

Watchman Nee:

THE divine activities in this age can be shown to have two great aspects, the direct work of God according to His eternal purpose, and His remedial work of redemption. In the revelation of Scripture these two interlock. We may distinguish between them, but we cannot separate them. God's work of recovery contains both a remedy for sin and a reaffirmation of His eternal purpose for man.

Even when God is dealing with the first step of justification He has the goal always in view. That is why we are told in Galatians 3. 8 that the scripture, 'foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel before hand unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all the nations be blessed'.

Abraham was the first man to receive the call of God. He was called because he was chosen; the call implies the choice. And he was chosen for no other reason than that God was pleased to choose him.

In the Book of Genesis God makes three beginnings, with Adam and his creation, with Noah after the Flood, and with Abraham at the time of his call. Noah was sent forth into the new world which he was appointed to govern. His generation saw the beginning of organized social life, of law between man and man. God's legislation through Noah was designed to give that new world a moral character, from which, however, it turned away.

Abraham's task was a different one. He was not called either to administer or to legislate for the nations of this world; indeed, he was to turn his back on the world. He already had a country of his own, but it was his only to leave. He had a kindred-to leave. He had a home-to leave. He looked for the city which has foundations (Hebrews 11. 10); he himself had no city. He was a pilgrim. Unlike Noah, he was to establish and to improve nothing. Noah had a task to do, to establish order and to give divine instruction to the world. Abraham in his life gave nothing to the world. He was a pilgrim, called to pass through it. His links were essentially with heaven.

Abraham was called out of the world. 'By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed to go out unto a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing whither he went' (Hebrews 11. 8). There is no call except to come out.

Abraham was at home in the world with its established order, its advanced culture, its justifiable pride of attainment, and he was called to come out of that world to fulfil the purpose of God. That is the divine calling. There had been nothing wrong with Noah's way of dealing directly with the world in order to improve it; it had been God's appointed way for Noah. But when it led nowhere, and when accordingly God set Himself to His long term task of recovery, He began with the call to Abraham, not now to improve the world but to come out of it.

Today God's principle of working is that of Abraham, not of Noah. At Ur of the Chaldees it was not that God had forgotten the world but that He was going to deal with it through Abraham, and no longer directly. Through this one man He would deal with the whole world. Abraham was the vessel into which God's wisdom and power and grace were now deposited, in order that through him God might open the door of blessing to all men.

How then, we may ask ourselves, should one chosen as God's vessel for so great a task know His God? For the responsibility resting upon this one man was tremendous. To use man's finite way of speaking, the whole plan of God, the whole divine will and purpose for man, depended on Abraham. It stood or fell with him. Need we wonder, then, that Abraham had to go through so much trial and testing in order to bring him to know God, so that men could speak of 'the God of Abraham', and so that God could call Himself by that name without moral violation?

Abraham, we saw, is the father of all them that believe. This is an interesting expression, for it shows us that all spiritual principle is based on birth, not on preaching. Men are not changed by listening to some doctrine or by following a course of instructive teaching. They are changed by birth. First God chose one man who believed, and from him were born the many. When you meet a man who believes and who is saved, you become aware that he has something you have not got. That something is not just information; it is life. He has been born again. God has planted living seed in the soil of his heart. Have we this living seed in us? If we have, then we must give birth to others. Paul spoke of his sons in the faith. He was their spiritual father, not merely their preacher or counsellor.

The nations are blessed through Abraham, not because they hear a new doctrine but because they have received a new life. The new Jerusalem will witness the perfection of that blessing of the nations. It was

Abraham's privilege to begin it.

Abraham's story falls naturally into two parts: his call (Genesis 11-14) in which the land is the central theme; and his posterity (Genesis 15-24) in which of course Isaac figures predominantly. We begin with the first of these.

We shall best understand the call of Abraham if we see it in its proper setting. `The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran' (Acts 7. 2). Nimrod the mighty rebel had established his kingdom in Babel. His subjects had set up their great tower in the land of Shinar, and they had been scattered. The nations everywhere had not only forgotten God but, as we have seen, were idolaters. The whole world worshipped false gods, and Abraham's family was no exception. In this Abraham was very different from Abel and Enoch and Noah. They seem to have been men of backbone, strikingly different from all those around them. They stood out against the stream and refused to be dragged along by it. Not so Abraham. He was indistinguishable from those around him. Were they idolaters? So was he. Why, after all, should he be any different?

The work of God started with such a man. Clearly then it was not in him, in his upright character or in his moral determination that lay the source of his choice, but in God. Of His own will God chose him. Abraham learnt the meaning of the fatherhood of God. This was a vital lesson. If Abraham had not been just the same as all the rest, then after his call he could have looked back and based his new circumstances on some fundamental difference in himself. But he was not different. The difference lay in God, not in Abraham.

Learn to recognize God's sovereignty. Learn to rejoice in God's pleasure. This was Abraham's first lesson, namely that God, not himself, was the Source. Our salvation is entirely from God; there is no reason in us at all why He should save us. And if this is true of our salvation it is true of all that follows from it. If the source of our life is in God, so also is everything else. Nothing starts from us.

From Acts chapter 7 we learn that Abraham was called by God while he was yet in Ur of the Chaldees, before he came to Haran. In his first words before the Jews' council Stephen begins from this fact. `Brethren and fathers, hearken. The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham. Then came he . . . and dwelt in Haran.' That was enough. The man who sees that glory knows he must respond. He cannot do otherwise. Stephen himself was in a tight corner when he said these words; but at the end of his terrible experience we are told (verse 55) that being full of the Holy Ghost he looked up stedfastly into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God. He who appeared to Abraham at the beginning and He whom Stephen saw at the end were one and the same God of glory. In the final issue, what is an extra stone or two to one who sees the glory of God?

Both the call of Abraham and the reason for his response lay in God. Once behold the God of glory and you must believe, you cannot do otherwise. Thus it was by faith - faith in the God of glory - that Abraham, when he was called, obeyed to go out.

But, you say, my faith is too small. I could never have faith like Abraham's!

This is where Genesis chapter 11 comes to our help. If it were not for Stephen's words in Acts we should never know that God had called Abraham while he was still in Ur of the Chaldees. If we only had the account given to us in Genesis we would get a different impression. In Genesis 11.31 we read: `And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his son's son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there.' It seems clear that the events described in this verse follow after the call spoken of in Acts 7.2 and Hebrews 11. 8. He had heard the call and believed yet Terah, we are told, took him out. That was the size of Abraham's faith at the beginning. He left his country, but he only left part of his kindred and none of his father's house. It was his father who led him forth. We do not know how it happened, but the one who was not called became the one who led out, and the one called out became the follower.

Noah took his family into the ark with him, his wife, his sons and his sons' wives, all of them. He was told to do so; and what he did was right, for the situation there was different. The ark typifies salvation, and salvation is designed to embrace every individual man. The more there are who come into Christ by faith, the happier we ought to be. But Abraham's bringing with him (or accompanying) his parents and their grandson Lot, was wrong. For here it was not a matter of amassing individuals for salvation. Abraham was called to be himself a chosen vessel in relation to God's purpose, a purpose designed to bring blessing to all the families of the earth. There was no way of taking with him into this purpose others who were not so chosen. Abraham believed, but

his understanding was faulty and therefore his faith was deficient. In other words, he was not an exceptional believer; he was just like us!

In the event Abraham was taken by his father only a part of the way to Canaan; then the movement stopped. 'They came unto Haran, and dwelt there.' He had heard God's call, but he did not appreciate the goal to which that call was leading, and so he saw no reason to pay such a price of loneliness. This explains why we murmur when God deals with us. Remember again, this is not the history of how a man was saved but how he became a vessel unto honour. A valuable vessel or a well-finished tool cannot be created without a high price being paid. Only poor quality goods can be produced cheaply. Let us not misunderstand God's dealings with us. Through Abraham God wanted to introduce a whole new economy in His relations with man, but Abraham did not yet appreciate this fact. Nor do we know what God wants to do with us. If He uses special trials and testings it is surely for a special purpose. If our hope is truly in God, there is no need for us to ask why.

So Abraham 'came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran'. He thought it quite sufficient to go only half-way. Yet the time in Haran was time wasted. Terah means 'delay', 'duration'. The years of Terah's life ran out and they were years in which God did nothing.

Then, when Abraham was already seventy-five years old, there came to him God's second call. 'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee' (Genesis 12. 1). Abraham had shown himself less than thorough in his obedience so far, but God, praise His name! did not let go His hold upon this man. 'From thence, when his father was dead, God removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell' (Acts 7. 4). With tears we thank God for that. In Haran everything comes to a standstill, but nothing is more precious than the divine persistence. That is why we are Christians today; that is why we continue. God's patient persistence with Abraham brought him to Canaan. Do not let us be ashamed to admit that in this life of call and response, nothing is of ourselves, all is of God. We would stay on in Haran for ever, but the divine perseverance would not let go of us. What amazing grace, that Abraham could still become 'the father of all them that believe', even after the wasted years at Haran!

'And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came' (Genesis 12. 5). God had said, 'Come into the land which I shall shew thee' (Acts 7. 3), and now at last he arrived. Abraham's coming into the land was of great significance. It was not a question of his owning a piece of territory, for in fact he owned none, but of the power of God taking possession of the whole land of Canaan. And where God's power took possession, there Abraham had his inheritance.

And so it is with us today; for this is the point, that our inheritance is the ground we take and hold for God now. We are called of God to a given situation, to maintain there the sovereign rule of heaven, and where the kingdom of heaven is thus effective, there is our inheritance. This is the sorrow of our day, that God's people do not know how to maintain God's power on the earth. They know individual salvation, but they do not know the government of God. And yet our inheritance is bound up with this; we cannot separate our inheritance from God's power. Unless God's rule is established and His enemies are overthrown, we have no inheritance. Remember Samson's riddle: 'Out of the eater came forth meat, and out of the strong came forth sweetness' (Judges 14. 14). It is when the lion is slain that we discover the honey.

The kingdom of heaven means that, on the one hand, God is King. Despite all appearance to the contrary, He has dominion on the earth. And on the other hand it means that He is ours. This God is our God for ever and ever. Do we know what it is to affirm this fact today, by faith, here in the place where He has set us?

'And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Shechem, unto the oak of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land' (12. 6). These place-names are interesting. Shechem means 'a shoulder', and may contain the idea of obedience. Moreh means 'a teacher' and suggests understanding and knowledge. How striking it is that these two ideas should be brought together here in the record, for Jesus Himself said, 'If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know' (John 7. 17). All knowledge is the outcome of obedience; everything else is just information. It is when we do His will that we see His will. Abraham had arrived in the land, and now he began to know why.

For here the Lord appeared to him, assuring him that he was on the right road. 'Unto thy seed will I give this land,' He said. This entire land, no less, was his inheritance. Now for the first time we are told that Abraham sacrificed, building an altar to the Lord who had appeared to him. These altars are altars of burnt offering, not of sin offering. They represent Abraham's total committal of himself to God. A man cannot do that until he has first seen Him. But as was true of Abraham, to see Him once is enough. It draws out from us everything we

have.

Abraham did not come to rest at Shechem. `He removed from thence unto the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, having Bethel on the west and Ai on the east: and there he builded an altar unto the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord' (12. 8). Here is a second altar. Abraham built the first on his arrival in Canaan, when he saw God, understood, and gave himself. The second he built in the place where he pitched his tent, the place which he made his dwelling place. In doing so he confessed that God had brought him to rest here.

After his visit to Egypt he came back to this second altar. This was the place where God wanted him to be. It was a token of the eventual accomplishment of all God's purpose.

His tent was pitched between Bethel and Ai. Again the two place-names are significant. Bethel means `the house of God'; Ai means `a heap of ruins'. His dwelling lay between them, with Bethel to the west and Ai to the east. Remember that later on in Israel's history the tabernacle of the testimony opened eastwards, so that a man entering it faced west. Here at Abraham's dwelling place if a man faced towards the house of God his back was towards a heap of ruins.

This has a lesson for us. Ai reminds us that the old creation is under judgment. Bethel, not Ai, is the place where Abraham dwells (13. 3), the place where through him the power of God will be felt throughout the land. And Bethel is the house of God, or in New Testament terms, the Church, the Body of Christ. Individuals cannot bring to bear upon the earth the sovereign rule of heaven; only the Body, the fellowship of believers in Christ, can do this. But to come to this we must leave behind us that heap of ruins! We bring the kingdom of heaven into this earth only when our natural strength has been brought to nought at the Cross and we are living by the common life of the one new man in Christ. This is the witness of Canaan.