

T. Austin-Sparks:

NOTE. The following message is the first of one of the series given at the conference in Switzerland this year [1964]. It is printed here practically as it was spoken. In due course we expect that the whole series will be published in book form.

"Didst not thou, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before thy people Israel, and gavest it to the seed of Abraham thy friend for ever?" (2 Chronicles 20:7).

"But thou, Israel, my servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, the seed of Abraham my friend" (Isaiah 41:8).

"And the scripture was fulfilled which saith, And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness; and he was called the friend of God" (James 2:23).

We have announced that in these evening gatherings our subject is going to be: "Into the Heart of God", and when we speak about the heart of God, we mean friendship with God, for friendship means that the one has entered into the heart of the other. It is a matter of heart relationship.

It is a wonderful thing that that is possible between man and God! It was God who said of David that he was "a man after my heart" (Acts 13:22), and we have read that three times in the Bible Abraham was called 'the friend of God'. Indeed, God Himself said of him: "Abraham, my friend" which means that he had entered into the heart of God. That entering was progressive. It did not happen all at once, but was a lifelong movement, a spiritual pilgrimage which ended in the heart of God. It had eight distinct stages - there were eight different movements in the life of Abraham which ended right there in the heart of God, and we shall hope to consider some of these stages.

First of all, however, let us remind ourselves that the Word of God reveals that there is a spiritual pilgrimage. Peter said: "Beloved, I beseech you as sojourners and pilgrims" (1 Peter 2:11), and the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews put it in this way: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things make it manifest that they are seeking after a country of their own... But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly" (Hebrews 11:13,14,16). You see what that says: They all died in faith not having received the promises. They had seen them and greeted them from a long way off. All these heroes of faith mentioned in that eleventh chapter of the Letter to the Hebrews are still looking for a country, that is, waiting for their inheritance, and chapter twelve makes it quite clear that although they have left this earth, they are one with us in 'looking'. They "all died in faith, not having received the promises... God having foreseen some better thing concerning us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect" (Hebrews 11:1,40. R.V. margin). So Abraham is still 'looking' with us for the heavenly country.

There is a whole group of New Testament words which describe the believer as a pilgrim and a stranger, and these many Greek words relate to people in the Roman Empire who had no settled abode anywhere. They were just visitors to the place. They had come to stay for a night, for a week, for a month, or for a year, but no matter how long they stayed, they did not belong to the place. They had no permanent residence there, and our New Testament is built upon that truth. All these Greek words are taken over and applied to Christians. When Peter said: "I beseech you as sojourners and pilgrims", he did not say: 'Be pilgrims and sojourners' but 'You are'.

The first five books of the Bible are books of a pilgrimage. The Bible opens with man at home. God had made a home for man, and he was there with God in that home. It was called 'Paradise'; but man lost his home, was driven out from it, and he became a stranger, a homeless stranger, a displaced person. He was a wanderer in the earth and a foreigner to God's home, all because he was out of friendship with God. When that friendship broke down, man lost his home, and he has been a pilgrim and stranger in the earth ever since. There is no restful home for the soul of man in this world because the world is no friend of God. That is how the Bible begins, and then that truth is broken up, firstly in the case of Abraham. All through his life Abraham was a pilgrim. We are told that he lived in a tent, and he moved up and down the land with that tent. You may think it is all right to be in a tent for a week's holiday (although that depends upon circumstances) but I doubt whether there is anyone here who would like to spend their whole life in a tent. Abraham was one of those of whom it is written: "They are seeking after a country of their own" - a place which they could call 'home'.

We pass from Abraham to Israel, who for forty years of their life were pilgrims and strangers in a wilderness. God had promised them all a home, a rest at the end of the journey, but they never received that promise in

their lifetime - "These all died in faith, not having received the promises". Even when they went into the land of promise they never had rest. Why was this so? Because they were in a world which God had rejected and repudiated, a world with which God was not in friendship, and a world which was no friend of God.

That brings us to our first stage in the spiritual pilgrimage, and we must look at other passages of Scripture.

"Now these are the generations of Terah. Terah begat Abraham, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begat Lot. And Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees" (Genesis 11:27,28).

"Now the Lord said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will shew thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing: and I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse: and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed. So Abram went, as the Lord had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him" (Genesis 12:1-4).

"And Terah look Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his son's son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan" (Genesis 11:31).

God had said to Abraham: 'Get thee out of thy country, thy kindred, thy father's house, unto a land that I will give thee'. Many hundreds of years afterward Stephen said: "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran" (Acts 7:2). How I would like to stay here to tell you something about Ur of the Chaldees! What a great city it was, and what a wonderful civilisation existed right back there at that time! I would like, too, to tell you something about father Terah, and about his three sons, the eldest of whom was Abraham, and about the kind of life they were living in that great city; of how the son, Haran, died there, and of how Haran's son, Lot, joined himself to Uncle Abraham, but time will not allow us to talk about all that, however interesting it may be. We have to come to this first step into the heart of God.

God had said emphatically and precisely. "Get thee out"! In those words it is quite evident that God had repudiated the old world of Abraham, and, so far as he was concerned, had finished with it, and finished with it in finality. In effect, He said to Abraham: 'Now that is absolutely finished with for you'.

This marks the first step into the heart of God. God's heart was not in Chaldea, but outside of Chaldea.

Now mark carefully: this was not a stage in the spiritual journey, but a definite, basic step. There was a point at which one foot of Abraham was in Chaldea and the other was outside, and when he lifted that one foot and put it at the side of the other he had crossed the line. There was just a line between Chaldea and outside of Chaldea. In our New Testament language: between the world and outside of the world. It was intended by God to be absolute and final at that point. He was allowing no compromise - Abraham's heart had to go over the line toward the heart of God. All the phases and the stages will follow that. This basic decision and step will afterward be applied and tested all through his life. Many situations, many trials and many difficulties will arise to challenge that step, and every one of those circumstances will ask the question: Did you really mean it when you began? How far did you really mean it when you said that you were going all the way with God?

You see, there stands right at the beginning of the spiritual pilgrimage, which ends in the heart of God, this crisis: the crisis which is in these words of God - "Get thee out"! All God's intention and purpose are bound up with our reaction to that first command.

Perhaps many of you older Christians do not need this word, but there are a number of young people, and there may be some older in years who are young in the journey. What God is saying is this: If you are at all concerned with finding a place in the heart of God, this is where you must begin. You must come to this first step of oneness with God in His repudiation of this world.

You see, what we are concerned with is the heart of God, that is, friendship with God. It is said of Noah that in building the ark "he condemned the world" (Hebrews 11:7). It was not a matter of whether the world believed that it was being condemned. The fact is that it was a condemned world, and it was only a matter of time before the flood came and destroyed it. It was a good thing that there were eight persons in the heart of God! They escaped the coming judgment.

Jesus made this basic separation from the world when He was baptized. and used His baptism as a means of

declaring to heaven, to men and to hell that His heart was separated unto God. At His baptism Jesus took sides with the heart of God against this world, and declared that His heart was not in this world - it was with the Father. Every Christian is supposed to be baptized. You may have different opinions as to what it is, how it should be, but if you are going to take Jesus as your example, and what the New Testament teaches on this matter, you have to recognize that baptism is a declaration that you have stepped over a line and that now your heart is wholly with God and out of the world. No sooner had Jesus been baptized than He began to be tested as to the step which He had taken. Those temptations in the wilderness by the devil were to test Him as to whether He meant what He had done. Satan offered Him all the kingdoms of this world and all the glory thereof, and the test was: Was the heart of Jesus out of the world or not? He stood faithfully to the position that He had taken and repudiated the world, and if you want to know what Jesus thought about the world you have only to read one chapter in the New Testament - the seventeenth chapter of the Gospel by John. There Jesus refers repeatedly to the world and prays that His disciples might be delivered from it. He said: "They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world" (John 17:16).

Now notice something: What was the world to which Jesus was referring? The only world that the disciples knew was the religious world, and that was the only world that Jesus lived in in the days of His flesh. What do you mean by the world? You see, it can be a very religious thing. There can be a lot of worldly religion - there can be as much of the world in religion as there is out of it. The world is a spirit, a mentality, a power. In one word, it is all that which is not in friendship with God.

God was no friend of that religious world in the days of Jesus. The world means independence from God, being able to get on without Him in its own way. It is self-centred, not God-centred; it is governed, deceived and blinded by Satan.

Now the point is just this: We shall never get anywhere in this spiritual pilgrimage until we have fully and finally settled this one question. One of the most painful things that we see is the way in which all young Christians do not go on with the Lord. They come to a point where they say that they are going with the Lord, they make a decision for the Lord, and there it stops. So many do not go any further than that - and here is all this immense purpose of God. They have only taken the negative side of His command and have not listened to the positive side: "Unto the land that I will shew thee..." ... 'I will make thee a blessing and thou shalt be a blessing' ... "in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed".

You see, God has called us 'out' for a mighty 'in'. He did not just say to Abraham "Get thee out"! The separation was governed by the great purpose of being made a mighty blessing to others.

One world is repudiated, but God does not believe in vacuums, so He must put another world in its place. Abraham was God's new beginning for a new world. He was called "the father of a multitude of nations" (Genesis 17:5). The father gives the character to the family, and the very first thing about the character of this man was that his heart was wholly set on God. If we are truly spiritual children of Abraham, we must take his character.

Well, that is where we begin, the first step in the spiritual pilgrimage to the heart of God. Whatever we may say about ourselves, in our faults and failures, may it be true of every one of us that we have a heart wholly for God, for this is the way that ends with God being able to say, of you and of me, "My Friend".