

FATHER OF THE FAITHFUL

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on March 5, 1961 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

One of the most impressive experiences anywhere in the world is to stand beneath a towering redwood tree in Yosemite or Sequoia National Park in California. These trees, oldest living things on earth, are a remarkable link with antiquity. For example, the General Sherman tree is more than 3800 years old, which means that it was a seedling in the time of Abraham. Still living in the 20th century A.A. it began its life in the 20th century B.C. It serves as an unusual bridge to transport us back nearly 4,000 years to the lifetime of Abraham.

In the New Testament there are two passages of scripture that I would like to read as an introduction to a study of the life of Abraham. The first is found in James 2:23, where we read, "And Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness; and he was called the friend of God." A parallel passage is found in Galatians 3:6-9 where the apostle Paul said, "Even as Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned unto him for righteousness, know therefore that they that are of the faith, the same are sons of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all the nations be blessed. So they that are of faith are blessed with the faithful Abraham."

In Hebrew, the name Abram, or in its later form, Abraham, means "exalted father." Because of the life that he lived he later came to be known as "father of the faithful." It is impressive to remember that the story of Abraham begins in the final part of Genesis 11 and continues through Genesis 25, extending for more than fourteen chapters. More space is given to the telling of the story of Abraham than to the telling of the story of any other man in the book of Genesis. Even in this book whose fifty chapters were designed to tell of the creation of the universe and of the first 2500 years of God's dealing with man, more than fourteen chapters were reserved for Abraham. Surely, from this emphasis in Genesis, and from the references throughout the rest of the Bible to Abraham, we discover that Abraham was one of God's favorite followers. His life is certainly worthy of our study.

Interesting Facts

Abraham was born in Ur of Chaldees, in Mesopotamia, about 2,000 B.C. Bishop James Ussher, whose chronology of events in the Bible is so widely used, dated the birth in the year 1996 B.C. It is also interesting to know that Dr. W. F. Albright, of Johns Hopkins University, dean of present-day archeologists, arrives at about the same date through an entirely different method of approach. Dr. Albright, through the study of the archeological remains of important cities of the ancient past, mentioned in the story of Abraham but no longer existing, places the date of Abraham's existence at about 2000 B.C. Abraham lived in the 20th century B.C., as testified by both the Biblical record and modern archeological findings.

In Genesis 12:1-3, we find God's call to Abraham in these words, "Now Jehovah 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 show 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." This was a tremendous challenge, for it involved pulling up his roots from the most advanced civilization of his day and moving into a relatively unknown frontier. However, Abraham responded to God's call. He moved to Haran, and then when his father, Terah had died, he moved on into the frontier. He was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. Evidently he traveled around the "verdant crescent," thus avoiding the huge, impassible desert of Arabia. This took him through the city of Damascus, which is evidenced by the fact that later on he referred to his chief steward as "one born in my house," and still later identified this most trustworthy servant as Eliezer of Damascus. Evidently one of his servants bore a child at Damascus while traveling with Abraham's family on the journey into Canaan.

The Spot on the Record

During the first ten years or so of Abraham's sojourn in Canaan, he was not tied to any particular place for very long, but moved about somewhat as a nomad. Somewhere toward the end of this period he went down into Egypt because of the famine in the land. There Abraham, this great man of faith, fell into sin, because of a lack of faith. To protect his own life, he told Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister. Although this was entirely correct, as explained later in Genesis 20:12, where he says that Sarah was the daughter of his father, but not the daughter of his mother, it fell upon Pharaoh's ears as a lie. This half-truth became a complete lie. As we read the story of the life of this good man, we wish we might erase this rare moral failure, but it stands there for all time as a part of the record. Surely this ought to be a warning to us to guard our lives and keep them from momentary failure, for these failures stand eternally as a part of the record.

During this same period Abraham returned to Canaan and became very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold." (Gen. 13:2). His nephew, Lot, also prospered to the point that his herdsmen were continually disputing with the herdsmen of Abraham. Abraham very generously gave Lot the choice of grazing areas and Lot quite selfishly chose the well-watered plains of the Jordan valley. As the

scripture says, "Lot dwelt in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent as far as Sodom." (Gen. 13:12). Abraham turned in the other direction, climbed the hills that formed the backbone of Palestine, and settled at the Oaks of Mamre, which we know later on as Hebron, some thirty miles south of what would later become Jerusalem. It was at this point that God renewed his covenant with Abraham saying, "Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which thou seest to thee will I give it, and to thy seed forever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then may thy seed also be numbered." (Gen. 13:14-16).

For the next fifteen years Abraham lived in Hebron. There he became even richer than before, as indicated in part by the fact that he had 318 armed men in his household. Counting the women and children, there must have been between 500 and 1000 people who make up the "family" of Abraham. It was during this period that he was also promised an heir. He and Sarah took the matter into their own hands and through the medium of Hagar, an Egyptian servant women, Ishmael was born when Abraham was eighty-six. He was not destined to be the heir, for God sent Isaac as the chosen one when Abraham was 100.

### God Proves Abraham

Still another fifteen years were passed while Abraham lived in the South, grazing his flocks between Hebron and the Negeb. The most significant event in Abraham's life occurred during this interval, for it was here that God decided to "prove" Abraham by asking him to "Take now thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, 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." (Gen. 22:2). As difficult as it must have been, since Isaac was the apple of his eye, Abraham immediately did as God required. He bound Isaac, placed him upon an altar, and drew the knife to slay him. It was at this point that God stayed the hand of the executioner, saying, "Lay not thy hand upon the lad, neither do thou anything unto him; for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thy only son, from me." (Gen. 22:12). The Jewish historian, Josephus, thinks that Isaac was a young man of twenty-five years at the time of this incident. We know that he must have been at least in his teens and possibly Josephus is correct. If such be the case, surely Isaac deserves some credit in this story for being an obedient son willing to submit to his aged father, though he must have been stronger and fleet of foot than the aged Abraham. Abraham stood the test that God provided and therefore comes down through history as the "friend of God."

Another twenty years or so were passed in Hebron, during which time Sarah became old and eventually died at the age of 127 years. Abraham purchased a field from Ephron the Hittite and buried his dead out of his sight in the Cave of Machpelah. This became the most famous burying place of the Bible, with the single exception of the tomb in which Jesus was buried. Still another thirty-five or more years were passed with Abraham living with Isaac, grazing their flocks in the South. Finally Abraham died at the age of 175 years and was buried beside his wife in the Cave of Machpelah.

### Great Principles

At this point we ask, "Why did God devote so great an amount of space to the telling of the story of Abraham's life?" The answer, we believe, lies in the fact that Abraham's life demonstrates in a most forceful way some of the great principles that God wishes all men to incorporate into their lives. Even though he lived in the 20th century B.C, Abraham's life is an unusual example for people of all ages and even for us of the 20th century A.A.

The first great principle exemplified by Abraham is the principle of absolute faith in God. This is more remarkable than most people realize because of the background out of which Abraham came. He grew up amid the Animism of Babylon. The people of his community believed that many objects of nature were possessed by super-natural spirits. This was an age when men referred to the god of a lake, the god of a mountain, the god of a forest, and so on ad infinitum. The people of Mesopotamia practiced polytheism as their religion. There were eleven chief gods--the Sky, the Earth, the Ocean, the Moon, the Sun, the Storm, and the five visible Planets--and innumerable lesser gods. The chief god of the city of Ur was the Moon-god and there was a prominent ziggurat made of brick, located just north of the city. This was the background of training that Abraham received.

Yet, in spite of all of this, Abraham believed in and worshipped Jehovah. There is no evidence whatsoever in the life of Abraham that he ever gave a backward look to the polytheism of his past, even though we discover it among the relatives of Abraham, when he sent his servant Eliezer to secure a wife for his son, Isaac. This faith in Jehovah is all the more meaningful, because it was unique in his day.

In the New Testament book of Hebrews, we read God's appraisal of Abraham, "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed to go out into a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he became a sojourner in the land of promise, as in a land not his own, dwelling in tents, with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God. By faith even Sarah herself received power to conceive seed when she was past age, since she counted him faithful who had promised: wherefore also there sprang of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of heaven in multitude, and as the sand, which is by the sea-shore, innumerable ... by faith Abraham, being tried, offered up Isaac; yea, he that gladly had received the promised was offering up his only begotten son; even he to whom it was said, In Isaac shall thy seed be called: according that God is able to raise up, even from the dead, from whence he did also in a figure receive him back." (Heb. 11:8-12, 17-19).

The second great principle exemplified by Abraham is the principle of obedience to God. As noted in the reading just presented, Abraham's faith was the foundation out of which there came his unflinching obedience to God. Notice again, "By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed to go out ..." His travels can be traced by the altars he built, another evidence of his undying respect and dedication to God. He did what God said, he went where God directed, and his whole life was built upon trust in God. No wonder then that God called him later on "the friend of God."

#### A Wonderful Influence

There is still another word that impresses us in this history. It is the word influence. Abraham's limitless faith in God and his unstinting obedience to God had a tremendous influence throughout the centuries that followed him. For example, the Jews took great pride in the fact that Abraham was the father of their race. When John the Baptist preached in Judea, he once addressed the Pharisees and Sadducees as followers, "Ye offspring of vipers, who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruit worthy of repentance: and think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father: for I say unto you, that God is able of these stones to raise up children unto Abraham." (Matt. 3:7-9). They were trusting exclusively in the fact that they were descendants of Abraham, rather than living righteous lives themselves, but it does show the influence of Abraham upon them.

Again, in Matt. 8:11 we learn that the Jewish conception of heaven was in terms of "Many shall come from the east and the west, and shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven." Luke 16:22 also shows us in the story of Lazarus and the rich man that when Lazarus died he went to Paradise, here called "Abraham's bosom." Abraham's life had a tremendous impact upon the generations that followed, as was proper, because of the principles imbedded in that life.

Throughout the Bible we find this same emphasis. For example, Solomon said, "This is the end of the matter; all hath been heard, Fear God and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every work in judgment, with every hidden thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil." (Eccl. 12:13-14). Whether in the 20th century B.C, or in the 20th century A.A, or in the centuries in between, man's primary duties are: first, fearing God, which means faith and trust and respect, and, second, keeping his commandments, which means obedience. Most of us will never be children of Abraham in the blood sense, for we are not of the Hebrew race, but in the deeper sense we can be children of Abraham by living lives of faith and obedience. May these two cardinal principles be so much a part of our lives that someday when we stand before God in judgment he may recognize us, too, as "friends of God."