not considered necessary to the narrative. We are also told that God divided the nations of the earth with a view to giving Canaan to Abram. This allows the suggestion that, although the nations may not have been told so by the Lord, and without their knowledge, He did consider that certain lands belonged to certain people.

Luke's report of Paul's words also lends weight to this idea: God 'hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed and the bounds of their habitation'. Just when this was done, or when or if or how He communicated His depositions to the various tribes and peoples, we do not know; investigation of the point is impossible. What we do know is that the earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, and that He is the God of the whole earth.

Abram had been shown enough to know this. Before he went down to Egypt; just what part it played in his thinking we do not know, but it could possibly have influenced him in his decision to go down to that land. Although he did not yet know the fullest extent of God's promises to him, he may have reasoned that, since he was the Lord's chosen and all the earth was the Lord's, he could go in and out and find pasture anywhere.

We know that the Lord had called Abram with the set purpose of raising up a people through whom He could bring in the Christ. We also know that the Judge of all the earth did right by Pharaoh and by Abram and Sarai. The only thing that seems to stand out as being glaringly wrong is Abram's and Sarai's lie, which brought such trouble on Pharaoh. Unless there is some factor undisclosed, we can only judge that Pharaoh did not knowingly sin against God or against Abram and Sarai. It is impossible to assess the matter fully, for there is insufficient evidence to go on, but we do know that God

protected His chosen man, and kept Pharaoh from interfering with His plans. In the end grace and mercy triumphed and God overruled Abram's folly.

Abram must have left Egypt in a very thoughtful vein. God had said He would bless him and make him a blessing, but he had not been a blessing to Pharaoh — quite the contrary in fact. He left a sorry testimony behind him; Pharaoh sent him and all he had right away from his land; he did not want him or anything to do with him in Egypt. Abram departed in disgrace; he left no blessing behind in Egypt, only a bad name; he built no altar there. It seems he lost his testimony altogether; it was very sad. Reproved and chastened, he retraced his steps northwards. God had been faithful to him, but O he had been a failure! It might have been a blessing in disguise to him if he had learned his lesson, but it appears he did not, for he repeated the subterfuge again later. Nevertheless he never went down into Egypt again.

This was indeed a sad episode in Abram's life, and it has been inserted in scripture so that, from it, we should learn the lesson he learned. The saint can only have the kind of trouble Abram had in the world if he acts in any way like the world. If a man practises subterfuges, moves in fear, uses worldly wisdom and seeks by his own cunning to protect himself, or to preserve or guard his supposed spiritual position, he will only fail and complicate his troubles. Abram failed because he ceased to rely on God at that time, and leaned to his own understanding. Nevertheless the faithful Lord intervened in their folly and saved Abram and Sarai from disaster. Restored to each other and to true wisdom, they left Egypt in search of the promised land and to restored communion with God.

### Chapter 3 — AT THE ALTAR OF GOD (Genesis 13)

'And Abram went up out of Egypt'. The man of God and of promise and of faith commenced his steady climb back up to the land of God's favour. He now knew that Egypt did not belong to him: the inheritance of God's people does not lie in this evil world. To seek inheritance there is to sink into its evil. Abram left it for good, with clear vision in his heart as he headed for the place of the altar. He knew exactly where he was going and why he was going there. Somehow he had not been able to worship God for a long time; ever since he had left his altar at Bethel he had been robbed of the power. Something within him now urged him back to Bethel — it was as if a deadly spell had been broken; he must get back to the altar again. He had not felt able to build another the entire length of his journey down to Egypt, nor yet while he was there, and now, though he was returning, he still felt the same. He could not, would not stay long enough anywhere to build anything. On he went without delay to the place where he had known sure communion with God: he knew he had been right with God then.

He was thankful to be delivered from Pharaoh and Egypt, but he wanted more; at all costs he must get back into the communion he had enjoyed and lost. He drove on as fast as possible. He had no assurance that he would ever be back in fellowship with God until he reached that altar. He had learned so much there; it had been a wonderful experience; there he had first called on the name of the Lord. He meant to regain that, so to the altar he pressed on, and to the altar he came. How long he had been away down in Egypt we do not know, but it had been too long. He had achieved his purpose as far as the salvation of his flocks and herds was concerned; they had been saved — increased in fact, but at what a cost!

Separate Thyself from Me

Whether or not the drought and the famine were over we are not told. It seems that the land had been greatly impoverished by it though, for the area in which Abram settled soon proved inadequate for his needs. He and his nephew Lot owned large numbers of animals — both had increased in worldly goods. Their stay in Egypt had proved highly successful in this respect; they had flocks and herds in abundance, but their very success was their undoing. Ever since his brother Haran and his father Terah had died it had been Abram's intention to look after Lot. He felt honour bound to 'father' his nephew, and he had taken Lot with him everywhere, determined to share with him whatever of blessing and prosperity the Lord gave him. It was highly commendable, and done from the purest motives, but it was not the Lord's will.

Lot appears to have been a likeable enough man, most unobtrusive and easy-going; he was anything but a troublemaker, one of those men who go along with everything. He was dutiful enough to Abram and apparently grateful for his uncle's generosity, as he should be, and partook freely of the bounty which the Lord showered upon Abram. There was no reason why he should not do so of course; he was just one of those fortunate people, who are so blessed as to have rich and prosperous relatives, as generous as they are wealthy. Perhaps it is true to say that Lot 'knew on which side his bread was buttered'. The phrase Moses uses about him, though brief, is probably very descriptive of the man: 'and Lot went with him'. Abram never found his nephew at all obstructive; everything suited him — if it was the promised land it was fine; if it was Egypt it was equally agreeable.

Lot appears to have travelled along in the backwash of another's blessing; he took the initiative in nothing. He was never in the same relationship with God that Abram was; he was not the called of the Lord and did not know Him personally at all. He was prepared to benefit from His goodness though. Lot, it may be said, was not responsible for the Egyptian lapse, but neither did he ever build an altar. He seems to have fitted in wherever he went — Haran, Bethel, Egypt, Sodom — all were equally acceptable to him. He was a most equable fellow, just, moral, a most likeable and companionable fellow traveller, and now also comparable in wealth with his uncle. Abram had never found him difficult; Lot had never seriously objected to anything he had said. He properly respected his uncle's convictions and, even if he did not enjoy the same spiritual fellowship with God that Abram knew, he did not object to it; he could accept that. He was most accommodating; seemingly he possessed the ability to adjust to anything; but in the end he proved to be a man with very little moral conviction and suffered the consequences of his folly. He was one of Abram's mistakes.

One of the things God had said to Abram was 'get thee out of thy father's house and from thy kindred', and he had set off in search of the promised land, taking Lot with him. But Lot was only related to him through Terah, the old man; therefore, when Terah died, Abram should have taken the opportunity to make a complete break with him and all the past, but he had not done so. Up until this time all had seemed well: he had been able to cope with Lot, and there had been no necessity to wonder about the correctness of what he had done. But now it became increasingly clear to Abram that it had been a great mistake to include Lot in the party. Necessity forced him to reconsider the wisdom of ever having asked him to accompany him in the beginning. The very blessings of God upon his life compelled him now to act in a manner contrary to his original decisions.

Both Lot and he were prosperous and wealthy men. Their flocks and herds were so

increased that their requirements in grazing were altogether too great for the land to bear. It had been difficult enough before, when he had decided to go down to Egypt; even with smaller flocks and herds the land had not been able to sustain them. But now the livestock had multiplied to such an extent that it was just impossible to find pasture for them. To complicate matters, and as a result of this, there was conflict between the respective shepherds and cattlemen employed by Abram and Lot. These men all felt responsibility towards their respective employers — Abram's employees strove to find pasture for his livestock, and Lot's men strove as manfully to provide feeding-grounds for his animals. Open quarrels broke out among them and the situation became very tense; it could not have been otherwise, but it was intolerable. There was no way of deciding who was right and who was wrong, so a solution acceptable to all had to be found; the animals had to be fed and strife must cease.

It did not take Abram long to decide — there was only one course open to them, separation; they must part. He saw that what God had said to him in the beginning was not only right, it was wisdom too. He should have obeyed Him. Blinded by tradition and duty, Abram had not been able to see that then, and he had done what people expected of him. But now he knew he had been wrong; he would cling to his family no longer; Lot must go. He approached Lot with customary grace and generosity and gave him the first choice: 'separate thyself, I pray thee, from me,' he said, 'if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right'. He not only saw that separation must be clear-cut, it must be final also; their relationship and companionship was through.

Abram's insistence and its result throws great light upon the character of Abram's nephew. Without even common courtesy or natural respect for his uncle's age, without any acknowledgement of Abram's great generosity towards him, Lot took full advantage of the opportunity and chose the best pasture land he could see. It seems he did not hesitate one moment to consider the fact that all he had was due to his uncle's great kindness in sharing the blessings of God with him. Selfishness and greed motivated him entirely; Lot thought exclusively in terms of self-advantage and, without a word of deference or thankfulness to Abram, made his choice first.

From the place of vantage where they stood Lot looked out over the well-watered plain of Jordan; he was strangely confused. Everywhere he turned his eyes it seemed to him that he was seeing the garden of the Lord; it was just like the land of Egypt he thought. Dotted here and there among the pastures there were also many cities; it all looked ideal to him. How far he could see across the grasslands we cannot tell, but way out there, far to the east, on the banks of the Salt Sea, stood Sodom and Gomorrah, twin cities of evil.

Whether or not their evil reputation was known to Abram and Lot at that time it is impossible to tell, but scripture allows that inference, for it contains the ominous words 'he pitched his tent toward Sodom'. Familiarity with the grammatical forms of Bible authors invites, if it does not confirm, the conclusion that, even if he did not know of its perversions and immorality, Lot fully intended to go to Sodom. Whatever moved him to do so we do not know, but it is certain that he did not go there to partake of its sin. From evidence supplied later, it appears that Lot did not easily take to the nomadic life. He had gone along with his uncle on his peregrinations, but his heart, it seems, was in the cities. So it was that, given opportunity, he chose the well-watered plain covered with luscious grass and studded with cities; he needed the pastures, but he wanted the cities. 'But,' scripture records, 'the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord

exceedingly'.

It was inevitable that Abram and his nephew should part, but he must have watched him go with very mixed feelings. With hindsight he must have seen that it had been unavoidable right from the beginning. God's very first words to him had demanded complete separation from all his kith and kin. It would have been far better to have left Lot back in Haran than to see him now setting out for Sodom. Whatever would become of him? Riches could quite easily become his undoing. Everything that had happened proved God to be right. They could not dwell together; the land itself would not permit that anyway. Trying to preserve peace between them had proved impossible; it had been a grievous thing to him that the inhabitants of the land had witnessed the incessant quarrels which broke out among their employees. It was all wrong and far from his intentions or expectations when he set out for the promised land. Abram had to learn that his first step of obedience in response to God involved him in committal to total separation from everything unacceptable in His sight.

God did not disclose to Abram all that was in His heart when He first called and commanded him, it was not necessary. Abram's future blessing did not depend upon his understanding but upon his continued obedience; in common with all men he had to be trained in that virtue, and it did not come easily at first. God's plans did not include Lot but He did not explain why; at the beginning He allowed him to go along with Abram, but the point had now been reached where the separation must take place; Lot could go no further. He could accompany Abram part way and during his time of defection into Egypt, but God had no intention of including the man in His special purposes, even though he was in Canaan. Lot could and did partake of the special providential blessings equally available to any man who accompanied His friend Abram, but the particular promises made to Abram were exclusively for him. Whether Abram saw all this at the time is open to question, but that is the truth. It may have been expediency, the sheer force of circumstances alone, which dictated the irrevocable parting, but whatever it was, God engineered it all. What a comforting thought that is. Over and through all things, despite all our defections, inner conflicts, emotional problems, family troubles or whatever, the Lord is working out His eternal purposes for our good in all things.

All the Land ... to Thy Seed for Ever

'Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan'. He still did not know the full extent of his promised possessions, but he had no intention of undertaking any further excursions into unexplored territory. He now knew enough to stay in the vicinity where God first spoke to him in concrete terms about the land He intended to give him. Abram's action soon bore fruit: not long after Lot's separation from him the Lord again spoke to Abram about the land. He told him to do exactly what he himself had told Lot to do earlier, 'Lift up now thine eyes and look', and he looked to all points of the compass.. He looked with eyes of ownership: all was his, God said — even that which Lot had chosen was his. Lot had gained nothing of a lasting nature; he only gained much temporarily to lose all eventually in terrible tragedy.

All that Lot was at that moment enjoying was also Abram's, although perhaps neither of them thought so. It is Paul who draws our attention to this. He does not discuss it at all, nor does he reveal the principle inspiring God's action but simply states the bare fact that the promise made to Abram was 'that he should be heir of the world'. This promise is not stated anywhere in Genesis; on the contrary definite territorial limits are put upon the

promise; God confined it to a comparatively small tract of land between the Nile and the Euphrates. But He not only made the promise to Abram, He made it to his seed as well, and in this lies the key to Paul's statement.

The fulness of the promise awaits the second advent of the Lord Jesus Christ, the original Seed to whom the promise was made: He is the heir of all things. God concealed the fact of Christ's second coming within the revelation which He made to Abram, who at that time had no seed. Because of this, Abram could not then construe the promise to mean universal and eternal inheritance for his child, for he had none.

God purposely did it in this way so that every mouth may be stopped. He did not commit Himself to give the world to Abram or to Isaac his son; He only gave them the promised land. This He did to Abram on that memorable day, even though at that time others (especially Lot) seemed to have so much of it. What God was teaching Abram was founded upon a basic principle of divine life. Abram had given so much to Lot, yet the Lord was saying, 'he may have much, but you have not been impoverished, nor has your substance been lessened by giving; it is still yours; all is yours'. As it is with God, so it is with His children. Although God gives much, or even if He gives all, He loses nothing; it is still His and always will be. 'The earth is the Lord's,' says the psalmist. God was not conscious of loss because He gave part of the earth to Abram. He said He would give the promised land to Abram and his seed for ever, but by that He did not mean that He gave it away to Abram. It was the same with Abram: he had given much cattle and the choicest pasture land to his nephew, but he had not given it away; he couldn't, for it was his by gift of God.

The Lord was pleased with him; He loves a generous spirit; Abram was truly learning of the Lord. He had not failed to hear what the Lord had said to him already. First it was 'a land that I will shew thee,' then it was 'unto thy seed will I give this land,' now it was 'all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever'. It is most instructive to notice God's ways. He reserved certain conditions within Himself and He was not prepared to commit Himself in positive terms to Abram until they were fulfilled. In the first place He did not promise Abram the land but only said He would show it to him. In the second place He again refrained from promising the land to Abram, and promised it to his seed; not until the third occasion did God promise the land to Abram. Then again we should notice how carefully the Lord phrased His promises. He committed Himself to the gift, but it was always in future terms: 'I will'. Even if he had not answered the Lord, Abram might well have thought, 'When? You say You will give, and I believe it, but when will You do so?' God never told him when, but from this incident we may perhaps correctly assume that it would all depend upon Abram's fulfilment of the unspoken conditions in God's heart and not yet revealed.

There is no questioning the fact that right from the beginning the Lord fully intended to give Abram the land, otherwise what was His reason for calling him? But not until Abram displayed utter obedience to Him did the Lord promise him the land which He had shown him. When Abram was prepared to obey to the full the original commandment God had given him, and to separate himself entirely from all, God unhesitatingly pledged Himself to give him the land. He had known all along that Abram would obey Him, but He also knew that it had to be brought home to Abram's heart that possession depends upon obedience. That is why, as soon as Abram separated himself from Lot, God committed Himself to him in a new way. Until then Abram could have been justified in

thinking that God would give the land He had shown him to his seed, but not to himself, for God had not so much as mentioned that He would give it to him.

Behold then the strict truthfulness of God; how wonderfully His faithfulness blends with His honesty; He never oversteps the mark in anything He does or says. The statement made by the writer to the Hebrews fully accords with this when he says of Abram, 'he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance'. The word 'after' is the important word here; Abram did not receive either the land or even the promise of it immediately he was called. Only at this precise point did the Lord promise it to him, and then he did not receive the land, but only the promise of it. Again this is why the Hebrews letter records that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were only strangers dwelling in tents in the land. This is a most surprising piece of information, as well as a very significant one. How is it that they lived as nomads in the land when it was theirs? If it was theirs, or (more appropriately to our subject) if the land was Abram's, why did he not possess it? The answers to these questions are vital to our proper understanding of scripture and of God's person and ways, so we must be sure of being correct.

#### They Shall be Strangers

Firstly it is perfectly obvious that Abram could not have been other than a stranger in Canaan. He was not a native of that land but an immigrant from Chaldea; he was also a stranger, in that he was the only person in Canaan who knew the one true and living God. The Canaanites proper and all the other tribes inhabiting the land were polytheists and idolaters. Abram was raised up of God, that by him He might bring the knowledge of Himself to mankind. In this, his highest calling, Abram was absolutely faithful to Him who called him. Herein lies his greatness; from the moment of his call he did not once deviate or compromise about this; in his day he was one lone witness unto the Lord. Neither Sarai his wife nor Lot his nephew nor Eliezer his steward knew God as Abram did or shared his faith to the same degree; even in his own house he was alone. He was a stranger in Canaan, looking for a city which he never found — he never even became a settler.

Secondly he was not able to take and possess the land; he was one person, so how could he dwell in all the land? He most certainly possessed the portions of land on which he pitched his tent and fed his cattle, but so did every other person similarly placed. Even to have attempted the impossible would have meant being constantly at war with the inhabitants. Although his one military engagement was a huge success, and he proved to be a most wonderful general and master of strategy, he was essentially a man of righteousness and peace.

Thirdly God did not want him to possess the land. He never told him to do so; He later said he would inherit it. Abram understood this perfectly, and later said that the most high God was the possessor of heaven and earth. It is to the glory of Abram that he never once claimed to possess anything; he always recognised that everything belonged to his God; he was perfectly satisfied with that. After some time, without saying it in so many words, the Lord told him that he would never possess the land, that he would die and only in the fourth generation would the land be possessed. Abram was to possess the land by his seed, who were led back into it by Joshua centuries later. Nevertheless he inherited it, dwelling in the land in faith that the time would come when his earthly seed should fill out and possess the promise God had made to him.

Fourthly, and this is a most important point, when making His promises to Abram, God at

no time went beyond saying 'I will'; He never said 'I will now'. He committed Himself to doing so, but never said when He would do so. 'Arise,' He said, 'walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee'. This oft-repeated occurrence of the phrase 'I will' is a revealing instance of a spiritual principle which we all must grasp and fully understand, for God works by the same method today. God was making known to Abram both the immediacy and the continuity of His giving. With Abram we all must learn that the Lord is always giving His gifts. His promises are exact and never misleading, as we have seen; they are oft-repeated and, upon obedience, are always expanded. Not once did he say to Abram 'I have given thee the land'. He never spoke to him of a past act of giving, but always spoke in the present with an eye to the future.

### By Faith He Possessed

A promise once given by God is never dead, and it is never made by Him with a view to making Himself inoperative. God was always giving the land to Abram. With each new approach it was as if He was saying, 'I have already given you the land as I promised last time; now I will give it to you once more; step out again Abram for I am still giving it to you; maintain your pilgrimages. This principle is revealed fully later, when He said to Joshua, 'every place that the sole of your foot shall tread upon, that have I given you'. Notice that to Joshua He said, 'I have given', referring to a past act, although Joshua was not then in the land and could have said 'but you have not given me so much as a foot in it'. But God testified that he had done so. He had said so to Moses.

He never said that to Abram though, and here is a wonderful testimony to that man's faith; when God said to him 'I will give,' he believed Him. Moreover he obeyed Him and arose and walked all over the promised land as he was directed. Therefore, when Joshua and the children of Israel entered the land hundreds of years later, they had only to plant their feet where Abram had already planted his. His footprints were all over that land. Great pioneer and pilgrim that he was, Abram claimed the promised land for his as yet unborn seed. By faith he inherited their land for them during his lifetime, and possessed it in them during theirs. Only once did the Lord use the past tense with reference to the land when speaking to Abram, and even then He was not speaking of giving the land to Abram, but to his seed. This is the basic reason why the land is called the promised land. Abram only ever had it by promise, not by possession. He was the great man of faith.

Fifthly, following on from this and bearing in mind some things Jesus had to say about Abraham, a still further and far greater possibility emerges, namely that, under the covenant of God, Abraham is still inheriting the blessings. If this is indeed so, it really is a tremendous thing. We know of a certainty that Abraham is not dead but alive, for Jesus said so. He also said 'Abraham rejoiced to see my day and he saw it and was glad'. On another occasion He said that a crippled woman ought to be healed solely because she was a daughter of Abraham, and to His critics He even justified His gracious treatment of Zacchaeus on the same grounds, namely that he was a son of Abraham. It is very likely that Abraham is still reaping spiritual reward for his faith, and that benefits have accrued to him ever since the day he first responded to the Lord in Ur of the Chaldees.

### The Unsearchable Riches

It is a most wonderful thought that, far beyond all the blessings of this life so freely heaped upon us by the Lord now, a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory will continue to build up for us throughout eternity. The blessings of the Lord are cumulative,

as Abram discovered while on earth. Faithfulness, as we know, had everlasting rewards. What if these are eternally increasing also? What if we all go on reaping for eternity? What if rewards continue to mount up for us? What if the factor involved in compound interest were to work everlastingly in our behalf? What immeasurable fulness of blessing will accumulate and heap up in ever increasing abundance for the faithful.

The late Sir James Jeans, Astronomer Royal, once spoke of the ever-expanding universe. He was theorising, but is his theory correct? It does not matter. But is this what Paul realised and referred to when he wrote such phrases as being 'filled unto all the fulness of God', and 'worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory'? We must look at the things which are eternal, not at the things which are temporal. The ways of the Lord are past finding out, but we can look beyond or through them at the eternal principles governing them. 'I will give saith the Lord. Was He saying 'I will for ever give'? That is His determination and His word; only in eternity shall we find out all that is intended and implied in it.

Abram's response to the Lord's further command was to remove from the place where Lot and he had parted company and to go to Mamre. Bethel was not only the place of separation; it was also the place of vision, where God had bidden him to look north and south and east and west and had promised him all the land he saw. In keeping with His former manner when making promises to Abram, the Lord at that time did not set any specific borders or give any measurements to the land; He spoke only of direction, not of dimension. He wanted Abram to rise to a sense of immensity. Lot seemed only to look in one direction, 'the plain of Jordan', the eyes of his heart fixed on the cities of the plain, especially Sodom: he was a man of the flesh. God wanted Abram to be a man of the Spirit, to know the immeasurable greatness of God and the exceeding greatness of His promise. What He really said to Abram was 'look in every direction Abram; everything is yours. Has Lot gone eastward? Look that way too; it is yours also, not Lot's'. The Lord is always wanting His chosen people to enter into all the fulness of the promise.

At that time Abram's vision was on one plane only, across the surface of the earth to the four points of the compass, a full circle of 360 degrees. His vision limited him; he could only see so far, but way out beyond the scope of sight lay the vast provisions of God for him and his seed. He believed the known God for the unknown fulness in which he was living. Soon his vision was to be lifted to a higher plane altogether, a heavenly one, but as yet he could only see promised land.

Dear Abram. The Lord God Almighty, who loved him and had called him, was committed to a promise with a purpose of which he as yet knew very little. God was gently leading on His man from earthly things to the heavenly, and before long Abram's eyes were to be lifted up to the stars of the heavens and a loftier vision. But for the present the promise was, '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'. And Abram did just that.

Who shall say what thoughts filled his mind as clouds of dust, kicked up by the hooves of his herds as they were moving towards Hebron, hung in the air? Cattle in abundance, dust in clouds, uncountable. Were his children really to be as many as that? What a great God he had. Abram's vision of earth and dust through God's eyes was golden with promise, extending far beyond earth's horizons. To see with God's eyes is faith's privilege, and leads into God's knowledge and rest, for whatever He promises can only be done by His

power. Whenever and whatever God promises, although He may not mention it, He always at the same time promises power.

### The Unrevealed Sacrifice

True to his word, when Lot travelled south and east, Abram went south and west. Perhaps it is significant that Lot went to the left and Abram to the right; the young man descended to the plain, while his ageing uncle stayed in the more mountainous country; Abram still preferred the heights. He settled in Mamre in the Hebron district for a while, and built an altar there; again there is no record that he offered a sacrifice. It must have seemed strange that a man should build an altar and yet offer no sacrifice there, but still Abram did not know what to offer, and he was not prepared to try to force God to accept anything from him. Then why build an altar? It was Abram's acknowledgement of God and his testimony to Him.

Whether or not he made animal sacrifice to God was not the important thing; the altar was a testimony to everyone that he knew he owed everything to the Lord. His heartfelt thanks could find no other expression than an altar. There were no limits to his gratitude; God could ask anything of him; he only needed to be told and he would respond with alacrity and joy. God knew that, but He was not yet prepared to ask anything of Abram except obedience. Since the beginning of time the Lord had not spoken one word about sacrifice to anybody. He was content with the sacrifice of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world: he needed no other, He asked for no other. As yet He was not prepared to institute the system of blood sacrifices which He later brought in under Moses. He had not yet given His law to men; it was an age of grace.

Abram lived and inherited the promised land by grace — he was pre-law. He lived before the Mosaic sacrificial age; the one pre-world sacrifice of the Lamb of God covered the whole of that period. The age of grace in which we live is post-law. Just as the pre-world sacrifice covered Abram's age and day, so the one sacrifice of the Lamb of God, which concluded the age of law, covers the whole of this period. Abram, standing by his altar, is as clear a type as we could wish of Paul's plea to us to present our bodies as a living sacrifice. The land was his; he was grateful and walked to and fro and up and down in it, but first he stood by the altar renewing his vows once again. Abram was offering himself to God.

## Chapter 4 — KING OF PEACE AND RIGHTEOUSNESS (Genesis 14)

So far in the story we have been occupied almost exclusively with Abram and Lot and very few others. In this chapter we are suddenly presented with many other names, some of them places and others are persons. All these are included in the text because now they all play a part in the life of Abram. So far Abram has appeared to be a very docile, self-effacing man, a lover of peace and concord, but now we see quite another side of his character — Abram is a mighty warrior too.

For reasons not disclosed, some foreign kings decided to raise armies and join forces to invade Abram's inheritance. They bore very imposing names and formed a very powerful and formidable company; at least one of them claimed to be ruler of an empire — he was called 'Tidal king of nations'. Beyond that, not much information is given about them. Perhaps, by raiding Canaan, Tidal intended to subdue nations dwelling there, annex their

land and enlarge his empire.

These kings did not attack Abram. If they did not consider him and his family a nation, that is quite understandable. He only appeared to be a stranger, a wandering herdsman; he had no permanent home or real estate, and claimed no property; he seemed harmless enough. One thing is absolutely certain: they completely underestimated him. We are not told whether or not they knew the land had been promised to Abram but, whatever their knowledge and intentions, they were trespassing; the land belonged to God, who had promised it to Abram. He was even then busy inheriting the land as the Lord had commanded him, and at that time was encamped at Mamre, which he was using as a base for his itinerations. His purpose was to survey the land, all the time keeping his eye open for a city to dwell in; so far he had not been successful.

He knew the desires of men's hearts to possess lands and build properties, and understood their tendency to achieve fame and everlasting remembrance by naming their lands after them. The very name and land of Canaan were a testimony to that. More particularly, the district where he pitched his tent was called Mamre, after the man who lived there; presumably this man claimed to own it. Very probably Abram had most humbly asked permission of the man to stay there; to his eternal credit he did not enter Canaan in any warlike mood. Just because God had promised him the land he did not go round casting out the inhabitants. On the contrary, Abram was a man of peace; he moved among the people as a friend. Of one thing he was absolutely sure: the land belonged to the One who had called him to inherit it, and He would give it to him in His own time and way; Abram was content. He did not realise that usurpers were about, and that other eyes than his were upon the land, wanting it for themselves.

#### The Battle is Not to the Strong

A king who wanted to dominate the world, supported by confederates who wished to possess it and reign with him, was marching through Canaan spreading destruction and death everywhere. This mighty army was victorious on all sides, overrunning vast tracts of country, pillaging cities, destroying kings, wiping out armies, and taking captives; resistance was broken, and behind them much of Canaan lay devastated. They marched across the plain of Jordan towards the Salt Sea and challenged the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah near the eastern border of the land. In an effort to stop them, the two kings raised armies, joined up with three other kings and their forces, and went out together to stem the advance and protect their cities. They met the enemy in the vale of Sidim, joined them in battle, and were defeated. Lost and scattered they tried to retreat to the mountains. Their losses were great. How many died is not known; among the slain were the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah.

The battle won, the four victorious kings abandoned the pursuit and entered Sodom and Gomorrah for plunder. They ransacked the cities, re-victualled their armies and took many captives (including Lot, who dwelt at Sodom) and moved off. Poor Lot; he had sought the life and safety of a city of sin; now he was destined for slavery in a foreign land. Robbed of all his goods, there was none so poor. But he was not so desolated as he thought, for among those who had escaped was someone who knew of Lot's connections; this person sought out Abram and told him the news of Lot's captivity. Abram's instant response was action: he immediately gathered together all the men born in his own house and formed them into an army, three hundred and eighteen of them in all. These he armed and trained, and, accompanied by Aner, Eshcol and Mamre, set out in pursuit of the

marauders.

How long he spent training his army we cannot tell, but eventually Abram overtook the thieves, laden with booty and heading for home. They had travelled far but, drunk with success and hampered by the slow progress of their many prisoners, they had not made very good time. Abram overtook them at Dan, just within the northern borders of Canaan.

Having located the enemy, Abram immediately made plans for battle and waited for nightfall. His strategy was simple: he would attack in the dark from two sides. This proved a highly successful manoeuvre, for he utterly demoralised and overpowered the enemy, and put them to flight. Pressing his advantage to the full, he chased them right out of the land, almost as far as Damascus, before he broke the pursuit; then he returned to camp victorious. Awaiting him there among the captives were Lot and his wife and daughters with their goods. All were safe and none the worse for their ordeal; his labours had not been in vain.

His object achieved, Abram set out for home, at intervals dropping the various liberated captives as they came to their homes en route. Travelling down the valley of Jordan, he arrived in the lowlands approaching the Salt Sea to discover that news of his great victory had preceded him to Sodom and Gomorrah. By this time Sodom had installed a new king, who went out as far as the king's dale to meet the returning hero and to pay him tribute. It was a historic meeting, so full of spiritual significance that over two thousand years later the writer to the Hebrews makes mention of it in his epistle.

Three kings met in the king's dale that day: the unnamed king of Sodom, Melchizedek, king of Salem, and Abram, the uncrowned king of the promised land. Of the three Melchizedek was the greatest, for he was also the priest of the most high God; he came with bread and wine to greet Abram, to honour his bravery and celebrate his victory with a royal banquet.

#### The Bread of God

It was simple fare; most likely Abram had better food among his own provisions, but he received the honour with humility befitting his royalty. This was no ordinary meal; it was a great spiritual occasion; Melchizedek was the royal priest of God most high. There were many gods in the land in those days and many priests, each claiming their god or gods to be greater than all the others. Abram had ignored all of them; he regarded neither gods nor priests, and had offered them neither prayer nor sacrifice, nor had he bowed in worship at their feet. He knew they were all false, for not one of them had ever spoken to him; he was not in Canaan by their direction, he had left that kind of god behind him forever in Chaldea. The God who had spoken to him was the living God, and he had never seen Him at any time. Abram knew there was an unseen God who was higher than all the gods of the nations and it was his avowed intention to know Him.

The trail of altars marking his route bore evidence of his God's faithfulness and his own sincerity; on none of them had he offered anything; no effigy stood beside any of them. Abram was certainly no idolater, and he did not claim to be a priest. He never partook of the altars of the heathen or ate anything offered to their idols; he was entirely God's. Therefore, when Melchizedek came to him, Abram was prepared to receive him. Whether Abram had known of him previously or had met him before we have no knowledge. It seems from the story that his presence in the dale excited no great surprise. It seemed quite normal and he was thoroughly acceptable to everybody; nobody attempted to

challenge his claims. Salem was a real place, as real as Sodom, and he was a real man, the bread and wine were real too.

Even the king of Sodom saw no reason to reject Melchizedek; perhaps he knew of him, for he accepted the fact that Melchizedek was the priest of the most high God; seemingly he was Abram's priest too. If this was so, then Melchizedek's presence there was only to be expected; it was quite customary for kings to make sacrifice to their gods upon returning victorious from battle. But quite contrary to custom, Melchizedek made no sacrifice on Abram's behalf; all that Melchizedek brought with him was bread and wine — no sacrificial lamb or ox, and no knife. That would have been very surprising to the king of Sodom; it may have been equally surprising to Abram; it was most unusual. But Abram asked no questions; he simply took the bread and wine from Melchizedek's hands and received his blessing with gratitude.

To those familiar with the glories of the New Testament, who understand the significance and symbolic importance of the bread and wine, there is no difficulty here. We are familiar with the famous passages about Melchizedek in the epistle to the Hebrews, so Abram's ready acceptance of Melchizedek's ministrations is perfectly understandable. Whether or not the happenings in the valley of Shaveh were the outcome of a theophany in no way alters the wonderful truth displayed by the bread and wine. Melchizedek may have been one of the Lord Jesus' pre-incarnation manifestations on earth, or he may truly have been a mortal man, born of ordinary parents. Hebrews makes much of the fact that no mention is made of parentage; he suddenly appears on the sacred page and just as suddenly disappears, but that is not conclusive proof that he was Jesus. The writer does not say he was; indeed his statements lead rather to the opposite conclusion; Melchizedek, he says, was 'made like unto the Son of God'.

#### A Priest Forever

If Melchizedek had indeed been the Son of God the writer would have said so plainly. Jesus was not made like unto the Son of God. He was and is and ever shall be the Son of God. Quite opposite to the idea expressed by the theory that Melchizedek was indeed Jesus, at His birth the Lord Jesus was the Son of God made like unto the son of man. It is the privilege of sons of men to be made like the Son of God; that is the whole purpose of grace. Millions, doubtless, besides Melchizedek have been made like Him. The basis of the theory is the verse which says of Melchizedek that he was 'without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God abideth a priest continually'.

The phrase 'without descent' could be translated 'without pedigree,' which could simply mean that there is no trace of Melchizedek's lineage in scripture. If indeed he did come into the world without being born of a woman, then he was a divine person of some sort, perhaps even the Son of God. The added fact that he abideth a priest continually also seems to support the view that he could indeed be none other than the second person of the trinity. But none of this is conclusive evidence, for it appears from scripture that every other priest of the New Testament is a son of God, a priest after the order of Melchizedek and abideth a priest continually. More than that, the verse is set in context of a passage which states 'Levi also paid tithes in Abraham, for he was yet in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him'.

Now it is absolutely certain that Levi in person did not pay tithes to Melchizedek for the very reason stated — he was not born, and in any case Abram was not his literal father.

That is why the writer begs permission to be allowed to make his statement: 'as I may so say'. He knew that, being as yet unborn, Levi could not even have paid tithes to his great-grandfather. The writer is dealing with spiritual principles determined beforehand by God. He knew that, looking from God's point of view, he could say what he said because it is true, but he knew that he had to make it very clear to men that he was not speaking literally. He did not say, 'if I may say so,' as though he was straining truth and begging to be allowed to say something impossible of achievement or belief; he knew he was using a perfectly acceptable idea.

'As I may so say' is a phrase inserted to draw attention to a principle and fact not otherwise immediately discernible. In the case under discussion he knew that, unless he emphasised the point, it was most likely that people would not have thought Melchizedek to be superior to Levi, and therefore to Aaron. But because both Levi and Aaron, and also Moses and David, indeed the whole nation of Israel, were descendants of Abraham, who gave tithes to Melchizedek, all of them paid tithes to him. In that act of acknowledgement Melchizedek, even though Abram alone actually paid the tribute, was confessed to be Lord of them all. This is not an unknown, or even a novel idea; the writer did not invent something; it was not a circumlocution; all men understand its practice.

It is an accepted thing among nations that their ambassadors represent the sovereign person or powers of their monarchs or governments in and to the country to which they are sent. Before the days of aeroplanes or postal systems or telephones or radio, an ambassador in a far country was almost entirely cut off from his own land and often had to act or speak as though he was the actual monarch or government he represented. What he did or said was as though that monarch or government was there in person, and was actually doing or saying whatever was being said, even though he or they had not been consulted about it. We see then that it would have been possible and quite proper for an ambassador (for example the Viceroy of India) to use the phrase 'as I may so say', either to preface or in the course of making any remarks he may have felt necessary to make in prosecution of his duties. Even if he did not use the phrase, the principle involved would have been understood to be in operation. If this is true (and it is) may it not also be true that the writer is referring to the Son of God in the same sense as he referred to Levi?

Abram was there and because he was there, Levi was regarded as being there too. Melchizedek was there, and because he was there the Son of God was regarded as being present also. Abram was there, not Levi, and Melchizedek was there, not Jesus; yet Levi was there in Abram and Jesus was there in Melchizedek. It is noticeable throughout scripture that Melchizedek is nowhere said to be the high priest. If he were, it is reasonable to suppose he might have been called that; on the other hand Jesus is repeatedly called a high priest, and in one place a 'great high priest'; the contrast is surely too great to miss, and too pointed to need emphasis.

Melchizedek was called by Moses 'the priest of the most high God'. David also refers to him when speaking of his Lord, saying, 'thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek,' but he is speaking of Jesus in resurrection and enthronement, not of Abraham's earthly priest; as scripture says, 'if he were on earth he should not be a priest'. Not one sacred writer calls Jesus Melchizedek, although it is said of Him that He is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. Melchizedek is without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days nor end of life'; in this he is made like unto the Son of God. But when Jesus came He was born of Mary; we know His

mother and we know too that God was His Father; we know also when His days began and ended, and that, risen from the dead, He has entered His high priestly ministry in heaven.

Melchizedek appears to have entered history on one occasion for perhaps an hour or so, and then departed without trace. This suggests everlastingness and supernaturalness, and that he was a priest of a heavenly order, who visited the earth in the course of his ministry. His name is not listed in any of the genealogies preceding his coming. He was not on earth before the flood, nor is he linked with anybody who lived then. All but Noah's family were destroyed in the flood, but Melchizedek is not mentioned as belonging to any of the three branches of the human race that descended from Noah. No one begat Melchizedek, yet it seems he had a permanent home on earth in Salem, which presumably was a place or city of peace over which he reigned. His name means king of righteousness, and where righteousness reigns there is peace.

This seems to provide an even stronger indication that Melchizedek was indeed the Christ, for Isaiah says that one of the names which was to be given to the son who should be born to Israel was Prince of Peace; however, this is not conclusive proof of his deity. The similarity of this man to Jesus Christ on so many points is most remarkable, and the mystery surrounding him is very great, so that it is impossible to be certain about his being and person. We may however be more sure about his provisions: bread and wine. These seem at first to be the clearest indication that he knew the twin elements in which, centuries later, Christ would institute the communion, and yet even this is insufficient to prove that he was actually the Christ. We see the implications, but the information is so scanty. Did all the people present partake of the elements? There were probably vast numbers, of whom over three hundred were Abram's own men, and who can tell how many rescued captives he had with him?

It may be right to suppose that Melchizedek did celebrate communion, but nowhere is that suggested. If he did, with whom did he commune? It may be equally valid to assume that, in view of the multitude of people, the distance they had travelled and the vast amount of food they would have consumed, stocks were very low, and that Melchizedek compassionately supplied the most urgent need they had, namely bread and wine. If that is so, it is legitimate to ask why, if they were thirsty, did not Melchizedek supply water? It is understandable that they had perhaps run out of flour, and needed, bread, but water is surely the staple drink they needed and would have been the natural thing to have supplied rather than wine. That query is easily answered when it is remembered that they were travelling along the valley of the Jordan which was well-watered everywhere; they had no need of water but would have appreciated the wine. If, however, the bread and wine were meant to represent the person of Jesus in whom they communed, then something marvellous was enacted that day in Shaveh.

If Melchizedek was indeed Jesus Christ, then Abram was blessed almost beyond all men. The possible inferences from their meeting are as follows: (1) Christ was meeting Abram and ministering to him as the Resurrection and the Life; (2) the relationship was as that of Head and Body. We know that Christ was slain as a Lamb from the foundation of the world, so it was quite right that Melchizedek the priest should bring bread and wine, not a lamb for an offering. Bread and wine have been established in the Church by Christ as memorials of a past offering; so to Abram in his day Melchizedek's provisions looked back to that fundamental sacrifice from which God moved when He began the creation.

Therefore he approached Abram as the Resurrection and the Life, ministering to him as though alive from the dead. He said Abraham rejoiced to see His day and was glad; how true that is, and how much greater the sight than may at first have been thought.

Because of the implications of resurrection, it must also follow that, whether or not he knew it, Abram's privilege that day was as that of the Church which is His Body. It is almost certain that he never understood all that was later revealed through Paul, but if indeed Melchizedek was Christ, He was saying a marvellous thing, as well as doing something wonderful to Abram; perhaps greater than we know or think we know, far too great to consider here. But whatever the implications may be, the priest of the most high God was showing Abram the good pleasure of his God with him. He had conducted a successful campaign against superior forces, putting some to death and the rest to flight, chasing them out of the land. It must have been a heart-warming experience to receive the blessing of the Lord upon all he had done, and to hear the words of confirmation from Melchizedek.

#### Possessor of Heaven and Earth

The most high God was the possessor of heaven and earth. Abram had long since believed that; he had never claimed it to be his, but fully believed he would inherit it by God's grace and generosity. 'And blessed be the most high God,' continued Melchizedek, which hath delivered thine enemies into thine hand'. Now he knew why he had won such an easy victory over the enemies; the Lord had not only given his seed the land; He had given him the great victory too. This is the one and only battle against invading forces Abram ever fought; it had been given to him in entirety by the Lord. He could always look back upon it as the place of decisive victory. He did not fight a series of campaigns, just this one; he fought it in the dark with a hastily recruited army, following days of forced marches. It would have been a gruelling test of stamina even for a professional general commanding veteran troops; Abram and his servants were anything but that, yet they had won.

Abram knew it was God who gave him the victory; he had always believed that. He did not go to battle for personal glory, or to get gain, or for the love of fighting, but as of necessity. He went for the following reasons: (1) the invading hordes were devastating the land which God had promised him; (2) he loved Lot, and felt he had a duty towards him. At heart he hated warfare; he was a man of love and peace and great contentment and lacked nothing. So, either before he went or at some subsequent time, he stood before the Lord and raised his hand in a solemn vow that he would not take anything 'from a thread to a shoe latchet' of the spoils of victory — he did not want them. They were legitimately his, but he was an utterly selfless man. Personal gain meant nothing to him; in any case he was already rich. Besides this, he knew that among the spoils were the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and he felt he could not touch them, so abhorrent to him were both the cities and their practices. But unto Melchizedek he gave tithes of all; he knew already that the earth was the Lord's and the fulness thereof.

Men work and strive and argue and fight for possessions, not knowing that a man can receive nothing except it be given him from above. They take things from others by subtleties, legalities, dishonesties, force and war; they receive them by gift or inheritance, not knowing or even caring that God has given them none of them, and that in His sight they have no right to them. Abram had been promised Canaan from above; God had personally spoken to him and he knew; he fought for nothing for himself. That he stood

to gain personally from the battle is true; it is always true; that is unavoidable, even if it is only the satisfaction of not being defeated.

The moral and psychological gain from winning when outnumbered, untrained and tired is invaluable. That kind of gain cannot be calculated, and Abram certainly had that. He went into the battle disinterestedly as far as swelling his coffers or increasing his herds was concerned. God gave him the victory, but not the spoils, although he won them.

Abram never heard or read Isaiah's prophecy concerning the Christ who possibly stood before him there in Shaveh: 'He shall divide the spoil with the strong', but Abraham saw Jesus' day and therefore without knowing it, lived in it. Christ shares the spoils of His victory with those strong enough to refrain from the spoils of any other. The Lord has consistently taught this same lesson to His own over the years. Though in a different element, under totally different circumstances, He taught a group of His apostles the same thing on the shores of Tiberias one morning while they were awaiting the breaking of the Pentecostal day. When at last they stood with Him on the brightening shore, they found that He had provided fire and fish and bread for them. Under His directions they had now caught a net full of huge fish, which He told them to bring to land. With almost superhuman strength Peter did so, but, that done, they were not allowed to eat of their fish; they had to share His provender; the fish they caught belonged to Him, not them. Whatever spoils men may win from their battles, whether with a raging foe or an unyielding sea, are not their reward, nor must their heart be set on them; they are Christ's.

By his conduct Abram showed his worthiness in God's sight to share in the spoils: God was very pleased with him. Before, throughout and following his campaign, he revealed his entire detachment from all worldly and selfish aims. Standing there in the king's dale, he displayed those great, majestic principles which should be the aim, if not the envy, of all kings. Sodom's king must have been thoroughly mystified by Abram's utter unworldliness; he completely misread the situation and misunderstood the man. Almost certainly he had heard of this Abram who disdained verdant plains and prosperous cities, whose nephew lived in Sodom; reputedly he was already rich beyond avarice. In silence he watched all that transpired between Abram and Melchizedek. He observed the partaking of bread and wine, the bestowal of the blessing, and he took particular notice also of the great amount of spoil and the host of freed captives. Finally he was amazed to see Abram tithe all his goods to Melchizedek — the man's generosity was astounding. In a flash he saw what he thought was an opportunity to get what he himself wanted from Abram. 'Give me the persons and take the goods to thyself,' he said. The man of God said, '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 shoe latchet, and that I will not take anything that is thine, lest thou shouldest say I have made Abram rich'. He was absolutely adamant; he had determined that none should get credit for his riches but God Himself.

Abram had made up his mind, he would bear the entire cost of the campaign himself. He regarded God's former generosity to him as the prepayment for all that should be required of him ever more. When Abram gave a tenth of all to Melchizedek, Sodom thought he had found a weak spot in the patriarch's character; he believed Abram was as inebriated with worldly possessions as he himself, but he was wrong. Abram wanted none of them. It is very instructive to note Sodom's request, 'give me the persons'. What did he want with persons? Sodom wants human beings; he wants to take souls into sin, morals to corruption and bodies to dishonour.

Abram did not argue with him; Melchizedek did not seek to prevent him either. Abram asked for nothing, enforced nothing; he had brought the captives back, most probably from a fate worse than death, and set them free. Lot was among them. What would his nephew do now? Did he still desire sinful Sodom, or would he make the break? It was a golden opportunity, never to be presented to him again. He could leave the city of shame for ever, there was nothing to go back to there, save sin. With classic unemotionalism Moses states the facts. There is no mention of Lot; the ways of God are with Abram. Lot had made his choice long before; he found no way of turning back; he followed the king to Sodom. Weak Lot!

For years the man had followed Abram, until he could follow him no longer. Lot could not live unsupported; he had to lean on someone. The loneliness of life on desert trails, mountain fastnesses and green pastures held no appeal for him; he must have companionship, social life. He had put down his roots in Sodom and to Sodom he returned; it was a fatal decision. The raid on Sodom had been providential for him. Shattering and costly at first, he saw no blessing in disguise in it for him, he could not see that God had used the marauders to cut him off from the shameful city. He and his and all his goods had been brought out, but he found no act of mercy in it, nor saw the hand of God at work. He threw away the golden moment, and went back to a judgement far worse than what he had so recently endured; the judge was waiting at the door.

Poor, weak, blind, insensitive Lot. It must have been with great sorrow that Abram watched him go. He could no more foresee the future than his nephew, but the fires of wrath were already burning in God's heart. What more could He have done to force Lot out of Sodom? By power and grace God had given him his chance, his last chance, but Lot rejected it. Abram was dumb.

## Chapter 5 — EXCEEDING GREAT REWARD (Genesis 15)

Lot's final decision in the presence of his uncle to go back and live in Sodom was one of Abram's most tragic experiences. Upon reflection the whole episode, the battle, the meeting with Melchizedek and the king of Sodom, as well as the rescue of his nephew and family, had been a most poignant time for Abram. He had put himself to unprecedented trouble in order to rescue his nephew from the enemy. In that battle against overwhelming odds he had put his own life and the lives of all his loved ones, besides the lives of his servants and friends, at risk. True he had felt assured of victory and God had given it to him, all to save this undeserving man, and Lot did not even seem to care about it. It was a bitter experience indeed, but Abram's sorrow was sweetened with joy, for God had sent Melchizedek to meet him and minister to him: Abram felt more than compensated. Nevertheless, sitting outside his tent under the oak by the well, with his altar in view, he was sometimes a troubled man. Righteous, blessed, wealthy, he was conscious of no material need, yet at times he was aware of unease.

What was troubling him we cannot definitely know. It may have been fear of reprisals; a counter attack by the enemy was very possible, and he must have entertained great fears for his nephew — what would become of him? Abram was indeed a worried man, and God knew it. That Abram could have been prey to great fears when he thought of his nephew's mental and spiritual condition and of his ultimate safety was not without reason; Abram was most concerned for him. But whatever it was, the Lord knew about it

all, and came to Abram, saying, 'I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward'. He loved His servant very much. What relief and gratitude must have filled Abram's heart to be assured that the Lord was fully aware of his inward state and cared about it; with God for his shield he need never be afraid any more. God did not promise to give him a shield, but to be his shield; that was wonderful, He was impenetrable. What a wonderful God he was discovering Him to be. God Himself would be his protection as well as his protector; he felt secure for ever.

God wanted Abram to be at rest. More than that, He desired to reward him. Abram had been so faithful over Sodom; he was a good man and had refused all gifts and rewards from the flesh. This was very pleasing to God; He did not want the spoils of battle to be Abram's reward, but He Himself: God is the reward of faithfulness. Paul saw this and put it in these words, 'that I may win Christ'. It seems, however, that Abram completely misunderstood what the Lord was saying, for he said to Him, 'Lord God what wilt thou give me?' God had not promised to give him anything, He was announcing a fact to His friend, trying to teach him something more of His love and of His personal commitment to him.

God did not say, 'as from this moment I am going to be thy shield and thy exceeding great reward', neither did He issue a command — 'from this moment take me as thy shield and reward' — God functions on far higher levels than that. He was simply informing His man who and what He was. From the very first moment Abram had stepped out from Haran in obedience to Him, God had always been these things to him; He was at that moment and would continue to be so in the future. He did not ask Abram to believe anything, nor did He promise to give him anything, He simply told him the truth. God is faithful, even when we are in ignorance of His ways. Melchizedek had already told Abram that God had delivered his enemies into his hand; now the Lord Himself was telling him that throughout the engagement He had been his shield. Abram must have known that really, for he did not lose a man in the battle; apparently no one received even as much as a wound; the whole episode had been a total miracle.

#### Father of the Faithful

God was exceedingly pleased with the way Abram had conducted himself and had come to reward him; he had been absolutely wonderful in the battle, and completely faithful to God over the spoils of victory, and the Lord thought that he was worthy to be rewarded. Without knowing it Abram had earned a prize far greater than he could have imagined. Had he been asked to choose one and fight for it he could have chosen no better. Although Abram was fearful and so mistaken about things, the Lord was determined that he should have the reward just the same. Abram was a disappointed man and God knew it, but He did not disapprove of him for that. Man cannot be expected to comprehend the mind of the Infinite. God does not penalise His servants for being human; misinterpretation of God's words and meanings is a common error among men; the Lord understands that perfectly.

At that time Abram's mind was predominantly occupied with one thing — the promised seed; this overrode everything else. He was in the promised land, already laden with riches and honour. He lacked nothing but a son, and he was getting to be an old man. He had possessions; God had given them to him and he was grateful for them; they meant something to him, but as compared with a son and heir they were as nothing. Nothing of this world had power with Abram; its riches he had given away, he had made Lot rich and

had given the spoils of victory to the king of Sodom. God had been so good to him and had given him so much already, but he did not want riches for the sake of them. In any case, of what use were his riches to him without a son to inherit them when he died? He could see the point of accumulating wealth to pass on to someone he loved, but he had no pleasure in multiplying herds and herdsmen just for the sake of it. So when the Lord spoke to him of reward, he said, 'Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir'.

It had been galling to Abram when another's child had been born in his house and still he himself went childless; he could no longer restrain his disappointment. The great unspoken 'why?' was coursing through his mind endlessly — he had no shield against that. God had promised him seed, then why had he no children? He was not ungrateful, but he did not want rewards; he wanted a son. That would be sufficient for him — he desired the gift of a son. He knew it would have to be a gift from God, a real miracle, for Sarai was barren. No one could earn or win children; a son must be a gift, especially in his circumstances. Were those all part of his fears? Perhaps so. Nevertheless God had determined to reward him. He was not prepared to make the award of a son to him yet; He was prepared to reward Abram's faithfulness though.

In God's mind Abram had earned the right to a further promise and a fuller revelation of His plans. Natural desire in Abram was turned by God to spiritual purpose, but only through much disappointment and pent-up longing and deferred hope in Abram's heart. This is the only way God can turn the natural into the spiritual; God can achieve much by man's patience. Patience is strength; if it be unbroken it is endurance. If it be determination it becomes the certainty of God, the conviction of truth and the tranquillity of trust, the very proof of love in a man's soul. God works His own glory by it.

Dear Abram, the finalising of the trial of his faith was the greatest reward of all. He was privileged in the end to be the father of all the faithful, as well as of Isaac. In him God found a man equal to His desires, and He rewarded him accordingly. He knew Abram was in need of nothing materially; in that area Abram could have said with Paul, 'I have all and abound, I am full'. It would have been a sad mistake, an awful blunder, to have offered the man gold or silver or further possessions. He had refused plundered wealth and spurned the spoils of war; he could not be tempted on that line. He had passed the test; God was pleased with him and had decided to reward his faithfulness.

First He allayed Abram's fears. God's promises are never lesser than a man hopes or thinks; they are always greater. 'This shall not be thine heir; but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir,' He said. Had the Lord ceased there Abram's heart would have been satisfied. To him a son would have been sufficient, but not for God. Someone to inherit the vast wealth he had accumulated, and live in the land of promise — what promise that held! That might have satisfied Abram, but his contented spirit had no idea of God's intentions, or of the vastness of spiritual wealth that lay in the promise. He was quite aware that God had committed Himself to him in an unprecedented way; there was not another man on earth beside him to whom God had made such promises. In the beginning God had given the earth to Adam and, following the extermination of corruption and renewal of the earth in the flood, had given it to Noah in a new beginning; but that was now history; God was moving afresh.

Abram did not know, nor could he be expected to know, all that was in God's mind; he

had sought to respond to Him, and so far had succeeded very well — so well in fact that God was about to fill his mind with greater hopes than he had ever known. The Lord always times His visits perfectly: it was night time and God led Abram forth abroad from his tent and said, 'Look now toward heaven and tell the stars if thou be able to number them', and then said to him, 'so shall thy seed be'. As the words sank into his ears, Abram lifted his eyes to the heavens; his eyes roved to and fro over the unnumbered multitudes of stars, and his mind boggled. The promise was absolutely staggering, but his heart believed God. What he heard was altogether too great for his mind to take in, but fundamentally he believed in the faithfulness of God. Abram had come to know Him; this was the secret of Abram's success; it is also the key to God's achievements by him: God and Abram shared a mutual trust.

Gazing at the stars, Abram had no means of proving that what God was saying was true. He could only look and wonder and believe, and he did. Abram knew he could believe every word that came out of God's mouth — he had proved Him in the past; God was trustworthy. The only way a man can measure the reliability of a promise is to consider the past and the present faithfulness of the one making the promise. Since the time of his original decision to obey the word God first spoke to him, Abram had found Him to be utterly dependable. God's word had been His bond to him in Chaldea; he knew it was as dependable now, and would always be. It was exactly the same with God: He knew He could rely on Abram. Because the man had God's confidence he received God's promises. It is ever like that with the Lord; to those who have walked in obedience and proved themselves worthy He commits Himself by His word without reserve, over and above all their expectations. This is exactly what Abram found.

The last time God had mentioned the promised land and Abram's seed He had done so in relation to the dust of the earth: 'If a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered,' He said, and followed it up by telling him to arise and walk through the length and breadth of the land. However much dust he saw on his journeys none can tell; Abram never attempted the impossible — a handful was wealth unimaginable. How great God is. But marvellous as that was, this was even more marvellous. God directed Abram's eyes from the earth to the heavens, away from dust to shining stars, away from flesh to spirit, from earthly seed to heavenly seed. Without explaining everything to Abram, God was indicating to him that he intended to fulfil His promise to him in two ways. Abram knew nothing of all that; he simply believed God, and God imputed that to him for righteousness.

At the beginning Abram could only see the cloud of dust, that which was 'of the earth, earthy'. He so went on with God though, that in the end he also saw the day of Jesus, the heavenly Seed; but he surely never saw the multitude of heavenly seed in Him. Nor did he then grasp what now he knows, and we all must understand, namely that, to the faithful heart, the promised inheritance will continue throughout all eternity. Because he believed in God, Abram is still inheriting the promise God made to him. While on earth he inherited it personally: through his children he entered into it more fully after he was dead: now, through Christ, he is inheriting in much greater form and measure all the fulness that God poured into the promise.

### The Day of Christ

It is a principle of eternal life presently operating towards and in all the believing sons of men, that whatever of spiritual promise is appropriated by them on earth shall never cease

to be fulfilled to them throughout all eternity. Some degrees and aspects of the promise may be fulfilled and cease to be because they have had their day and passed away. The need for them has ceased to exist; but as they die away, other and greater degrees and aspects and meanings of the promise will emerge to take their place. The greater will always swallow up the lesser fulfillments by which the greater became possible. The lesser were necessary for a time, but were only made because of the greater, which includes them into their fulness, and transmutes them in the process. Greater and grander worlds of meaning will constantly open up to the heart to which God has committed Himself: 'of His kingdom there shall be no end' ..... 'of His fulness have all we received and grace for grace'. Forever we are to be being filled with the Spirit unto all the fulness of God unto the ages of the ages.

Abram started out on his pilgrimage at the call of God, and upon a command and a promise. As he walked in the dust, viewing the land, he had no idea of all God intended by His commitment to him; the greater part of it was as yet still unspoken. He saw the dust and the land in broad daylight and received God's first promise in childlike faith, but he saw the stars and received God's second promise in the darkness of night — which things are an allegory. When he saw his earthly seed, Isaac, it was as in the sunlight of the day, at Beersheba, but the heavenly seed only shone out to him in the darkness of Moriah. The second promise was always intended by God — it was there all the time — but it was obscured by the bright shining of the sun at first. What a great exercise of faithful love that was; he had to believe God for that second promise separately. Without knowing it, Abram had to believe for Christ, and for all of us as well; praise God he did it. True faith goes far out beyond men's knowledge; that is why it is reckoned to men as righteousness — it reaches into God's. True faith proclaims that God is righteous; that is its importance.

When Melchizedek, the faithful priest of the most high God, spoke to Abram as he did, he was being faithful to him. God is possessor of heaven and earth, he told him, and in doing so proclaimed the two elements in which the promise was to be fulfilled. He also gave Abram terms of reference so that he could put the promises in true perspective and correct order. Melchizedek also brought forth bread and wine and ministered those precious emblems to Abram, testifying to him by these that the darkness was past and over. Through what took place in that darkness the spiritual seed have been brought forth; Abraham is still inheriting. He has learned that his inheritance through the spiritual Seed, Jesus, is greater than that which he gained through the fleshly seed, Isaac. He rejoiced to see Isaac's day, but rejoiced far more to see Jesus' day, and now rejoices still more to see the day of the Christ.

That which Abram saw in the dark was far greater than that which he saw in the light. The second sight was the most important of the two, but both sights were necessary. The first was absolutely vital, for without it the second sight could never have been, and would never have been seen. Everything in God's plan is vital both to Him and to us. For us nothing is trivial; the future depends on today; for Him today depends on the future; it proceeds from it. Eternity's finished product is being shaped today. Heavenly things are built on earthly foundations; natural must issue in spiritual; in the beginning though, it was God, and in the end it shall be God, God all in all.

'Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness'; God delighted to do it; it was part of the reward He had planned for Abram. When the Lord spoke to him

He was not only intending to reward him for his faithfulness in the past, or to take the present opportunity to enlarge the promise He had made. He used the occasion to bring Abram to a fuller understanding of Himself, and to greater faith in Him. 'I am thy exceeding great reward': God was telling Abram that his reward was God Himself. Abram had won God, won His heart; we all must.

Rewards are given for meritorious deeds. Gifts are given apart from desert; generosity and grace inspire the giver, and possible need provides the opportunity. Wages are paid for services rendered; work should be paid for, but rewards are bestowed for achievements accomplished. They are gifts of a special order; they have to be earned, but they are not agreed wages. They are not given so much for grace as for admiration. Though they are usually of some value, they can be of any order. But God did not offer Abram anything He had created, nor did He even suggest to Abram that he should accept a gift. He simply announced to him that He was his reward.

It must have been obvious to Abram that greater things than he knew were involved in the battle he had recently won. Abram did not chase the invader out of the land for hope of gain; all he knew was that Lot had been captured, and he went primarily to rescue his nephew. Abram never expected any kind of recompense for that. It was his natural response to his adopted son's need; God counted him worthy of reward though, and what reward! It is common practice to invest conquerors and heroes with medals. Of old, monarchs would bestow titles and riches and lands on their champions, but neither medals nor honours nor possessions of earth were heaped on Abram: God gave him Himself. It is all so stupendous.

To God it was as nothing that He should give a portion of land to the man, though for a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul is a tragedy to God. Abram himself did not want anything of earth anyway; all he wanted was a son. He had been brooding on it. 'I go childless', he said; that summed up his ambition and his despair. Little did he know to what extent God intended to fulfil that desire, but it was to be in His own time. There was still much to do before all that He intended for Abram could be revealed to him, but God could and did make Abram further promises, and to Abram He became the sweeter.

Abram knew he could not hope to fully inherit the land of promise himself. All he could do was investigate it. He could travel in it, survey it, tell himself that all was his, but occupy it he could not; it was beyond his powers; it was too vast for him, and anyway he still did not know its exact borders. He needed not to have worried about that though, for the Lord had already decided to settle his heart on that score. What he did not know was that the Lord was more concerned about the type of people who should possess the land than He was about the land itself. He must have righteous people in possession; the righteous gift must be possessed by righteous people, they alone.

Whether or not Abram believed this, when he believed in the Lord he really believed in His righteousness, ability and power. Abram believed that God was going to do what He said; his was a considered faith. He realised the utter impossibility of the suggestion God had made. Neither he nor Sarai were capable of it; but without one shred of human hope, indeed utterly against it, with calm assurance he believed what God told him. In spiritual hope and with absolute faith, alone before God that night, he became the father of us all.

In God's plans he had already been made the father of many nations, and at that point, human though he was, he assumed the exalted position of spiritual paternity for all the

seed, including the new race in Christ. He is the father of us all, the great pioneer of faith — probably, until Christ, the most amazing man who had ever lived on earth. Faith always achieves similar things to this; it always exalts us because it exalts God. Faith is always a testimony to God's righteousness, and always procures it; it pronounces God to be absolutely righteous, and therefore trustworthy. Whenever anyone believes in God He imputes righteousness to that person — it is the beginning of eternal spiritual life.

### A Covenant of Grace

It was absolutely vital that Abram should be made righteous. God had done much for him and he had come a long way, but not until he was righteous could the Lord proceed any further with him. Having procured that, the next thing in God's mind was the creation of a covenant between Himself and Abram. Now that he was righteous God wished to bring the man on to even surer ground than he had hitherto known. The Lord had devised a covenant of grace in which both He and Abram should be partners to accomplish His will with regard to Canaan, so He proceeded to bring it into being and to establish it with Abram as it was in His own heart. 'I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees to give thee this land to inherit', He said. For the first time He introduced the idea of inheritance into His promises to Abram. He had repeatedly said He would give the land to him, but now He is using a more suggestive word: Abram had to inherit the land.

Abram had now become God's heir, because he had been made righteous. The Lord was putting everything in order; He can only go so far in His generosity to men. By His grace He works on hearts, drawing them to Himself by sundry providences and promises made gratuitously for all men. There are those also to whom He makes calls and gives encouragements and gifts beyond the ordinary, but when He would make anyone His heir, He has first of all to make him righteous. This is because, beyond promises, He wishes to enter into covenant with men. That is to say, He desires men to enter into covenant with Him; He wants to fully commit Himself upon oath to do things for them. It is not that His promises are not good enough, or that His word is not His bond — it is; but He wants us to be brought into the same kind of terms of agreement with Him that the members of the Godhead enjoy between themselves.

God was about to extend to Abram the privilege previously extended to Noah when he came out of the Ark centuries before. Abram knew all about the reason for the bow in the cloud — it was a token of the covenant God made between Himself and Noah and the whole earth. God said that the covenant was everlasting; He also said that it was His. Way back, behind every covenant that God has ever entered into with mankind, whether with an individual or a group of individuals, there lies the one great everlasting covenant. All covenants agreed and ratified between God and men throughout history have been adaptations and applications of this eternal covenant to the situation or conditions then prevailing. Covenants are also initiations for the purposes God has in mind for that period of time. In Noah's day the Lord adapted the eternal covenant to His own requirements and the man's needs as he stood there on the renewed earth on the brink of a new era. Now, with equal determination, He moves with intention to adapt the covenant to His designs with Abram in his day.

God wanted Abram to become His heir so that he could inherit land from Him as of right. Had He simply decided to give it to whom He would, none could have challenged Him, but the Lord did not want to do that. Although He was willing to make His power known, God is not a despot; He is loving and righteous. Character is more important than ability;

God's ability and authority rest entirely upon His righteousness. Abram became heir of the righteousness which is by faith; that is of far greater importance than possessing Canaan. Abram only inherited the possession because he was made righteous in God's eyes. Abram did not miss the new element introduced by God into the promise; he immediately took it up, 'Whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?' he said. God knew His man. This was just what He wanted, and He swiftly answered Abram, giving him detailed instructions concerning His requirements.

First the covenant must be established between them, and this could not be done without sacrifice and blood. God carefully chose the five different kinds of creatures He required for that purpose. All these the Lord would later require of Israel under law, but Abram did not know that. Abram did not live under the law — he was under grace, and five is the number of grace. The covenant God was about to make with Abram would apply in both the age of grace and the age of law. It applied to Abram then and to Israel later; it also applies to us today.

It seems that Abram knew exactly what God was about to do, for without further instructions he prepared the animals and birds exactly as God required. What Abram did was to follow the method used by everyone who made covenants in those lands at that time. Possibly he slew the animals, cleft them in two and laid the corresponding halves opposite each other in line on the ground, thus forming a way. More probably still he stacked the halves up into pillars to form a kind of doorway through which the two 'covenanters' passed as one. There was no altar there; the bodies were not burned; the sacrifice was of the lives of the animals and birds. Having slain and arranged the parts, Abram stood watchfully by, ready to protect them from vultures and other scavengers. Vigilantly Abram continued this till nearly sundown. Then as night fell a deep sleep fell upon him, and Abram plunged into a horror of great darkness. In this unconscious state, Abram lay still while the Lord spoke to him, writing deep into his heart and mind the truth He wished him to know.

The whole procedure was highly prophetic, and how informative it is. The Lord's prophecy covered the whole period of grace from that time onwards to the day of Joshua over four hundred years later. The Lord Jesus may have been making a kind of prophetic allusion to this when He said, 'Abraham rejoiced to see my day', for Joshua and Jesus are identical names. Abram did not foresee Israel's entrance into Canaan, though the Lord informed him of it. This He did because, in that lay the fulfilment of the promise He had referred to by the dust. When the sun had finally sunk and Abram was deep, deep in sleep, his mind was in great darkness and his soul in horror. He saw a smoking furnace and a burning lamp passing between the pieces of sacrificed animals. He heard the voice of the Lord also reaffirming His promise to him, cutting it indelibly into his subconscious mind. When he awoke Abram knew God had given the land to his seed; it was assured, the covenant had been established.

At last one of Abram's pressing needs had been satisfied. He now knew the extent of his possession and its borders. The covenant was by promise and it is still anticipatory in many respects, for its fulness still awaits complete fulfilment. Even in their heyday Israel never possessed their possessions fully. It shall be fulfilled though, for God has cut a covenant with Abram about it. Abram took and slew those animals and birds for God; he acted for God that day, not for himself. He took and killed and ordered and guarded the birds and animals as though he was God: they were God's sacrifices. That done, Abram

was put to sleep, rendered inoperative, so that he should take no further part in the proceedings. It was as if God cut those bodies in twain and laid them together, two halves of one animal placed together as though they were still one undivided whole. He was showing Abram that there are two sides to the covenant whenever He adapts it to man, namely His side and man's side.

The usual practice among men when making solemn oaths and entering into agreement was that both parties to it walked together through the slain animals: in the imagery of the furnace and the lamp that is precisely what happened. But in reality neither God nor Abram did so, for God was in His heaven and Abram was asleep. What really took place was a gracious revelation of God's eternal methods when making covenants with men. If it is to be a covenant it must be an agreed arrangement involving commitment to promise. But when making covenants with men, God knows they can do nothing about it; they must be all of grace on His part; He can expect nothing of us. That is one of the reasons why He put Abram to sleep. The other reason is that He wished to show us that covenants must be wrought in the depths of spirit. Abram was unconscious during the revelation; God cut His covenant deep down within the subconscious mind of His man so that it should become law in his heart and mind, an unconscious all-pervasive controlling factor of life. He did all the talking; it was He who took Abram's little lamp through the covenant pieces.

By God's grace and power Abram accompanied God through the ordination; when he awoke he knew; deep down in him he knew. From that day onwards he never again doubted or questioned God about lands or possessions or inheritances. God had cut it into him; he had complete heart conviction and mental persuasion about it. It was sheer grace; an equally gracious experience is necessary for every man chosen of God and called into His New Covenant in Christ. We all must know an occasion when, by His Spirit, the Lord puts His laws into our minds and writes them in our hearts, sets the bounds of our habitation and limits the extent of our possessions, saying, 'you can have nothing beyond here'. Everything beyond that is prohibited, but all within it is included.

Men are trying to inherit what God has not given them, but if God were to cut the covenant with them they would know what is lawful and what is not. The Lord always allows us a choice. He said to Abram, 'Take me...'. Had Abram refused to obey, the covenant could not have been made, but because he obeyed he gained final assurance. It is a wonderful thing, and the purpose of grace, that men should pass, by believing and obedience, into undoubting, unquestioning knowledge and understanding and rest. All this was made possible to Abram because he believed God, and therefore was accounted righteous by Him; God only covenants with the righteous man.

### The New and Living Way

The covenant which God made could only be accomplished in the way in which God did it. Although Abram provided the substance in which the covenant was made, he did it as God's executive only. Although executed in the same substance and elements as the sacrifices, and by the same means, that is by animals and birds, death and blood, the covenant was not established in the same way as sacrifices were made. The difference lies in this: (1) the animals had to be halved, that is split down the middle; (2) as we have seen, it seems they had to be stacked up into two pillars, one upon another on the ground in order, one half corresponding to the other on the opposite pile; (3) the fire passed between the halves.

When animals were sacrificed to God they were slain, handled and treated in different ways according to the object of the sacrifice. Sometimes they were divided into many parts, sometimes disembowelled, sometimes parts were taken from them; not all were sacrificed whole or wholly. But when covenant-making, God commanded entirety: every part of the beast had to be included. All sacrifices had to be made to God upon an altar; they were not allowed to be offered as from the mere earth. The covenant victim was split in two and placed by order on the ground. All sacrifices had to be consumed by fire; they were placed upon it and burned. The covenant victim was not burned — the fire passed through it — and the pieces were left, presumably to be devoured by vultures.

The covenant victim divided in two represented the Lord Jesus. Each half spoke of one side of His being, the divine and the human. He was God and Man. Through Him God establishes His covenant with men, and Abram was put to sleep that he should have no part in it, yet should see how it was done. Unless God and man had been blended and united in Christ, no covenant could have been made, and except He had died He could not have been the Way. It was only through this blending of divine and human that God could make the covenant which He desired and man needed. Man, if he would enter into union with God, must also be a divine human being whilst still human; he must be born from above.

The devil knew this, and constantly sought to destroy the Lord. He was the divine union of God and Man. He was the God-man on the earth, God's and man's one hope of creating a righteous covenant between them. Men were ignorant of this but Satan was not, so he tried to have Him murdered as a babe, and tempted Him to self-destruction as a man. The devil's plan was very simple, and his tactics and manoeuvres many and varied: they were always directed to one end, namely to split the union between God and man in Christ. To this end he directed all his energies and designed his temptations in the wilderness. 'If thou be the Son of God', he commenced. 'Man shall not live by bread alone', countered Jesus; He saw through the devil's opening ploy. Satan was suggesting to Jesus that He may not be the Son of God after all. Jesus proved that He was, by replying as from His manhood and humanity. His Godhead was secure, His manhood and humanity were under attack. The devil failed to split His divine-human nature and being. Yet God did that at Calvary. His humanity was made sin, His deity remained righteous and intact, that we, through Him, may become men of the covenant with Him. This is that which God did in type with Abram by those animals and birds in Canaan.

## Chapter 6 — BORN OF THE FLESH (Genesis 16)

How much of God's revelation to him Abram shared with Sarai is not disclosed. Even with the dearest and closest of our loved ones it is not always possible to share the fullest extent of God's dealings with us, so personal are they. Quite often they are expressed in such individual terms that others seem to be excluded from their scope or intentions. Although Sarai was indispensable to its fulfilment, the covenant had not been cut with her. She was included in God's plan though, and therefore in the nature of His intentions, so when committing Himself to Abram, the Lord unavoidably committed Himself to Sarai also, but it seems that she had not yet attained unto equal spiritual stature with her husband. It also appears from the following episode that the constant pressure of her common-sense ideas caused Abram's faith to waver somewhat. It is all perfectly understandable, and who among us does not feel for and sympathise with both of them over their problems? Who would regard himself or herself as superior to either of them,

and who would have acted differently under the same circumstances?

### Barren by Divine Intention

It was now some ten years since God had first promised them a child; that is a long time to wait; they were both well advanced in years. Moreover, God had confined His promises strictly to Abram; Sarai had not been brought directly into the covenant at any time. They had naturally assumed that Sarai would soon become the mother of his child, but contrary to expectations, after the passage of many years nothing was changed; Sarai was as barren as ever. Yet the promise had been reiterated to Abram repeatedly: he was to have a seed which was to multiply exceedingly and possess the promised land. With the passage of time the thought inevitably asserted itself that perhaps God expected them to take the initiative about it, and act as everybody else did under such circumstances. After all He had not forbidden it; indeed He had made no clear statement about it at all; would they be so wrong if they sought to fulfil God's promise in the normal way? Sarai was very forthright about it; she believed God had deliberately restrained her from bearing. She was right — He had.

All God's specific promises are made in accordance with a plan and a timetable. Unknown to them He was moving with a single mind to an appointed end; all must be of Him. The conversation between Abram and Sarai reveals two things: (1) God's time had not yet arrived, and (2) the conditions for the miracle were not right. If Isaac had been born before or at that time he would not have been the divine seed. Events proved that, although Sarai was barren and incapable of bearing, Abram was certainly not incapable of begetting; indeed later he became the father of Ishmael. This was quite contrary to God's will, for He planned that the promised seed should be naturally beyond the possibility of both of them. Besides this, Sarai was trying to move her husband to act from wrong motives: 'I pray thee go in unto my maid, it may be that I may obtain children (Heb: be built up) by her'. This was not an unnatural desire, but she was entirely wrong; she was thinking that if her scheme was successful and Hagar her maid proved to be fertile, she could perhaps have many children by the same means. It was quite natural, and in those days socially acceptable, but this was not the will of God for her or for her husband or for Hagar.

### The Carnal Mind ... Enmity

'The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit .... neither can he know them because they are spiritually discerned': to the person living entirely for the fulfilment of natural desires the things of God are foolishness. It is folly to believe that we can make God fit into our natural desires. In fact precisely the opposite is true; our natural abilities must be accommodated to God's purposes. God had no intention of building up Sarai, neither did He even suggest that there could be more than one seed to inherit the promise, 'He saith not and to seeds, as of many, but as of one and to thy seed, which is Christ', says Paul, commenting centuries later on this event.

Poor Sarai; she had not the slightest idea of all that was at stake when she made her suggestion to Abram. In mitigation it could be said that God had not then fully revealed His purposes, so she was not to be blamed. She did not sin against God; there was no rebellion against God or His word in her heart. She was just planning to bring God's word to pass in her own way — it was only plain common sense; she was being natural, not sinful. If God had forbidden it to Abram and Sarai, as He had prohibited the tree in Eden to Adam (and therefore to Eve) Sarai would have been guilty on three counts: (1) of

rebellion, (2) of incitement to rebellion, and (3) of conspiring jointly with Abram to bring God's word to nought.

In the absence of the law, and the direct word of God prohibiting their action, Abram and Sarai were neither culpable nor guilty before God; nevertheless their attempt was as the result of the outworking of original sin. Of itself that is an evil enough thing, yet far, far deeper than that, a more exceedingly grave situation becomes apparent. God had raised up Abram to make him the great patriarch of Israel. With him God was as it were making a new start with men. Following the failure of Adam in the beginning and Noah centuries later, God called this man Abram: He hoped for success with him, and lo, before His eyes He sees a repetition of the first man's sin. Only the fact that He had not directly commanded Abram to refrain from concubinage saved the situation; how wise God is. It was bad enough though; God wanted Abram to have one seed only, a gift entirely from Himself. Instead Abram had two sons, one of whom — this first one — was not of God.

When he was begotten and eventually born, Ishmael was of the flesh; he was not of the Spirit. That is to say he was not of God's word; only that which is of God's word is spiritual. If it be by God's word, even though it be of the natural order, it is of the Spirit and therefore good; nothing else is. Ishmael was of the woman's word; where Abram went wrong was in hearkening to his wife's desires and suggestions. There is no questioning the fact that he loved her very much and wished to please her. His mistake lay in the fact that, in doing so, he exceeded the word of the Lord to him. In all fairness it could be said that the Lord had not told him by whom he was to beget his son, so he could have pleaded ignorance as justification for his act. But whatever he may have done he would have been wrong; if only he had considered past experience, Sarai's importance in the plan of God would have been obvious to him, for God had already shown it to them.

In scripture Egypt represents the world. Hagar, Sarai's maid with whom Sarai proposed Abram should liaise, was an Egyptian, a native worldling and a slave. The spiritual significance of their defection is therefore made immediately plain. On Sarai's word Abram attempted to beget the promised seed from the world; it was a total impossibility — nothing was further from God's mind. The tragedy is that something can always be bred from the believer's union with the world; it always appears to be a success too, but it is always disastrous, and the outcome can only be anti-Christ. The world is a very fertile place, as fertile as mother earth, but God produces nothing spiritual from it, so Abram had to depart from it.

The strong urge in Sarai's heart to have a child overrode all the memories of their stay in Egypt, though it had been a terrible time, absolutely calamitous both for them and for the Egyptians. Spiritually also it had been a complete failure; God had not contacted Abram there; he left no altar behind as a testimony, only hearty dislike and rueful memories in Pharaoh's heart. The man of God never impressed him for God; he only brought him trouble, he had been glad to get rid of him and his wife; when they left his troubles ceased. Perhaps too their visit to that land was the indirect cause of the present situation, for it is possible that Hagar was taken into the household at that time. If indeed this was the case, they paid dearly for their folly, and so have we all. It has been left as a troublesome legacy to all mankind to this present day.

Jealousy, Cruel as the Grave

Greater than the actual tragedy of that visit and its local consequences, the aftermath of

worldliness was then, and still is, immeasurable; except by God's grace it is ineradicable. As soon as Abram complied with Sarai's wish, there was trouble in Abram's household. When Hagar realised she was to be a mother she immediately, though perhaps unjustly, despised her mistress and did not hesitate to make it quite evident to her, whereupon Sarai turned on Abram. Blame had to be laid somewhere. She knew she had been wrong. We cannot tell whether she had known it all along and had subtly hidden it from Abram, and by plausible arguments had persuaded him against his better judgement. Maybe both of them had known it to be wrong and had continued with their intention in defiance of that knowledge; it is impossible to be sure. Sarai admitted that she had been wrong, but Abram did not; she rued the day and sought to place the blame solidly on her husband, who then seems to have accepted responsibility without demur, and shouldered the blame for it all. Perhaps they knew of the temptation and fall of Adam and Eve in the beginning; Adam's response to Eve's temptation then constituted him the responsible person in God's eyes. Abram never complained — headship and fatherhood are inescapable privileges with undeniable liabilities.

'As by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned', says Paul. He did not blame Eve but Adam. Certain it is also that by one man the great Arabian conflict with Israel entered into the world. Worse still, the anti-Christ battle of the flesh against the Spirit, now rampant in the churches, also became manifest for the first time. Useless it is to bemoan the tragedy, but if only Abram had refused to listen to Sarai things would have been so different in the world and in the Church.

Whatever its present outcome among us, the whole affair wrought much trouble in Abram's family then. His relationship with his wife became very strained; terrible jealousy took hold of Sarai and carried her to such dreadful lengths that she provoked Abram to completely uncharacteristic actions. Because of her demands he handed Hagar over to Sarai, even though he knew the bitter jealousy of her heart: 'Behold thy maid is in thy hand; do to her as it pleaseth thee'. Was it a case of 'anything for peace and quiet'?

In the midst of her upset Sarai had said to Abram, 'the Lord judge between me and thee'. It never occurred to her for a moment that her maid ought to have justice as well as she; Hagar was not granted any say in the matter. Of course she ought not to have despised Sarai or provoked her to anger — that was wrong — but beyond that it would appear that the girl's only crime had been in consenting to her employer's wishes. Quite unjustifiably Sarai's hatred and spite increased with the passing days, and with Abram's consent she victimised her maid for her obedience.

Poor Hagar — life became intolerable. What undeserved punishment she endured. Poor Sarai too — what needless torment she inflicted on herself. In her misery she determined to drive the woman away, so that there should be no chance of further association between her and Abram, and she tried by all means to accomplish it. Her basic fear was that she would lose her husband to Hagar; it was the reason why she wanted the Lord to judge between herself and Abram. Jealousy, like fire, consumed her. She was greatly torn and hurt and humiliated, but it was all her own fault and Abram said nothing; but she need not have feared; she was his princess.

If she had only contained herself and considered it all rationally, she would have known how secure she was in Abram's love, but jealousy maliciously provoked becomes a bitter foe and a tyrannical master: she could not stop. She set her mind, and in the end achieved

her purpose: Hagar fled, utterly broken. Sarai drove her away from her home and from her face, drove her out into the wilderness against the will of God, and all this time He remained silent. He did not even rebuke her. He chided with neither Sarai nor Hagar. He did not even remonstrate with Abram, nor did He intervene between them all, but it is obvious that the whole episode met with His entire disapproval: it was wrong from start to finish. Surprisingly perhaps to Sarai His attitude to Hagar was quite different from Abram's and Sarai's.

How loving God is. He could not have approved of Abram's and Sarai's connivance with Hagar to produce the promised seed; their conduct in this matter was totally against His will. Nor could He have been pleased with Abram's apparent heartlessness and silence over his wife's behaviour toward Hagar, but He stood by and let the inevitable happen. Nevertheless Sarai's malice toward Hagar was distasteful to Him: Hagar was the victim of Sarai's scheming and Abram's acquiescence to an entirely human plan, and God knew it. She was more wronged than wrong, and He pitied her, although she was perhaps a willing party in the attempt to circumvent His purposes. It was an unholy mix-up, an outworking of a principle of rebellion which, having been put into operation, could not be rectified, but must run its course. He had to allow it to do so, concurrently administering a gentle rebuke to Abram and Sarai; with typical grace He did it without saying a word to them.

#### An Innocent Victim

To Hagar He showed loving-kindness and over-watched her with tender care; His goodness must have melted her heart. She was quite lost, trying somehow to make her way back to Egypt along one of the main caravan routes, perhaps hoping to fall in with other people travelling in the same direction. When the angel of the Lord found her she was still a long way off, sitting by a fountain of water in the wilderness in the way to Shur: 'Hagar, Sarai's maid, whence camest thou? and whither wilt thou go?' he said. 'I flee from the face of my mistress', she answered. With infinite compassion and without a word of rebuke the angel of the Lord first gave her a command, then a promise, then a directive and followed it with an assurance of His everlasting care: (1) 'Return to thy mistress and submit thyself under her hands; (2) I will multiply thy seed exceedingly that it shall not be numbered for multitude; (3) Behold thou art with child and shalt bear a son and shalt call his name Ishmael; (4) because the Lord hath heard thy affliction'.

Dear Hagar; it must have been a wonderful moment for her when she realised God's care for her. Until then everything had been so contradictory; she had heard so much of the one true God in Abram's household, yet Sarai's treatment of her, and Abram's consent to it, had seemed so opposite to all she had learned. Did God make people act like that? She had been used for the sake of a promised seed, and then driven out when no longer wanted. It seemed to her that the Hebrews' God was no different from the gods of Egypt. Where would it all end? What would happen to her and her baby? She was dazed with fear and full of unanswerable questions. Should she have stayed on and endured the torment? But she couldn't stand it; in her present state it had been too much, and so unfair. Besides, Sarai had intended her to go, she drove her out; the cruel wilderness was infinitely preferable to, and not half as cruel as, that woman's hatred and spite. If these were the people who were going to own the promised land, then she preferred her own people and her own land.

She was heartbroken and disillusioned and worried and fearful and very bitter when the

angel of the Lord found her. How tenderly He called her; He knew her, understood her sorrow, sympathised with her point of view, and how impartial he was. He did not side with Sarai and Abram, nor yet with her, but asked where she came from and where she was going. She was running away, but that was not what God wanted. He did not blame her for doing so; He was not seeking to allocate blame to anyone. What had happened was an inevitable consequence of acting after the flesh; the mind and will of the flesh are against the mind of the Spirit. When Sarai persuaded Abram and Hagar to come together for the child, they had all three been entirely in the flesh. In the end their actions gendered to bondage and strife. The immediate disaster resulting from it all was a foretaste of the greater tragedy to follow, but the Lord did not blame Hagar for that. The child in her womb was Abram's seed, and because of that both she and her son had a place in God's plan.

When things have gone wrong and wounded souls smart because of injustice, and suffer undeserved punishment; when those who ought to know better become persecutors instead of benefactors, it is no use running away. From whom do we run? Running away never solved any problem, so the Lord sent her back: 'Return, submit'. The Lord had great blessings in store for Hagar and her son, and her mind must have boggled as she listened to the unexpected words. She was a woman of spirit though, and would not have failed to catch the note of command in His voice: would she humble herself and be obedient? Whether she realised it or not, she was being tested and challenged to faith. Would she believe God and do as she was told? The promise was exceedingly great. She would have a son and call his name Ishmael, and he would be but a beginning, a seed that God would multiply; it was wonderful.

#### The Well of Him that Seeth Me

The Lord had heard her affliction. She had not cried in vain, neither had she been misjudged by Him: He was good. Ishmael was going to be a wild man though, a hater of mankind. The angel said men would hate him and fight against him, and he against them; that was terrible. The coming of her child would bring warfare and strife; she recoiled from it, but recent events all indicated that it would be true: what a sad prospect for an expectant mother. It had been a sorry affair altogether, better never to have happened, but she would hold her baby in her arms and love him — that would be joy; the future she must leave.

Hagar did not know God; His name was unknown to her, and when He spoke to her she did not know how to address Him. She knew Abram had called upon Him and He had answered him, but He was Abram's God, not hers. She had heard that the priest Melchizedek had called Him El Elyon, the most high God, and that Abram had given him tithes of all he had won in battle, but she had not been there. She had seen Abram's altar but not his God, and she had not been involved in anything to do with that. She was a realist, and from the moment of her visitation she thought of God in terms of her experience — it was all she knew. She used no names, but spoke to herself in terms of reproof.

The angel of the Lord had sought and found her when she had not been seeking Him, and He had comforted her soul. To her this was wonderful; it was a miracle. 'Have I also here looked after Him that seeth me?' she said. Her wonderment was tinged with shame as she thought of it. God had looked after her even though she had not looked for Him; even in her extremity she had not done so; perhaps her very sorrow had hindered her. Penitently

she questioned her own heart before the Lord, and without demur quietly accepted the name God had given her as yet unborn son, Ishmael, 'God hears'. He had not only seen her; He had heard her too; it was a momentous discovery for Hagar. Had she known it, it was a commitment for the future also. For the first time in her life she had had personal dealings with the living God, and had discovered that He loved her.

It was the most thrilling discovery of her life, and she felt she could not let it die; the well had been a place where God spoke and the revelation of His love and care came to her. From that time forward she could only think of the unnamed fountain as 'the well of Him that liveth and seeth me'— Beer-la-hai-roi — and so it became known. It was Hagar's testimony, and how fitting it was; it seemed to sum up everything.

Fleeing from Sarai she had come upon the spring in the wilderness by the way, and with gratitude she sank down to drink of it. The sweet cool waters had been life-giving to her, refreshing her tired body and strengthening her for the journey that lay ahead. No less, when the Lord spoke to her there His words also had seemed like sweet waters to her soul. She had drunk them into her conscious believing as deep draughts from heaven, and was satisfied. She may even have thought that her son was indeed the promised seed God had spoken of. In the light of what had happened and of God's promises to her, she was not to be blamed if she did mistakenly think that. It might have seemed logical enough, for as yet Sarai had not been named as the one who should bear the promised child. Sarai was still barren, while her own little Ishmael was already living and moving within her; she was happy. She had conceived Abram's seed; now she knew Abram's God, and from Him had received similar promises to those He had given Abram. She arose and went back home.

Sarai must have had very mixed feelings when she received her maid back into the household. When the story was fully told to Abram and Sarai, Hagar's testimony must have made Sarai envious beyond words. But there was no reversing it; God had met the woman, and had spoken to her. Although jealousy might consume her, Sarai knew she dare not drive her maid away again. God had sent her back! He was evidently displeased with the whole episode; there could be no doubt that Hagar and her child were accepted of God. As for Abram, he had no choice but to believe Hagar's story, and when the child was born he named him Ishmael according to the will and word of God. He was a constant reminder to his father of something he wished had never happened and would never be able to forget.

None of them really understood much of what was happening to them. All of them were at different stages of spiritual development, and God loved them all. Despite their defects, mistakes and failures, and strangely enough through them, the Lord was working to bring about His purposes; He overruled everything. Although it was a very sad time, a year of wrongdoing and misery, each of them learned a great lesson. What Abram and Sarai learned by it can only be imagined, but Hagar found God, or rather was found of Him, and that perhaps made it all worthwhile.

## Chapter 7 — AN EVERLASTING COVENANT (Genesis 17)

This is a chapter full of revelation, some of it related to names and their meanings — God's, Abram's and Sarai's. Of itself that would qualify the chapter to be rated as very important indeed, but there is far more in it than that, for it is also the chapter of the

covenant which Abraham cut with God. It was a most important occasion for everyone concerned — for God, for Abram, for Sarai and for the whole world (and because of what happened it was the chief reason for the changing of Abram's and Sarai's names). God began it all; He appeared to Abram again, announcing Himself to him by a new name. It was not new to Him; He had always been that, but Abram did not know it; to him it was a new revelation of God, who coupled it with a most remarkable command: 'I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect'. The command was so great that it could not have been given except the revelation had first been made; that is why God made it, and what a revelation it is — El Shaddai!

### El Shaddai - The Almighty God

El Shaddai is only one of God's many names, but it was the one Abram needed to know at that time. He could be named by everything that is good: everything that is good and right and holy could be singled out or combined with other virtues into a name for God. How blessed Abram was that God should have revealed this name to him — the Almighty God. God put together three wonderful things to form this particular name: El is simply 'God'; Shaddai is a compound of two Hebrew words referring to the shoulder and the breast. What beautiful ideas! It is a wonderful revelation of Himself as the eternal God, all powerful, all sustaining and ever-loving. The very last revelation given to Abraham by God was 'the Lord will provide'. By then he had lived to prove it, but at the time now under consideration that name was still hidden away in the unknown future. Before he could prove that, he needed to receive this; so the Lord, his eternally living and loving God, came to reveal it to him.

Man cannot know God's provision unless he knows the God of all-sustaining grace. If a man lives to prove the final provision of heavenly love, it is because he has been kept till that hour by his God. That is why the Lord came with such grace to Abram; He wanted him to go through to Moriah, but there were so many things to be accomplished in his life before that. The years that intervened, especially the next twelve months, would be so full of incident that, unless God sustained him, Abraham would never be able to reach the chosen end. Besides being a revelation, the new name was also a confirmation; the Lord had sustained Abram from the first moment he had stepped out in obedience to Him. By this name, God was emphasising two aspects of His being and nature from which Abram had already benefited so bounteously.

How complete God is, and therefore how strong. Right up until that moment of further revelation, God, good shepherd that He is, had borne Abram and all his dependants upon His shoulder every hour of his journey. His strength is inexhaustible. How loving He had been to him; He had clasped His friend to His breast and comforted him, assuring him, even in the darkest days, of His constancy of love. In scripture God is always referred to in the masculine gender. Nowhere in the Bible is it suggested that God is a female. Here and there He introduces delightful little insights into His nature, touches that remind us of His uniqueness, and that female as well as male was created by Him. This particular name was specially chosen by Him for that purpose. The breast not only signifies God's love to us; it is also the place of natural sustenance for babies.

God was making a point to Abram so necessary for us all to understand, namely this: grown man that he was, Abram was really only a babe. That is the reason for this deliberate revelation of God as El Shaddai. The name incorporates the idea of father and mother into the Being of God. Abram needed to be shielded from blasphemous portrayals

of God as a female. They were only based on ignorance and were quite heathen, but he did need to know that the powers God included in Woman are as much a portrayal of Him as those He incorporated into Man. Both male and female are of Him. These were things Abram had to learn about God, as do we all; in knowledge of God Abram was only a babe. We all regard him as a giant of a man, and by comparison with ourselves he is — then if Abram was a babe at that time, what are we?

The land into which God had called Abram was later to be described to the children of Israel as a land flowing with milk and honey. He chose it specially for His people. His eye was always upon it. His heart was there. It almost seems as though His very love and bounty proved to be Israel's undoing; so prolific was its produce that the Israelites got their eyes fixed upon that instead of on the Lord. They reasoned that, because the almightiness of God had provided these things for them, they should sustain them. So near to the truth were they, that, without realising it at first, they set their eyes and hearts upon God's gifts and not on God Himself. In the end they sought to live by bread alone and not by God who gave it. This was grievous to Him, for He had deliberately led them through the wilderness to the promised land to learn exactly the opposite of that. In this revelation of Himself to Abram as El Shaddai, the Lord showed him, and all who will receive it, that all sustenance is from Him. Even though He provides material blessings, we must not try to live by them.

#### Be Thou Perfect

This revelation of Himself to Abram led to the introduction of further truth to him. God's desire was to expand to Abram something more of the covenant and the idea and purpose of it. Before He did this He made clear to Abram the kind of man with whom He makes covenants: 'walk before me and be perfect,' He said. He revealed everything in that name of strength and love. All Abram would need to fulfil the command was comprehended within that name and God's testimony of Himself. Given this, Abram knew he could indeed walk before the Lord and be as perfect as He wished. By God Almighty's grace, with all the guarantees which the name implied, Abram knew that, great though it was, he could rise to the challenge, therefore he did not stagger at the standard set, or quibble at the command; he recognised the promise in it. Walking before God Almighty in the full light of His countenance and in the assurance of His presence, he knew he would not be asked to do anything too hard for him. God would expect nothing beyond the powers and provisions guaranteed by the commitment implied in the commandment; with God he could do all that was required of him.

God was seeking to achieve more than that by His visit though; He gave the command because he wanted a certain condition. The reason the Lord required Abram's consent to walk perfectly before Him was to enable him to make His covenant with him: 'I will make my covenant between me and thee, and will multiply thee exceedingly'. Abram fell on his face. The standard was high — a perfect walk! He had not walked at all perfectly in the matter of Hagar and Ishmael, nor yet when he went down to Egypt, but that was now behind him. He had come a long way over a long period of time to this point since then; he had learned much and felt he was now ready to receive this word of the Lord. He could be perfect; he knew he could if he but walked before the Lord as he should. How gracious God was to him, and how wise — not a word of rebuke. Perhaps that was the greatest reprimand of all; how gracious God is to man.

Abram had been wrong, so wrong that he had deserved reproof, but instead of

punishment, grace! Gently, lovingly, the Lord sent back Hagar to bear Ishmael to him; how bitter-sweet it proved. Their presence would remind him of his folly, and urge him to turn from fleshly lusts and walk once more before the Lord perfectly. Lying prostrate on his face, Abram listened to God in silence; He was spelling out some more terms additional to the covenant He had already made with him. The words already spoken still rang in his ears: 'I will make my covenant between me and thee', He had said. This was a little confusing at first, for the Lord's former revelation to him about the covenant was still vivid in his memory. The whole episode had sunk deep into his spirit and soul; it was cut into his memory. The covenant had been made with him then. Why did the Lord speak of making it now? Why did He say, 'I will make it', when it had already been made?

Lying there before the Lord, one thing at least became outstandingly clear to Abram: if this further commitment to him on the Lord's part was ever to be established in his life he had to walk perfectly before his God from now on. Something else became perfectly clear to him also: the Lord God Almighty was only interested in multiplying that kind of man. God wants multitudes of people walking before Him in ever-increasing perfection; that was His purpose in approaching Abram afresh to establish the covenant. His wholehearted committal and utter determination is revealed by His emphatic use of the first person — seven times He used it. Having first revealed Himself as the Almighty, He then disclosed that His mind was made up; He was absolutely determined to do as He had planned.

'I am; I will; I have made; I will make'. This surely is the language of God — only an almighty being could speak like that. Committing Himself to be El Shaddai to Abram, He embraced all his children if they would become children of the covenant too. The Lord was concerned about Abram's perplexity — He knew he needed reassuring; there had been no withdrawing from former commitments on His part. 'As for me', He said, 'behold my covenant is with thee and thou shalt be a father of many nations'. At that point He made a sovereign move. It was a stroke of natural genius and absolute power. He changed Abram's name. The Lord added another syllable to it, expanding Abram to Abraham. By that the meaning of his name was changed from 'Father of a multitude' to 'High Father of a multitude'. The reason God gave for doing this is most illuminating and totally in keeping with His being; 'a father of many nations have I made thee'. The Lord had not only just then thought of changing Abram's name; He had long since determined to do so, but Abram had only just reached the point where it could be revealed to him. He was a man taken up into the purposes of God. In experience and understanding of this he might have said, 'I am gradually being taken up into God's purposes', but in God's thought and purpose it was all complete. Abram had already been taken up and in. Abram had come forth from the will of God. In Abram's ears the words 'I have made' sounded like a present or immediately past act, but in God it had ever been, and it did not stop there: 'I will make', He said; it stretched out into the future. For Abraham it was a new beginning.

God had done it in His will long before He approached Abram; it only remained for Abraham to become what he had been made; the Lord had predetermined the course for him. Abraham's renaming was the promise that he could achieve God's ends. They were staggering and he must have realised that he could only accomplish God's will as he placed himself in God's hands for that purpose. What a wonderful thing it is to be in the Lord's will and plans and hands — 'I am; thou shalt be — for I have made thee'. Such language reveals sheer determination and absolute ability. El Shaddai was full of power

and love, and determination to achieve an assured end. When a man is in God's fixed will there is a sense of inevitability about everything. Within the terms of the covenant, God's promises are commitments to an end. Their fulfilment is absolutely certain, even though the uncertain human element may be involved in the process.

It was about this latter element that the Lord was presently engaged with Abraham in the present promise: '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'. The real purpose of God is revealed: 'I will be a God unto thee'. This is what God wants. He desires and intends to be Almighty God to us, to show Himself strong on behalf of all His children; strong to create, strong to provide, strong to achieve.

How faithful God is. Making His proposal to Abraham He had the whole future under review — He is promising to be Abraham's God for all eternity. God was proposing to establish the covenant afresh with him in every successive generation of his children. It was a stupendous commitment; only God could do that. He proposed to establish the covenant with Abraham then, but He wanted it to be established in every succeeding generation also; this is the only way it could be made permanent in men's hearts. The covenant must be continuous on man's part, re-established afresh in each successive generation. God wanted to be God to His people always, but in order to be that He must be acknowledged to be God all the time. This assured, He would give them the promised land for an everlasting possession, and be their God.

#### In Your Generations

The Lord was most concerned about this. Abraham and his progeny must understand clearly that continued possession of the promised land was entirely dependent upon their faithfulness to Him; He must be their one and only God. At all times they must realise that their security and sustenance did not arise from mother earth but from their Father God. The God who gave it to them, not the land that flowed with milk and honey, was to be their object of adulation and adoration. He is the One flowing with milk and honey for them, and He would make the land He gave them flow with milk and honey likewise if they were faithful to Him.

He spoke so definitely to Abraham about this: 'Thou shalt keep my covenant therefore, thou and thy seed after thee in their generations. 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 ... my covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. The uncircumcised man child ... that soul shall be cut off from his people, he hath broken my covenant'. In these words the Lord set out His requirements for the multitudes He purposed to beget through Abraham.

This is a most important section of scripture. For the first time the truth of circumcision is introduced into God's dealings with men. This side of the covenant was crucial. The men of the covenant must carry the sign of the covenant in their flesh; it was to be a testimony that God was in covenant with them and they with God. The Lord was very clear about it; the covenant was His, not theirs. He created it; He set the terms of it and He established it; circumcision in any man's flesh was only the sign that he had accepted the terms and was in the covenant with God. Of itself circumcision is of little moment, a very minor operation indeed; a cutting off of the flesh which, if performed when the child was young, inconvenienced the child hardly at all — a little soreness, healed in three days and soon forgotten. But in the scheme of salvation it held great spiritual meaning, and is shown by

Paul to have had an unsuspected significance out of all proportion to its ritual practice.

The very fact that God insisted on Abraham's circumcision gives some idea of its importance in His eyes. Abraham had now been in the promised land for many years; he was established in the faith, and God's covenant was already with him. He had accepted God's conditions and obeyed Him, and had entered into covenant with Him most joyfully: it had been a meaningful and tremendous occasion for him - unforgettable. Yet, great as it had been, he now learned that it was not established with him yet, nor would it be until it was cut into his flesh as it had been cut into his subconscious self earlier by God. Circumcision was a minor thing by comparison, a token incision, a small severance; nevertheless it had to be done.

It had only been a token operation when God had made the covenant in the beginning. Although Abraham had himself supplied the animals and the birds, he had done so under God's instructions. It was all symbolic. God had cut His covenant pledge with Abram through sacrifice on blood-soaked ground. Deeper than he knew, the ritual had represented things in the Spirit connected with our redemption; he had acted on God's behalf entirely, not his own. The episode looked backward to the election of grace in God, and forward to the future manifestation of redeeming love in Christ. Because this was so, Abram, who had at first been a co-operative participant, became only a slumbering observer; God had done it all. Abram had only been allowed to participate in the operation up to the point of slaying the animals; he could go no further.

Unknown to him, God was going to allow men to go as far as that in the crucifixion of His Son: beyond that, they, as Abram, could not go, but could only observe — and what wonders they saw! At that time God had shown Abram that, in order to establish the covenant he wished to make with man, God had first to create it for man; this He accomplished by cutting Himself. On this occasion though, God is asking something from man, something comparable in kind, yet infinitely less in reality, than the sufferings He endured. Apart from those, however much or greatly men suffer, the covenant could not be established between Himself and them; all He asked of them was circumcision. For God: Golgotha, for men: circumcision. Spiritual circumcision is a token representation of God's purposeful voluntary endurance of the death of the cross and of men's inclusion in it by God's grace.

The importance of circumcision was so great, that from that moment in time no-one uncircumcised (even though he be Abraham's seed, or even Abraham himself) was included in the covenant blessings of God. God virtually told Abraham that His covenant was only with the circumcised man. This was what lay behind His opening remarks to Abraham. From then on, unless a man was circumcised, it was absolutely impossible to be God's perfect man. Whether born or bought, all had to be brought into the covenant or must be excommunicated — completely cut off from the inheritance and the nation. Unless flesh was cut off the man was cut off.

A true Gospel note is struck here: circumcision had to do with birth and with purchase alike. Both these ideas are combined in God's intentions for His people: each one who belongs to Him is both born of Him and bought by Him. By circumcision the Lord identifies both regeneration and redemption with the work of the cross. Neither is valid except that, together with them, the circumcision of the cross is manifest in the life of each one who professes them.

Circumcision Made Without Hands.

The place and meaning of circumcision in the New Covenant is explained by Paul in his gospel of the uncircumcision. In his day circumcision in the flesh, the great mark of grace and favour in the Old Covenant, had become the greatest bone of contention in the early church. To the Jews it was the mark of favour, to the gentiles it became the badge of bondage. Eager Judaizers tried to impose circumcision on gentile converts with some degree of success, until at Jerusalem in A.D. 48, by the unanimous decision of a conference of leading apostles and elders, circumcision was officially rejected as being a necessary practice in the Church. In God's wisdom, by the cross, and by decree, circumcision is now changed, and has become new. In order to be in the covenant with God, each of His children must know heart-circumcision inwardly in the spirit. In the New Covenant it is entirely impossible to be redeemed and regenerate without, at the same time, being circumcised in heart in the inward spiritual man.

David foresaw this, and, although he could not phrase it as precisely as Paul, he groaned for it in his famous psalm of penitence: 'Thou desirest truth in the inward parts: and in the hidden part thou shalt make me to know wisdom ... Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me'. He was a physically circumcised man but his heart was uncircumcised, so he felt unclean, and feared excommunication from God except he be spiritually renewed — thank God he was. Through this man we see how inward circumcision superseded the outward, being far superior.

Circumcision, as originally received and instituted by Abraham and practised by his descendants, has no spiritual value at all now. It does not procure God's favour, nor does it entitle anyone to extraordinary blessings. In the New Testament it is spoken of in a disparaging manner and called the concision. In some cases, doubtless, it may be practised with a degree of physical benefit, and is perfectly acceptable for this reason, but in God's present scheme of salvation it bears no spiritual significance whatsoever.

Instead of the circumciser's knife, God has now brought in the cross. Jesus Christ is named as the minister of circumcision. In His death the old man of the flesh was executed, consequently both he and all his ways of life may be severed from us. That all-powerful death has substituted circumcision and is now applicable to us by the Spirit. Each one of us, whose spirit is redeemed and regenerate in Christ, is of 'the circumcision which worship God in the spirit and rejoice in Christ Jesus and have no confidence in the flesh'.

### Mother of the Seed

Before God left speaking with Abraham He took up the important matter of the seed again, this time in relation to his wife's name: 'Thou shalt not call her name Sarai but Sarah shall her name be'. The change was related to the same two letters ('h' and 'a') whereby the Lord had changed Abram's name. By adding those to Abram's name, it became Abraham. With Sarai the change was different. He substituted 'h' for 'i', and her name became Sarah. By renaming her, the Lord was really laying claim to her, and telling Abraham that she belonged to Him more than to him. Her new name means 'Princess', whereas Sarai means 'My Princess'. For His own reasons God removed the personal pronoun which linked her exclusively to Abraham. She was still his of course; she had to be to bear the promised seed of Abraham; but now she was The Princess, the woman chosen by God; she must know her personal privileges. Sarah was chosen as well as Abraham; that is why God dealt so severely with Pharaoh and his women. There was no fear that Sarai would conceive Pharaoh's child — she was barren; to God she was Sarah,

not Sarai. Sarai was Abram's chosen wife; Sarah was God's chosen vessel, hence God's reaction to Pharaoh's action. Pharaoh touched the apple of God's eye — God dealt very leniently with Pharaoh really.

Beyond anything Abraham knew, the Lord God Almighty was working out His purposes in him. Behind and through all the events of his life, God was working, moving towards the time when He should bring His own Son into the world, that He should redeem mankind and become the firstborn of an eternal generation. Abraham accepted the change of his own and Sarah's names without demur; he really was a great soul, but he seems to have had difficulty in his mind about the promised seed. It all seemed so impossible now; Sarah had always been barren, and he himself was altogether beyond it also. How could it be? He fell on his face and laughed. 'O that Ishmael might live before thee,' he said. His hopes were pinned on Ishmael, but God's were not and He continued to unfold His plan. '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'. God had fixed His will; nothing could turn Him from His purpose. But Abraham's persistence must be answered too; he was determined to ensure Ishmael's inclusion in any future blessings that God might give. 'As for Ishmael', God continued, 'I have heard thee. Behold I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly... But my covenant will I establish with Isaac'.

It was done; the petition was made; God had answered favourably; Ishmael would be blessed, but not equally with Isaac. Ishmael was Abraham's son, and the father-heart was seeking to secure favours for him at least equal to those promised to the yet unborn Isaac. After all, Ishmael was the firstborn and, by social custom and all the laws of logic, was entitled to the double portion of his father's fortune. Abraham was acting naturally. He could not be expected to do otherwise, but it is doubtful whether God was altogether pleased with His servant's request. It is recorded in the psalms that, upon one occasion, God gave the children of Israel their request but sent leanness into their souls — they had their prayers answered as they wanted, but lived to regret it. One wonders if some similar kind of principle was not operative in this case, for the Isaac-Ishmael issue has now reached world-wide proportions, and is lamentable to say the least.

Ishmael's name means 'hearing', and that is how God answered Abraham: 'I have heard thee'. He had. If only Abraham had been content to receive God's word and abide by that, instead of pressing his own word upon God! How truly it is written that 'we know not what we should pray for as we ought'. Whatever Abraham hoped to achieve by his request he could not move God away from His avowed intention, or switch Him and His promised intentions from a promised future Isaac to a present living Ishmael. God cannot be moved from the spiritual to the natural, from grace to law — not even logical law — and certainly not from eternal love to human sentiment. God would make no covenant with Ishmael at all, even though it seemed the most realistic and logical thing to do. To say nothing of sin, Ishmael was the child of the flesh and of bondage and of self-will and the world. Although God loved Abraham and knew that Abraham loved Ishmael, He would not establish His covenant with the flesh; He cannot. God can only commit Himself to the Spirit. 'I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him exceedingly,' He said, but that is as far as He would go, and He was only prepared to go that far because Ishmael was Abraham's son.

Conflict must have raged in Abraham's mind. God was acting contrary to all nature, and

showed signs of going further still in that direction. He virtually said that He was going to break with tradition; He had openly stated that He was disinheriting Abraham's son. Not completely, of course, but He was promising to reverse all the accepted laws of inheritance: the second-born, not the firstborn, was to receive the birthright. There could be no doubting that God had cast out Ishmael: this grieved Abraham very much.

..... Neither are Your Ways My Ways

This God who had revealed Himself to Abraham was great and mysterious. As Abraham had grown to know Him he had discovered how absolutely unconventional He was. First He had demanded that he leave home and family and go out into the unknown. Then He had forced him to separate himself from Lot. Now He had made him consent to forego exclusive claims on his wife, and followed it up by insisting that he should accept the deposing of Ishmael. There were other things as well, enough to cause the mind to reel; it was all so contrary to human nature and ways. His own and everyone else's human and social instincts, and cultural senses and tastes were outraged. True he had received compensatory blessings; God had always been as good as His word, better if that were possible. Abraham had no complaints. God's words had all proved true, but how different God was, absolutely opposite from everyone else he had ever known. He had called and then taken command of him.

Father, mother, brothers, sisters, blood relatives, friends and acquaintances, wife and son had all been taken from him in one way or another, and now this strange practice of circumcision was being forced upon him. It seemed to him that everything was being taken away from him, and that which remained was either being denied him or reversed, or in some way changed from the ordinary, natural order he knew to something different. Was God seeking to establish a new social, cultural and natural order? Indeed, was He going to bring in a new race and civilisation on the earth? With the certainty afforded by hindsight we may say an absolute 'Yes', but Abraham did not know that then. He had no Church history to consult, no counsellors to whom he could repair for advice, no Christian tradition to which to look; he was alone, without a Bible to guide or instruct him, and with no fellowship. There had never been a precedent or example.

How great was this man! He did not know how great he was, or that his faith and faithfulness would afterwards be spoken of with awe, or his example held up before the eyes of all Israel and the Church, and his fame extend throughout all the earth and to heaven and eternity itself. He was just a humble, simple man, obedient and submissive to God Almighty. He never argued with his God, and the Lord never penalised him for his naturalness. How could he be expected to know? Abraham had not sinned against Him. Sin is rebellion; Abraham had not rebelled; he had acted naturally upon occasions, and had been wrong, and who has not done that? Naturalness can hinder God, but being in control of time He allows for mistakes — He times His word and works perfectly. He eliminated Abraham's mistake regarding time, though it has been a negative influence among men ever since.

How merciful and kind God is to us all. Abraham was a great man, as great as a man could be, and it was by these means that God made him great. When Abraham had first stepped out God was unknown to him, but as God had revealed Himself to him, and as Abraham had come to know Him and learn of His ways, he had adjusted his life accordingly. How different he was now from the man who first heard God's call in his native land over a quarter of a century before. Abraham knew he had changed

considerably; he had to do so; he was in touch with the One who changes not; he was caught up in His purposes; there was no changing Him. Abraham could not make Him accept Ishmael as the chosen seed, but at least he had obtained the assurance that his firstborn son would live in the blessings of God.

Poor Abraham. Who knows what went through his mind? He may have thought that, in order to give the full blessing and establish the covenant with the promised Isaac, God might slay Ishmael. Would something awful happen to him, such as sickness or an accident or murder, or would he be slain in war? Normally that was the only way in which Ishmael could be properly banned or prevented from inheriting the traditional double portion, so Abraham had pleaded for his son's life. To his relief he learned that, having already blessed Ishmael, He of the shoulder and breast had no intention of slaying the lad, or of letting him die or be slain; Ishmael would live. His pleadings had not been in vain; he had received assurance about his son's life: future blessings in multiplication were laid up in store for him.

### Seed of the Woman

Abraham had understood God's word perfectly; the message had got through to him; God was going to multiply the circumcised man only, and no other. He arose from the ground and obeyed God immediately. He had early learned that delay meant only loss, if not disaster; certainly it brought distress and dismay. Without further ado he gathered all the male members of his house and entourage and did exactly as God had said. It was typical of him that he circumcised himself and his son first; then, having set the perfect example, he circumcised all his retainers.

It could not have been a pleasant experience for any of them; it was all so new as well as painful. Yet, so great was Abraham's faithfulness and zeal, that no one resisted the command. The sharp pain soon passed to soreness, then to inconvenience — it was soon over. But why, O why, must they all endure it? God had said that only in Isaac should Abraham's seed be called, so why force circumcision on those who were not the called of God? Why circumcise even Ishmael, since he was not the promised seed, and why were all those others brought into it, when they had no more connection with Abraham and the covenant blessings than the fact that they were employees of his? And what about Lot? If they were so loosely connected with Abraham, why should not Lot be included in the covenant of circumcision? We all may well ask the question too.

Perhaps to answer the last inquiry poses no great difficulty: God had deliberately separated Lot from Abraham, and thereby from all chances of special blessings. Lot finally lost all he had gained while travelling along in the wake of his uncle's blessings; God excluded Lot from the covenant; he belonged to the old life of Ur and Chaldea and Sodom. To answer the former question is not so easy though. We have no more ground for believing Abraham's household retainers were not Chaldean than we have for believing that they were Canaanites or Egyptians. We know also that Abraham's chief steward was a Damascene. If blood relationship was the qualifying factor, Lot ought to have been included. Certainly none of the others were family, though we cannot be sure they were not nationally of one blood with Abraham. In any case the chosen seed had to be a blood relative of his, so that factor could not be the particularly vital one.

There is of course a difference between the blood relationship of Isaac to Abraham and that which any of those could have had, but it was very little different from that of Ishmael. The vital difference lay in this: Isaac, when he was eventually born, was the

child of promise; Ishmael was not. Further than that, Ishmael had a different mother; that is one of the most important factors governing the mystery. Although it was so early in history, God was already working according to the eternal purpose He purposed in Christ before the world began. Throughout all time from the very beginning everything has followed a pattern, and still does. God could do no other than He has done.

The Jews once said to Jesus, 'We have Abraham to our father', but the more important thing they could not say. In the same sense as all the rest of the Jews, Jesus could also claim Abraham as His father, that is after the flesh; but it was the maternal connection that was so important. It was this that made Him so different from all others: His mother was the virgin of whom Moses hinted and Isaiah prophesied. Jesus was born of promise; so was Isaac. Before fulfilling His promise, God deliberately waited until both Abraham and Sarah were utterly beyond all hope of becoming parents. Although both of them were ultimately involved in Isaac's birth (he was their child) the Lord ensured by this means that, in his generation, Isaac should as nearly as possible foreshadow Jesus.

Paul's comments about Abraham at this time are most apt: 'He considered not his own body now dead .... neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb'. Commenting further, he reveals the secret that so closely allies Isaac's conception with that of Jesus: 'At the time appointed I will return ... and Sarah shall have a son'. How closely this resembles the angel's word to Mary, 'The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God'.

#### Child of Promise

Isaac, though the child of Abraham and Sarah, was nevertheless the child of promise. When God visited Abraham to declare the covenant of circumcision Isaac was as yet unborn, therefore he was not circumcised at that time; Ishmael was though. Abraham's child of the flesh, along with many, possibly hundreds of others not of Abraham's seed, received the sign of the covenant which God established with Abraham; only later was this established with Isaac. This seems beyond explanation. Perhaps it ought to be interpreted as an indication of God's marvellous grace, and may only be understood and interpreted in the same light as the words of John: 'God so loved the world that He gave'.

There are wonders of grace in all God does — providences of mercy as well as His dealings with men with providence through nature. The wonders of the Lord's multitudinous blessings showered on people while He was on earth are an illustration of this. These were bestowed on men bounteously; thousands of unsaved people were healed or fed, or both, by His hands; whether they were enemies or friends made no difference. Those blessings had nothing to do with whether or not those included were good or evil by nature — they were of providential grace, and in the majority of cases no faith but His was required; sheer good nature made Him do it.

All those persons were made beneficiaries according to His will in the kingdom of heaven, though none of them were in the Kingdom of God. They were circumcised; that was their entitlement to blessings above other nations, but they were not the spiritual seed of Abraham because they were not born of the promise. Jesus was. The promise was and is the promise of God; that is to say it is the promise made in God by God the Father to God the Son concerning God the Holy Spirit. In other words it was the covenant or arrangement made in God by God about God for God concerning His purpose to create the universe and man. He revealed this in measure to Moses, but he had only recorded

what God hinted to Adam and Eve in the beginning.

David, and Isaiah of the major prophets, later took up the theme; but it is Luke who most fully tells of the promise in his Gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles. The Son of God was born of this promise; so was the Church. Throughout history others have been born in ways which, to some degree, have been according to the promise. It may be said that, to an extent, God instigated and carried out all His dealings in creation and with men according to His promise and purpose in Christ. The whole world lies in the wicked one spiritually, but for its existence at all it lies in the Spirit of God. The air surrounding us, which we breathe and in which we live, is a modification and adaptation of the Holy Spirit to God's requirements for our physical being. Everything is of God's person and promise and purpose and plan and power, and is according to the eternal covenant. Latterly God appeared on the earth in person in order to draw attention to the promise, to implement it and thereby to inaugurate a new age.

He came according to the promise and by the promise, to illustrate and emphasise it in terms of human life. Then He returned to heaven to receive it as a man, and to mediate it, in process of the fulfilment of covenant grace, to men and the purpose of God. Those born of the Spirit are the spiritual seed; it is with these that God is primarily concerned. Others receive blessings of varying degree and number, but these are the real promised seed. These are heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ, and live in the kingdom of God on a far superior plane of inheritance than all others, both in this world and the next.

## Chapter 8 — SARAH SHALL HAVE A SON (Genesis 18)

The absorbing interest of the previous chapter continues on uninterruptedly into this one, so also do the events; there should be no chapter break here. Abraham and his son and all the men of his house were circumcised, 'and the Lord appeared unto him'. This appearance was granted to Abraham as the reward of faithfulness. And what a reward it was! Perhaps that of itself would have been sufficient blessing to Abraham, but God had something further to say. Five important things emerge from the reading: (1) a new and fundamental revelation of God; (2) the Tree; (3) the Seed; (4) Sin; (5) Intercession. These five combine to give new insight into the wondrous ways of God. Of the five the first is by far the most important, for it is the first plain scriptural indication of the trinitarian Being of God.

### I Will Manifest Myself

To Abraham the revelation was a totally new one. He was sitting in the doorway of his tent when suddenly three men appeared, standing by him. It was amazing; he had not seen their approach: 'He lift up his eyes and looked, and lo three men'. He knew at once that the Lord was appearing to him. He did the only thing he knew: he ran to them and bowed himself to the ground. This was something entirely new, even for Abraham. The Lord had appeared to him six times before this, but (with the exception of Melchizedek) it had always been by His word. Seldom, if ever, had there been any manifestation to his physical senses, and never had he seen three persons and known it was God. Since he had first met Him, Abraham had always thought of God in the honorific sense, attributing to Him all the honour due to the uniqueness and omnipotence of which he was capable.

To Abraham God was a Being of great wonder and power, whose word was absolute; the only way to think of Him was in the plurality that best befitted his concept of such august and singular splendour. God, to be the kind of God He is, must be a complex and multiple

Being, consisting of many persons, each of them God. He is so much greater than man, far, far beyond the comprehension of his mind — so far as to make Him unknowable by men, it was thought. In His most recent revelation to Abraham God had been pleased to impart to him further knowledge about Himself: Abraham had then learned that He was El Shaddai — Almighty God. Until then Abraham had known and called God by a variety of other names. Now, bending low at His feet, he acknowledges both his own personal relationship to Him and his estimation of Him — Adonahay — my Lord: the first word is singular, the second is plural.

God had been preparing Abraham for this; it was a most important moment. Almost certainly when Abraham was first called of God, he did not know who was calling him; most certainly he did not know Him. The Lord had called him and was raising him up to reveal Himself as the one and only true and living God; He is, but Abraham did not know that. From that moment He always wanted to reveal Himself fully to His servant, because He loved him He kept moving to that end. More than that, because of His purposes with mankind, He needed to reveal Himself to them as He is: the triune God. He has committed Himself to a plan, and from the beginning He has moved steadily on to its fulfilment. Everything was perfectly thought out; He had built up a solid foundation in Abraham, sufficient for His intentions then, but with an eye on the future. His immediate business with Abraham was to open his eyes to further truth; this was why He appeared to him in the form of three men. He had it in mind to make this an entirely different and far longer visit than any previous one.

The bodily features of the three men Abraham saw are not described. Maybe they looked like any other three men; maybe they were indescribable. Whether they were human or divine Abraham could not tell, but they were certainly men, and appeared to be on a journey. Abraham was so glad they had come to him, and, when they accepted his hospitality and washed their feet, they ate and drank while Abraham waited upon them. Who were they? Were they all together God, or was one of them the Lord and the other two angels? It was very difficult to tell. Was God three persons? Had He ability to appear on earth as three men as men are, with human looks and human appetites? Just who were those three? Was this in fact a manifestation to Abraham of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, the Trinity we now know God to be, but who was at that time still un-revealed to Abraham?

The mystery of God comes momentarily into focus through occasions such as this; the allusion to the Trinity is unmistakable. Even though it is not clearly represented or defined, the name used by Abraham when addressing the three emphasises the mystery: 'My Lord', he said. He did not pluralise the word and speak of 'Lords'; he used the singular, 'Adonahay'. Of itself this is a plural noun. He addressed them all as one, thereby confessing the three to be one Lord. It is difficult to judge whether Abraham was indeed including all three in the title, or whether he was speaking to one of them only and, as befitting the occasion and the personages, ignoring the other two as being only attendants of the One who was obviously His Majesty the Lord God Almighty?

Subsequent events seem to point to the possibility that actually it may have been the Lord with two angels who visited Abraham that day. Three possibilities are open to us: (1) it was a manifestation of the Trinity; (2) it was the Lord attended by two angels; (3) it was simply three angels. If it was indeed three angels of the Lord, each one was there in a representative capacity as indicating the presence of one of the persons of the Godhead.

This could have been the case, for at the conclusion of the chapter we read, 'the Lord went His way as soon as He had left communing with Abraham'. On the other hand we read that, following their meal and conversation with Abraham, 'the men rose up from thence and looked toward Sodom'. Again we read later that 'the men turned their faces from thence and went toward Sodom', while Abraham 'stood yet before the Lord'.

This could seem to lend weight to the suggestion that indeed it was the Lord and two angels who came to Abraham. The opening of chapter nineteen lends weight to this, for it reads, 'and there came two angels to Sodom'; these are later referred to as men. If these were two of the original three, it seems possible that at least two of that Trinity were angels, which in turn could imply that the other was indeed God manifest in flesh for the purpose of visiting Abraham. Another possibility is that all those three who visited Abraham were angels, who, when they concluded their business with him, returned to heaven. This would suggest that God either dispatched two of them to Sodom to accomplish His will there, or else sent two others to do so. It is not possible to come to definite conclusions about it, but it is worthy of note that, for reasons best known to Himself, God chose to appear to Abraham in this trinitarian manner.

It cannot be overlooked that this form of manifestation was used by God for this occasion only, which suggests that He had a special reason for taking the unusual step. This manifestation was given in connection with two significant events: (1) the finalising of the promise of the seed; (2) the clarification and judgement of sin. Whoever they were, it is clear that these men were not God by incarnation, but God in manifestation. The manifestation was made in order to bring to Abraham the news of the incarnation of the promised seed. If these men were indeed angels, then we may rejoice that they were so disposed and adaptable to God that He could totally indwell them, and so take over their persons and powers that He could appear as Himself in them. He identified with them, and could act as God through them, and speak in the first person singular to Abraham so that to him they could appear to be God.

This principle of Godly manifestation is a Bible fact revealed in many places (for instance to Moses at the burning bush). Moses himself was later so indwelt by God that at times he spoke as though he was God. If the blessed Trinity of God did not actually appear on earth at that time, we do see that He co-ordinated His final annunciation of the birth of the promised seed to Abraham with a unique manifestation in trinitarian form. This is a most remarkable testimony to the involvement of the whole Trinity in the incarnation of Jesus. God also knew that, in process of time, men would, without doubt, interpret this as pointing to God becoming man in Jesus Christ.

#### He Stood by the Tree

The second intriguing thing about it all is the place where it took place. Abraham first saw the three standing by him within a few yards of the tent door and he ran to meet them. The impression they made on him was so profound that he counted their visit a very great favour indeed. With courtly grace he invited them to stay awhile, wash their feet and rest themselves under the tree: 'Comfort ye your hearts,' he said; 'after that ye shall pass on: for therefore are ye come to your servant'. Being granted permission from the Lord, he quickly departed to order and supervise the preparation of the meal; meanwhile they presumably washed their feet and rested under the shade of the tree. Everything took place there, under the tree. In its shade they washed their feet and rested and comforted their hearts; then, with Abraham standing by the tent in the background,

they ate their meal and delivered themselves of their message.

To any casual observer the scene would not have been an unfamiliar one; it was possibly being enacted at that very moment in many places all over Canaan. Nomads always sought to pitch their tents by a well in the shade of a great tree if possible; they needed shade from the burning rays of the noonday sun, as well as cool water from the earth. Under the tree they would recline, hold council, meet with friends or entertain visitors. Abraham did not know the purpose of the visit when he entertained those strangers, nor yet that he was entertaining angels unawares. In his heart he knew they were no ordinary mortals, and, gathering them up into one Lord, he gave of his best, fresh from the herd and the hearth — generous, hospitable Abraham.

The men were intent on their purpose, they had come to deliver a message, but before doing so they graciously paused to partake of Abraham's bounty, then they turned to the message. It was twofold: first it was a word of life, then it was a word of death. The promise of life was foremost in the heart of God, and they sat in the shadow of the tree to declare it. That day Abraham's tree took on a new significance. It became the place of annunciation; the gospel was preached to him there. How clearly still this gospel still reaches us across the centuries. Everything, all the gospel, comes to us from the God of the tree on which Christ died; there He rests and comforts His heart, and there He eats and drinks. God would only make His promise and announcement to Abraham concerning the Seed, the Word who was made flesh, from under the tree.

There would have been no Bethlehem if there could not have been a Calvary. Jesus had no birth before the manger, but He lived and was slain from the foundation of the world. Jesus was begotten to die; it was with great cost out of inner woundings that God promised His Son. Each member of the Godhead was fully engaged in this; it took all God's almighty will power to make the promise, as well as His strength to accomplish it. Under the tree God revealed to Abraham the most basic reason why He announced Himself to him as El Shaddai. He was not prepared to commit Himself to Abraham and Sarah and to the programme in His heart for the world unless they would covenant with Him by circumcision though. He could not, dare not. Circumcision in the flesh was a sign of the spiritual circumcision accomplished by the cross — that is why He insisted on it. Under the tree they rested and comforted their hearts; there they broke their journey to Sodom, where wrath and judgement were to be poured out on sinful men. It was necessary, but it brought no pleasure to God; it was righteous though: everything is right under the cross; God rests, finds His comfort and feeds there. It is His justification for all things.

All God's actions are justified by the cross: there the sinner finds pardon, the weary find rest, the destitute find hope. By one tree God combines and outworks the effects and purposes of all other trees. Whether of life or of good and evil, all is headed up there; Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God. So it was that the three sat under the tree. Thirdly, and closely allied to the foregoing, God drew Abraham to the tree to observe Him, attend upon Him and hear all that took place there; Abraham 'stood by them under the tree'. Blessed man! He was one of the world's most privileged men; to him it was given to become the father of the seed, and thereby to portray the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the heavenly Seed. So the Father drew him there.

By sundry promises, Abraham had been told over and over again that he was to be the father of the special son, and he had believed it. Although long delayed, he had not

doubted that it would happen; looking at the dust he had believed it; gazing at the stars he had believed it; sleeping and waking he had believed it. God had taken him through many exercises; again and again, following many particularly testing circumstances, He had come to him reaffirming the promise. Because of it Abraham had survived all the difficulties; throughout a score of years he had maintained his firm trust in God. He had not always understood the delay; he did not know why God had waited until his and Sarah's bodies were dead and incapable, unable to accomplish God's purposes. God's future plans were unknown to him; he did not even know they existed, nor did he know that he was being so honoured that day.

Abraham was being incorporated into the prefiguration of the death and resurrection of Christ. How could he be expected to know that? God had deliberately withheld the final promise of the seed until now. He had planned that Abraham should stand near Him by the tree to receive the news. It was a dim foreshadowing of the greatest mystery yet to be revealed, namely that Christ should be the first-begotten from the dead. All unconsciously to Abraham, the message of birth from death was being etched into his life, and into history itself. By waiting over the years until Abraham and Sarah were both 'dead', without possibility or hope of parenthood, the Lord laid down a principle and made an emphasis; He drew Abraham to Himself under the tree that day to underline the truth that the Seed is spiritual and miraculous, not fleshly and natural.

All God's children must be begotten from the dead. Looking at the dust, by God's command, years before, Abraham could have learned that all the seed were 'of the earth, earthy'; that is the first and natural view. Looking up at the stars that never-to-be-forgotten night much later, he may have understood the further truth that the children must be heavenly too. Standing by the tree listening to his Lord that day he was given greater opportunity still; to him was granted then the possibility of foreseeing that the Seed is absolutely miraculous and completely spiritual. More than that, he could have seen that God had planned and directed and was still directing everything from the shadow of the cross. What a privilege! He was being let into the secrets of heaven and God. In history the cross was a new starting point; in eternity it had always been planned as the beginning: He who is the beginning and the ending was elected to hang on it then. It is not quite clear whether He came and sat beneath the tree that day; if so, then Christ Himself was speaking to Abraham about His own death and resurrection. Abraham's miracle seed foreshadowed Him, The Seed; Isaac's birth foreshadowed His.

Perhaps in retrospect Abraham one day came to the conclusion that when God had told him to count the dust, He had indicated that all the seed should rise from the dust of death and no longer be of the earth, earthy. Whether or not he did see this in his day, we in our day may now see the marvels of God's ways and trace His steps in the figures and foreshadowings of history. The one thing of which we may be absolutely sure is that the cross is indispensable to all God's plans and provisions for men. By the cross God changes people from being one kind of person to being another — fleshly to spiritual, earthly to heavenly. Christ crucified is both the power and the wisdom of God, and by the cross is now made unto us wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Christ crucified is Christ risen from the dead; the risen crucified Lord is the living and glorified Seed, born from the dead.

All things are Possible

The Lord had more difficulty in convincing Sarah about this than He had in convincing

Abraham. Throughout the conversation between the visitors and Abraham, she had remained in the tent listening, unseen. She heard all that went on between the men and disbelieved it; she heard the enquiry as to her whereabouts, but remained hidden, and when they reaffirmed the oft-repeated promise she laughed at it. Abraham did not hear her laughter but God did; quietly and inwardly she laughed at the word of God — she was cynical. 'Why did Sarah laugh?' He asked, 'Is anything too hard for the Lord?' Abraham must have been amazed, and perhaps ashamed, but Sarah was frightened and confused, and denied it. 'Nay, but thou didst laugh', said the Lord.

God's greatest problem is with people like Sarah; there are many of them among us, people who look at circumstances, and reason from human limitations. The matter of making it possible for the child to be conceived and born was not at all difficult to God, but getting Sarah to believe was very difficult indeed. Impossibilities do not lie in God but in us. His first task is to get us to believe that He is, then to believe in Him — that is to believe in His love and power and in His intention to do what He says. This accomplished, He has to convince us to believe Him, that is to believe what He actually says. It was absolutely crucial that Sarah should believe like this; Abraham's faith was quite useless without hers. Believe as he may, and did, there could have been no Isaac except Sarah believed also; there must be unity of faith.

Poor Sarah, she needed more convincing than her husband; hope deferred had made her heart sick, and she could no longer believe. Her unbelief was so profound that it warranted reproof; how lovingly and gently it was administered. God did not do it directly even — she overheard it and learned that God knew her inmost thoughts. She received the correction though, and later, thinking over the incident and meditating on God's faithfulness, became thoroughly ashamed of herself and changed her mind. Repenting completely, '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'. Isaac, when he was born, was a child of faith, the faith of God and Abraham and Sarah.

Although her own and her husband's powers of reproduction were now dead, Sarah believed she could and would bear a child because God is faithful. She did not know that she had been born barren so that Isaac may be born. Had she or her husband been capable of producing children at that time she would never have borne the promised seed. For some reason unknown to her, Isaac had to be the child of promise, the word made flesh, an impossible child. It was all so very bewildering, completely contrary to nature, and scientifically impossible. But with God impossibilities become possibilities, natural becomes supernatural, defeat is swallowed up in victory, and death is the condition for life.

How long it takes for men and women to learn that God is Almighty; He has set His will and made His plan. He has fixed His purpose and passed the decree; His strength is everlasting, and He worketh all things after the counsel of His own will. It must have been wonderful to them when Abraham and Sarah together realised that they were the elect couple of God's eternal purpose, but perhaps the sweetest thing of all to Sarah was God's faithfulness and, perhaps even more wonderful, He loved her personally and was true to her, nor had she suffered so many things over so many years in vain. She was not a mere tool of El Shaddai, or only a necessary extra to Abraham. God did feel for her; He would keep His promise; she believed in Him. The men who visited Abraham that day

did not wait for all Sarah's capitulation and repentance to work out. Their message delivered, their task was accomplished, they rose and prepared to leave.

### Very Grievous Sin

The fourth point, and God's next reason for the visitation, is now revealed: 'The men ... looked toward Sodom'. Abraham had felt that they were on a journey. Somehow he had known that he and his encampment and the meal were not the end of the road for them; their errand, he felt, included things other than delivering further information about the promised seed. What their total business was he did not know, but, perfect host that he was, 'he went with them to bring them on the way'. The road led to Sodom; were they going to visit Lot? He did not know that the Lord had come down to earth in order to know sin and to judge it. As he continued with them though, the three were having a conversation among themselves; it was most illuminating, and it seems that Abraham might have overheard it. Whether he actually did or not is impossible to tell, but what he learned was that what God was about to do was definitely related to his own faithfulness. This was most informative; to this day it stands in scripture as a clear indication as to why some people know far more than others about God's mind and works.

Let us look first at the Lord's intention. He was on His way to Sodom and Gomorrah because the cry and sin of those twin cities was very grievous to Him. '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', He said, taking Abraham into His confidences. In Abraham's presence they had expressed the conviction that he would become a great and mighty nation and would command his children and household to do justice and judgement, and keep the way of the Lord. How well God had chosen and how faithfully Abraham had responded; God was pleased with His man.

The crying sin of Sodom and Gomorrah was homosexuality, the perversion and prostitution of bodily function to immoral and corrupt ends. God's hatred and abhorrence of such practices is clearly shown by the reasons given for the disclosure to Abraham of His intended actions. He knew that homosexuality was as sickeningly obnoxious to Abraham as to Himself; the circumcision episode had proved that. Had the sin been in any heart it would have come to the surface then — an easier opportunity for its indulgence could hardly be imagined — from that time onwards it could have become rampant. Abraham's encampment could have become a Sodom, but it did not; it remained the camp of righteousness and purity. The Lord knew that by experience. The three men had stayed there and received gracious hospitality and due reverence in that place.

What a contrast when the angels went down to Sodom. The Sodomites, seeing them as men, lusted after them to abuse them as they did each other; it was horrible. As the Lord said, 'I will go down and see ... I will know'. He did. He did see and know for Himself. He did not judge from far off in some distant heaven; He went down to the horrible pit, only to have His worst fears proved to Him personally. He went to Abraham's encampment first and to Sodom second. What a contrast! In both cases He saw and knew by personal experience. He left nothing to chance, or even to second-hand information; He found out for Himself. He was told nothing by men, not even Abraham. God does not move by hearsay; too often men's attempts at information are only thinly disguised accusations; God will have none of it. In his fifty-third chapter Isaiah penned a wonderful line relative to this: 'By His knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities'. That is why Jesus was born.

God was incarnated on to the earth; He 'went down' that He might gain knowledge as a man and servant among men. Betrayed by one of His own, He was delivered finally into the hands of wicked men, who unlawfully and immorally beat and bruised Him; He was abused beyond description by His creatures. He knew the horrors of sin long before He was made it. Unlike angels, when He was threatened He did not respond by first blinding and then burning up His opponents; instead He stayed among them, received all their ill-treatment without murmur, finally dying at their hands. Hanging there, God made Him Sodomy and the Sodomite — it was awful. Men could not hurt Him as much as that. When He went down to Sodom He saw and knew it all; that was the purpose of His visit.

Although under the tree the Lord spoke with such joy to Abraham about the seed, it was also with sorrow in His heart about Sodom and Gomorrah. He could rest in comfort under the tree, refresh Himself and feed on all that Abraham represented and presented to Him, but it was a mixed blessing. There was another side to the visit, so He set His face towards Sodom, thinking of the sin for which He needed the tree. Oh the horror of the filth and the degradation! Grief over the perversion and vileness of sinful men flooded in and hurt Him then; it was as a foretaste of the cross. Foreseeing what Jesus would be made there was worse, far worse, than the actual physical crucifixion. Golgotha was at once the chiefest glory and source of highest bliss to God, as well as the greatest grief to the Father-heart.

Determined to exterminate the seed bed of sin, 'the men turned their faces from thence, and went toward Sodom: but Abraham stood yet before the Lord'. Although they departed, Abraham did not lose touch with his Lord; he continued to stand before Him. He had often stood there when no other form, human or divine, had been visible. He knew he did not have to stand before three men in order to have audience with his God; he sought neither to dissuade nor to delay them. The conclusion of their visit did not terminate his standing with the Lord. He knew this, and was determined to use his privilege, so the fifth marvellous revelation comes into focus — intercession.

There is an inexorability about judgement: 'the men ... went toward Sodom'. Abraham was fully aware of it; that is why he did not seek to turn them from their stated purpose — it was useless to attempt that. He was the man he was, and was where he was, because God kept His word. He had done all He had said to Abraham, and Abraham believed He would yet do all He had promised him about the future; so He would certainly go down to Sodom as He said. Deep down in Abraham's heart a word was stirring. God had spoken it to him years earlier when he lay in deep deep sleep and a horror of great darkness fell upon him. The Lord had spoken it when making covenant with him about Israel and Canaan: the nation would not be allowed to possess the land for four centuries, because 'the iniquity of the Amorites' was not yet full.

There is a righteousness about justice; it is 'the way of the Lord to do judgement and justice'. Justice, however long it tarry, must ultimately pass judgement on sin, but Abraham learned that it will not do so until iniquity is full. Abraham was a righteous and faithful man; he knew that Sodom and Gomorrah were ripe for judgement, so he did not attempt to dissuade God from His purpose. The Lord always moves in fulness of time; when He sent forth His Son for redemption it was in the fulness of time. In all He does He never moves except in absolute justice, especially when moving in judgement.

Speaking of His crucifixion on one occasion Jesus said, 'now is the judgement of this world': when the world judged Him, God judged the world. This day of grace is not only

a merciful period of salvation, it is also an era of clemency; judgement is stayed. The sentence is already passed; it will be carried out later in the fulness of time. Abraham knew that the judgement of the cities of the plain was at hand; he might have thought it long overdue; now the men were on their way there. He knew what the result of the inquiry would be: the end was inevitable, the cities were doomed; but Lot and his family were there in extreme danger. The fire of God was shortly to be poured out on Lot's house and he did not know it; but he need not have worried, for, somewhere up in the hills, his uncle Abraham was standing before the Lord in his behalf. Blessed, faithful Abraham, with Lot in his heart, stood there, intent on his nephew's deliverance.

Intercession to the Lord of Hosts..

From this point onwards in the story it seems that the trio which visited Abraham indeed comprised the Lord God and two angels, for we read next that 'Abraham drew near'. It is as though at first he stood before the visible presence of the Lord, and then drew nearer still to the person he could see. But whatever may be the facts of the matter, whether the Lord had been, and was still, visibly manifest in flesh or was invisible, Abraham drew near to Him. It was a wonderful occasion, and in the following ten verses the first great revelation of the mystery of intercession unfolds in scripture.

The lessons to be learned from it are quite invaluable to those who would become intercessors. The first is greatest of all: intercession is entirely of God. Intercession, as it is introduced and demonstrated here, is defined by, named, and based upon a vital aspect of the function of God's Being. It is essential that we all realise that, as the arterial system is not a creation of man but is an indispensable part of him, without which he could not exist, so is intercession vital to the Being of God. Because this is so, it is vital to the Church; it is as fundamental to its being as the intercession of Christ is fundamental to salvation. It is part of the indispensable intermediary ministry of the Son, without which no one could be saved. It is as the heartbeat of God; there could be no life without it; a heart without a beat cannot exist; it is dead.

Intercession in the Church is as the pulsing of blood in the body and the continual urge of pure desire in the Spirit of God; it is essential to all life and function in God and the Church. It was God, not Abraham, who instigated this intercessory exercise. The Lord drew near to Abraham before Abraham drew near to Him. It was He who came to the tree and informed Abraham of His intention to deal with the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah, and He told him because He wanted him to engage with Him about it. He knew Lot was in Sodom and He knew that Abraham was very concerned about his nephew. Lot was still a righteous man according to the standards and possibilities of righteousness intended for men by God in those days.

God had no desire to engulf Lot in the fires of judgement; He intended to save him. He also wanted His servant to be involved in that salvation. Knowing Abraham, He therefore informed him of His intentions and waited for his response, wanting to draw him yet further into the necessities of salvation and the desires of His own heart. He wanted to take up Abraham and absorb him into the basic function and understandings of His own being so that he could learn of His righteousness and love and grace. Abraham responded exactly as God knew he would: 'he drew near'. Intercession can only be made from that position. That is the first lesson we must learn about intercession: it is initiated of God and is an indication of our intimacy with Him.

Secondly, intercession is found here in its true place. Firstly we saw its source — God;

this time we see its place. The Lord first came to the tree, then He spoke of the seed; now He initiates intercession. There is an utter consistency in all the Lord does. To whomsoever He relates, at whatever time in history, under any covenant, in any dispensation, He never varies the principles, or alters the plan, or changes the doctrine of salvation; indeed He cannot.

The master-plan of salvation is set forth in all fulness only by the person and ministry of Jesus Christ. By no-one else and nothing else could it be fully revealed. Therefore we may see only an application of it in the life and times of Abraham, but what we do see is true: Jesus who died on the tree was the seed promised long before Isaac; He is also that first begotten from the dead, who ever lives to make intercession for all that come unto God by Him. Although in Abraham's day this had not yet been revealed, it was the order followed by God then, as it is now.

Perhaps it is not sufficiently understood by the churches that there is no salvation without intercession. Too often it is either preached or implied that Calvary is all that is necessary for the salvation of sinners, whereas the salvation of men depends as much upon the Lord's present intercession as upon His historic act of redemption. This is very plainly set out in scripture by God's dealings with Israel when delivering them from Egypt. With unmistakable clarity He places the redemptive act first in order; no one can doubt that it is fundamental to salvation. God could not begin without it. By the death and blood and body of the Lamb alone could Israel be saved. They had to kill it, sprinkle its blood on their homes, and roast and eat its flesh, or they were not eligible for salvation. It was done in majestic isolation; no other rites were ordained of God then. It was the great solitary redemptive act upon which Israel's life depended and their nation was founded, and it was nationally and historically honoured as such.

However, long before Israel reached Canaan, indeed well within two years of their departure from Egypt, God put that historic redemption into proper perspective with the rest of the truth in Christ. He commanded Israel to make Him a tabernacle in which to dwell. This accomplished, He related redemption to atonement by regeneration and intercession, and so finalised Israel's approach to Himself. He had the passover / redemption commemorated annually by a feast which marked the new year, thereby ensuring that Israel should forever understand that they came into being by redemption alone. But in the layout of the tabernacle He showed them that the act of redemption was only a part of the plan and way of salvation, not the whole.

Redemption is in Christ Jesus. It was made effective to us by the redemptive act; but, although it totally redeemed us, that deed was not total redemption; it only made it available (provided it) for us. That is why, in the tabernacle, the altar was not placed within the tabernacle proper, but within its courts: it was the open gateway into everything. On that altar the one obligatory daily sacrifice was the lamb; it was offered to God morning and evening without fail. Whatever else was offered there by persons in Israel, for whatever reason, the redeeming lamb had to be sacrificed, its blood shed and its body eaten by the flames; that was fundamental to the life of the nation. But that was not all there was to it. There were other things as vital as the altar, and further articles by which alone men could come to God. Beyond the altar in the court before the open door of the tabernacle stood the Laver of regeneration; in the same way that the altar was as the gate into the courts, so this Laver was as the door into the tent. No one could enter the tent where God dwelt except via the Laver: it was as vital as the altar.

Once a person was inside the tent the way lay still forward to the Altar of Incense, which stood before the veil covering the throne; there was no way in to God except through that veil past that altar. It was the altar of intercession: from it the incense was rising constantly to God; it was as a cloud of fragrant prayer. Anybody going in to God through that veil could only enter thoroughly incensed; it was impossible otherwise; there was no other way. Now that the veil is rent we see the way clear from the altar to the throne and, seeing, understand all which in those days was obscured from Israel's eyes. The direct way to the throne and God from the Altar of Sacrifice lay via the Laver and the Golden Altar: they were as vital to salvation as the brazen altar. Redemption is not only from Egypt to Canaan; most vitally it is from sin unto God.

The act of redemption is the most fundamental of all Christ's works of salvation; it is as eternal as Christ, but is only one of His works. The act of resurrection is symbolised by the Laver, and is as vital and necessary to salvation as the initial and initiating work of redemption. The ministry of intercession is also as eternally necessary to salvation as the acts of redemption and resurrection, so God had the Altar of Incense made. The way is unmistakably clear; it is simple and straightforward: not one of those artefacts and what they represent is of any avail without the other. Salvation, to be effective, must be a chain of action, not a sequence of isolated events, even if they be in succession. This then is the place and importance of intercession in the scheme of salvation.

However, Abraham the intercessor was neither the Saviour nor the Seed; how then could he typify the true intercessor? In this: although he was not the promised seed, he was in the direct line of the promised seed of Genesis chapter four, verses twenty-five and twenty-six; he was a descendant of Seth, the seed appointed in place of Abel, the son of the shed blood. There is little doubt that Eve saw in him the seed promised in Genesis chapter three, verse fifteen. To her he was as though raised up after the death of her son. To us he represents the birth which follows the bloodshed. In time Seth had a son also —'then began men to call on the name of the Lord'; perhaps they were expecting the fulfilment of the promise. Here then is the link with Abraham: he did precisely that at first, and then, as we now see, he progressed to intercession.

We, like Abraham, cannot claim to be saviours in the sense in which Jesus was and is the Saviour. We preach the cross of sacrifice and redemption which we did not provide, and in this sense follow the divine order, but all to no avail unless, as Abraham, we know to intercede also. God does nothing except in the original order and upon the unchangeable principles He set out in scripture for us to discover. Abraham had no book of God's laws to read, no one to copy; he was no one's disciple; his life was a lonely discovery of God. Mercifully for us the account of this is recorded, so that by it we, as he, may be taught the way of God.

The third principle to discover is the righteousness of God. What happened at Sodom and Gomorrah is a clear indication of what will take place at the end of this age. Before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah He removed Lot from the danger area: before He destroys the earth by fire He will remove His people from it. He will not destroy the righteous with the wicked. The Judge of all the earth always does right.

Dear Abraham, How gracious God was to him. He enjoyed great privileges bestowed upon him by God. He also had a great standing with the Lord, who had great sympathy with His chosen servant, and took pity on his ignorance. Like us all, Abraham was slowly learning of Him, and He knew how little Abraham understood yet. He had imputed

righteousness to him earlier and had already tested the result in some areas of his life, especially in the area of sodomy. But O how much more Abraham needed to learn about his God. It was far from Him to destroy the righteous with the wicked, and thereby imply that there was no difference between them in His sight.

How tender He was to His servant; the implied rebuke in Abraham's address was unintended: he did not really think he was holier than God. In his concern for Lot, and because of his ignorance of God, Abraham confused truth, but the Lord did not penalise him for that. Perhaps Abraham thought that righteous Lot had succeeded in influencing others for good, that by his life and testimony he had stemmed the flood of filth in Sodom to such effect that a nucleus of righteous persons had been raised up there. If so, he was correct in thinking that it would not be a righteous thing to punish them as though they were every bit as bad as the rest. But he was wrong: there were not fifty righteous people in the whole of the cities of the plain; neither were there forty-five, nor forty even, nor thirty, nor twenty; there were not even ten.

In answer to Abraham's persistent supplication, God said that for the sake of ten righteous people in Sodom He would not destroy the city, but would remit the sentence; then He went His way. Disconsolate Abraham was left with the sad knowledge that there were fewer than ten righteous people in Sodom. Was he disillusioned? God knew what Abraham was doing: deep down beneath his suppositions he was seeking to assure the deliverance and safety of his relatives. But he need not have worried about Lot; God is righteous in all His ways. Whenever He executes judgement it is always with justice; He is scrupulously fair in all His dealings with the sons of men.

This brings us to the fourth point: when seeking to engage in intercession we must remember that Abraham's method is not the right one to follow. In our endeavours to be fair to men we must not be unfair to God. When we intercede we must not employ the 'bargaining' method; the 'knocking down' technique used by Abraham has no place in intercession.

What lay deepest in Abraham's heart was the desire to protect his own flesh and blood. It was so strong in him that he persisted to the point of risking God's anger. For the sake of Lot he would have saved the whole city, but God would not. The Lord had no more intention of relieving the cities of sin than He had of relieving the world from the flood for the sake of Noah in his day. He saved Noah and his family, and would have saved Lot and all his family if they had allowed Him to do so, but in neither case would He save the filthy sinners who rejected His righteousness. He who knows best and judges righteously deferred judgement in grace as long as possible, but the only way open to Him in the end was extermination. There is no turning Him from His righteous purpose; the intercessor must learn to plead within the bounds of His holy will as well as appeal to His loving heart. It would have been better if Abraham had asked God outright for Lot and his family and left it at that; pressing for more, he gave the impression that he was more gracious than God.

Fifthly, intercession is a special grace granted as a direct favour from God to faithful souls. As we have seen, it was not Abraham but God who initiated the episode; He drew near to Abraham so that Abraham should draw near to Him and, when He had finished communing with him, God terminated the session. God commenced and finished the whole affair. But let us notice Abraham's progress: God elevated His servant to a conversational level with Himself; He let Abraham into a secret he could not otherwise

have known, because He wanted to see his reaction to it.

Intercession is a great privilege, a high honour known only to the few, yet all God's children may know it. Sadly enough, not many do; the price to pay for intercession is too great for most to pay. To become an intercessor Abraham had come a long way. He had left everything and everybody for God, entered into covenant with Him and obeyed Him consistently throughout the last twenty-five years of his life. He had fought and won battles, received promises, learned lessons, built altars, stood under the stars, believed when he alone believed, known spiritual estrangement from his wife, suffered the loss of all things, and remained faithful.

Abraham's reward was elevation to intercession for further training from the Lord in the art of adjusting love to righteousness and salvation to justice. This always involves entire submission of everything to God. Opinions of justice based on observation over the years, and the unshakeable devotion to kith and kin, innate in us all, so easily beset us and warp righteous judgement. The price to pay is very real and intensely personal. Every intercessor must learn the basic righteousness of the true disciple's prayer: 'Our Father which art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. Even though it costs him dear to pray it, he must pray it through to its bitter end and still remain sweet, or he will never be an intercessor. Jesus did it and is become the Chief Intercessor.

The sixth prerequisite for intercession is deep heart-concern for the perishing. Whatever mistakes Abraham made, he had a heart to plead for others. Misunderstanding we may have, training we all need, learn of God we all must, but a heart of loving concern is fundamental to all; without that, intercession is beyond our reach. As Abraham, we are but dust, but that day dust stood before Deity, risking His displeasure, fearing that he might anger Him, yet braving possible annihilation (as he thought) because he cared for souls. He need not have worried, because the Lord had called and chosen him, and had committed Himself to making him the father of many nations and a blessing to all mankind; he was also granted rights with God above the ordinary.

Let every intercessor know this: he who enters into intercession, rising to the heights with his God, shall be forgiven all his misunderstandings. All mistakes shall be blotted out, ignorance shall not be a hindrance, nor misinterpretation of God's intention be laid to his blame. Communion leading to communication, and issuing in intercession, is communion used to greatest purpose. By it the Lord includes men in His mind, involves them in His works, and in His saving love and power uses them to His glory.

## Chapter 9 — Part I — ABIMELECH, KING OF A RIGHTEOUS NATION

### (Genesis 20)

The judgement of God upon Sodom and Gomorrah and all the cities of the plain had a profound effect on the inhabitants of Canaan; the news of it spread everywhere. Perhaps no one was more affected by it than Abraham, for soon after the awful catastrophe he struck camp and moved off towards the south. By this move it may possibly be judged how badly he had taken the seeming failure of his intercession with God, coupled with the belief of the death of Lot and his family.

Abraham's former journey south had nearly brought disaster to Pharaoh and Egypt; it had

been entirely mistaken, to say the least. Its most serious feature was the way in which it jeopardised the purposes of God by exposing Sarah to interference from Pharaoh. Sarah was the chosen vessel to bear the promised seed, and Abraham had seemed to take no account of that at all. The couple had learned a great and very serious lesson in Egypt, yet here we find them repeating the same folly.

If Abraham had only stopped to think of the direction in which he was travelling he might have known that he would soon be in grave danger of displeasing God. It was true that twenty or more years had elapsed since he had travelled in that direction. Things were different now; the trail south did not seem to bring him any significant misgivings. But south was the wrong way for him entirely — unavoidably it was down; if he continued far enough along the easy road he would finish up in Egypt. In any case he knew that it would lead him into the desert and out of his promised land, but he did not stop. On he went! Inevitably the old spirit rose in him again; he could not flee from it; he had gone the wrong way altogether.

Straightway he fell into the old trap in the old way. He lost his former clear faith, and with it went his courage: he said of Sarah, 'she is my sister'. He was not entirely wrong of course, nor was he entirely right or as truthful as he should have been. He had said the same thing of Sarah when they were in Egypt; it seemed all right to say it then, and the circumstances were exactly the same again. No doubt he justified himself again by the fact that she was indeed the daughter of his father, though not of his mother; Sarah was his half-sister. He may also have employed the dubious practice of spiritualising the whole relationship, a common enough method of practising deception. Seeing that she was his spiritual sister he would not be wholly wrong if he said 'she is my sister'. But she was his wife and, whatever grain of spiritual correctness he may have intended, he did not tell the whole truth to the people of Gerar. It was a tragic mistake and, as it proved, so unnecessary.

Broad is the way ....

It is sad that righteous Abraham should so quickly descend from the heights of intercession to this depth of subtle deception; it was so unworthy of him, and so stupid. It was so uncharacteristic of him; normally he was such a truthful and honest man. Whatever caused it? Without a word of condemnation, or even a hint of malicious criticism of such a fine man, let us try to understand the reasons why men of such high principles and so greatly privileged should at times so unaccountably fall. There is no doubt Abraham was a frightened man; the judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah struck fear into many hearts other than Lot's, and one of them was Abraham's. He was not afraid for the same reasons as other men; he felt no sense of guilt; he had for many years been a righteous man in God's eyes. Only recently he had been tested by the Lord and found guiltless on all the counts on which He had judged Sodom and Gomorrah; not those things were troubling him. Abraham's fear had arisen from a quite different source than that: he had lost his sense of security and was running away. The relationship between himself and God had been so sweet to him over the years, and it had never been sweeter than at the moment He reaffirmed to him the promise of the seed prior to the announcement of His intentions with regard to Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham had felt so blessed by all this; he was God's confidant and it seemed so easy to rise to heights of prayer unknown before. He felt he was on such terms with the Lord that he could ask Him for anything and obtain it — but it had not proved so. He had asked the Lord for

Sodom, hopes high in his heart that he would save Lot and his family, perhaps another one or two — ten perhaps; but Sodom had been destroyed.

The morning following the catastrophe was a complete disaster to him; he rose and went to the place where a few hours earlier he had stood before the Lord and looked out over the plain. Horror filled him; he turned away, sick at heart — he could hardly believe what he saw. The cities of the plain had disappeared; they were not there. God had wiped them out: he had failed.

Faith is the substance (in this instance the ground or place of standing) of things hoped for, but he entertained no hope for his nephew now. The smoke of God's wrath rose in the distance; he was numbed. With the crashing of his hopes, Abraham almost felt his ground of acceptance with God had crumbled too; he felt nothing but dumb sorrow. God told him nothing about Sodom and Zoar and the rescue of Lot. He could have done so, but He chose not to tell His friend. Wracked with mental pain, filled with disappointment and doubts, for reasons known only to the Lord, Abraham was allowed to stumble brokenly from the heights of communion to the depths of despair. How bitter is disillusionment, and how swift the devil is to tempt a discouraged man.

Feeling dreadfully insecure and wanting to get away from the place, Abraham fled towards the south, wandering anywhere, wanting only to get as far away as possible from the scene of his failure. Poor Abraham! Our hearts go out to him, yet he had no need to feel like that; far from it, he had succeeded in saving Lot; Abraham was a king. He had lost his confidence though, and instead of moving about in the country as a monarch he was almost behaving as though he was a fugitive. Where, O where was the man who had defeated five kings in battle in the valley of slime-pits? Was this the same Abraham who had fearlessly stood among the heathen and built altars to the unknown God, the man who had believed God and had proved Him true in the most unlikely matters and the most impossible of situations?

Dear Abraham, he was as secure as ever he had been; the promises were as true as when they first fell from the lips of the Almighty; the covenant still stood fast; God was his and he was God's. Why then did he stumble? Simply because he had fallen into the error of judging by the sight of his eyes and upon apparent results. Abraham thought he had utterly failed, failed in his ministry, in his duty, in his relationship to Lot, and somehow in his relationship to God. He had done nothing of the sort; he only felt he had.

God let him go to wandering again, not because He did not care or that he was out of sympathy with His friend, but because He had to let Abraham learn that nothing depends upon the results a man may achieve, or upon the heights to which he may rise, but upon God alone. When God commits Himself to a man, He remains true to him. He, the unchanging One, was Abraham's friend. Failure makes no difference to friendship, for friendship is based upon mutual trust, not upon estimates of success or failure. Abraham broke, but God did not; He remained faithful to Abraham; He loved him — Abraham had to learn that the only things that matter ultimately in the earth are God's love and will and wisdom and purposes and grace.

Whether we succeed or fail in men's eyes, or even in our own, is unimportant. God works to a plan not disclosed to men; we must trust Him and remember that we all see only in retrospect, never in prospect. All His elect must cease from attempts to explain the future or to judge the present; we can never understand the Infinite. Unless He reproves, none must assume that He is offended, or that things have failed; should we do so, the very

failure we wish to avoid will beset us. Worse still, either pride or fear will cripple us; uncertain and insecure, we shall wander away and sink from the place of communion and intercession where we stood before the Lord, into black despair and hopelessness.

When Abraham left the secure place he had in God he finished up in Gerar, feeling less secure than ever. He could not sense the presence of God there at all; it was awful. That is why he again sought Sarah's co-operation in subterfuge; it was most distressful. He was seeking safety for them both, but the result was exactly the same as before in Egypt: 'Abimelech sent and took Sarah'. They were parted, and so lost even the security of each other's presence. Tragically too, God's and Abraham's princess was back in the identical danger from which the Lord had previously extricated her in Egypt.

It may be that in this Abraham acted with calculated forethought, believing that God, who had rescued them from a similar plight before, would do so again. He had protected Sarah those years before. He had prevented Pharaoh from touching her then, and would also restrain Abimelech from coming near her now. Abraham may also have reasoned that, assuming the fear of God was not in the place, it would be of no use expecting them to respect the marriage bond, or to believe that God had laid His hand on them both.

Whatever may have been Abraham's reasons, they are not revealed; what we do know is that Abimelech was deeply hurt by his subterfuge. When he discovered it, he taxed Abraham with the question, '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'. He might have added, 'by any man, least of all by you', and he would have been right.

Whatever did Abraham feel like at that moment? The very first thing God had said to him was, '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'. That is what God intended, and, with but one exception, that was how it worked out, but at Gerar he had brought nothing but trouble on an innocent man. God had brought him into the land to be a blessing to Abimelech and his family, and he had almost brought cursing upon them; Abraham felt terrible. He had spent himself trying to save Sodom and Gomorrah from the curse and bring, as may be supposed, a blessing to men, and they were sinners exceedingly in God's sight. But Abimelech was a good and righteous man, and here Abraham stood accused, and rightly so, of bringing sin and curse upon him.

Abraham, the righteous man, the bringer of blessing, had become Abraham the bringer of trouble, just because he had failed to get his prayers answered in the way he wanted. What a fall from faith to fear. He stood arraigned before men, and could not in any degree justify his actions; he was without excuse. Had he been a witness of the conversation between God and Abimelech the previous night, he would most certainly have discovered the reasons why.

God came to Abimelech and told him that he was but a dead man because the woman he had taken was another man's wife. Abimelech was profoundly shocked, and his recorded reply is most surprising and informative: 'Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation?' The man had evidently heard of the Lord's dealings with Sodom and Gomorrah. What an unexpected reply — but how honestly given. There was nothing like that among his people; they were a righteous nation, and he himself had acted correctly in the matter; he had proceeded in all innocence and 'in the integrity of his heart', he said. God did not

deny it. On the contrary He said, 'Yea, I know thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart'; and then went on to explain that He had restrained him from touching Sarah.

He also straitly told him, upon pain of death, that he must restore her to Abraham immediately. Besides being a righteous and innocent man, Abimelech was also a very frightened and thankful man that night. Rising early, he hastened to his servants and recounted his dream. Like him they also were gripped with fear; to a man they felt as though they were all as good as dead. Abimelech was already dead, dead as Abraham, and so was his wife; she was as dead as Sarah. The death of fruitlessness and impotence was already within them, and they feared that failure to obey God now would end in physical death also. Would it be the fiery death of Sodom and Gomorrah? If so, after that, what?

Calling Abraham and rebuking him, Abimelech pleaded to know why he had done them all such a grave injustice. 'Because I thought, surely the fear of God is not in this place;' he replied. How greatly he had misjudged them: 'I thought'. How often has thought brought a man to distrust, dishonour and the dust. He had been quite wrong; the correct fear of God was in the place; the incorrect fear of God had been in his own heart; he was entirely mistaken. Abimelech and his people were God-fearing, they could plead righteousness, integrity of heart, and innocency of hands in the sight of God, and be found true. So much so that God withheld Abimelech from sinning against Him; the man never had any intention of doing that. In what had he sinned against Abraham? Nothing.

It had been Abraham's fault entirely; his own disappointment and frustration had driven him out of God's will and away from the highest and best. Thank God it was only temporary, but how quickly he brought his own and Sarah's condition upon others who were only trying to help them and entertain them in their city. Everything had gone wrong: Abraham had ceased to look for the city of God and had gone to dwell in Gerar. Probably he had intended only to sojourn there a while before moving on, but how long he did eventually stay there is not revealed: how long he may have stayed, had not Sarah become involved with Abimelech, or on the contrary if she had, who can say? What a blessing for him that the Lord intervened. If Abraham had not been the Lord's chosen, he may have become like his nephew Lot, who only went to Sodom as a sojourner but stayed on till the death. Now he was lost on the mountains, living like an animal, astray and without a home. The possible results of falling from God's will and grace are almost incalculable, and do not bear thinking about.

The whole horrible truth must have smitten Abraham with deadly force. In principle was he any better than Lot or Abimelech? How are the mighty fallen! Not long since, with multitudes on his heart, he had stood before the Lord pleading, interceding for their salvation. Behold him now, acting as though he was totally indifferent to what might happen to the people of Gerar in consequence of his own and Sarah's folly. So far down does the devil depress a man who allows his feelings to usurp faith, and his imaginings to disturb trust. But the God of grace, who forgave Abimelech and protected Sarah for His own eternal purposes, does not cease from loving men, nor does He cast off His own because they fail. He does not destroy the innocent with the guilty, or the righteous with the wicked. He is the judge of all the earth and always does right.

My Land is Before Thee

How wonderful is our God. How magnificently He dealt with the situation; He overruled everything. All was not lost; Abimelech was not slain, and Abraham's lapse was only

short-lived; they and everyone else were restored to righteousness and proper relations. With kingly grace, Abimelech 'took sheep and oxen, and men-servants and women-servants, and gave them unto Abraham, and restored Him Sarah his wife'. It was a thank offering; he gave as a king, to a king, and Abraham, as a chastened king, humbled to the dust, received the gift from a king of grace. 'Behold my land is before thee', said Abimelech: he was utterly magnanimous.

Abimelech was truly the father-king; his name means that. He had a fatherly nature, and with simple dignity he said to Sarah, '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'. It was a telling reproof, absolutely deserved, majestically delivered. To support Abraham's subterfuges, Sarah had renounced the eye-covering which married women wore in those days: only the husband was allowed to look upon his wife's face. In Abimelech's eyes she had been immodest; she was shamefaced; her deception could have brought disaster upon him. What was worse, it could have endangered all the families of the land, and destroyed the nation.

Standing there before everybody, Abraham and Sarah must have felt utterly humiliated, but it was abundantly worth it. To their credit they allowed the king's rebuke to take maximum effect on them; they never did it again. This was not because of the public humiliation they suffered, but because God's mercy and grace had been shown them from such an unexpected quarter. With contrite hearts they returned to the Lord.

Gifts had been showered upon them so undeservedly: men and women servants, sheep and cattle in abundance, and now a thousand pieces of silver; it was most embarrassing. It was as though Abraham was being paid to look after his wife; or was it a kind of dowry? Was Abimelech, with supreme irony, paying Abraham as a man would pay a man for his sister that he may take her to wife? If this were so, it was a clear rebuke richly deserved, almost a thinly veiled insult. But who could blame the king? Abraham and Sarah had deliberately insulted him and all his people; indeed they had virtually slain him and brought immorality to his land. Even worse, his whole family had been in danger of becoming extinct, 'For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife'.

They had played a shabby trick on the Philistines; in this matter the king of the nation had proved himself to be more righteous than Abraham. Nevertheless Abraham did not forfeit his position because of his lapse; he was still God's chosen. The Lord had committed Himself to him and was determined to fulfil His promise at all costs; His faithfulness is greater than all our sin.

An interesting fact emerges here: Abraham was a prophet as well as a patriarch. Seldom is he considered in this light, for not until the end of his life does the gift of prophecy seem to function. Unexpected corroboration of this is given by the Lord Jesus Himself; He it was who said that Abraham was a seer: 'Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day', He said. Abraham saw it with gladness; indeed he 'saw' many vital things and foreshadowed many more, but seldom did he prophesy. Perhaps he had no need, for it is undeniable that his whole life was prophetic, almost parabolic; he seems to be the great prototype of almost everything worthwhile.

To us the events of this chapter may be very mystifying, and not easy to explain. Why, for instance, did God direct Abimelech to ask Abraham to pray for him? It may seem an odd thing that in the end Abraham should be Abimelech's benefactor, yet he was, and we

may well ask why. The answer lies in the fact that God had said to Abraham, 'In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed'. That settled the matter. God has spoken and so shall it be; Abraham had to be a blessing despite all things. There is no escaping the determinate foreknowledge and counsel of God; what He said He meant.

In the end Abraham was the benefactor. Abimelech was under a suspended sentence of death: he needed deliverance, so he sought Abraham's help and Abraham readily prayed for him. It was a great occasion; he prayed for his life, for the restoration of his body to normal function, for his wife also and the women of his household, that they all should bear children again. God was very gracious to them all and, in the end, brought good out of evil. God is always righteous. Although not always at first apparent, there is a correctness about all He does, and His visitations upon men are singularly adapted to the occasion. When He judged Sodom and Gomorrah, for instance, He suited the punishment to the crime; they burned in their perverted lusts one towards another, and he punished them by raining fire from heaven upon them, burning them up.

In this case, Abraham was impotent and Sarah was barren, so God solemnly warned the Philistines of His abilities and intentions by bringing the identical conditions upon them. He had given clear indication of His desires to Abraham earlier. He wanted children of the perfect man; only with such would He confirm His covenant; He does not want any other than these, and we can read those desires in the nature of His judgements as well as in His promises. Everything God does is related to His purposes with regard to His seed. He does nothing indiscriminately, but always pays great attention to detail. He is utterly consistent in all He does.

## Chapter 9 — Part II — SON OF PROMISE (Genesis 21)

The enormity of the tragedy averted by God in Gerar is nowhere more plainly seen than in the opening words of this chapter: 'And the Lord did unto Sarah as He had spoken'. In the light of that, Abraham's and Sarah's conduct seems all the worse. God had sworn to return to them at the set time to strengthen Sarah to conceive the promised child. He had firmly stated that this would take place a year after the promise was made, yet although they knew the time was near at hand they had not hesitated to jeopardise it and put everything at risk.

We shall perhaps never know whatever possessed them to do such a thing. Had they slipped so far that they did not care? Or had they jointly lost faith? Or was it sheer craven fear that drove them to it? If not, was it because again Abraham felt that God would not keep His promise if He had not answered his prayer? Whatever the cause, their foolishness was greater than they knew. God simply had to step in; the whole plan of redemption could have been ruined; only God's intervention saved the situation. The seed that God promised Abraham and Sarah was absolutely vital to man's salvation; He intended it to prefigure the Lord Jesus Christ, who, two thousand years later, was to be born God's Seed through the virgin.

All God's dealings with Abraham and Sarah to date were to conform them as nearly as possible to His own purposes and activities in begetting His Son into the world. Although Abraham was not God the Father, and Sarah was not the virgin Mary, both of them were chosen to be the vessels of honour who should, to some degree, represent them.

And He as Good as Dead

This is the reason why God waited so long before the child Isaac should be born. Until Abraham's natural ability to beget children had completely died, God would not, dare not, work lest there should be confusion; Isaac must be the miracle child. His way with Sarah was much more direct: as closely as possible she must resemble Mary, so He had preserved her in barrenness unto Himself all her life. God did not tell them this, neither did they know His plans for the future miraculous incarnation of the Son — this also would be done at the time appointed. So it was that God came and performed a miracle on both Abraham and Sarah; consequently, in his birth, their son should, of all men, most nearly represent Jesus.

Because of those two things, (Abraham's) impotence and (Sarah's) barrenness, it was humanly impossible for them either to beget or to bear a child, yet the son was born. 'This is the word of promise,' God said, 'At this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son.' and it happened accordingly. 'Sarah ... bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him'. It was a sheer miracle; everything about it from start to finish was miraculous. In almost every way possible under these circumstances the child was the Lord's; he was born of Abraham and Sarah as the result of God's unchanging purpose and preserving power; Isaac was the child of man's impossibility and God's immutability. By Himself and His oath, in which it was impossible for Him to lie, God brought forth the child of His choice. He was not born of God's seed as was Jesus Christ. Jesus was born of God's actual word, and was that word made flesh. It was not quite so with Isaac though, he was born according to God's word. Each in his day and way was born of God's power and will though. How marvellously Isaac prefigured Christ.

Abraham called his son Isaac, laughter. What joy he brought to his parents' hearts; they laughed loud and long at his birth. Sarah said, 'God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me'. It was the laugh of triumph: by God's grace she had accomplished the impossible. Who would have said that Sarah would have borne Abraham a son in his old age? The birth of Isaac crowned her life's ambition: she was a mother at last; her reproach was gone. It was not quite the same with Abraham though; he did not name his son Isaac because of Sarah's joy; he joined in and laughed with her, but he called him Isaac because God had told him to do so. Isaac was God's laughter. He that sitteth in the heavens was laughing.

God was glad because He could see Christ's day; He was also laughing at His enemies and all the impossibilities, and Abraham and Sarah were laughing with Him. Satan and sin and the frailties and failures and follies of the sons of men had not been able to prevent Him from bringing in the promised seed. God was gloriously happy; the birth of Isaac was one of the great occasions of history. God and man rejoiced together over the earth-child who had been given from heaven.

In accordance with God's commandment concerning the race, Abraham circumcised his son when he was eight days old, thereby bringing him into the covenant of God. At the time he did not know that by the cutting of the flesh he was marking his son for the altar and the far greater miracles that lay ahead. It would have made no difference if he had known either. Abraham was a most happy and satisfied man that day; he was perfectly content to walk in obedience to God.

How merciful God is! He never overburdens men with information, but tells us sufficient for faith to receive at the time. Had He told Abraham then that the day would come when he would ask him to give his son back to Him, it would almost certainly have broken

him. Poor Abraham would surely have thought it must all have been a delusion — an altar of fire — a sacrifice — his precious son? No, that could not be. So in wisdom and tender love, He withheld from Abraham at that time the ultimate purposes of the birth; in time He knew he would receive it: God does not crush the broken reed or quench the smoking flax. It was best that He should withhold the news from His servant at the present; he would soon be able to bear it. All Abraham needed was time to grow to the full stature of faith required for the miracle, he was not ready yet; the time would come, but not now.

The memory of flaming Sodom still haunted Abraham at times; whenever he thought of Lot's body burning in fire, searing horror filled his mind; it had been almost too much for him to bear. Maybe by the time of Isaac's birth Abraham knew of Lot's escape and where he was, but if so there is no indication of it in scripture. It appears that, to Abraham's knowledge, Lot was a dead man. Abraham now had no other blood relatives than his two sons.

Unknown to Abraham, Lot had been saved from death by the skin of his teeth, and was now out on the mountains somewhere, hiding in a cave. Two baby boys played round his feet, innocent of the tragedy that had brought them into the world, and of which they were heirs. They brought pleasure to their respective mothers, and to the old man, their father, just as Isaac did to his parents. But oh, unlike the joy that filled the hearts of Isaac's parents, up in that mountain hideaway all pleasures were tinged with sorrow: the lads' mothers were Lot's own daughters, and he who found no rest in Sodom could find no peace in a cave. Lot sought solace in drink: it was a tragedy. Lot was in the promised land, but it did not belong to him; what he had chosen had been swallowed up in fire; he could not even call the cave his own. God's purposes were not with Lot and his sons; those boys were the fruit of incest.

God had chosen Abraham and Isaac. Soon the great moment would come for them; in God's time they would be ready. Further perfecting processes were still necessary though, for only by these would they be jointly prepared for the future greatest day of their lives.

#### The Rest of Faith

This man Abraham was a great man if ever there was one. He was a man raised up of God that He might show forth His power in him, and through him reveal His own greatness. Whenever God works, and whatever He does in time, whether in the past or the present or the future, He follows the same basic pattern. Though He works through a multitude of people, He never varies the principle of death and resurrection — it is in all He does. Eternal life in God Himself is governed by it; this alone guarantees His own continuance as the eternal Being. It was not fully demonstrated on earth until the coming and life and death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. If therefore He is going to bring a man to perfection, He must conform him to the same pattern ultimately revealed so fully in Christ.

We may ask why it was so necessary for Abraham to endure all the things he endured. Could it not have been done some other way if it had to be done at all? The answer to that is 'no'. Abraham could have saved himself a lot of trouble if he had not acted contrary to the will and word of God in the beginning, and he knew it. Not for one minute would Abraham have agreed that he had been hardly done by, or made to suffer unnecessarily, and it is certain he is now absolutely convinced that it was all worth it, for he is one of those blessed spirits of just men made perfect.

To the onlooker there is always a very real sense of mystery about men who determine to go on to perfection at all costs. These receive the promises of God with joy, obey His commandments with alacrity, and walk in holy covenant with Him. At times they can find no reason acceptable to men for what is happening to them, nor can they explain why it is they suffer; they follow a call and are certain of His will and know that all is according to His plan: in this they rest content. There is no explanation — all that is required is patient endurance.

To feed the mind with information will make a man knowledgeable, but none of it will give him understanding. True knowledge is spiritual; this only comes through faith's obedience; mental grasp may follow afterwards, but not always. To become life in us, knowledge must be of God's will, not merely of facts, and true understanding can be gained only through suffering. Abraham's perfecting lay in this, and only this, as it did with Christ long afterwards. God had confidence that Abraham would go through, right through to the end. He knew it before He called him. God knew that Abraham would obey Him. He must, that was essential. He knew that through Abraham's obedience He would be able to take command of him; that is just what He wanted.

Far beyond anything else, Abraham understood that God was working something into history which would only be fully outworked in eternity. This child born unto Abraham in his old age was a most important gift to him. Isaac shared an equal part with Abraham in God's plan. He had come into Abraham's life from God, and together with him Abraham had much to work out during the next half-century.

Isaac grew up in his father's house of blessing and plenty, yet although he was so greatly loved, he was also greatly hated — Hagar and Ishmael resented him. The jealousy which filled their hearts over Isaac was tolerated by Abraham and Sarah all the time it was suppressed, but on the day Isaac was weaned all the seething jealousy and hatred was revealed; it was a never-to-be-forgotten occasion. We are told that in those days children were weaned from their mother much later than is customary today; quite possibly therefore Isaac was a sizeable lad before he was fully weaned, a teenager perhaps. When this was accomplished it was customary to mark the event with a great feast, and that is just what Abraham did.

Hundreds of people gathered for the feast; it was a specially triumphant occasion because Isaac was such a special child. Besides, Abraham was a great king, and all his retainers, and perhaps even some neighbours, gathered for the celebration. All was joy, and everything was going well until Sarah saw Ishmael, Hagar's son, mocking. The effect was momentous; all the old rivalry revived with power. She recalled the jealousy and mockery she had to endure in the past and turned to Abraham and said, 'Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac'.

#### Son of the Bondwoman

Abraham was grief-stricken at the suggestion; Ishmael was his son. Once again Abraham was plunged into turmoil. Sarah was vehement in her demands. He did not know what to do. Obviously Isaac was the promised seed, and must have the pre-eminence when it came to the inheritance, but Ishmael was as much his seed as Isaac. How could he cast him out? Sarah was being unreasonable. He had hearkened to her once before and as a result she had driven the boy and his mother out, but it had all been wrong; God had sent them back. Much as he loved Isaac and knew that he alone was God's chosen one, he felt

he could not send Hagar and Ishmael away again unless God told him to do so. Sarah was insisting that he do it this time — she had driven them out before. Somehow she knew he must (and she was right), but he felt he could not do so unless God told him to do it. In a sense it was Sarah's fault that the boy was in existence anyway. It was she who had given her maid into his bosom for a child because she so badly wanted the baby she could not bear herself.

Abraham was not trying to put all the responsibility on her; he had consented to it also in the end, but it seemed so wrong to him; it was unfair and inhuman. He had been altogether wrong when he agreed to her suggestion in the first place; he had also been wrong when he allowed her to drive them away. He could not allow himself to be wrong again; but this time she was right. God, in mercy, spoke to Abraham in his dilemma, 'Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman', He said, 'in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice, for in Isaac shall thy seed be called'.

Abraham's heart came to rest. He had gone wrong before because he had hearkened to Sarah's voice, allowing her to do as she wished without confirmation from God, but now that the Lord had spoken the same thing he would do it. What a lesson for us all to learn; we ought never to do any major thing like that without direct commandment from God. It is not safe to assume that, because in the general will of God we are in the place of blessing, we may do things without waiting for God to speak or to otherwise direct us. Abraham had acted before on the assumption that Sarah's word alone was right, and had lived to rue it; this time he made sure. The time had come to separate flesh from spirit — that is where the conflict lay; Ishmael and his mother must go.

Taking up this incident Paul put it very clearly and strongly, 'He that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit'. By Hagar Abraham produced a son after the flesh. He was Abraham's son but he was not after the Spirit (that is according to the Spirit) and word of God: God had neither made any promise nor given any prophecy about Ishmael. Abraham begat him of his own ability from the Egyptian slave, Hagar, the woman of the world; Ishmael was all of flesh.

By Sarah, says Paul, speaking allegorically, Abraham produced a son after the Spirit. He was not of the flesh by the urge or innovation of the flesh; he was through or by means of the flesh; he was of the Spirit and word of God by promise. He was not begotten of Abraham's own ability from Sarah, but through the strengthenings of God; God came to them both specially for his birth, and on that occasion only: Isaac was born after the Spirit. At the word of God therefore Abraham 'cast out the bondwoman and her son'. Abraham did so because God did so. On God's part it was an act of separation; on Abraham's part it was an act of faith. This time it was final.

Abraham was up betimes in the morning. Rousing Hagar and Ishmael, he informed them of his intentions, gave them bread and water, and sent them away. It seemed a heartless thing to do, and he could not have done it without emotion, for he loved his son and was fond of his servant. He did not do it for Sarah's sake, or for Isaac's, but because God had spoken — that was sufficient. God had promised to bless the lad because he was Abraham's seed. Moreover, in his flesh he carried the sign of the covenant: 'I will make (him) a nation', God said.

It did not look like it that morning when, rejected from the fulness of the blessing and cast out, Hagar went off with her son to wander in the wilderness. Far from that, it looked

exactly the opposite, for before long the water ran out, deadly thirst set in and death stared them in the face. Stranded in the desert, without water, their search for it fruitless, bitter of soul, weak and exhausted, they sat down in despair together to die. The death-watch was awful; and was that a vulture in the sky? Hagar waited and watched till she could stand it no longer; rising up she took her son and cast him under a shrub; then, unable to bear the sight of her son's last moments, she staggered away. Where was He 'that liveth and seeth me' now? She sat down a good way off, wailing in her misery.

Who would not pity Hagar? She was a disillusioned woman, a broken-hearted mother. Her suffering was not entirely her own fault; she was the victim of circumstances, an unwanted slave of the flesh. She had been led to believe that Abraham's God would look after the lad, but he was dying of thirst, cast out by his father and cast away by her. Had she been deluded? Had God cast him off too? He was crying in his misery; she could hear his faint cries over the distance that lay between them. How much longer could it go on? Suddenly, piercing her misery, a well-known voice spoke to her, 'What aileth thee Hagar? fear not, for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is'. God had heard Ishmael too.

Her gratitude and relief must have been indescribable! God had heard; it was wonderful. He loved and cared; His eye was upon her and upon her child also. 'Arise,' He continued, 'lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand, for I will make him a great nation'; and God opened her eyes — there was a well of water right before her eyes. She was incredulous: a well of water and she had not seen it? Had it really been there all the time? Why had she not seen it? She could hardly believe it, but it was true: the well of water was there. God had been faithful to her.

She had given up, preparing herself for the inevitable, when all the time water was at hand. Can grief and hysteria so blind a person that what is obvious cannot be seen? There was no doubt about it — God had brought her to her senses; He was with her and the lad, as He had promised to be, and the things He unfolded to her brought comfort and assurance to her heart. He reminded her that He would multiply her seed exceedingly and that Ishmael would live in the presence of all his brethren; His word was true.

If only she too had the same tenacious faith as Abraham, the lad's father, but she did not. On the first occasion, when she had been cast out to wander in the wilderness in the direction of Shur, she had found the fountain. She had not been looking for God then; but this time, when she had been looking for God's expected intervention, she had not seen the well. How strange are the ways of humans, and how unexpected are the ways and the faithfulness of God. Without knowing it she had been led by the Lord; He had been overruling all the time. She did not know Him, nor could she comprehend His ways, but she was very grateful to Him.

True to His word, the Lord watched over the lad in their wilderness home and became as a father to him, and Ishmael grew up into a strong man, an expert at archery, but very wild. Eventually Hagar, as was the custom, found a wife for her son; the woman was an Egyptian like herself. Ishmael, his wife and his mother settled in Paran, and at that point the family disappear from the life of Abraham altogether.

#### Well of the Oath

It appears that, following the distressing incident with Abimelech and the departure of Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham became more settled. He decided to remain with the Philistines as invited, so he dug a well and pitched his camp by it with evident intention

of staying, but he did not long remain in peace. One day, for some reason unexplained to Abraham, Abimelech's servants descended on him with violence and took away the well. It seems that it was a complete injustice, and it speaks volumes for Abraham's meek and gentle spirit that he never made any gestures of retaliation. Nevertheless, if there was no hostility in Abraham's heart, there was in others', and there was a good deal of bitterness in the air. So, when Abimelech and one of his senior military advisers paid Abraham a visit one day, he decided to take up the matter with them.

Contrary to Abraham's expectations, his friend Abimelech knew nothing of the affair — he was no party to the unpleasant situation. His servants had done it without orders or consent from him; he had not come to visit Abraham on that account at all. The king and his chief captain had come on a different errand entirely; it was a mission of goodwill.

Abimelech and Phicol had been observing Abraham very closely; since God had told Abimelech that Abraham was a prophet, he had watched the man with fear and some suspicion, mingled with awe. As a result he and Phicol, and perhaps many others too, had become convinced that God was with Abraham in all that he did; this was why they visited him. They had decided that the best course to take with this man was to come to terms with him, and how right they were. 'God is with thee in all thou doest', said Abimelech to Abraham, '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'.

His praise of Abraham was quite fulsome, but he was out of his depth completely and utterly nonplussed, not knowing what to think. He had observed that incident of Hagar and Ishmael, and it left him with very mixed feelings indeed. Abraham had sent away his own son. He had cast out the lad with his mother into the wilderness with nothing more than a little bread and a bottle of water. How could he be a prophet of the Lord? By all humane standards it was a terrible thing to do; would a prophet of God act like that? To say the least it was not accepted behaviour. He was quite certain that God was with Abraham in the act. What did it all mean though? The implications of the act were perhaps even greater than he cared to think. Since Abraham had done this with his own son, Abimelech would have been quite justified in asking what he might do with Abimelech's son if he and God deemed it necessary.

The poor king could not understand what it meant at all, and who can blame him? Abimelech had no insight into the Lord's purposes; he knew nothing of the promised seed and everything connected therewith. Whether he knew that the Lord had taken care of Hagar and Ishmael we cannot know; his purpose was to ensure that this prophet of the Lord did not treat his son as he had treated his own son. Knowing Abraham's power, Abimelech had come with a trusty witness to make a covenant with Abraham about these things. He knew Abraham's reputation in warfare; the man could overpower him at any time without any trouble. He had done it to a mighty army of kings; Abraham was unconquerable, and he wished to make a peace treaty with him while he had the opportunity. Abraham agreed immediately to the suggestion: 'I will swear', he said.

Abraham had no second thought about it. Abimelech had no need to fear for his son; neither he nor any of his children were in any danger from Abraham, because they were not involved in what God was doing. Abraham and his family were different, and quite apart from everyone else; God was only vitally concerned with Abraham's seed.

Whatever Abimelech thought about him and his obedience to God, Abraham was quite sure that Ishmael was all right, because he was his son and God is so faithful. Abraham had no reservations about entering into a contract with Abimelech, but before doing so he took up the matter of the well with him. When he reproved Abimelech for his servants' violent and unfair behaviour, he was quite surprised to find that Abimelech was ignorant of the whole affair. It was soon settled therefore — the well was his. They then proceeded to establish the covenant in the usual manner of the day.

Having this done, Abraham set aside seven ewe lambs for the covenant, and gave these to Abimelech. 'What mean these seven ewe lambs...?' asked the king, and Abraham replied, 'These seven ewe lambs shalt thou take of my hand, that they may be a witness unto me that I have digged this well'. So, satisfaction and mutual trust being established between them, with one heart they entered into covenant with one another about the son and the well; the king and the captain then departed with the seven ewe lambs, and Abraham was left in peace. How inspired was that gift of Abraham's to Abimelech. Those seven lambs would soon become a flock, Abraham's flock in the midst of Abimelech's flock, as unmistakable and unforgettable as the covenant itself. Those lambs were not only a token of Abraham's generosity; they were a symbol also: he and his family were only a small flock in Canaan, but they would grow and grow till they filled the land. Abraham was testifying to his faith in God when he gave that gift — it was a witness to his integrity, as he said; but O it was more, much more than that.

Abraham named the well Beer-Sheeba — to him it was the well of the oath; which oath he did not say, though undoubtedly everyone thought it was this most recent one. He settled down to enjoy life again, and liking the place, he planted a grove by the well and 'called there on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God'. This is the first time it is recorded that Abraham had ever called on the name of the Lord, without previous reference being made to an altar. So much is different now: this is also the first and the only time he ever entered into blood covenant with any person other than God: it is also the only time Abraham named a well; indeed we are not told that he ever dug another.

Whatever significance these things may have had among men at the time, they certainly had value in God's plan for His servant, and from them we may discover wonderful truth of abiding value for ourselves. What took place between Abimelech and Abraham was doubtless common practice; men made covenants, took oaths and dug wells as part of good conduct and daily life — it was the cultural pattern. But daily living and cultural behaviour, then as now, result from spiritual realities. Man basically acts from what he is in spirit; he can do no other; he can only proceed one way.

Sitting by his well among the trees, Abraham could not have failed to see the links between the oath, the covenant, the blood and the well, and note their connection with the sons: the one he kept, the one he sent away, and the one with whom he had promised never to deal falsely. All were drinking at different wells. Hagar and Ishmael were drinking of a different supply from Abraham, Sarah and Isaac; so were Abimelech and his son. God had shown Hagar a well from which thereafter she and Ishmael sustained their wilderness existence. Abimelech had either discovered fountains and streams or else had dug his own wells, and Abraham pointedly reproved him for taking away his supply by violence.

Abraham had dug his well, and no one but he and his family and associates were allowed to drink of it; Abraham was adamant. He was not prepared to enter into blood covenant

with anyone about sons, unless first the well was secured unto him alone: there could be no agreement unless this was included in it. That was the whole point of the seven ewe lambs; although they were set aside as being separate from the main gift and sacrifice, they were also included in the gift. Abraham supplied everything for the occasion: the present of sheep and oxen for Abimelech, the sacrificial animals for the making of the covenant of sonship, and the lambs for the establishing of the witness, the living testimony that the well of living water had been dug by and belonged to Abraham.

What a picture this is of God's own grace and provision in the New Covenant. The role of the Father and His gracious provision for a people ignorant of His benign attitude and good intentions towards them is shown by Abraham's generosity to Abimelech. Abimelech represents that which is neither spiritual nor carnal, but natural: he was a man of natural righteousness, good and upright and moral in all his ways. He was utterly innocent of any evil thought or intentions towards Abraham or his wife. He was completely ignorant of his servants' trespass against Abraham, and robbery with violence was obnoxious to him.

His name means 'father of the king', and he moved with the royal dignity befitting his position. He was a fine character, good, kind, generous, peace-loving, hospitable, God-fearing, a believer of the same type as Cornelius of the New Testament. Christ might have said of him, 'He that is not against us is for us', for that is exactly the picture he presents. Nevertheless it is clearly shown that, righteous and innocent to a degree though he was, and generous and forgiving towards Abraham, he was also totally ignorant that, quite unintentionally, he was working violently and criminally against God's man. He was grieved that he had not heard of it, and said to Abraham, 'Neither didst thou tell me', as though to say, 'If I had known I would have stopped it immediately, for that is not my heart towards thee'.

There are many in the world today who are naturally religious, and in no way obstruct the gospel; good and upright in themselves they tend rather to help towards its spread. They believe in God but do not know Him and are completely unclear about the living water. Although they know about Calvary, they have no real experience of the covenant in the blood of Jesus, nor do they understand what the covenant is really about.

To Abimelech Abraham was prepared to swear an oath of salvation covering him and his son and his son's son, that he would not deal falsely with any of them; beyond that he would create a covenant for them in flesh and blood sacrifice, and this he did. He supplied the flesh and blood, and arranged the sacrificial death himself, and with it also the resurrection. This he did by causing the seven ewe lambs to stand by while the sacrificial victims were being slain. While the sacrifice was being consumed, those seven stood in mute testimony to the fact of the resurrection and the life — this was Abraham's witness. All was done within sight of the well: the living lambs were to be accepted by Abimelech as proof that Abraham the 'high father of a multitude', had digged that well.

Even at that early point in history, God laid out the general basic pattern of the New Covenant. Though not so clear as in other later types, the foreshadowing of fundamental principles of New Testament salvation is nevertheless distinguishable. Ascending from the dead to the throne, the newly slain young Lamb poured out the gift of the Holy Spirit to be the living water of God for man. All wells have to be dug and the Father had 'digged the well' for it, in the humanity of His Son, to reach the life blood of the covenant in Him.

On Abraham's insistence the well was included in the covenant; both he and Abimelech

passed through the stacked carcasses on the blood-soaked ground as a testimony of faith in each other's word, and that Abraham had a well. God's gospel is all about sonship through the grace of the Father and the Son, the Father to give, the Son to die, and the Spirit for life, human-divine life for the sons of God.

This is the first time the word 'well' is mentioned in scripture, and it is also the first time Abraham is connected with one. In an earlier chapter the Hebrew word is also translated 'pit', and associated with the word 'slime' —'slime-pits'. The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, appropriately enough, fell to their deaths in the valley of slime or bitumen pits. But Abraham's well was absolutely opposite to those pits — new, full of clear, living water, springing clean from freshly-dug earth; no slime, no black bitumen belching up from the dark pits of earth; just pure water flowing up from hidden springs.

It is to be supposed that Abraham had dug wells before this, but if so it has not been mentioned. This must be of some significance, due entirely to the influence of the Holy Spirit restraining Moses from making any reference to wells until now. The Lord has quite deliberately put together the oath, the sacrifice, the covenant, the living lamb and the well.

Perhaps this is the reason why there is no mention of an altar, although Abraham must have built one for the purpose of the sacrifice. He had left one at Mamre when he started out from there after the destruction of the cities of the plain. Certainly the altar is the place of communion; and, quite possibly, the place where he stood before the Lord, overlooking the plain of Jordan, was by an unmentioned altar, but we are not told so. Abraham had built several altars — for the past twenty-five years, wherever he was, whether his stay was short or long, he had lived by them. In Philistia, however, there is no record that he built any; instead he dug a well.

From this time forward the Lord is at pains to tell us that Abraham lived by the well. He never returned to live at Mamre; he may have visited his altar there from time to time, but from the time of the fulfilment of the promise until the day of his death his fixed abode was at Beer-sheba, the well of the oath. The promise was fulfilled there; the seed was conceived and born there; the oath was taken, the covenant was cut, the sacrifice was made, the witness was given and the well was dug there. Beer-sheba was home.

At Beersheba Abraham pitched his tent permanently; it became his base. There, later, he was to leave Sarah when he went to sacrifice his son at Moriah, and from there he set out finally to bury her. From there he sent to Chaldea for Isaac's bride, and from there he was carried to his grave. It was the place where he shed sacrificial blood to provide the doorway into the covenant which he himself made. Beer-sheba was to him as the entrance into a new life. It is as though, before this, he had been looking towards the cross, not quite understanding it, but now had passed through the blood into the covenant and had received the Spirit.

## Chapter 10 — A LIVING SACRIFICE (Genesis 22)

The opening words of this chapter point directly back to the events of the previous one. How long Abraham dwelt at Beer-sheba before the great temptation came to him is not indicated, but we do know that it must have been many years. God deliberately waited until Abraham had settled down by his well before confronting him with this great test. This was to be the greatest of his life; all that had ever happened to him right from the beginning, all the things he believed, all his great faith, was to be tested now. Unknown

to Abraham, God had been building him up, gently leading him to this place all along. How carefully God plans and works.

Settled and comfortable in the blessings of God, Abraham might have been excused for thinking he had now 'arrived', and could enjoy the rest of his days in peace and pleasure. He could look back over the many miracles he had witnessed, years and years of them; if any man had proved the faithfulness of God, it was he. What a difference from Ur of the Chaldees! He was dwelling in the land God had promised him; God had given him the precious seed; he was wealthy, honourable, respected, the chosen of the Lord. What else was there to desire? He had been faithful, courageous, consistent, quick to learn, patient even in loneliness, obedient and fearless; God had been good to him. He was a great man by any standards, and thoroughly deserved to enjoy his blessings, but the Lord was not finished with him; He dared not let Abraham settle down yet; there was more to accomplish.

The tendency to sit back and enjoy the calling and the gifts and work and blessings of God is in us all. It is a very subtle snare, but, while we are on this earth, the work of God is never finished in any of us. We may finish our course and the work He gives us to do here, but we shall never reach the end of all He has for us. Every blessing and gift of God bestowed on any person is only one of a series, and is distinctly related to the calling. If a man ceases to follow his calling, every blessing and gift already received will pall on him. The newer blessing, the greater gift still ahead, is designed by God to enhance all the past and present favours. The call is the guarantee of God's commitment. This is greater than the call, and is intended to be more than a calling to which a man commits himself. The call is constant; it is the pathway into the future, and must be followed at all costs.

Too often blessings are thought to be synonymous with happiness and pleasures; in many, perhaps most, cases they are, and for this reason are very alluring settlements, but if this is all they are they become deadly. On we must go, otherwise blessings become funereal. The call is progressive; so must the response be, thus ensuring to us God's guarantee that all His blessings shall cause us to gain in strength. Like stones in a building, each blessing bestowed is laid on former ones, and in turn becomes the foundation of yet others. God's work for us never is completed; like Himself it goes on for ever. He Himself is for us. By living, He is being someone to us, doing something for us; simply the fact that He is is a challenge to greater glory. His being, the very fact that He is, creates aspiration in all His children; this was no less so in Abraham than in us. God had accomplished so much already in and for Abraham, but there were yet greater heights for him to reach after, and far greater things for him to discover about God and himself than he had yet known.

One great quest of his life, which, though so blessed, had not yet found fulfilment, was the whereabouts of the city of God: he had not found it anywhere. His encampment at Beer-sheba was like a huge city — the area of tentage must have been enormous. But that was not the city. During his pilgrimage he had visited many cities, but none of them had anything to offer him. God had neither founded them, nor had He built anything in them. Abraham knew they could not stand, and he would not stay in any of them. At Beer-sheba he had sunk his well, planted his own trees, proved that his life was founded on God, and he was settling for that. His encampment may have been flimsy, but it was most firmly founded; the well of the oath was right where he lived.

But the Lord had other ideas: He had not yet finished His intentions with Abraham.

Although He had commenced His purposes by calling him, He had by no means completed them. To be the man God wanted him to be, Abraham had to go with Him through another ordeal and face another great test, the supreme one. He was totally unaware of God's requirements or his own need, and had no idea of what was about to happen, so he could not prepare himself; all Abraham could do was abide in the place he had reached, and rest in the Lord.

There simply is no way of preparing oneself for a temptation or a special test; all anyone can do is exactly what Abraham was doing; he was abiding in what God had already given him by grace, in the place he had already achieved by faith. It is absolutely essential that every man does this; unless Abraham had been where he was by the grace of God, the Lord could not have done what He did, for that is why the Lord had brought him thus far. This was to be the last and greatest test of Abraham's faith. God was going to put to him a proposition by command, from which he would instinctively shrink. Opportunity would be allowed him to say no and refuse to do as God said. If he did so no-one but he and God would know, for the temptation would be completely private. It was not to be a temptation to sin — God never does such a thing — but a test which would allow a temptation to sin.

Abraham did not know that the Lord God Almighty had it in His heart to raise him to the greatest heights of blessing possible to man; he could not have known the glory implicit in the call which first came to him in Chaldea. Everything God proposes to do in a man's life lies unspoken, yet implicit, in the first commands and promises God makes to a man. Although Abraham did not know it, all God's intentions stood unrecognized within the mystery of Abraham's changed name. Because of that very thing Abraham was entering into this most crucial phase of his life. It must have seemed to him that the birth of Isaac was the fulfilment of all, or practically all, his desires. He had fully believed God when He said, 'In Isaac shall thy seed be called', and that in Isaac all the starry promises of God would eventually find complete fulfilment. But there had been no need to change his name for that; so great was the miracle of Isaac that Abraham indeed became the high or exalted father; but he could still have continued to be known as Abram. He had not known then that Isaac's birth was only the first great miracle of that order. When God changed his name to 'high or exalted father of a multitude', He did so with a yet mightier miracle in view, and it was for this, and what lay beyond it, that God renamed him.

Without knowing it Abraham had foreshadowed this miracle when he had set aside the seven ewe lambs of witness. God had known though, and now the time had come. Abraham was to be tested and elevated to the heights; his calling would be fulfilled and his name honoured on the earth above all men as 'Father'. Angels had not even been created for this, nor have they at any time since been called or commanded or named to do so. It was a privilege never granted to them or to anyone else — God had chosen Abraham for that.

Inaugurating this latest and newest test, the Lord Himself moved on to a new line: 'Abraham,' He called. He used the new name; it was the first time He had done so. Never before had God addressed Abraham by that name, not by any name in fact. In all the years He had known Abraham, God had never opened His conversation in that manner — this was entirely new. In the heart of God this had always been Abraham's name, and He had always had this occasion in view. In the darkness of the night He came and called, 'Exalted father of a multitude,' and waited; 'Behold, here I am', came the reply, and in the

silence the familiar voice spoke again. It was an unusual hour. Was it an emergency? What did God want to say? Abraham listened, '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.' Silence!

It was out: God wanted Isaac back. Why? God had not said anything remotely like this at the beginning. Why had He not said, 'I will give you a son and after you have had him awhile I shall want him back again'? For what reason did God want him back again? It didn't make sense; and if He wanted him back, why couldn't He take him by natural means? He could die, have an accident, or even be murdered. Why must it be by sacrifice? Why must he kill his only son and burn his body on an altar? Why? Could it be true that his son, his only son, Isaac whom he loved, was to be a sacrifice, his father's sacrifice?

The long night of conflict dragged through, yet it was going all too quickly: soon, too soon, the day would come. What was he to say to Sarah? How could she be expected to take this? He could imagine what her reaction would be — her bleeding heart. She had waited so long for her child, and had been such a long time coming to faith in the beginning — she would be shattered. 'Isaac, my son Isaac? No, O no, Abraham, it cannot be'.

But it must be: God had commanded it. He had not asked him to do it; He had ordered him to do it and he must obey. Daybreak was coming on and he would rise and set off for Moriah with his son; he would say nothing to Sarah. Isaac must go without saying a word to his mother. She must not know; she must be spared the pain; besides, she would not suffer them to go; she would do all in her power to stop them.

Now he knew what feelings drove Abimelech to seek a promise from him about his son. It was all clear in his mind — he thought Abraham might deal falsely with him and his son. Deal falsely? Was God dealing falsely with him and his son? 'Thy son, thine only son Isaac': the thought was agonizing. What if this were true — that God had done so much — blessed him, given him all things richly to enjoy, led him to believe all He said and trust Him fully — only to dash all his hopes — destroy him? No! That could not be — but what other explanation was there to this? The temptation to refuse God, doubt His love, throw everything up, was strong; God was testing him. Would Abraham break? God knew how much he loved Isaac; he was the only son he had now, the only blood relative left to him, he thought. God had made him part with all the rest of his flesh and blood: father, mother, brothers, sisters, nephew Lot — all of them with their families — his son Ishmael also — and now Isaac. God was stripping him of everything. Why?

God did not tell him why; He had told him when, who, where, what and how, but not why — simply the call and the command, and then silence. God did not stay for him to ask questions, or to intercede for Isaac's life as he had for Sodom and Gomorrah and Lot; He came and spoke and then withdrew. That night was like a Gethsemane to Abraham: he lay there alone before the Lord God and, as the hours passed away, fought his way through unending questionings to absolute obedience and peace. Abraham won. He had resisted the tempter and the temptation.

Somehow into his heart there stole the conviction that he and Isaac would return together. Twice before God had done business with Abraham in the dark — once when the Lord had led him out under the stars to tryst with him about the seed, and once again when God had plunged him into the horror of darkness beyond the darkness of the night, to

show him the suffering of the seed. Now it was night again, but, though the conflict had been terrible, it was not the horror of great darkness. 'So shall thy seed be'. It rang in his ears; God had promised him; it must be true; He couldn't break His promise. Somehow, O somehow, God would give him back his son.

'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 unto the place of which God had told him'. Except for some necessary commands and normal conversation related to the journey, he said not a word to anyone; the visitation of the night and the terrible temptation lay secret in his breast.

These were almost God's final dealings with Abraham; had he known it, he was being perfected in the image of God. When he returned from Moriah he would, all unknowingly, have furnished James with substance for the text 'Seest thou how faith wrought with his works, and by works was faith made perfect?'. He was travelling to the place of personal fulfilment also, where he would bring to completion what he had begun when he 'believed God and it was imputed unto him for righteousness'. He did not know that then, nor that he would be required to do this now; nor indeed that, this accomplished, he would be called 'the friend of God'; he simply believed God. God had befriended him.

Blessed indeed is the man whom God befriends; He will speak with that man, He will take him up and love him and change him, and lead him on till he does at last attain unto His likeness. These twenty-five years Abraham had been a friend to God; he had listened to His voice and obeyed His word again and again, until he became thoroughly disciplined to do His will. Abraham was a God-controlled man. He not only became a faith-pilgrim but a father-type also; the Lord guided him unto God-likeness. The great feature of this chapter and its chiefest value to men is the insight it affords into God and the sacrifice He made. A window has been opened into God's heart for us, because Abraham, a human as we all are, did not refuse when God called on him to go and offer up his son to Him on a lonely mountain. Which mountain he did not know — God had not told him that — but there remained a peak, a height unnamed and unknown still for Abraham to climb. He did not know its name; he only knew it existed. 'I will tell thee,' God had said, that was sufficient. Abraham had trusted Him till now, he knew he could trust Him for ever.

We can understand how Abraham must have felt those three long days and nights, with the secret locked up in his heart. His heart felt like bursting with agony; by his own hand he had to kill his son, burn him to ash — and what? Walk away? However could he know that and live? How could a human being be expected to bear all that strain and not break under it? He was expecting a miracle of some sort, but when and how would it happen? Oh, poor Abraham, poor lonely Abraham. What an ordeal! It was horrible. But he only had to endure it for three days; God took Abraham into His heart to introduce him to secret things which He Himself had been enduring from eternity. Long after Abraham had passed away from the earth into rest, God would still be bearing them. His friend Abraham was spared that — he could not have endured it.

If the contemplation of Abraham's suffering is well nigh unendurable to us, what must have been the sufferings of the Father when contemplating Calvary? It yet remained for Him to beget His Son into humanity and slay Him for sin; He never asked Abraham for that. Isaac could never take away the world's sin; he could not even take it; he was not

good enough for that. God's Son was though, and He took it.

Sin did not kill Jesus. He did not die by sin, nor as a result of taking sin upon Him. He died because God His Father slew Him in consequence of it. Jesus died because His God forsook Him. Deliberately the Father set His will to slay His Son; He had to; He loved Him so much that, even though He knew He was going to raise Him from the dead, unless He had fixed His will to slay Him, He could never have done it.

Abraham's greatest honour was that he and his family were chosen of God to enter into this, and illustrate it for God. They were probably the most vital link in the chain of evidence He forged beforehand to certify His redemptive purposes in Christ when He sent Him. In them, in measure, He set forth Himself, His Being, His ways, His exercises and feelings. Abraham did not know this when he set out on his long journey to Moriah, nor could he understand. God did not explain anything to him.

For three whole days he journeyed with his son, not knowing that they were together destined to show forth the death and resurrection of God's Son. Even the time factor was important — three days! God's timing is always perfect: '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'. Wonderful words of faith: He was so certain of it. His faithful heart had slain his son some time during the fateful night three days earlier. Abraham was a marvel, one of the wonders of the world.

Before he left his bed that fateful morning Abraham had fought and thought his way through to the end. God had brought him into Canaan to give him the land and seed to inherit and possess it. He had repeatedly given him promises about it, and had long since removed from him any alternative hopes or means of their fulfilment. Only Isaac was left, none other than he must be the one through whom the promises were to be fulfilled. Abraham entertained no hopes in any other direction now. If he was going to slay his son, then God must raise him from the dead, for he was determined to kill him. Abraham could not raise Isaac himself; he could kill but he could not make alive. God was going to perform a real miracle now. His plan must be to raise up Isaac again from the dead; there really was no other way.

Abraham's decision was made; he must obey God as he had always done. Over and over, in every situation, Abraham had proved that to obey Him had been the only right way. He was where he was now only because, until that moment, he had lived and walked in obedience to God's expressed will. To disobey now would be fatal, as well as stupid; it would be self-contradictory — he would be breaking the habit of a lifetime. He would go and sacrifice his son, slay him, offer him up to God, burn him to ash, exactly as God said, and leave the consequences to God.

That was the frame of mind in which Abraham rose from his bed and prepared for the journey; he and Isaac were going to Moriah to worship God and return. His was marvellous faith, based entirely upon God, His many promises, His great power, and a miracle not yet seen. Abraham's word to his servants matched God's word to him, 'I and the lad will go yonder and worship and come again to you'. It was superb.

'Yonder': that is where truest worship takes place. 'Yonder' is the place virtually no man knows, where the true worshippers worship the Father. It lies far out, way beyond where most people are prepared to go — few there be that find it: Abraham did. Abraham

trusted God, Isaac trusted Abraham, and in that simple trust they went together, way out, far, far beyond anything hitherto known to men, themselves included. They found both the place and the secret of the place. Their hearts were full of perfect love that knows no limits. 'And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering, and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together'.

#### God Will Provide a Lamb

Not only was it essential that both of them went; they had also to be together in what they went to do. Isaac at that time knew nothing beyond the fact that they were going to worship God; he could not see what lay in the depths of the father-heart by his side. He had a question though. It had lain unasked in his mind ever since they had left home: 'Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?' They had taken their journey without one, neither had they procured one on the journey. What was the use of making the journey without a lamb? The whole point of going to Moriah was to offer a burnt sacrifice. He must put the question to his father: 'And Isaac said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son. And he said, Behold the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering? Abraham answered, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together'. There spoke Abraham, the man of faith, the father, the worshipper, the prophet. Isaac the son did not know how closely at that moment he resembled the Son whom he did not know.

Desiring only to find the mountain, Abraham left the ass with the servants. When he and his son returned they would not need it; they would be travelling lighter, much lighter than they were now. Loading Isaac with the wood of the burnt offering, Abraham took the fire in one hand and the sacrificial knife in the other, and moved off with the lad towards the summit.

Isaac had always been an obedient lad, a perfect example of filial love, a worthy son of a wonderful father. He did not know that one day another Son would go forth, bearing His cross, to the place of death, His Father with Him. Neither did Abraham know that what lay in his hands that day were symbols of what lay in the Father's heart that day centuries later. When He walked up the little hill with His Son, God was consuming with the fire of love and steeling His will for the final stab of death. 'My son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering.' They were the words of a prophet, a man of faith who had passed into God, a father of love. Abraham's knowledge was profound, but he surely spoke more truth than he knew that day. He had no fear in his heart. He knew that when the time came his son would not let him down — he was as sure of him as he was of God. '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'.

At what point Abraham told his son the real reason why they had come to Moriah unaccompanied is not disclosed. Was it at the last minute, or somewhere along the road as they walked the last mile together; and what did he tell him? Did he tell him of the original command and say, 'Isaac, it's you I'm going to offer to God in fire. You are the lamb. Come, let me bind you and lay you on the altar. I'm going to kill you, son; and burn you up. I believe God will raise you up again from the ashes. You'll come back to me, son; I believe God will give you back to me again. Believe me, son; I believe God. Trust yourself to me, Isaac. Trust God. Come, let us worship together. There can be no worship except by faith, son.'

The imagination runs riot at the thought of Moriah. What did happen there? The altar of Moriah, O the altar of Moriah. No one knows what happened there, nor can know, but the Father and the Son, and they to whom God makes it known. Not even Abraham and Isaac, chief participants as they were, knew or could know all that it meant on earth or in heaven. Only God knows. We wonder, with dim understanding.

The altar which Abraham built on Moriah was the last he ever built and the only one on which, as far as we know, he ever offered sacrifice, first the bloodless offering of his son, then the blood offering of the lamb. It is only logical to assume that he did offer sacrifices to God on those previous altars; otherwise why did he build them? Isaac was obviously well acquainted with their use, for he enquired after a lamb, as though he was surprised at the absence of the usual offering; but nowhere do we read that his father offered anything to God on any of them. If he did, the sacrifices are never referred to.

It cannot be without reason that scripture omits any record of what Abraham had so far offered to God. Over a century had passed since he entered Canaan; the omission is as significant as it is deliberate. The Spirit of God focuses exclusively on the altar of Moriah. Excluding Calvary, the sacrifice Abraham and Isaac jointly made there is the greatest ever made on this earth. In the whole episode, from its beginning in the night to its ending in the day, Abraham discovered exactly what God wanted. More than that, he discovered who He wanted — He wanted both of them, their absolute obedience, utmost love and sheer devotion each to the other, and both together to Him.

The Lord laid on Abraham and Isaac the greatest of all tests, utter self-sacrifice, the ultimate self-giving, and He was not disappointed with the result. Man can rise no higher — father and son could give no more. By no sacrifice which they can ever make, can earth-men take away sin; Abraham and Isaac were not asked to do that. They did not go to Moriah to expiate, but to worship. Between them they displayed the conditions required by God before He could lay the sin of the world upon His Son. Abraham and Isaac attained to the ultimate degree of sacrifice possible to man, but to God it was only the penultimate position. It was as far as Abraham and Isaac could go; to go further would have required Isaac's death.

Jesus went the whole distance: His death was the ultimate. He literally had to be raised from the dead — He was made sin; He expiated it. There was no figuration of death at Golgotha, nor figuration of resurrection afterwards: He died and rose again. Abraham and Isaac only illustrated God's requirements. They did it perfectly, going as far as was possible, and He was well satisfied with them. God watched Abraham building the altar and arranging the wood in order on it; He watched as the father bound his son, picked him up, laid him on the wood and stretched forth his hand to take the knife. Abraham really intended to slay his son.

Joy and sorrow, and love and pity filled God's heart as He looked upon the scene :— so utterly unnatural it was, so inhuman, so immoral, yet so right. But God did not intend Abraham to kill and burn his son, nor had He ever desired him to do so; He wanted so much more than that. He did not want a dead Isaac, betrayed by his father and disillusioned in the moment of death; nor did He want a broken-hearted father, living in mental distraction and filled with remorse, a self-condemned murderer, living out the rest of his days in unimaginable torment. That would have been the very opposite of what God wanted; He already had one man like that, existing somewhere high up, away out on the mountains, always fleeing from the burning wrath of God, seeking refuge from the

fires of hell that lit his soul with terror.

Poor, shameful Lot, broken by sin — he could not forgive himself; self-recrimination filled him; he was living out his days awaiting the last call with dread. He had been saved by the Lord from the dreadful burnings, but what of his soul? The Lord did not want another Lot. God wanted a unique Abraham, someone who was worthy to be the father of a spiritual race like the stars of heaven for multitude, and a unique Isaac, a seed of love and righteousness and obedience and faith equal to his father's.

Particularly He wanted a true father-figure, a man by whom He could reveal Himself to men as God the Father. That Abraham should slay Isaac was never in His plan; had Abraham done so he would have been a murderer. God pushed him to the very limit though, waiting for the exact moment to step in, and Abraham responded all the way. Knife in hand he raised it to kill his son, believing yet that God would raise his son from the dead, even though his ashes lay on the altar. 'And the angel of the Lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham'. Abraham halted and said, 'Here am I'. And he said, 'Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from me'. The knife descended, sliced through the binding-thongs and Isaac was free and in his arms again — Isaac, his Isaac, was his as from the dead. The test was over.

#### I Will Multiply Thy Seed

Abraham had been perfect. Without a falter he rose to the heights unto which God called him. He had renamed him for this, and He was completely satisfied; God had found a man after His own heart. He who had the resurrection in his heart rose to the heights of his calling — only that kind of man can possibly do so. Abraham had shown forth the Father to perfection; but he could not have done it without a son; Isaac was his perfect partner; he showed forth Jesus to perfection. Father and son were a perfect pair, they matched each other to perfection and showed themselves worthy to represent the Father and the Son before men for ever.

All heaven gathered at Moriah, gazing in wonder at the spectacle. No human eyes but Abraham's and Isaac's beheld the miracle of faith taking place there when Abraham offered up his son to God. In his heart Abraham had the sure knowledge that God would raise Isaac from the dead, and in a figure it happened. Isaac rose and climbed down whole from the altar which was to have been his bed of flame; he was alive as though he had come back to his father from the dead, and Abraham received him.

Glorious Abraham; glorified Isaac: the son was raised from the dead by the glory of the father; the father was glorified by the loving submission and obedience of the son — they were both glorious. Their joint glory was that of total love and perfect obedience. Spontaneously, in a demonstration of faith unparalleled in scripture, they acted together, and between them set forth God as never before or since. It is marvellous in our eyes.

What God did at Calvary can never be shown in all its wonder and glory by any other than He, but of all the many types of scripture foreshadowing Calvary, this episode on Moriah is outstandingly the most moving. It is the most instructive too, for it affords a glimpse into the secret joy and love of Father and Son. A veil is drawn over the emotional relationship between Abraham and Isaac. Nothing is said between them whatsoever except the two short sentences of enquiry and answer as they approached the mount. The impression given is that their appreciation and understanding of each other was profound.

The spiritual affinity between them needed few words; in their exchange Isaac said 'My father', and pointed to the fire and wood, and Abraham said, 'My son', and directed him to God and the lamb.

Worshipping hearts fill with awe and wonder; everything points to this: 'God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering'. It was pure prophecy, profound understanding not of this world. Whichever way the words may be interpreted, 'God will provide Himself as a lamb', or 'God will provide a lamb for Himself,' they are literally true, for God did both. Figuratively in Isaac on the altar God provided Himself as a lamb; in the lamb on the altar God provided a lamb for Himself.

Behind Abraham, unseen by him until the dread episode was finished, a ram had been caught by its horns in a thicket, possibly becoming entangled while father and son were setting forth the hearts of God and His people. At a glance Abraham knew that God had provided a lamb for a burnt offering, and he promptly offered it up to God instead of his son. It spoke their hearts to Him. If they said or sang anything of significance it is unrecorded; they turned and left in silence.

Centuries later God provided Himself the Lamb in the Person of His Son, who took away the sin of the world. But on Moriah sin was not dealt with; it was not even in view. God had no intention of dealing with sin there or then. Neither Isaac nor the ram were sufficient for that, and it was not the time: only Jesus, in the fulness of time, could deal with sin.

Abraham offered to God a whole burnt offering, a substitutionary sacrifice, accepted by God as it was offered up by Abraham in lieu of his son. It was an offering of gratitude, thankfulness, praise, love, relief, worship, his heart, himself. Except for the roar of the flames and the splutter and crackle of burning flesh, silence ringed the altar. Now they knew; so did God, for He said so. When a man goes through the test God knows him and he knows God.

From that time forward Moriah was a very special place to Abraham. He looked at the ashes on the altar, now cooling in the mountain air, and then at his son, and breathed out 'Jehovah Jireh'. Later people, especially Jacob, Abraham's grandson, called their altars by name, but this is the first and only time Abraham did so. 'The Lord seeth', or, 'the Lord provideth', he called it, and half a century later it was still being called by the same name. Its treasured memory is laid up in scripture so that we too should learn of the altar of true worship, 'Jehovah Jireh'.

Abraham and Isaac and Moriah became legendary in Israel: 'In the mount of the Lord it shall be seen', they used to say. God, who saw it too, and heard his words, spoke again. '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 the gate of his enemies; And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice.

The promise came again, enlarged and for the last time. It had come to him first in Chaldea; it had been repeated to him over the years; always it was the same, but always it was expanded, as though every step of obedience earned him greater favours. This time it came with praise. The Lord was praising him, commending him; it was most gratifying and unspeakably wonderful. 'So Abraham returned unto his young men, and they rose up

and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beer-sheba.'

Nothing was said, not a word to anyone, not even to Sarah when they arrived home. The secret of Moriah was locked up in their hearts. At times speech may be boasting, as Paul discovered, foolishness. The named father with his named son went from the named altar to the named well — 'High father of a multitude', 'Laughter', 'The Lord seeth, the Lord provideth', the 'Well of the Oath'. What a galaxy of truth for the heart of faith!

## Chapter 11 — A BRIDE OF THE FATHER'S CHOOSING (Genesis 23:1 — 25:10)

Little remains for us now but to gather up the fragments scattered throughout the next three chapters. Abraham dwelt long at Beer-sheba; how long we do not know. His life can be divided up into three sections: seventy-five; twenty-five; seventy-five; in all one hundred and seventy-five years. He was seventy-five when he entered Canaan, one hundred when Isaac was born, and one hundred and seventy-five when he died. It appears that all we have studied in these pages until now could have taken place within the span of fifty years. Certainly we know that Sarah died when she was one hundred and twenty-seven years old, and that she was nearly, if not quite, ninety years of age when Isaac was born, which makes Isaac about thirty-seven when his mother died, and forty when he married.

Just how old Isaac was when he accompanied his father to Moriah is not revealed, nor does it matter. It is certain that he was not yet a man, for his father called him a lad — but at what age a man was called a man in those days is not clear. Later in Israel a man was not reckoned to be a man before the age of twenty, when he was considered old enough to go to war. However, in Acts chapter four Luke used a word about the Lord Jesus which means 'a serving or servant lad' — 'Thy holy child Jesus'. That is not Luke's word; he is only reporting what the whole company were praying all together under divine inspiration and control on a certain occasion. Commonly they referred to God's only Son as 'Thy holy child' or 'lad', and He was thirty when He began His earthly ministry, and in His thirty-fourth year when He died. All of this leaves ground for speculation, but is immaterial to our main theme.

### A Gift from the Altar

While still at Beersheba, and before Sarah died, Abraham's thoughts turned to his further duties towards his son Isaac. He had at least two more paternal commitments to fulfil: one was to secure a bride for his son, the other was to suitably endow him for their life together. It was a customary duty expected of him, and beyond the expectations of others he desired with all his heart to do so. He had obeyed God to the letter at Moriah, and had received back his beloved son from God as a gift from the dead. Actually he was a gift from the altar, a far more meaningful thing than a gift from the grave.

In reality Isaac was a gift to Abraham from life, not from death. He rose from the altar, the scene of death, not the tomb: it typified that wonderful moment when Jesus said, 'Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit', and 'yielded up the ghost' to Him. Jesus' spirit was not in the body they laid in the cave. That body lay in the tomb for three days, but His spirit didn't; that went back into the Father's hands and into 'the form of God' which He ever had with the Father and the Holy Spirit before time was. Jesus' gift to His Father then was a gift from life: He gave Himself to God as a gift from the altar, not from

the grave.

It is said that Jesus 'was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father', and He Himself said, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up' ; but these statements refer to the resurrection of His body. The self-gift of His spirit (His real self) to His Father coincided with the death of His body; it could be done no other way. But His spirit did not die: as with every other human being, that left the body at the moment of death. When the time of resurrection came He and His Father jointly raised His human body, but Jesus' spirit was a living gift from the altar of the cross. No human eye saw that, but when He rejoined His body it had to rise from the dead for everybody to see.

Isaac could only be received from the dead in a figure because Abraham, in his heart, had utterly given him up to death. 'Before Him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead'— this was imputed to him for righteousness. He was spared the ordeal of seeing his son reduced to death and ashes; Isaac was a gift to him from the altar. The lad was unique. In every way he was a gift: his life was a special entrustment to Abraham and Sarah from God. He was the seed through whom God was going to fulfil all the promises. Abraham could remember them clearly in every detail: God had testified to him in two elements, the dust of the earth and the stars of heaven. Spiritually and physically the promise was sure, but for its fulfilment Isaac must have a wife. He must be married, but to whom?

Abraham's fatherly heart considered the question with great care. Contrary to usual practice, he had not yet attempted to betroth his son to anyone. He had observed the inhabitants of the land very closely: young women abounded all around, and most probably many a man would have been pleased to have betrothed his daughter to Isaac, the son of wealthy Abraham; but Abraham would have none of them. He sought alliance with none of the inhabitants of the land. All the inheritance was a gift from God; Abraham refused to recognize that anyone had any possession in the land. No one was going to be allowed to think that he had made Abraham rich; so Isaac remained single.

After the passing of the years, with the problem still unresolved within him, Abraham was filled with joy one day to hear news of his family in Mesopotamia. His brother Nahor and his wife Milcah had been blessed with children, greatly blessed, for not only were there children, but children's children. Abraham was overjoyed, especially at the news that there was a young lady among them called Rebekah; he did some calculations and began to make plans.

Evidently, after Abram's departure from Chaldea, Nahor and Milcah had speedily become parents. He and Sarah had not been so blessed: Sarah had been barren all her life. (He could see the reason now, and did not in any way blame her.) But this was not so with his brother's wife. Working out the possibilities, Abraham became convinced that Rebekah was of marriageable age and he determined to find out. There was only one way to do that — he must send someone to Mesopotamia to investigate the true position. However, before he could put his idea into practice, a major crisis arose in the family: his wife Sarah died. It was a great loss to him, and a terrible grief to Isaac.

There They Buried ... Sarah His Wife

There is a mystery surrounding the death of Sarah, which took place at Kir-jath-arba, 'the city of Arba', called in Moses' day Hebron. The mystery is not about the way she died, but about where she died; scripture says that Abraham came to mourn for Sarah and to

weep for her. It would appear from the language that he was not with Sarah when she died but had come from another place — presumably Beer-sheba — to the place where she was. Had Abraham and Sarah separated? If so, was the separation of a permanent nature? Had a rift taken place between them? Or had Sarah gone away for some perfectly normal reason, such as may commonly happen in any family? Strangely enough, Isaac is not mentioned at all in the incident. That may be because, by this time, he had left the parental home at Beer-sheba and was living in the south country near the well at La-hai-roi, but we cannot be sure.

There is a strangeness about the whole affair which allows the idea that perhaps Abraham and Sarah had become distant in heart at the time. If so, it may have been because of Abraham's behaviour over the sacrifice of Isaac. There is no record that Sarah was ever consulted about Moriah, or told anything about it when Abraham and Isaac came back, which may seem an almost incredible thing to us. Perhaps she had been offended by Abraham's seeming callousness, had found it hard to forgive him, and so had left him. On the other hand, it may be that none of this is true, and that there is a perfectly simple explanation — that both she and Abraham had removed from Beer-sheba and were staying together in Kir-jath-arba. In this case, the words 'and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah' could mean that he was not present when she died because he was out of the tent on some local business, and she had a sudden fatal heart attack. Whatever may be the correct interpretation we do not know, but the language used by Moses is singularly adaptable to our purpose of learning scriptural truth then unknown to Abraham.

The simple unfolding of the major truth of chapter twenty-two is that father Abraham went to Moriah with son Isaac, in a figure slew and sacrificed him to God, received him back again from the dead, and returned home. But the chapter does not end there. Immediately following this, Rebekah, Isaac's prospective bride, is mentioned. The Bridegroom, the Bride and the well of the oath are presented together in the same chapter: wonderfully the romance of Christ and the Church comes to light in the story of Isaac and Rebekah. But at this point the story of Rebekah and her union with Isaac is still a future event and, before it takes place, Sarah dies and is buried.

Whatever may have been the true state of Sarah's relationship with Abraham at that time, both Isaiah and Hosea tell of the sad estrangement of Israel from Jehovah centuries later. God spoke of Israel as His 'wife', saying He had 'married' the whole nation. He regarded the exchanges between Himself and Israel at Sinai as a holy covenant, but 'she' broke her vows and left Him. God remained true to her though, and eventually Jesus was born of 'her' through the virgin.

There is a great similarity between Isaac and Jesus. When Isaac was born he was a fulfilment of a greater promise than Abraham and Sarah received. God had made a vow to Adam and Eve in Eden which was far greater in scope and personal commitment than the promises made in Canaan. It required a miracle of a different order from that which Abraham and Sarah knew for Jesus to be born of a virgin, and His birth was the fulfilment of all the promises God made along that line.

Despite the Lord's faithfulness, and far worse than anything Sarah may have done, Israel rejected both Jehovah, her patient husband, and her son; but in spite of all, the Lord kept faith with the world of men, and raised His Son from the dead. By 'her' final act of betrayal and rejection at Calvary, Israel 'died' to Him and, just as Abraham buried Sarah, He buried her. Long before this, Jehovah had shown Ezekiel this in a vision: Israel lay

dead and buried in an open valley of dry bones. Praise God, He is yet going to open the 'grave' of Israel; but at present, in company with all nations, 'she' lies dead to Him.

We cannot fail to observe the parallelism of ideas revealed here. Before the Father made any moves to arrange the marriage which He had planned for His Son, He had first to accept the death of Israel after the flesh. At present He is engaged in espousing the Church as a chaste virgin to Christ — she is the bride of His choice for Him. So it was that Abraham, in the midst of formulating his plans for Rebekah and Isaac, had first to face, and then endure, separation from Sarah. To gain a daughter he had to lose a wife.

Everything must be done decently and in order. Abraham turned for a while from Isaac's future to the tragic present. He must bury his dead out of his sight; he must only see the living. Mourning and weeping, he stood up from before his dead and started to negotiate for a burial ground. He did not seek to negotiate from the place of strength; he did not once mention the promises, or tell the sons of Heth that, since the land was his, he would take whatever he wanted; instead he sought to purchase a piece of ground from them. In vain they tried to give him land, or persuade him to use one of their sepulchres; he was adamant, he would purchase what he wanted outright. It seems strange that the only thing which was made sure to Abraham in his own land was a burial ground: he buried his dead in his own possession.

#### A Bride for His Son

With the departure of Sarah, Abraham turned his thoughts again to Isaac's marriage. His mind was completely made up; he wanted Rebekah for Isaac, but he had no means of ensuring that his desires would be fulfilled unless he sent to Chaldea to find her. So one day he sent for his chief steward, ordered him to prepare himself for a journey to Mesopotamia, took a solemn oath of him that he would go and find a bride for Isaac, and sent him on his way.

It seemed a hopeless task. How could anyone be expected to find a woman willing to leave her home and family and country upon request, and go with a strange man to a foreign country to meet and marry someone whom she had never seen or even heard of until that moment? Who could expect a woman to do that? Eliezer himself may have been a little skeptical about success, for he had a lot of questions to ask. Supposing she demanded to see the man before she left the security of her father's home. Was he then to take Isaac to her? No, under no circumstances was Isaac to be taken out of the country. If the woman refused to come, should he find a woman of the Canaanites? Again, no. The woman must be prepared to leave all for Isaac. She must desire him, his country, his possessions only; she must believe Eliezer utterly, accept his gospel completely, and come immediately.

It was a tremendous commission for any man to receive, an almost impossible task for him to undertake. However was he going to accomplish it? Old Abraham knew; he, the father of the son, understood: 'The Lord God of heaven, which took me from my father's house, and from the land of my kindred .... he shall send his angel before thee, and thou shalt take a wife unto my son from thence'. Abraham was in touch with God; he saw no difficulty. God had taken him out of Chaldea, away from his home and country and kindred. Why should He not do the same kind of thing again? He would also take Rebekah out and bring her into the promised land. It all seemed very logical to him; there was no fear of failure in his faithful heart — he knew God. There was only one area of uncertainty, but it did not lie on his side; that was guaranteed. It lay on Rebekah's side.

Would she come?

Abraham knew that the will of God was inflexible. He had learned that His power is illimitable to fulfil His purposes; but, for all that, He would not force Rebekah to respond; she must come voluntarily. She could refuse; both Abraham and Eliezer knew that, but somehow Abraham felt she would not. He had not been able to say no to God when He had called him out; the call had been so commanding that he had found it impossible to refuse. The whole structure of his life since he left Chaldea in obedience to God, plus the logical progression of events leading up to this present step, convinced him that Rebekah was the one for Isaac. Somehow Abraham knew she would find the invitation irresistible. He was not relying on Eliezer but on an invisible agent, the angel of the Lord, who would accompany his servant; if he went, then the result was a foregone conclusion.

Abraham was a man of faith; that is why he included the exemption clause in the oath, 'if the woman will not be willing to follow thee, then thou shalt be clear from this my oath'. Thereby he shifted the burden of responsibility from the man to God — the whole matter lay between Abraham and God. Abraham had meditated long before the Lord before deciding to take this step, and he was sure that He who had prevented him from slaying his son would also have intervened if his plans for his son's marriage were wrong. He never hesitated.

The oath is only made void to an individual through unbelief; the promise becomes ineffectual if rejected, but the word and oath of God abide eternal to faith. Abraham's hope was in God; the angel of the Lord would ensure Rebekah's committal — she would come. With this understanding, it is not difficult for us to identify Eliezer and his mission with the person and work of God the Holy Spirit.

The story told in Genesis twenty-four is one of the great classics of Old Testament writing. It commences with the father and ends with the son — Abraham seeking a bride and Isaac receiving her — but the substance of the chapter is taken up with Eliezer procuring her. During the whole of Eliezer's operations abroad, Abraham and Isaac remained at home in the promised land. In figure, the father, having sacrificed the son and received him back from the dead, represented God the Father, and Isaac represented God the Son. He was first promised to Abraham, then begotten, circumcised, sacrificed and received back from the dead entirely by Abraham; he played a passive role throughout. Eliezer, the trusted servant in whose hand were all the goods of Abraham's house, represented the Holy Ghost: he was sent forth directly by the father for the specific purpose of finding and bringing home the bride. There can be little doubt that Isaac wanted her, but, save that he was almost certainly informed of his father's plan to obtain her for him, he did nothing about it but pray. He certainly was not the prime mover in the plan, nor did he initiate the search for her. The father and the servant were the two active persons who sought the bride for the son.

This all so beautifully fits in with the facts of the New Covenant as we know them. Jesus, the Son, being raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, 'being by the right hand of God exalted' now sits on the right hand of the Father in heaven. The Father, in pursuance of the divine plan for the Church, has sent forth the Holy Ghost in Jesus' name as He said He would.

As far as His own involvement in sending the Holy Spirit was concerned, Jesus called Him 'the Comforter ... whom I will send unto you from the Father'. The Lord Jesus always nominates the Father as the one from whom the Holy Ghost proceeds and is

given. Peter, on the day of Pentecost, confirms this with these words, 'having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this which ye now see and hear'. The Holy Spirit, with the consent and by the cooperation of the Son, is now sent forth from the Father to seek and bring the bride. Jesus, the Bridegroom, is at home, praying, waiting.

The relationship between the members of the Godhead is very tender and beautiful. In all their works and ways they are the manifestation, as well as the origin, of eternal life. Some of that beauty is brought out in this story of Eliezer's quest for the bride. The poignancy of their relationship is wondrously captured for us in both the written and unwritten story of Abraham's and Isaac's ordeal on Moriah, but here something of sweet romance is revealed, pointing to the espousal and marriage of the Lamb: it thrills our hearts.

One of the dangers we must beware of is thinking that God is less than human. On the contrary, we know that He is greater, much greater, than human, yet He has chosen to reveal Himself and His gospel to us by men and women in human picture. We saw it in chapter twenty-two: there, in stark realism, without words, Abraham and Isaac jointly enact something fundamental about the cross. But here the sweet loveliness and engaging lowliness of the mind of the Spirit of our God is drawn for us in simple heart exchanges couched in words as human as could be. It is all so suggestive of meekness and tenderness, tempered with such unshakable resolve that the untaught heart can scarcely take it in. We must bear in mind that the event actually happened, and that they were real human beings who were taking part, and make allowance for that fact. But O the glory of the presence and power of the angel of the Lord working behind it!

First of all, Eliezer prays to God; that is very human; it is also utterly divine. Does God the Holy Spirit pray? Does God pray to God? O yes. His first coming to the human heart to abide is ascertained and announced by prayer: 'Abba Father'. He comes crying and continues in us crying, praying to God for us. One of His most blessed and fundamental ministries in human hearts is prayer. His last recorded function in the Bible is prayer — 'even so come Lord Jesus'. Just as Jesus in the flesh prayed to the Father, so does the Holy Spirit pray to the Father. And so Eliezer prays.

Secondly, he makes his conditions: respectfully and deferentially he says exactly what he wants the right woman to do. That is another way of telling God how he wants Him to work, which is a very bold thing to do. But in his capacity of representing the Holy Spirit it is the very thing we should expect of him; the Holy Spirit can and does make His conditions, and does have His own way, always subject to God the Father and God the Son's common consent. Thirdly, he stood by the well; the Holy Spirit's connection with living water is too obvious to miss — everyone finds the Holy Spirit when they come thirsting to drink. In order to receive, hearts must drink. Fourthly, Eliezer's prayer was instantaneously answered. O how like the Holy Spirit he was! 'Before he had done speaking', Rebekah was there: so instantly is the will of the Holy Spirit done. He is God.

He has been sent from the Father on behalf of the Son, the Only One of the Father, His Lamb. He is His joy, His laughter; for Him He wants, yea, has chosen, a virgin most fair. As the man opens his eyes, beautiful Rebekah appears before him: the bride has come in answer to his prayer — he feels it, he knows it. Fifthly, he appeals to her in words strongly reminiscent of the as yet unspoken words of Jesus the Son. Down to the well she goes unafraid, as though she was all unaware of the presence of the man and his camels.

She dips and fills, returns her pitcher upon her head and gives him drink.

Two thousand years later Jesus said to the woman at the well, 'Give me to drink', and was refused. He, as Eliezer, spoke almost identical words; he was there under the father's direction on behalf of the son. Jesus said of the Spirit, 'whom the Father will send in my name': and there at the well, as in Isaac's name, he asked for a drink. That is exactly the way of the Spirit; He has come in behalf of Jesus: both the Spirit and the Son alike say, 'Give me to drink'. The adulteress said, 'No'; the virgin says, 'Yes. Yes, my Lord'.

That was Rebekah's first step towards marriage with Abraham's lamb, but not the final one. In fact it was only half of the twofold request Eliezer had made to God, and he waited with anticipation for the second and final half which would confirm the truth. He was not disappointed, nor did he have to wait long; as soon as he had drunk she said she would draw water for the camels also, and, greatly wondering, he stood in silence as she did so.

Filled with wonder at the success of his journey so far, and at the willingness of fair Rebekah, Eliezer made his next move towards the objective for which he had come. Already assured in his heart that this was the woman he sought, he took from his treasures a gold nose-ring and two gold bracelets and, with these in hand, he enquired after her parentage and whether he could abide at her parents' house. Just as he expected, she was Bethuel's daughter, the grand-daughter of Abraham's brother — he had found her. Slipping the ring and bracelets on to her nose and wrists, he blessed the Lord for His faithfulness.

With heart aflame and mind in a whirl Rebekah, adorned with gifts, ran to her home to tell the news. As a result there was much excitement and activity among the family: Laban, Rebekah's brother, rushed out to the well and brought Eliezer and his party, with the camels, to the home, and extended all the usual hospitality.

The urgency of Eliezer's mission was so strong upon him though, that he refused to eat until he had discharged his commission. With simple grace therefore he related the reason for his visit, and the events leading up to the moment. So convincing was his story, and so earnest his manner, that they all knew it to be true and with one consent bowed to the will of the Lord. Thereupon more precious gifts from Abraham were bestowed by Eliezer upon Rebekah and distributed among the family also. This was followed by a feast, and after a short rest Eliezer was up again in the morning and ready to go.

For some reason known only to themselves, at this point Laban and Milcah sought to delay their departure. They wanted a period of ten days to elapse while Rebekah made up her mind, but Eliezer would not hear of it. So the damsel was called and the question put to her, 'Wilt thou go with this man?'. To Eliezer's joy, she said, 'I will go'. Rebekah was utterly convinced of God's will. Eliezer's message had reached her soul; her heart had been won, she saw no reason at all for delay and was determined to go. Seeing the girl's heart, and that her mind was already made up, without further ado her brother and her mother blessed her and sent away Rebekah, her nurse and her personal servants as well, to the promised land.

The espoused bride, laden with precious gifts and decked in new clothes, mounted a camel and was carried away by Eliezer to a new life in a new land. Her response was total, immediate and irreversible; she never went back. As Abraham had foreseen and fully expected, Eliezer found not the slightest opposition, nor suffered any mishap on his

expedition — it was one hundred percent success.

Perhaps Rebekah's mother and brother employed delaying tactics in the hope that Rebekah would change her mind. It was a worldly-wise move. It had been such a lightning affair, and they wanted to be sure that she knew what she was doing. They had no doubts as to the genuineness of the offer, but who could blame them for their attitude? They had never even seen Isaac. What was he like? Was he a suitable husband for Rebekah? Hadn't she better wait and consider her answer well? It is an amazing fact, less suited to western than to eastern thinking, that the first to be consulted was not Rebekah but her brother and mother. The proposal of marriage was not extended by Isaac but by Abraham, and brought by Eliezer. Had Nahor, Rebekah's father, been alive it would have been delivered to him, but he was dead, hence Laban's offices in the negotiations. Rebekah was not unaware of what was happening though — everyone knew that the gift of the nose-ring and bracelets meant only one thing. They were tokens of Rebekah's engagement to be married.

How wonderfully romantic it all was, and why not? But underneath all lay the seriousness of God and eternal love. Rebekah's heart had somehow been prepared for this by the angel of the Lord, and was wanting, even waiting for something like this to happen. Her response was astonishingly spontaneous; her answer was pledged the moment she accepted the tokens. In her view there was nothing to keep her back; her father, Nahor (her 'old man'), was dead; she had no husband; her mother was Laban's responsibility; she was free. To her the proposal was good news. She accepted the nose-ring, extended her arms to receive the pledges of marriage, and watched through the night of anticipation. She was aware of what was happening all around her — the arguments, the whispers of caution, the doubts for her future — but she was unmoved and could hardly wait for the morning to seal it all by a word: 'I will go'. Rebekah was a woman of strong mind; her heart was fixed. With that word she gave herself over completely to Eliezer, who carried her off as a bride prepared for her bridegroom.

Whom Having not Seen She Loved

Rebekah first saw Isaac, 'whom having not seen she loved', coming from the way of the well La-hai-roi, 'the well of Him that liveth and seeth me'. He was anticipating an evening of meditation alone with God under the mellow sky, his thoughts perhaps fixed on his great heredity and destiny. Inevitably his future, the reason why he had been born, his place in the plan of God, and unforgettable Moriah, would have engaged his heart — the uniqueness of it all! He had prepared a place for Rebekah of whom he had heard, yet had not seen. Where was she? Had she responded favourably to his proposal of marriage? He was fairly sure she had, for his father had been so certain about it; he had never known him to be wrong.

He loved his father; he and his father were one; they had never been divided on anything. To obey Abraham was sheer joy; it was as if he was doing his own will: father and son sensed each other's desires perfectly. They were truly one about the forthcoming marriage, and, having been so obedient all his life, Isaac could not imagine anyone else doing anything other than he. He was sure all was well, 'And he lifted up his eyes and saw, and behold the camels were coming.'

The journey across from Chaldea and down through Canaan to the south country had been arduous and long, but the time had not been wasted by Rebekah. Every day which brought her nearer to their journey's end also gave her opportunity to discover all she

could about Isaac. She was anxious to know from Eliezer all he could tell her about her husband to be; all she wanted was to learn more of him. Eliezer was a wonderful champion of Isaac; it was through his powers that she had been persuaded to leave all for Isaac. He readily spoke of his master and she listened with joy to all he had to say. There was obviously great love in the family — she was sure of that — and she longed to be joined to her Isaac and be included in it all.

At last the long journey ended. Rebekah had heard much and believed much; now she was to enter in and prove it all. Riding along, her eyes scanning the horizon, she turned her head and saw Isaac. 'What man is this that walketh in the field to meet us?' she asked. 'It is my master', Eliezer answered. Taking a veil she covered herself up, lighted off her camel and went to meet him; at last they met. 'Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife'; and it could be said of Isaac and Rebekah that they lived happily ever after, for they did.

Unto Him — All that He Hath

This remarkable story of Rebekah's espousal and marriage to Isaac is memorable if only for the fact that, for the first time, Abraham is left in the background. He planned it all and instigated Eliezer's expedition to Chaldea for Rebekah, but from that moment it was all Isaac, Eliezer and Rebekah. Abraham ceased to be the focal point of attention. This is most surprising, for until then he had been the one around whom everything turned. He was not even there when Rebekah arrived. She was not introduced to him, and there was no contract of marriage enacted in his presence — he was missing from the scene entirely. He had given Sarah's tent to his son, and it seems that he and Isaac had parted. They were not divided, but Isaac had moved away from his father to live an independent life, and prepare a home for his bride. It may also have been because Abraham wished to marry again, and had decided he would not ask his new wife to live in his first wife's tent. But, whatever the reason, though still in the one encampment, Abraham and Isaac were living separately.

Having seen the goodness of God repeated once more, and his son comfortably settled in his own home, Abraham himself found another wife. She was much younger than he and bore him six sons, who in turn, between them, begat another ten. All these Abraham regarded as his sons; he saw in each of them something further of the fulfilment of God's promise to him. His heart became set on this, so, besides Keturah his new wife, Abraham also took concubines, that by them he should beget many more sons; he was intent on fulfilling the 'dust' as well as the 'star' part of the promise. It is obvious that, following God's visitation upon him for the birth of Isaac, Abraham was entirely rejuvenated.

He did not know all that lay in the word God spoke to him, nor all that faith could accomplish by it; all he knew was that he believed God. This was the man who 'staggered not at the promise through unbelief, and 'considered not his own body, now dead ... but was strong in faith giving glory to God'. Abraham did not know that, when God visited him with power to beget seed, He would thoroughly revive every power of his body and make him capable of fulfilling both the heavenly and the earthly aspects of the promise. Because of God's abundant blessings, Abraham was able to have many more sons than one; the promise was sealed to him in abundance. All these sons were included in his inheritance; whoever they were they were sons of Abraham, and that entitled them to a share of the blessing, even though they were not of the spiritual seed.

After the birth of Isaac, Sarah returned to her original barrenness — she only had one son.

Isaac was the child of promise, the one and only miracle child, the beginning of the heavenly line, the first of the 'stars'. He was different from all the others; that must be made clear. Abraham knew that, however great his affection for his children and whatever duty he owed them, the true line of possession and inheritance lay with Isaac alone. Therefore, in the day he distributed his bounty, he gave all that he had to Isaac. He gave gifts of one kind or another to his other sons also, and sent them away, and from that moment they disappear completely from the story.

He wanted his son Isaac to be seen distinctly for the son he was — Abraham's son born of the promise, and, as it were, begotten from the dead. God had said that in Isaac his seed should be called, and he was perfectly content. Ishmael, his son, was cast out, virtually with nothing. Keturah's sons, with the concubines' children, doubtless received a gift, but we are told little about it. The total inheritance came to Isaac: Eliezer had informed Laban and Milcah of this when seeking Rebekah's hand in marriage to Isaac. It was a commitment that, though other sons may be born to Abraham, whatever they received would be minimal; all that was Abraham's was Isaac's by God's decree.

Faithful to the end, Abraham obeyed God in everything. All along he had acted against nature; he believed against nature and passed beyond its limitations. Because he did this, the natural became spiritual and was incorporated by God into His plans. This is one of the ways in which he saw Christ's day. The Lord Jesus was Himself born against nature, of one who herself believed against nature. He was of Abraham's seed, of David's line. Abraham's greatest gift to Isaac was not possessions or wealth, but faith — gold and silver and lands and property would have been worthless without that. Isaac's inheritance from his father was priceless indeed; by it he himself became a great man. But that is another story.

#### Gathered to His People

The saga of Abraham ends with these words: 'Abraham gave up the ghost and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years; and was gathered to his people'. How great this man was. It seems that in every way and in everything God made a new beginning with him. Even in this obituary-like notice we are introduced to something entirely new. Hitherto men's deaths had been referred to in entirely different terms: 'and he died', or a slight variant of that. In many instances no reference is made to death at all; 'he lived and begat' is the final phrase used of many men. Of no one before Abraham is it recorded that 'he gave up the ghost' (spirit), save for a verse which says 'and all flesh died that moved upon the earth ... all in whose nostrils was the breath (spirit, perhaps) of life'. No reference is made to the spirit of man or beast before this; how much then may be learned from this statement.

Three things of outstanding importance are clearly indicated in the text:

1. Abraham is the first one in scripture about whom God directly refers to his spirit; he should therefore be regarded as a spiritual man. When a man lives by faith he becomes a spiritual man; he is no longer a natural brute beast, nor is he only of the flesh fleshly. Neither is he carnal, nor yet is he sinful. He cannot be classified with any of these; he is spiritual. Except a man live by faith, although he be most refined, he cannot be anything other than a natural brute beast, of the flesh, fleshly and sinful and carnal.

In his day of grace and according to the age in which he lived, Abraham lived in the Spirit; he was a spiritual man in that his spirit developed far beyond his natural body and

abilities because he believed and obeyed God. Of all men on the face of the earth at that time he knew God. He was chosen to act like Him and become like Him. His was a wonderful calling.

2. 'He died in a good old age and full of years.' Seeing that formerly many of Abraham's ancestors had lived to nearly a thousand years of age, it may seem strange that a mere one hundred and seventy-five years is spoken of as a good old age, but this is to overlook the fact that by this time God had limited man's life span to one hundred and twenty years. Abraham lived nearly half as long again; that is why his was called a good old age. It was. When his son Isaac was married, both of Abraham's brothers, Haran and Nahor, were already dead. Unto Abraham God granted fifty-five years above the allotted span so that he should do His will on the earth. Abraham's old age was good because his middle age was good; all the sorrows and disappointments of his earlier years were passed away.

Everybody dies filled with their years. One way and another, as the years go by, we fill up our lives with either good or evil; that is an inescapable law. Abraham's grandson, Jacob, was later to say, 'few and evil have been the days of my pilgrimage'; sadly, his was a different testimony from Abraham's. The years fill us up. Throughout time we gather and store what cannot be put into barns or banks or garages or houses. Those things do not matter; they have no value; people count them to be treasure but they are dust. There are other things; these have no bulk, they take up no space, they cannot be measured by men, neither can they be weighed or calculated except in heaven. These are the real things; they are either good or evil and in whomsoever they be, that person dies with them.

Jesus was once challenged by a man to judge between him and his brother concerning the family inheritance. The brother appears to have been a greedy person and had taken more than his share. The Lord sharply corrected the man, 'Who made me a judge or a divider over you?' He said. Let everybody see from this that Jesus is not a social reformer. Having made Himself clear to the man, the Lord then went on to tell His famous story of the rich fool, his crops, his barns and his death. 'So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God', He said. He wanted His disciples to understand exactly what He meant by laying up treasure, what treasure is, and in what it is stored. 'Provide yourselves bags which wax not old', He said.

Firstly we must know what the bag is: He tells us in the parable by putting it into the lips of the rich man, 'Soul thou hast much goods laid up for many years'. The soul of man is the bag. The fool thought his barns were his bag — how foolish. Our souls cannot be filled up with things we put in barns, nor what we eat and drink. The 'bag' that we fill with food and drink is the stomach. The fool's heart was deceived and full of evil; he thought his soul would find security in barns filled to overflowing. Plentiful provisions are not a source of salvation; every man ought to know that.

Jesus was determined that His disciples should know this; they must be clear about truth. He was underlining things he had already taught them. Don't be like this man; don't store up anything for yourselves; don't think about eating, drinking, clothing. Consider the ravens; consider the lilies; don't doubt; don't be afraid. 'It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom', He said. Now get yourself a bag that does not wax old, fill it with heavenly treasure which cannot fail. Fill your soul with peace of mind, absolute trust in God, total dependence on Him; let your soul be renewed daily and never grow old. Fill it with faith, hope, charity, righteousness, peace, joy, holiness, beauty, glory. Be rich

towards God; lay up treasure in heaven, have the wealth of the kingdom. Through the years every man is filling his soul with good or evil. Abraham had a big bag; he was full of years which God had filled with blessing, and he stored it all by faith.

3. Abraham was gathered unto his people; everyone will be gathered to exactly the same place. Let no man be mistaken about this: when his soul departs this world it will go to that class of people with whom he has had affinity and has made his life on earth. From reading Hebrews chapter eleven it becomes perfectly clear who Abraham's people were, the people of faith; many of them are named. More were unnamed than named, but how many there are of these we cannot tell; let none of us be presumptuous about it. Perhaps Christ's answer to the enquiry, 'Lord, are there few that be saved?' should give us sufficient ground for refusing all incautious speculation: 'Strive to enter in at the strait gate: for many, I say unto you, will seek to enter in, and shall not be able'.

Abraham is now safely home among 'the spirits of just men made perfect', gathered to his people. Because of his faithfulness there sprang from him when he 'was 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'. But none of these were his people then — they had not been born. In his day there were very few, if any. He had left all his people — all of them.

He was a stranger, a pilgrim on the earth. He had fellowship with God and Melchizedek and angels, but with who else who can say? He was confederate with a few men such as Mamre at times, and was friendly with people like Abimelech; but except these few confederates and friends, and his household servants and retainers, we know of no one else. He did go down to Egypt once, much to his sorrow, but after that he refused ever to leave his land again. He did not even go out of it for the all-important business of Isaac's betrothal; he had come to Canaan to live and die there.

He dwelt in the promised land as a stranger though, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. He lived to see his grandsons, Jacob and Esau, and knew that a new race of men was being raised on the earth. He could foresee a little of the future, but who were his people of the past? Abel, a man who made a sacrifice and was slain; Enoch, a man who had a testimony of righteousness and was caught up to heaven; Noah, a man who built an ark and became a saviour. These were his people: he was gathered unto them, and to all that for which they had lived and worked and died. He was their lineal descendant and spiritual heir. He did not betray them, nor did he fall short of the heights of faith which they reached. Sarah was also among them. Her body lay as dust in Machpelah's cave, and he would lie with her.

Isaac and Ishmael came together to their father's burial; the half brothers had remained separate ever since Abraham had cast out his son as a lad. At Abraham's funeral the wild man of the wilderness and the genteel man of faith acted together for the burial of their common father, and stood sorrowful by his grave. Their presence gave mute testimony to both the failure and the success of a spiritual man; each in his way was an outworking of the promise of God. Flesh and spirit in representation, the two sons gathered momentarily unto their father's memory and imperishable honour, and went their ways again; and Abraham slept on.

But he lives! GOD IS NOT THE GOD OF THE DEAD BUT OF THE LIVING. He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and all who are blessed with faithful Abraham.

## Chapter 12 — HIS SPIRITUAL SECRETS

**Reading: Romans 4; Acts 7:1-4; Hebrews 11:8; Genesis 12:1-5.**

In the first chapter of this book attention was drawn to the importance of Abraham in scripture. With the possible exception of Melchizedek, he is greater than all other Old Testament characters. Abraham's estimation of Melchizedek is plainly to be seen; in return for his blessing Abraham gave him the tenth of the spoils of battle. To Abraham the blessing of the most high God was far greater than all the treasures of Canaan and the whole world besides. Abraham was content to have food and raiment; the privilege of feeding on Melchizedek's bread and wine was spoil enough for him. Perhaps in this we have one of the keys to the understanding of this man's greatness — he was a very simple man.

A phrase in Hebrews chapter eleven is most illuminating: the writer speaks of Abraham as being 'as good as dead'; what a world of meaning lies in those words. The phrase chiefly refers to the birth of Isaac, the spiritual seed. Only because Abraham was as good as dead was the child born, but how aptly that same phrase describes the man at other times of life and in other situations. He was utterly dead to the riches of this world; he did not spare God a tenth of the spoils and keep nine tenths for himself; he gave away all. He was 'as good as dead' to worldly possessions.

The combination of the word 'good' with the word 'dead' is most suggestive. Presumably to be 'alive' and responsive to the allure of these things is to be 'evil'. Humanly, death is a bad thing, to be avoided, warded off or escaped at all costs. Every normal person wishes to put off the moment of death as long as possible; no one welcomes it. Yet in the things of the Spirit only those who are as good as dead can succeed. When a man is dead to sin and self and the world by the cross of Christ, it is a good thing — he may enter into all the riches of Christ. We must be risen with Christ before we can enter into the heavenly blessings in Him, and it is quite impossible to be risen with Him until first we be dead with Him.

#### The Father of us All

Let us then learn some of Abraham's spiritual secrets; they are of prime importance to every pilgrim who would, as he, inherit the promises of God. In this the great apostle is a fine example to us. There can be no doubt that Paul was profoundly affected by the patriarch's life for, apart from the Gospel writers, he is the one who makes most mention of him. In his epistle to the Romans (4.16 & 17) he tells us forthrightly that, before God, Abraham is the father of us all; this he does in contrast to his former reference to Abraham as 'our father as pertaining to the flesh'. This latter is an exclusive reference to Israel after the flesh, and held no special meaning to the Romans, who were gentiles; this need not concern us here. The former though is a straight declaration to all spiritual Israel about their paternity; this concerns us all very much.

When Paul declares Abraham to be the father of us all. He does not mean that Abraham is the father of our spirits. Abraham is the father of spiritual people, but not of the spirits of those people. Not to speak of any other man's sons or daughters, Abraham did not even regenerate his own son; he did not because he could not, nor was he asked to. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the Father of spirits, and he exclusively. Abraham is the 'father' of all those men and women of faith who have responded to God's word as he did, and have thereby become members of a new race on earth. 'Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude'. The writer at this point is addressing the Hebrews. Abraham is the father of the whole

company of those who walk in the way, the way of faith he pioneered. The elders of faith whose names precede Abraham's in the account given in Hebrews chapter eleven were three: Abel, Enoch and Noah. These were the faith elders of the whole race of men. God cut off all flesh and refashioned the earth and heavens with a view to repopulating the earth with men and women of faith. Because of sin, God's desires were not fulfilled, so He recommenced with Abraham. Abraham is revealed as the new 'father' of God's new race. All Israel may trace their ancestry back to him, some both physically and spiritually, some spiritually only. Abraham is the father of all these only in the matter of faith.

The writer to the Hebrews is careful to make this clear to us in chapter twelve: we, he says, must look off (and away from all the aforementioned cloud of witnesses) unto 'Jesus the author and finisher of our faith'. Although Abraham was such a great man, and we may learn so much from him by example, he is not the example to the Church. Christ is our example, not Abraham, great though he was; nevertheless Paul's use of him in Romans four is for our benefit, and we shall learn much to our profiting if we will take Paul's instruction to heart. Firstly (verse 1), Abraham found something: he was not only a pioneer; he was a discoverer. Unless he had been that, he would not have been what he was or have been mentioned in God's book. The man found something, and what he found is open to all who will 'walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised'.

#### Of Faith ... by Grace

Paul is hereby laying open the possibility for all mankind: we all must discover it for ourselves or we shall not be the children of God. What he found was that, although a man may, by his own works, be justified before men, he cannot find justification before God by that means. Abraham discovered that he was gradually being narrowed down by God to faith and the way of faith; this was not the easiest of lessons to learn at first. God persisted with him though, so that in the end He may justify him entirely by His own grace, and not by Abraham's works. Justification unto life is 'of faith that it may be by grace'.

This is the point Paul makes to the Galatians. By believing that justification was not of grace, but by works, they were in danger of falling from grace. This justification by faith, he assures them, is the blessing of Abraham which should 'come on (all) the Gentiles'. We must never lose sight of the fact that Abraham was not a Jew — he was a gentile. Every individual may receive that blessing, but each one must procure it for himself or herself. Whatever of further blessing Abraham received and accumulated unto himself in the promised land, nothing was greater than this. Indeed nothing was equal to it, not even receiving his son back from the altar of Moriah, great as that was.

It is so essential for each of us to qualify for this blessing that Paul goes to great lengths to make sure that the Romans and we all understand what saving faith is: (1) we must believe in God who quickeneth the dead and calleth things which do not exist as though they do actually exist; (2) we must believe what God says, though this may be against all common sense and all possibility and natural hope; (3) we must not be weak; we must face up to the difficulties and calculate the impossibilities and still believe; (4) we must look alone to the promise of God and not stagger at its greatness, but be strong in faith and give glory to God; (5) we must be fully persuaded in our hearts that God is able to do what He says. This, and this alone, is the kind of faith which procures the promises.

Abraham did all this, and by and beyond it made the discovery of God and His ways;

above all else this is the great reason why God grants us faith. Discovering the truth of what God does and says is good and profitable, and there is much to gain thereby, but chiefly faith is granted to us that we may come to know who and what God is.

Perhaps one of the strangest things Abraham found is this: every person God calls has to become what God has already made him or her. At first this is not the easiest of things for us to accept, but it is so, and this is precisely what we find written of Abraham; indeed it is the whole reason that he finds mention in the book. God said to Abraham, 'A father of many nations have I made thee'. He did not say 'I am going to make thee a father of many nations, but 'I have (already) made thee'. What an extraordinary statement! It was plainly to be seen by all that Abraham did not have so much as one child. It must have seemed a most extraordinary thing to Abraham, yet against all hope of this ever being accomplished, he believed God, calm in hope that he might indeed become the father of many nations as God had said.

God spoke to Abraham of things which did not exist as though they did exist. He spoke of future things in the past tense, and Abraham believed Him; we all must learn to do likewise. As with Abraham, God has already determined beforehand what each one of us is to be, and what we shall do; from the moment we respond to Him we are to be forever cast upon Him for power and faith to become all He wants. Abraham believed in God, not in himself, and because he did so he could believe Him in hope. We can only hope that all that He intends for us, for which He calls us, shall be completely fulfilled by us. If this is the case, all that He hoped for in calling us shall be fulfilled. It was so with Abraham. Will it be so with us?

#### The Obedience of Faith.

God does not first call us in the hope of finding a response, and then, if the hope is fulfilled, decide what He is going to do with us; He lays hold of us, having already decided before He lays hold of us what we are going to be. The decision is made before the call and, if and as we continue to obey and respond to Him, He will outwork it in our lives. By that fact whoever He calls is already nominated an heir to something. We have to inherit according to that which is spoken, whatever that may be. With Abraham it was 'So shall thy seed be', and on that starry night the miracle was spread all over the heavens before his eyes, and would soon be published all around this old globe. He believed in God in hope that it should be so, and it is.

So faith and hope are bound together: faith in God that it shall be so, and hope towards oneself that it may be attained to. Our inheritance is altogether bound up with what God has in mind for us, and what He speaks to us. We have to listen and believe and hope to attain unto that; if we do so we shall inherit the fulness of the blessing linked with the design in God's heart.

Abraham did not settle with God simply to live in the promised land and say, 'Thank you very much Lord; that is all I want'. God did not only take him to the promised land so that he could live there, but that His seed may be born there also. Had Abraham settled for the blessing of possessing or dwelling in Canaan only for his own comfort, he would have betrayed the Lord. Far too many are settling for this kind of blessing; many of Abraham's descendants did so centuries later. Some were even content to settle into the verdant pastures of Moab rather than cross Jordan into Canaan, and God allowed them to do so. Alas they were not of the same spirit as Abraham, although they were all his children.

This is a danger into which all may fall; it is subtle selfishness, and results from seeking blessing instead of seeking Him. Who will deny that Abraham was greatly blessed, but who knew God as well as Abraham did in his day? Therein lay his secret, and he accomplished it by the simplest of means available to us all — obedience, the obedience of faith. It seems that this man, having once fully believed God, found it natural to do so; it became habitual. As the habit grew, he did not hesitate under any circumstances to obey God implicitly. The result? — continued and increased blessing. This faith must become natural to us also.

Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was a true man of faith. In more senses than one he was a son of Abraham, and when on trial for his life he made reference to him. He made no mention of Abraham's call, but launched into his 'apology' with these words: 'The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham'. Further on in his statement he referred to an incident which occurred centuries afterwards, when God also appeared to Moses as 'an angel of the Lord in a flame of fire in a bush'. These two appearances were entirely different from each other; this latter appearance was visible: 'When Moses saw it, he wondered at the sight'; but Abraham did not see anything at all with his natural eyes. God never appealed to his sight, only to his hearing. God appeared unto him by His Word. This was one of the secrets of Abraham's greatness; he had no alternative at first but to believe God. Paul's words find perfect illustration in Abraham: 'Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God'.

#### Faith Comes by Hearing

We must all understand clearly that, although God does at times manifest Himself to certain people in some visible form, His greatest and most frequent appearances are by His word. This is a most important truth for us all to lay hold of, for we are living in days when, having once 'spoken to us by His Son', He has now chosen to 'save souls by the foolishness of preaching'. 'The righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise ... The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart'. This is truth directly linked with Abraham. Abraham was not made righteous by anything he saw any more than by anything he did. Righteousness is not based upon anything a person sees, nor is it available to anyone upon anything he feels. It is only available upon the ground of what a person hears.

Now this is of utmost importance to us, for we are living in days of great deception. People are believing that they are Christians because they have had a vision; they have seen something or 'someone' — and doubtless they have — god or devil — man or woman or angel, or something, and they think that this constitutes them God's children. Not so; a person is not a child of God until righteousness, the basic characteristic of God's nature, is placed in them. This righteousness is spoken into us by God when we believe Him — not until then can we have it. Righteousness speaks. It is most illuminating that scripture says, 'God ... hath ... spoken unto us by His Son'. Why did the writer not say, 'God hath shown us something by His Son'? It would have been a more appropriate phrase to us surely. To our minds, yes, but not to God's.

Righteousness, before it can be righteousness to us, must be right in God. Whatever He says must be wholly consistent with what He is and what He has decided and what He intends to do. His will, His mind, His thoughts, His words, His actions, His movements must be altogether and absolutely consistent. Praise His name, they are. Therefore, when He speaks, righteousness speaks; what He says is one hundred per cent consistent

throughout His whole being and the three personalities of it.

When God spoke to Abraham faith came to him, and Abraham believed God and it was imputed to him for righteousness. The thing God said was true; that is to say it was absolutely righteous. He had thought it, talked it over and decided to do it; then He communicated it to Abraham, and the righteousness of it all came right through to the listening Abraham. When he believed God, Abraham was then and there constituted as righteous as the righteous thing he heard.

Every man must know this: when God speaks to a man He grants that man hearing; that is to say, He creates conditions for Himself to be heard. Now hearing is a twofold thing. A passage in Acts chapter twenty-five casts light on this truth: it concerns Paul's trial before Agrippa and Festus at Caesarea. We read that Agrippa said to Festus, 'I would also hear the man myself. Tomorrow, said he, thou shalt hear him. And on the morrow, when Agrippa was come ... into the place of hearing ... at Festus' commandment Paul was brought forth'. 'The place of hearings was the courthouse, the place where the 'case' was heard, but contrary to expectations it was the place where Agrippa was heard. Not only was Paul heard there, but the king was also finally challenged by Paul: 'King Agrippa, believest thou ... ?' Festus, Agrippa and his queen, Bernice, went to the place of hearing to hear Paul, but Paul turned it all round on them, and he heard them. Likewise with God and us: when God speaks He grants us hearing. We cannot hear Him until He speaks, but always when He grants us hearing He grants us 'a hearing' too.

This is the truth lying behind Paul's statement: 'The righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? ... Or, Who shall descend into the deep?' God listens to every heart, He grants us a hearing with Himself and listens carefully to our responses. When He speaks, the righteousness of faith is speaking; He says, 'the word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth and in thy heart: that is the word of faith, which we preach; that if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved'. Nothing could be more righteous or gracious than that. When a person listens humbly to God after the example of father Abraham, that is, lying flat on his face before God, or standing by an altar, or looking up into the heavens, faith will come to his heart and confession to his lips and salvation to his soul.

We could scarcely do better than to conclude this series by referring back to Genesis chapter twelve verses one to five where it all began. Let us note first of all that nothing really happened in Abraham's life until he took the initiative and obeyed God. When God originally appeared to Abraham in Ur of the Chaldees, he was at first content to move in the general direction of Canaan under his father's jurisdiction and overruling. He did not strongly lead; he let his father do that; he was content to let God's ways work out as they may. Some may call that 'being as wise as a serpent and harmless as a dove', or think Abraham was using 'sanctified commonsense', or promoting unity, or letting love prevail — or use some other such high-toned moral or ethical cliché. But whether it be Abraham or us, if we do not immediately and wholeheartedly respond to what God says, whatever we say, we are weak and disobedient and foolish.

Stephen's strong word about this episode in Abraham's life makes things very clear: 'Then came he out of the land of the Chaldeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him ...' Two things are outstandingly clear here: (1) God was wanting to be a father to Abraham; (2) He heartily disapproved of Abraham living in

Haran. The word written to the Corinthians, 'Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord', is linked by the apostle to the fatherhood of God: 'I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters'. It could hardly find more pointed illustration than by this incident with Abraham. God revealed Himself to Abraham as a Father first of all, but it seems that Abraham was not yet willing to allow himself to be taken over. Let no one mistake God's intentions: He purposes to take the place of priority and headship in everyone's life; He did it to Abraham by removing his father.

This is brought out very strongly in the second point: 'He removed him'. God removed Abraham from Haran. The impression given is that he brooked no refusal, accepted no excuses, made no allowances, but insisted that Abraham go. However highly Abraham esteemed his father, and however great his natural love was towards him, and although he may have been loath to lose him, he had to go. Abraham clung to him, submitted to him, and dutifully obeyed all his natural instincts towards him and his family, and to this extent deferred the claims of God on his life. What God had said to him and the promises He made him were all contingent upon Abraham's obedience. God meant every word He said and, having spoken, would not go back on His word, so He removed Abraham's father from hindering Him, and proceeded to remove Abraham also to the promised land.

Whether or not God repeated His call and commandment and commitment to Abraham in Haran is not certain. What is plain is that when God speaks to anyone, He intends it to be the initiation of a working partnership between Himself and that person for the outworking of the thing of which He speaks. Having alerted or awakened the person to His intentions, God awaits the expected response before He proceeds further. His method is simply this: He does something, then we must do something, then He will do something more, and so on. Six things stand out in the account of God's initial appearance and charge to Abraham: (1) His sovereign choice; (2) His loving desire; (3) His secret purpose; (4) His exquisite workmanship; (5) His miraculous ability; (6) His wondrous grace.

### 1. His Sovereign Choice

This is always a matter of wonder to the chosen one. Quite without human cause, and certainly beyond human reason, God suddenly appeared to Abraham. There is nothing in the preceding verses to indicate why He did so: no reason on Abraham's side, nothing to indicate any degree of merit that marked Abraham out as being greater than any of his contemporaries; it seems that he was quite an ordinary person. If it be true that Melchizedek was indeed a man, then, as scripture says, he was a greater man than Abraham; yet God chose Abraham. He is not shown to have been a specially righteous man and chosen because of that; we know that he had to have righteousness imputed to him. There may be some ground or reason to infer that he loved righteousness and hated iniquity from the fact that he recognized Melchizedek's sovereignty and priesthood, and partook of bread and wine at his hands, but there is no proof of it. The truth of it is that God chose him. He said that out of all people on the earth He chose Abraham alone.

God began with Abraham in sheer grace. There is nothing in the whole realm of intelligent thought which reveals the sheer wonder of grace as does God's sovereignty. God is sovereign, and He makes His initial choices among men according to the good pleasure of His will, not upon ground of merit; He simply chose to appear to Abraham and to no one else. True it is that Abraham came of that long line of faithful men

stretching right back to Abel, and that God had preserved that line from corruption and extinction by the miracle of the Deluge and the Ark. But that also was an act of utter sovereignty, for, although Abraham could trace his lineage back to Noah, it was through ten generations. The line was rather tenuous, and who is able to say that among all his friends and relatives there was none as worthy as he? The fact we know is that God sovereignly chose to call Abraham, and in that fact is set forth a basic principle of salvation, for it was sheerest grace.

## 2. God's Loving Desire

Deeper down in His heart than the purpose He purposed and the choice He made and the call which eventually came to Abraham, lay the desire to be a father to Abraham. Abraham did not know this, but God knew that if He was going to accomplish all He planned with the man, He had to be as a father to him. It was a most loving thought and an absolutely vital one for Abraham, for through his discovery of the fatherhood of God he became the most famous father of all time: the whole nation of Israel called him father.

Abraham never once called God his father; the personal relationship which now exists between the children of God and God was not possible until Christ came, so it was not possible to Abraham. Nevertheless, although new birth was reserved in time until Christ died and rose again, God revealed Himself in fatherly ways to Abraham, and led him on to the place where he himself, with his son, should display in measure on Moriah that fatherly heart that had 'fathered' him.

This is what God wants for every one of us. He wants every child of His to grow up from babyhood and infancy into young manhood in order to mature into fatherhood. The apostle John tells us this, and the apostle Paul (who himself was the father of the Corinthian church) also tells us that, deeper down in the heart of God than choice and purpose, lay 'the love wherewith He loved us'. Everything concerning the salvation of men started in the heart of God with love; His loving desire was to father us into His family. In order to do this He had to slay that 'old man' nature of father Adam, by whom we were linked with the devil, so that God Himself could be our Father by the 'new man' nature of Christ, the last Adam, within us.

So it was that, before Abraham could begin to set foot in the promised land, his father had to die. God just had to show him that He must be his Father. Not under his earthly father could Abraham enter in and know God in his inheritance. In this he is the father of us all, for through God's dealings with him — first of all men — the idea of the 'fatherhood of God' was born in scripture. What a lovely thought, and what a loving desire.

## 3. God's Secret Purpose

Because of His great love for His chosen one, the Lord had planned great things for him personally; but beyond all the personal blessings promised to Abraham, God purposed to bless him with blessings too great for his mind to comprehend or his life to contain: 'In thee shall all families of the earth be blessed'. Despite the fact that God came again and again to Abraham, repeating and adding to His first promise, it was quite impossible for Abraham to understand all that God meant.

O the vastness of the purpose of God. When He first approaches a man with intent to take him up for His purposes, although He commits Himself in explicit terms, it is not possible even for Him to put into words all that His heart means to do. He purposed to

bring this man somewhat into the secrets of the sufferings of God by the sacrifice of his son. More, He intended to let Abraham and his son into the secret of the resurrection, and still further to reveal the secret of the bride of Christ, but He did not tell him that.

Jesus said that Abraham rejoiced to see His day; that was God's purpose for him — he was a privileged man. God called him with the purpose of revealing secrets undreamed of by any since the foundation of the world. Abraham entered into the exercises of the Father, saw the day of the Son, and beheld the ingathering of the Church through the offices of the Spirit. He begat the seed, offered up the son, received him back from the dead, sent forth the servant, selected the bride. Whether knowingly or unknowingly, he set forth God in a way unprecedented and unequalled by any other because he allied himself with the purposes of God. It was secret to God in the beginning, but as Abraham responded to the gradually unfolding plan the secret purposes were outworked, and in him all families of the earth are blessed.

#### 4. God's Exquisite Workmanship

With what skill and patience and power the Lord wrought in Abraham's life to bring forth His purpose. His choice of the man had not been in vain, nor was His love squandered to none effect when He called him. With such an end in view it was absolutely essential that He should take command of Abraham's life, but although He did so He never destroyed his personality or obliterated his will. He always left him the opportunity to refuse, or the chance to make an excuse.

Although He is so powerful, God does not overwhelm a man's powers or override the desires or choices of those He chooses. We are His workmanship, created in all the exquisite delicacy and beauty of Christ, wherein He chose us to be glorious by the skill of His hands. We have to become what He has already made us, but He will never force us against our will. He does, however, bring pressures to bear upon us to achieve His purpose.

When God called Abraham, He quite deliberately withheld from him any directions about travel to the promised land; He simply told him to go. By being so deliberately uninformative, He provided Abraham with an easy excuse not to go; Abraham could have said that all God said was, 'I will shew thee', but he did nothing of the sort — he went. How wonderfully God wrought on him! He had patiently waited until Abraham was ready to make the break and go; He did not tire of Abraham's dalliance and drop him and take up someone else. He had chosen him and fixed His purpose. for him and He knew He could love His man out of all his fears and weaknesses. His love and patience won, and in winning destroyed not the human vessel He loved, but gently worked out in Abraham His wondrous design for Abraham's life, which was supreme fatherhood, and He named him accordingly. What He calls a man He makes him.

#### 5. God's Miraculous Ability

We humans marvel at the things God does simply because we are human and very limited; but God, being God, knows not any such limitations as we have. Apparently Abraham believed that — he never seemed to find any difficulty in believing God; if God said so it was so; if God spoke concerning the future, 'So shall thy seed be', then it would be so. God, he knew, was able to do it. Abraham was 'fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform'; he had no doubts — they never entered his head. Paul says that on that basis God was prepared to impute righteousness to Abraham, and

that He did so. Abraham not only believed God; he also believed in God's ability: God never makes promise to do anything that is beyond His capabilities.

The tragedy of many Christian lives is that they have tried to make God do what He has not promised them He will do. The trouble arises when people seek to proceed from the general to the particular when trying to exercise faith. Quite contrary to this, scripture mostly concerns those who have done no such thing; Abraham is a most outstanding example of this. God always particularized when dealing with Abraham: He gave him direct instructions; He told him specifically what He would do. God never gave him permission to generalize from His previous activities among men, but carefully told Abraham what He would do and what Abraham must do. It is certain that God is able to do more than He promises to do, and it may often be taken for granted that He will do so. He will do for us all that is consistent with the promise He makes. Although He may not mention all these things in detail, they are included in the commitment, but beyond that we must not presume.

Although God 'is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think', this does not mean that He will necessarily do so for everybody in this world. At any given moment in time, God is always already doing exceeding abundantly above all they ask or think — that is normal with God. But once a person comes into relationship with Him, a new life of communion must develop in which promises may be obtained and fulfilled. These are conditional and necessarily limited to what God is able to do under the conditions and within the terms stated.

As an illustration of this, we may cite God's first promise to Abraham, 'I will shew thee; I will make of thee; I will bless thee,' etc. All this was conditional upon Abraham's obedience to the command, 'Get thee out of ... unto a land'. Although He is God Almighty, He was not able to make Abraham a father of many nations unless he did what God said and fulfilled His requirements. When Abraham obeyed God, His miraculous ability then became ordinary.

## 6. God's Wondrous Grace

For reasons known only to Himself at the time, God called Abraham out of Chaldea. Why it should have been Abraham and not someone else we cannot tell: it was a sovereign act, but it was also an act of grace, for it seems that he deserved it no more than anyone else. It was an act of grace of a most comprehensive nature. God was being gracious to Abraham in view of the grace wherewith He planned to be gracious to all mankind. It was gracious of God to give to Abraham a seed in Isaac, but he was only a prefiguration of Him who was the original promised seed, because of whom Abraham was called, and by virtue of whom Abraham was blessed. God's particular grace to Abraham was all part of His special grace wherein He sent His Son to be the Saviour of the world.

It is not known whether or not there was on earth at that time an established order of true spiritual faith and worship and communion, over which Melehizedek was the high priest and to which Abraham belonged. If there was, and Abraham believed in a past sacrifice of which bread and wine were the symbols and of which he, by grace, was a partaker, it was of God's mercy and grace he did so. To have been included at that early hour of the world's history in the mystery of redemption would have been a wondrous thing. Although holding a different position in God's plans than us, and certainly of different practice from ours, they who lived and worshipped then would have been people of great grace. Truth has been revealed and developed through the millenia to this time and to the

present state of enlightenment about the kingdom of God, and all is of grace, as Abraham discovered.

Even the age or dispensation of law was an adaptation of grace. As David said, by giving Israel the law God confirmed to them the covenant He made with Abraham. All is of grace; there was originally no need for God to do anything. Out of absolute love He wanted to create others, that they may share and enjoy His life with Him, so He did that. When they sinned, without any compulsion except that same love, in sheerest grace, voluntarily, without request, He acted to redress the wrong. Speaking of Abraham, Paul says, 'it is of faith, that it might be by grace; to the end the promise might be sure to all the seed', and those who are of the faith of Abraham shall find the fulness of blessing which grace bestows. All is committed in the promise, and those who commit all, as Abraham did, shall prove the promise true and find abundance of grace to inherit all, for the promise is to all the seed of faith.

### Ye are God's Workmanship

In the whole of scripture there is no better summary of God's ways with a man than these verses in Genesis chapter twelve. They are vital to us, for what was true of Abraham is true for all of us. The Lord's plainly stated intention was to bless the man, and having blessed him to bless those who blessed him also. So powerful was the intention in God's heart that He also added, 'I will curse him that curseth thee'. Abraham was set for blessing if he would obey God, and so is any other man or woman; for this scripture was not written for his sake but for everybody who has since read it. Abraham had finished his course and left the earth hundreds of years before Moses wrote this account for those of us who wish above all to know the truth. This is God's direct testimony of Abraham to Moses, and He gave it because He wants every one of us to understand the way He works with men.

On the basis of these three verses, God's intentions with men may be stated thus: (1) I will show you something; (2) I will make something of you; (3) I will do something with you. We who can look back on Abraham's life can see how fully the Lord worked out these commitments in him, but Abraham did not have that advantage when the Lord first spoke to him. In common with the rest of us he had to prove the Lord as the Lord was proving him; bless the Lord, they found each other to be faithful.

#### 1. I Will Show You Something

We have already considered the fact that it is a principle with God when giving men commandments, that He always gives them freedom to say 'yes' or 'no'. He never forces us to do anything; it is essential to His plans that our obedience to Him is wholehearted and willing. Here is an example of this: He did not first show Abraham the land and then invite him to go there, but told him to get out of the country and away from the people he knew; then He would show him a land. As we know, Abraham obeyed God.

Weak, fearful, unbelieving souls are always full of excuses; they can furnish plenty of commonsense 'reasons' why they do not obey the Lord. As these excuses are completely acceptable to most people, they feel justified in refusing to step out on the Lord's command and promise. For this reason God cannot show them anything He wants to show them, for the revelation is not for the present state, nor for those people. Full of worldly wisdom they may be, and it may pass for great judgement among their friends, but they have no revelation from God. Because of their refusal He has not been able to

show them anything.

## 2. I Will Make Something of You

Only after Abraham had entered the land could God make of him what He wanted him to be. God wants to make something of each of us. What we are by nature, talent, gift, accomplishment, education or culture is not good enough for God. All these are what we have been made by the flesh through parentage, heredity, circumstances, training and nationality; God sets no store by them; they mean nothing to Him. He calls people with a view to making something of them, but before He can do that He has to make someone of them, namely, an obedient person. He must have our trust; until we trust Him wholly at the time He speaks to us and about the thing He then speaks of, and step out 'not knowing whither', we do not place ourselves in His hands sufficiently for Him to make of us what He wants.

Let none despair, God can take up any person who responds to His call and is willing to live by His command, and can make him or her exactly what He wants. No-one is so useless but that God can take him or her up and make something of beauty and usefulness for Himself of that person. We do not know just when and how God will do it, but we do know we must be in His will and in His hands and in the right place for Him to do it.

God was not prepared to make anything of Abraham all the time he was in Ur or Haran; he had to be in Canaan, a strange place to Abraham; he lived in it as a stranger all his days, but that is where the Lord chose to fulfil His promise to him. 'I will bless thee', He said, 'and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing'. It is wonderful to be blessed of God, and it is more wonderful still if God makes a man's name great, so that to hear of it is a blessing. Had Abraham refused to obey God and stayed in Haran, God could not have blessed him so. Whatever God makes a man is always a blessing to others. The blessing of God came on Abraham when he first responded to the voice of God, but O, how much greater the blessing that came on his life in Canaan, when God had led him to the place where He had chosen to work on him and in him. As with Adam when God made him in the beginning, so it was with Abraham; God made Abraham and blessed him, and that is the order of the revelation here, 'I will make of thee a great nation and I will bless thee': made and blessed, God always blesses what He makes — it is very good.

## 3. I Will Do Something With You

It is a most precious thought to the trusting soul that God should want to make us, bless us and use us. No one wants to be useless in this world, but unless we allow God to do something with us we shall be useless for His purposes with our fellow men. It is always what God does in us, more than what He does with or through us, that is of greatest use to Him, for it is that which determines our usefulness: 'in thee shall all nations of the earth be blessed'.

Mary, the mother of our Lord, understood this perfectly, for, when she realized what God had done in her, she said, 'All generations shall call me blessed'. This truth of the inner working of God is the key to everything in Abraham's life; it must also be the key to all usefulness in everyone else's life. God can never make anything of any person's life until He has wrought something in that life. With Abraham, as also with Mary centuries later, that which God wrought within was the seed. What God was saying in reality was, 'In Christ shall all families of the earth be blessed'. But here is the blessing of it to us in our day: that source of blessing is in each one of God's obedient ones now; 'Christ in you',

says Paul, is 'the hope of glory'.

So it is that that great man Abraham was made by God unto us an example of His workings; what God did with him in the flesh is unique: it never needed to be repeated; we are not to demand repetition of it. We are definitely not to seek another's personal blessings. God is big with blessings, and is waiting and wanting to bestow them on all His children; we have no need to be envious of another. All we need to do is to be obedient, to do as we are told, submit to becoming His workmanship to the last detail of our life without and within, and He will show us something, make something of us, and do something with us.

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G.W.North, 1981

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