

THREE SIGNIFICANT MEN

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WHEN in the Old Testament God sets out to secure a people wholly delivered from bondage and separated to Himself in a unique way, and when in order to do so He appears first to Moses at the burning bush, it is remarkable that He identifies Himself by a three-fold designation. 'I am the God of thy father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob' (Exodus 3. 6). And when a little later God sends Moses to the Israelites to announce His intention to them, the same three-fold expression comes as a kind of refrain through His pronouncement. 'Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, hath sent me unto you: this is my name for ever, and this is my memorial unto all generations. Go, and gather the elders of Israel together, and say unto them, The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, hath appeared unto me' (verses 15, 16).

Now we should surely not be wrong in asking ourselves, Why this triple refrain? Especially so since the Lord Jesus Himself uses the same expression in a passage which occurs in each of the first three Gospels. 'As touching the resurrection of the dead, have ye not read that which was spoken unto you by God, saying, I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? God is not the God of the dead, but of the living' (Matthew 22. 31, 32). Why is it, we would like to know, that God employs this three-fold expression when He identifies Himself to mankind? What is the significance for us, His children, of these three recurring names?

The apostle Paul assures us that what is contained in scripture was written for our learning, and here is something which is brought to our attention in both the Old and New Testaments. This suggests that in both the old dispensation and the new God is working to one identical principle. In the old God appeared to Moses with the intention of calling Israel out of Egypt to become His chosen people. In the new Jesus appeared in resurrection to the nucleus of a new people of His choice. If now it is true that we who have been saved by His grace are of that people, may we not confidently expect therefore that with us He is working to the same principle?

Again, what does God mean when He speaks today of 'Israel'? Is there a larger meaning in the term than appears on the surface? For answer let us look at the end of Paul's letter to the Galatians, where he writes of the new creation in which there is neither Jew nor Greek (6. 15), but where all find their common ground in the Cross of Christ. Desiring peace and mercy for all who are Christ's, Paul uses of them the remarkable expression, 'the Israel of God'. I tell you, we who believe in the Lord Jesus are the Israel of God, one with all the true Israel, not a separate people.

But further, if God has chosen us to be His own, then we are right to ask ourselves what history we must pass through under His hand to constitute us such a people of God. Surely it is as we study the lives and experiences of these three significant men that the answer to that question will be given to us. For Abraham, Isaac and Jacob hold a special status in the providence of God and one not held by any others. Theirs is the privilege of leading us all to God in a unique way.

Let us go back to the beginning. As we know all too well, Adam yielded to the temptation to doubt God's love, and so fell from his high destiny and came under condemnation and death. In the course which he had taken all his generations followed him-except Noah. Noah, the exception, was a righteous man and blameless. Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord.

Yet Noah was one and alone; and we are given no clue as to how God dealt with him to bring him to the place where he 'walked with God'. He was righteous, but we are not told whether God specially chose him, nor how He handled him in order to make him righteous. In this particular matter therefore Noah has nothing to teach us, though of course there are many other lessons for us in his story.

But it is when we come to Abraham that we encounter the first example of a man chosen by God. Abraham was an idolater-but God chose him. 'Your fathers dwelt of old time beyond the River, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor: and they served other gods. And I took your father Abraham from beyond the River, and led him throughout all the land of Canaan, and multiplied his seed' (Joshua 24. 2, 3). Yes, God chose this idol-worshipper, laid hold of him, and said, 'He is mine.' According to His will He chose him, Today all God's people are like that. They have responded to His love, they have tasted His salvation, and now they find themselves His chosen. God possesses a people whose startingpoint is His choice of them.

Of course Abraham was not yet a nation, nor was Isaac. Nor indeed was Jacob, until he became Israel. But when Israel was called out of Egypt, then at last God had a people for His own possession. Thus God's people

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may be said to have had two beginnings: Abraham the man, and Israel the nation. First came the individual men of faith. When these had opened the way, then there followed the kingdom of Israel in its fullness. God's dealings with Abraham and with his son and grandson made possible all that came after. So the nation, we may say, is founded upon these pioneers. Without them there would be no Israel. Ultimately it is the combined experience of these three that accounts for the course followed by God's people on earth.

Do you wonder at the special position given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob? Surely it has something to do with the fact that God's name, God's character, is bound up with them. He is their God. When speaking to man God so identifies Himself again and again. We have seen too that Jesus names them as evidence of the resurrection. Furthermore in Luke 13. 28 He says, 'Ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets, in the kingdom of God.' Once again it is just these three who are singled out by name. Everything turns on them. Why do they have this position?

Historically they had it because, as we have said, God wanted a people. Today they have it because God's present aim is precisely that—to take out from among the nations a people for His name (Acts 15. 14). And that people's history begins with Abraham because God begins with Abraham. God worked in that man's life because he was to have a special experience to transmit to them, and of course the same is true also of Isaac and of Jacob. With each man God moved to the same goal, namely, to mediate to His people through him a unique experience of Himself.

Moreover, while it is a fact that God began the creation of a people with Abraham, yet He did not of course possess that people until Jacob's history was completed and the twelve tribes were in view. What the three of them went through therefore must together be the spiritual experience of all God's chosen. The history of just one or two out of the three is not enough. Nothing one-sided will meet the divine requirements. We should not content ourselves with a merely partial enjoyment. As the Israel of God we must have, in however small a measure, the full experience of them all. It is the intention of God that all His true people should say of themselves, 'He is to me the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob.' Let us not stop short of this. No doubt Ishmael could call Him 'the God of Abraham', but that will not do. Esau could go further and say 'the God of Abraham and of Isaac', but that too is insufficient. Spiritual experience is not summed up in Abraham and Isaac. Jacob's name must be included as well. To the true Israel He is the God of all their fathers.

Many of God's children say, 'I have a lack; I am conscious of a need; yet I am unable to define what it is I need.' At some point in our history many of us seek from God a 'second blessing', often with little clear idea of what the content of such a blessing may be. Let me tell you that it includes not one thing merely but three. In the pages that follow we shall seek to set forth from the history of these three patriarchs what is the nature of the threefold blessing God has for His people.

God is the true Originator, from whom all His new creation springs. We might fittingly borrow here the words of the Lord Jesus, who said, 'My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.' This is a lesson we have all to learn; that we can originate nothing. God alone is the one who begins everything (Genesis 1. 1; 1 Peter 1. 3-5). Though this touches our pride, yet the day we really see this as a fact is a day of happiness for us. It means that, where eternal values are concerned, we have recognized that all is from God.

Abraham was not a bit like Noah. Noah, it seems, stood out as righteous in clear distinction from all those around him. Abraham on the other hand was just like his neighbours, an idolater. Amid such circumstances God chose him. Abraham had no beginning of his own. God took the initiative. Nothing is more precious than the sovereignty of God. Abraham never thought of Canaan as his goal. He went out, not knowing whither he was bound, but in response to a call of God.

Blessed is the man who doesn't know! This man even moved house 'not knowing whither'. When we really understand that God is the Originator of all that matters in life, we no longer have such cocksureness about what we are going to do. We gladly say, 'If the Lord will.'

Even Abraham's son came from God; he had to be given in a unique way. Nothing that originated from Abraham himself, including his other son Ishmael, could serve God's purpose. He learned that God was the Father, the Source, the Fount of everything. Without Him there is nothing at all. Unless God does a thing, we can do nothing. Learning this lesson, we begin to be 'the people of God'.

Isaac is pre-eminently the son. He illustrates in a remarkable way the work of God in Christ. This is made very clear for us by the apostle Paul in Galatians, where Isaac, the heir, is said to have been born 'after the Spirit', and where we who are Christ's are called 'Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise' (4. 29; 3. 29). 'When the

fulness of the time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, that he might redeem them which were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons. And because ye are sons, God sent forth the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, Abba, Father' (4. 4-6).

Abraham is distinguished by what he did, by the great movements which started with him. Jacob is notable for the much suffering he passed through. Between these two great men stands Isaac, a very ordinary man, with nothing special about him except his ordinariness. As you read the Genesis narrative you cannot find any great feature by which Isaac is distinguished. Look at the following facts. Abraham, we are told, amassed much wealth; not so Isaac. Isaac only received the inheritance, he did nothing for it, nothing to bring it into being. What in fact did he do? We are told that he dug certain wells, but when we look at the story in Genesis 26 it appears at once that he only unstopped those which his father had previously dug and which had been filled up with earth.

What, then, is the lesson which Isaac teaches us? It is this, that we have nothing which we were not given. If nothing was by my own originating, then equally surely nothing is by my own attaining. As Paul puts it: 'What hast thou that thou didst not receive? Abraham's experience is very precious to us, teaching us that God is our Father, the source to us of everything. But Abraham's experience without Isaac's is not enough. God is also the Son, the Giver. We all know that forgiveness of sins is a gift that must be received. So also is victory over sin. We have nothing of ourselves that is not fundamentally God's gift to us. So we find that to Isaac God promised precisely what He had already given to Abraham (Genesis 26. 3-5).

Isaac was born into wealth. We do not progress, we do not advance into wealth: we are born into it. This is true of every spiritual experience we have as Christians. For example, 'The law of the spirit of life' which 'made me free from the law of sin and of death', is something which I possess in Christ Jesus, not in myself. It is not mine as something I have attained; it is what I have received. It is like the miracle of life which keeps the birds in the air in defiance of gravity. It is designed to deliver us from sin and death; and it is God's gift to us. But how many of us Christians really know its secret? No wonder the sparrows think we have no heavenly Father like they have! Yet to be wealthy when you have been born into wealth is surely no problem.

We have said that the principle of Isaac's life is the principle of receiving. This can be seen in the difference between the wives of these three men. Except that she was Abraham's half-sister, we do not know who Sarah was nor where she came from. We know only that he brought her out of Ur of the Chaldees with him. Jacob was a man who bargained for everything; he even bargained for his wife. He made his own choice. Isaac never even saw Rebekah before she was chosen. His father said who she must be, chose her, sent for her, paid for her dowry. In his role as son, Isaac received everything. And we, before God, possess nothing that is not His endowment.

So we come to Jacob. He presents us with another significant principle in God's dealings with His children. Many of us can see that God is the source of everything. We accept in theory at least that we have to receive everything from Him. Why then is it that so many of us do not take the gift, but go on struggling for it? The answer is that the Jacob principle, the principle of natural strength, so dominates us. We are so sure that we shall achieve God's end by our efforts.

This is why no teaching on victory over sin, no doctrine of sanctification is complete which does not deal radically with the strength of our nature. Without this essential the results they produce are transient only.

We who are Christ's are heirs according to promise, but the inheritance we receive in the Son, and the road which God wants us to walk in enjoyment of that inheritance-these depend upon the touch of God on our natural strength. Jacob was a most clever, able man. There was nothing he could not do. He cheated his own brother, deceived his father and contrived to relieve his uncle of all his possessions. But this cleverness, this talent for self-advancement had no place in the will and plan of God for him.

It must all be brought to naught, and the experiences of Jacob by which this was accomplished well illustrate the disciplinary work of the Holy Spirit.

Everything Jacob set his hand to went wrong, even from his birth. When the twins were born, we are told that Jacob's hand was found to be holding his brother's heel; nevertheless he was not born the elder son. He sought by guile to secure the birthright, but it was he who in fact had to leave home and flee. He had set his heart on Rachel as a bride, but he found himself first of all married to Leah. He set out eventually from Paddan-aram with much wealth, most of it gained by questionable means, but he had to be prepared to give it all away to his brother Esau on the journey home in order to save his own life. Here is the discipline of the

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Spirit. God's hand is in judgment upon everything Jacob does while relying upon his own craftiness. People who are specially clever have to learn, if necessary through suffering, that it is not by the wisdom of men that we live, but by God.

Jacob learned one great lesson. He was on the eve of losing everything, all he had accumulated, all he had worked for. He could think of a way of meeting man, and he devised a plan that he hoped would appease Esau and at least save his own skin. But then he met God. He met God, and was lamed. God had touched Jacob himself. Up to that day he had been Jacob, 'the supplanter'. From that day on he was Israel, 'a prince with God'. This was the beginning of the kingdom. We are not overstating the facts when we say that he was a different man from that day forward. He who had deceived others was himself now deceived by others, even by his own sons. The old, crafty Jacob would easily have seen through their deception. The new Jacob was completely taken in. He believed them, and wept, saying: 'It is my son's coat; an evil beast has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn in pieces.'

This, the breaking of the strength of nature, is the point to which all God's people must come. 'Jacob was left alone; and there wrestled a man with him until the breaking of the day.' We may get along well enough in the dark, but the light of God is our undoing. We are finished. This is the discipline of the Spirit.

Abraham saw God as Father. He proved Him to be the Source of all things. Isaac received the inheritance as a son. It is a blessed thing to have a gift bestowed upon us by God. Yet even what we receive we may seize upon and spoil. Jacob attempted to do this, and was only saved from the consequences by having his natural strength undone. There must be a day in our experience when this happens. The characteristic of those who truly know God is that they have no faith in their own competence, no reliance upon themselves. When Jacob learned this lesson, then in truth there began to be an Israel of God.

Let me say something to reassure you. God is not expecting to find those who are naturally 'born good', and who therefore have no need for His dealings with them. He knows well that they are not to be found. He chooses ordinary folk like you and me, who are willing to receive from Him His gift of grace, and who are willing also to submit to this discipline in order that the gift should not be abused. Abraham displays the purpose of God in His choice of us sinners. Isaac shows us the life of God made available to us in the gift of His Son. Jacob sets forth the ways of God in the Holy Spirit's handling of us to conserve and expand what we have received. He cuts short our old, self-willed nature, to make way for our new nature in Christ to work in willing co-operation with God. Thus the Spirit moves to attain God's ends by His own means. This is the goal of all God's dealings with His own.