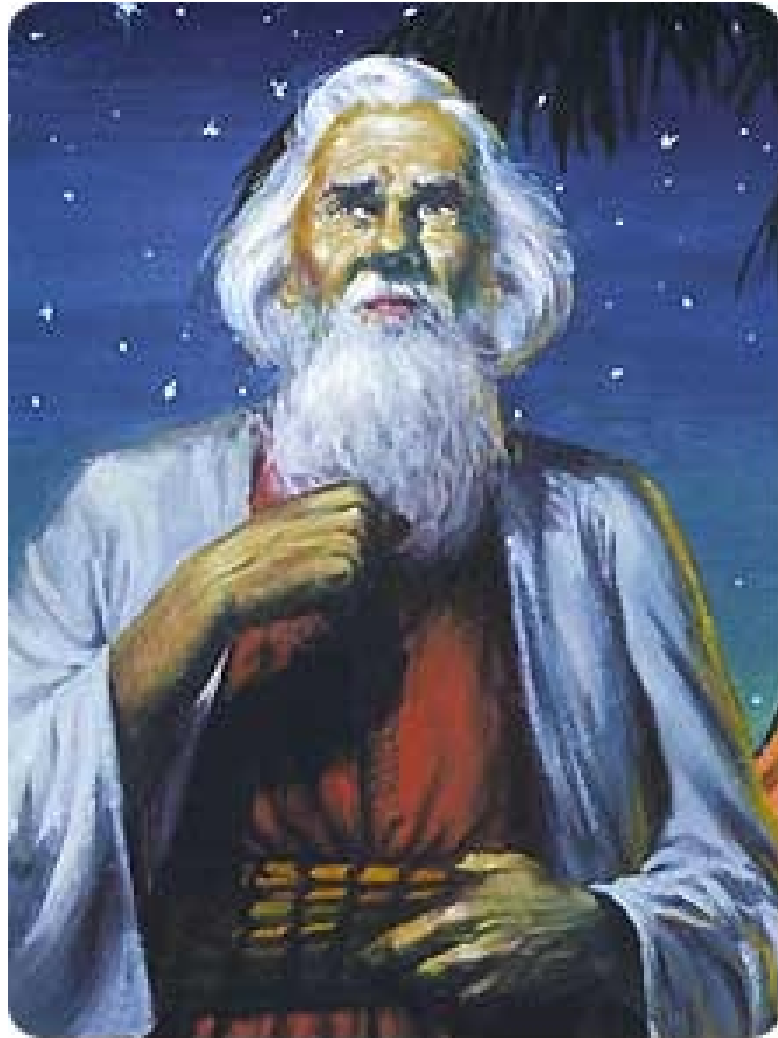


Abraham – Father Of Faith



an exposition by John Edmiston

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Abraham's Family Background

Genesis 11:25-32 MKJV And after he fathered Terah, Nahor lived a hundred and nineteen years. And he fathered sons and daughters. (26) And Terah lived seventy years and fathered Abram, Nahor and Haran. (27) Now these are the generations of Terah: Terah fathered Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran fathered Lot. (28) And Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. (29) And Abram and Nahor took wives for themselves. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai. And the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah, and the father of Iscah. (30) But Sarai was barren. She had no child. (31) 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 he went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan. And they came to Haran and lived there. (32) And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years. And Terah died in Haran.

Abraham was the first real monotheist and as such is a pivotal figure in Judaism, Islam and Christianity. The Jews call Abraham "Father Abraham", the Muslims "the Imam to the nations", and the Christians "Father of Faith". All three religions claim to be "the true faith of Abraham". Judaism claims it is the original Abrahamic faith, Christianity as having the blessings of Abraham via the Holy Spirit and Islam claiming that it is a return to the true faith of Abraham. In fact many of the political tensions in today's world stem from this long standing dispute over the meaning of the Abrahamic blessings and inheritance. Jews say the inheritance went through Isaac while Muslims claim it was through Ishmael. So if we are to understand our Christian faith and if we are to understand today's world, we have to understand Abraham.

Abraham was the son of Terah, an idol worshiper and a legend found in both Jewish and Islamic folklore has a young Abraham protesting this. Abraham takes idols to food and water and says "eat, eat and drink, drink" and mocks them. The townsfolk however keep on believing in idols. So one day Abraham smashes all the idols except for the largest idol and he puts the hammer in the hand of the largest idol. When the infuriated townsfolk come to Abraham and ask him why he did it, he replies "the idols had a fight and the biggest idol won and smashed up all the others". When the people said "Idols cannot move or use hammers" Abraham replied "Then why do you worship them?"

Abraham's hometown was "Ur of the Chaldees" - Chaldeans were noted for their astrology (Daniel 2:2) and Ur seems to have been a center for moon worship. In the midst of this spiritual darkness one man stands out, one man thinks about the idols and objects to them on plain sensible rational grounds - that the idols could not hear, or talk, or eat or drink or do any good or evil and even needed to be carried about! (Isaiah 44:9-20) Our conscience and our reason are very closely connected, and the sensible obvious conclusions of reason become principles for conduct in the human conscience. Gradually Abraham's conscience became very sensitive to God, until he was on speaking terms with God. God even calls Abraham His "friend" (2 Chronicles 20:7, Isaiah 41:8, James 2:23).

The Babylonian /Chaldee connection is further in evidence in that this all happens in Genesis 11 just after the Tower of Babel. A large part of post-flood community was at Babel/Babylon building a vast astrological ziggurat to reach up to Heaven and to demonstrate their wisdom and power and control over fate. It was a massive effort, but God dispersed it. Yet the Chaldean/Babylonian culture lived on at Ur, a culture of

astrology, hubris, and folly. By direct contrast Abraham is monotheistic, humble and wise.

In Jewish, Mormon and Muslim legends Abram's father Terah serves Nimrod, "the mighty hunter before the Lord" and the founder of Babylon and Assyria. Nimrod is one of the most wicked predatory people in the Bible. If Nimrod is darkness, Abraham is light. Now I do not want to make too much of extra-biblical legends other than to say they all revolve around the theme of Abraham being entirely different from his environment and from his genetic disposition. Abraham was different because he had a different spirit, and was set apart by God.

Abraham married Sarai, his half-sister, and despite the mistake with Hagar, Sarah's slave (at Sarah's instigation) Abraham and Sarah, established monogamous marriage as the pattern for all Jews and Christians. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob fully intended to be solely monogamous, (and only the trickery of Laban subverted that in Jacob's case). Despite some low points the patriarchs clearly married just one woman for life and the romance between Isaac and Rebekah stands out as a marriage of both love, equality and respect. However the women all tended to be barren, and this created great stress and tested the patriarchs in their loyalty to God. But despite their great wealth which meant many women would have been available to them, there were no divorces, no permanent replacements and no trophy wives. They were different in their religion and different in their ethics and their family life.

You will notice the long ages of the patriarchs, Terah dies at 205. This was not too long after the flood and according to most dating scenarios Noah and Shem were still alive well into the time of Abraham. The pre-flood records that Noah and Shem has would have been passed down to Abraham, and then to Isaac and Jacob who would have passed them on to Joseph, and thus eventually to Moses who wrote them down in Genesis. After the flood there seem to have been climatic changes that gradually came in to limit man's lifespan to around "120 years" (Genesis 6:3).

Terah was the one with the original idea to go to Canaan: "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 he went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan. And they came to Haran and lived there. (32) And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years. And Terah died in Haran."

Haran is the half-way point where many grand callings of God stop, in fact it is about two-thirds of the way along the route. A friend of mine who was a running coach said that when people run a 400 meter race there is a point about two-thirds along the way when people "hit the wall" and want to stop. He said this is also true with most large projects in life. You get two-thirds along and its weary, and the end still seems a long way off and you feel like, giving up, and many people do. Think of doing a large pile of boring filing – when do you stop? I bet its about two-thirds of the way through the pile! So sure enough they stop at Haran, two-thirds of the way to Jerusalem.

One of the other members of the party was Lot, Abraham's nephew. Lot is always a counter-point in the story, who makes the foolish choices while Abraham makes the wise choices. Yet despite Lot's lack of wisdom he was rescued by Abraham and later by God, and 2 Peter even calls Lot righteous.

2 Peter 2:6-9 MKJV *And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, He condemned them with an overthrow, setting an example to men intending to live ungodly. (7) And He delivered righteous Lot, oppressed with the lustful behavior of the lawless. (8) For that righteous one living among them, in seeing and hearing, his righteous soul was tormented from day to day with their unlawful deeds. (9) The Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptation, and to reserve the unjust for a day of judgment, to be punished,*

Lot may have made many blunders but fundamentally he feared God and knew right from wrong and was tormented by the presence of evil. He was godly, so God delivered him.

Now this is in a way, a parable of two types of Christian. Abraham is the Christian who gets really close to God and taps into His wisdom and lives by faith, and Lot is the Christian who loves God but is not fully consecrated and is a bit too chummy with "the world" and keeps getting entangled in its mess. More on that as we go through this series.

"And Terah died in Haran." Terah's death is Abraham's calling. God moves in generations and often the old order has to pass away before a new order comes to pass. I believe we are at such a juncture now as many of the older evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal leaders such as Billy Graham are old or are passing away. These have done a great job and taken us two-thirds of the way there, but we still have to press on, by faith, into Canaan.

God Calls Abraham

Genesis 12:1-3 MKJV *And Jehovah said to Abram, Go out of your country, and from your kindred, and from your father's house into a land that I will show you. (2) And I will make you a great nation. And I will bless you and make your name great. And you shall be a blessing. (3) And I will bless those that bless you and curse the one who curses you. And in you shall all families of the earth be blessed.*

Abraham was blessed in order to be a blessing. "And I will bless you and make your name great. And you shall be a blessing." This was a new paradigm, God blesses those who trust Him, so that they in turn can be a conduit of blessings to others.

In fact God took Abraham and made him so great that all Jews, Muslims and Christians honor his name as the ancient founder of their faith and all three claim to be "the true religion of Abraham". Abraham became the father of both the Jews (through Isaac) and the Arabs (through Ishmael). He unites Christians, Jews and Arabs as the great man of faith. Now Abraham did not become great because of his own cleverness or through his own intense sweat and striving, rather Abraham became great because God blessed him. Abraham was a God-made man.

Now as we saw in Romans Abraham was not blessed because he kept the Law, for the Law did not come for another 430 years. Nor was Abraham blessed because he read the Bible (there was no Bible back then) or because he made a pilgrimage, or attended a mosque or synagogue or church. Rather Abraham was blessed because he totally trusted the one God who was the Creator of Heaven and Earth.

Genesis 15:6 MKJV *And he believed in Jehovah. And He counted it to him for righteousness.*

The success that came to Abraham came because he trusted God and walked with God and because Abraham cooperated with God's agenda. God did not bless Abraham's agenda. In fact God set Abraham's agenda. God told him what to do and where to go: *And Jehovah said to Abram, Go out of your country, and from your kindred, and from your father's house into a land that I will show you.*

God made the plans, and as Abraham entered into those plans he was blessed and became a blessing. God calls the shots. God is the General who commands us. Our job is to obey and to take our place in the plans that He has made. It is as we obey, that we are blessed.

Just a quick note about the concept of "blessing". Blessing is more than just favor or kind regard. Blessing tilts reality in our favor, life gets easier, the plants bloom, the crops are abundant. Blessings is a "Easy Button" that makes life easy. If we put in ten units of work, instead of getting ten units of production, we get 100 units of production. If we do a days work, we get a week's worth of results. The field that used to yield x amount of wheat yields eight times as much – and so on. Blessing makes us to be fruitful, to multiply and to have dominion. It makes life work much, much better.

When Abraham was blessed he became a 'mighty prince' (Genesis 23:6) with herds and flocks and great wealth (Genesis 13:2). On top of that he had close fellowship with God, and a great name, that is still remembered today some 4000 years later. Blessing thus eventually totally outstrips even the most vigorous human effort – for who remembers the kings and nobles of Abraham's time - except as they are connected with the man of faith? Without blessing we eventually fade away to nothing but with blessing we endure and "become a great nation".

The curse is the opposite of being fruitful, multiplying and having dominion. Cursing brings barrenness, division, reduction, powerlessness and humiliation. The curse makes life unbearably hard. Now God said to Abram: *And I will bless those that bless you and curse the one who curses you.* We see this in the rise and fall of nations, first those that opposed the Jews such as Assyria, Babylon and Edom, and later those that opposed Christians such as Rome and Russia. Nations like Saudi Arabia and China that persecute Jews and Christians will eventually suffer the consequences! I believe the water shortages, pollution, civil unrest and instability in China is a direct result of its policies with regard to forced abortions, persecution of Christians and its manifest greed and corruption. If Scripture is any guide, China must either reform or collapse.

Abraham is not just a Jewish figure, he is an international blessing: *"And in you shall all families of the earth be blessed."* This blessing came through Jesus Christ, a descendant of Abraham, and extends to all who have faith as Galatians 3 makes abundantly clear:

Galatians 3:6-9 MKJV *Even as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness. (7) Therefore know that those of faith, these are the sons of Abraham. (8) And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the nations through faith, preached the gospel before to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all nations be blessed."*

(9) *So then those of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham.*

Galatians 3:14 MKJV *so that the blessing of Abraham might be to the nations in Jesus Christ, and that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.*

Galatians 3:28-29 MKJV *There cannot be Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is no male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (29) And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.*

Thus through Jesus Christ the blessings of Abraham came to the whole world, including the Gentile world, and became available through the indwelling Presence of God, the Holy Spirit, who is promised to all who believe. Christians enter into fellowship with God, just as Abraham had, and into great and very precious blessings which we inherit, because of what Christ has done for us on the cross. Let us enter into these blessings by obediently walking with God, by faith, as Abraham did.

And Jehovah Appeared to Abraham

Genesis 12:4-9 MKJV *And Abram departed, even as Jehovah had spoken to him. And Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. (5) 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 gained in Haran. And they went forth to go into the land of Canaan. And they came into the land of Canaan. (6) And Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem, unto the Oak of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. (7) And Jehovah appeared to Abram and said, I will give this land to your seed. And he built an altar there to Jehovah who appeared to him. (8) And he moved from there to a mountain on the east of Bethel. And he pitched his tent with Bethel toward the sea and Hai on the east. And he built an altar there to Jehovah, and called upon the name of Jehovah. (9) And Abram journeyed, going on and pulled up stakes toward the south.*

In these verses we find that God spoke to Abram (v.4) and that God appeared to Abram (v.7). Then everything Abram does flows from these personal encounters with God. It is part of the paradigm of faith – life flows from our encounters with God. God speaks and it alters everything; and we simply hear, and believe and obey. Abraham does not try to figure out God, he simply follows His instructions to the letter.

Now Abraham's encounters with God are not like talking to an imaginary invisible friend. Abram does not imagine God, or conjure up God. Instead the sovereign, covenant-making God appears when He chooses and speaks just that which He wishes to say.

God seems to be rather terse in His dealings with Abraham “ *I will give this land to your seed.*” is not a very long speech. In fact God seldom says any more than a short paragraph or two when He appears to various Bible characters such as Solomon (1 Kings 3:11-14). Messenger angels tend to get the longer speeches such as the revelations to the prophet Daniel (see Daniel chapters 10,11&12). But God speaks with such complete authority that a few words can mean a great deal and the ramifications of “*I will give this land to your seed*” are still being felt today!

We can expect our encounters with God to be brief, and yet to be highly significant.

When God speaks conclusively into your life, everything will change for you from that point on, and perhaps even for centuries afterward.

In our daily dealings with God we sense His love and His peace and His guidance in this direction or that. But real words, whole sentences from God, pregnant with meaning, are generally rare, coming perhaps three or four times in a lifetime. Sometimes more often, sometimes less. We may converse with God daily as Moses did but that "big encounter" the revelation of His glory (Exodus 34;6,7) is a rare thing for most of us. When it happened to Abraham he had to do something in response so he built an altar to God who appeared to him (v.7).

Because God has given us His Holy Spirit we can know God very deeply and intimately. We can have a personal relationship with God, and we are called into fellowship with Him.

1 Corinthians 1:9 MKJV *God is faithful, by whom you were called to the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

1 John 1:3 MKJV *that which we have seen and heard we declare unto you, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.*

2 Corinthians 13:14 MKJV *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.*

Philippians 3:10-11 MKJV *that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable to His death; if by any means I might attain to the resurrection of the dead.*

We are to walk with God, and to encounter God, and to live life out of these encounters with God in the face of Jesus Christ. When Paul encountered Jesus on the Damascus Road everything changed. And when Zacchaeus climbed a tree and saw Jesus, his life turned around, as did the lives of blind men and lepers and demoniacs who encountered Jesus.

Fellowship with God is a mixture of these "big encounters" with many little moments of grace and joy. Most days should be lived in Christ, in love, and in the peace of God. We have good quiet times, great worship and are touched by sermons. But no matter how hard we try we cannot make God appear in a burning bush and speak to us. That is His prerogative. God is in command of the great moments of faith, but we still need to be faithful in our daily quiet times as well.

After God appeared to Abram a few times Abram started "calling on God" in return. "And he built an altar there to Jehovah, and called upon the name of Jehovah." (this was the second altar that Abram had made). Abram had worked out that a) God was personal and had a name YHWH (Jehovah) and b) That this God was interested in hearing from Abram and would respond to him if he called out. This is a huge jump from Chaldean idols and astrology and "fate" and moon worship, and "fortune". This was personal faith in a living God who was good and who rewarded His worshipers and who interacted with His Creation.

Hebrews 11:6 MKJV *But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.*

Calling on God is often associated with some danger or great request. It is seeking help from one's Creator and is fundamental to true worship and the journey of faith. It is very common in Psalms e.g. :

Psalms 18:6 HCSB *I called to the LORD in my distress, and I cried to my God for help. From His temple He heard my voice, and my cry to Him reached His ears.*

For Christians the name we must call on is the name of Jesus Christ:

1 Corinthians 1:2 HCSB *To God's church at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus and called as saints, with all those in every place who call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord--theirs and ours.*

Romans 10:13 HCSB *For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.*

Calling on the name of Jesus was what got the early Christians in trouble because it was considered blasphemy: **Acts 9:13-14 HCSB** *"Lord," Ananias answered, "I have heard from many people about this man, how much harm he has done to Your saints in Jerusalem. (14) And he has authority here from the chief priests to arrest all who call on Your name."*

As a "faith experiment" try this in your next quiet time – start by quietly and reverently calling out the name of Jesus half a dozen times "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus..". Literally "call on God by His name". I find that I very quickly enter into the Presence of God when I do this. God responds when His name is called!

Abraham Takes Care of Himself

Genesis 12:10-20 HCSB *There was a famine in the land, so Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine in the land was severe. (11) When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "Look, I know what a beautiful woman you are. (12) When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' They will kill me but let you live. (13) Please say you're my sister so it will go well for me because of you, and my life will be spared on your account." (14) When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. (15) Pharaoh's officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, so the woman was taken to Pharaoh's house. (16) He treated Abram well because of her, and Abram acquired flocks and herds, male and female donkeys, male and female slaves, and camels. (17) But the LORD struck Pharaoh and his house with severe plagues because of Abram's wife Sarai. (18) So Pharaoh sent for Abram and said, "What have you done to me? Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? (19) Why did you say, 'She's my sister,' so that I took her as my wife? Now, here's your wife. Take her and go!" (20) Then Pharaoh gave his men orders about him, and they sent him away, with his wife and all he had.*

Abraham fails to consult God about the famine or about his expedient ruse and ends up acting disgracefully. Abraham goes wrong by:

- a) leaving Canaan because of the famine
- b) misjudging the Egyptians and
- c) lying about his wife

Firstly Canaan was the place of blessing and honor. This was the land that God had given him. He was to stay in it, and if it got tough he was to pray about it. This is a word to pastors who have been called to tough churches, or believers in tough marriages - who feel like moving on - pray about it at length and only go if God lets you. Do not go "down to Egypt" simply because there is a "famine in the land".

Secondly Abraham had come from Ur, from the land of Nimrod the predator. He saw the whole world outside his family as dishonorable and predatory. He was wrong. Both Pharaoh and later Abimelech prove much more honorable than Abraham expected. We often misread others motives based on our own past. The fear of man is a snare. We should only fear God instead. Isaiah, who lived in terrible times of political intrigue says this:

Isaiah 8:10-13 ASV *Take counsel together, and it shall be brought to nought; speak the word, and it shall not stand: for God is with us. (11) For Jehovah spake thus to me with a strong hand, and instructed me not to walk in the way of this people, saying, (12) Say ye not, A conspiracy, concerning all whereof this people shall say, A conspiracy; neither fear ye their fear, nor be in dread thereof. (13) Jehovah of hosts, him shall ye sanctify; and let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.*

We are not to fear the plots of men and their conspiracies or to attribute such to them, rather God alone is to be our fear and our dread.

Thirdly Abraham lied about Sarah. We need to stop fearing things in advance. Before any trouble arose Abraham made up his foolish defense. In fact if he had not done this, and had just trusted God and been honest, no trouble would have occurred. Honesty is the best policy. Cross your bridges when you come to them, not before. Anxiety causes us to make foolish plans and implement silly strategies that only get us into trouble. As the Psalm 37 says "Do not fret it only leads to trouble.."

Now Abraham does this not once - but twice, as he repeats this mistake with Abimelech in Genesis 20. Abraham's weak points are fear and pragmatism, when the threat arises he works out a scheme, a short-cut, a way through - without consulting God first. He makes three such mistakes - with Pharaoh, with Abimelech and with Hagar /Ishmael. Yet God is so committed to Abraham that He blesses him anyway and he comes out of the sojourn in Egypt with cattle, slaves and camels. God blessed the other mistakes as well - making Ishmael into a great nation, and giving Abraham 1000 pieces of silver, cattle goods and wealth from Abimelech.

God so blessed Abraham that even his worst mistakes were covered and that even his "stupidity" worked out for good in the end! Oh that we might be so blessed! In Romans Paul quotes one of David's Psalms to prove that righteousness comes by faith:

Romans 4:6-8 HCSB Likewise, David also speaks of the blessing of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: (7) How happy those whose lawless acts are forgiven and whose sins are covered! (8) How happy the man whom the Lord will never charge with sin!

Some people are blessed even when they do the dumbest things. Abraham, Jacob, Samson and David are among them. God commits Himself to some people and NEVER charges them with sin, their sins and lawless deeds are forgiven and are COVERED. God may discipline them, but He never condemns them. They are always His heroes of faith! Righteousness is credited to them apart from their works.

Abraham is never censured by God (though he is rebuked by man) - even when he falls into sin and folly. Everything Abraham does is blessed - even lying about his wife! He came out of Egypt a very wealthy man. Yet if you or I had tried such a thing we would end up in Pharaoh's dungeon or even worse! Because God is with Abraham he always "lands on his feet"!

Abraham made these serious mistakes, out of fear, and yet God let him live and blessed him and sent him on his way safely: *"Then Pharaoh gave his men orders about him, and they sent him away, with his wife and all he had."*

This is the favor of God! God has a higher logic than mere fairness. He has a logic of covenant love, and this covenant love has come to us in Christ. He blesses those who He wishes to bless. It is as simple as that! In Christ we have the blessings of Abraham! God gave His beloved Son for you, and with Him He will give you all things! (Romans 8:31-34)

The Prosperity Of The Patriarchs

Genesis 13:1-7 HCSB *Then Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev--he, his wife, and all he had, and Lot with him. (2) Abram was very rich in livestock, silver, and gold. (3) He went by stages from the Negev to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had formerly been, (4) to the site where he had built the altar. And Abram worshiped the LORD there. (5) Now Lot, who was traveling with Abram, also had flocks, herds, and tents. (6) But the land was unable to support them as long as they stayed together, for they had so many possessions that they could not stay together, (7) and there was quarreling between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were living in the land.*

This is like a scene out of a Western movie where the two big ranchers are "taking over Texas" and their cowboys are fighting, and rustling each others cattle and feuding breaks out. So Big Rancher Abraham and Big Rancher Lot end up saying "This town isn't big enough for both of us..." and end up parting ways.

Yet this is more than just two very rich men having a dispute. Each of these men would go on to found a number of nations. Abraham would found Israel and the Arab tribes, and Lot would found Moab and Ammon. These men in tents would turn out to be nation-builders, not through their own virtue or ability - but because of the sovereign calling and blessing of God.

Abraham was "was very rich in livestock, silver, and gold." It is strongly implied that this occurred because of the blessing of God. God certainly does make some people very wealthy. In fact this was part of His covenant with the patriarchs:

Deuteronomy 8:17-18 HCSB (17) *You may say to yourself, 'My power and my own ability have gained this wealth for me,' (18) but remember that the LORD your God gives you the power to gain wealth, in order to confirm His covenant He swore to your fathers, as it is today.*

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph were all very wealthy individuals and the Jews have continued to have an unusual access to wealth. They are the wealthiest ethnic group in America today with three times the assets of the average person. The poorest religious group in the USA is "conservative Protestants" (that's us folks) with Catholics and mainstream Protestants falling somewhere in-between. (This really contradicts the "tithing in order to get rich" crowd).

Now this really presents a major problem for practical theology. The patriarchs were wealthy and David and Solomon and Daniel followed suit and yet conservative Christians who tithe and give generously and believe in Jesus are at the bottom of the economic heap! Where are our blessings? Do we even have the right God? Why are missionaries poor and Jewish bankers rich?

If God's covenant with the patriarchs included wealth, and Christians inherited that Abrahamic covenant through Christ – where is the financial proof? How come Abraham gets "silver and gold" and we just get "our daily bread"? I think we need to look hard at these money questions because most folk ask something fairly similar at some point in their Christian life.

The world financial system is plainly unjust and rewards mere market-ability, not effort or virtue. So Playboy magazine's Hugh Hefner can be incredibly wealthy while pastors have to save up for tires on their car. People who trade bonds can make billions, and yet produce no "useful product" while a farmer who puts food on people's tables suffers drought and flood and financial pressure. Drug dealers are generally richer than teachers.

Now I am not saying that all rich people are wicked, or that all poor people are virtuous. But I am saying that in the current system great wealth is not connected to faith, virtue, good character or hard work. The world system is in fact largely under demonic control:

Luke 4:5-8 HCSB *So he took Him up and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. (6) The Devil said to Him, "I will give You their splendor and all this authority, because it has been given over to me, and I can give it to anyone I want. (7) If You, then, will worship me, all will be Yours." (8) And Jesus answered him, "It is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only."*

1 John 5:19 HCSB *We know that we are of God, and the whole world is under the sway of the evil one.*

If the financial system is largely under demonic control then that could explain why people such as Hugh Hefner are so wealthy and why those who follow Christ most closely are frequently poor. This is not to impugn the power and sovereignty of God but to point out the spiritual reality of our present situation.

However this present evil age (Galatians 1:4) will give way to a better age in which righteousness dwells (2 Peter 3:13) and in which we will be rewarded:

Matthew 19:27-30 MKJV *Then answering Peter said to Him, Behold, we have forsaken all and have followed You. Therefore what shall we have? (28) And Jesus said to them, Truly I say to you that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration, when the Son of Man shall sit in the throne of His glory, you also shall sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (29) And everyone who left houses, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life. (30) But many who are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.*

This is when our inheritance under the Abrahamic covenant will finally bear fruit. When Christ returns, then we shall fully inherit all things. If we confine our faith to being rewarded in this life, we shall be bitterly disappointed. But if we seek our reward in the inheritance we have in Christ and in the things of the Spirit, then we shall leap for joy!

We are in this for the long haul. The blessings of Abraham will come to us. First in the presence of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 3:14), and then in our redemption, glorification and reward at Christ's return.

Now to clear up some of the confusion that this may cause:

- a) God can still bless Christians financially today and sometimes does so.
- b) God will certainly provide your daily needs.
- c) However we live in an unjust world where great wealth often goes to the wicked.
- d) In this unjust "present evil" world Christians do not receive their full reward from God.
- e) The full reward for Christians, which will include the fulfillment of the Abrahamic blessings on your life, will come at the return of the Lord Jesus Christ.
- f) Our present reward is in the presence of the Holy Spirit and the love, joy, peace and power He brings into our lives.**

Lot Camps Near Sodom

Genesis 13:8-13 HCSB *Then Abram said to Lot, "Please, let's not have quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, since we are relatives. (9) Isn't the whole land before you? Separate from me: if you go to the left, I will go to the right; if you go to the right, I will go to the left." (10) Lot looked out and saw that the entire Jordan Valley as far as Zoar was well-watered everywhere like the LORD's garden and the land of Egypt. This was before God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. (11) So Lot chose the entire Jordan Valley for himself. Then Lot journeyed eastward, and they separated from each other. (12) Abram lived in the land of Canaan, but Lot lived in the cities of the valley and set up his tent near Sodom. (13) Now the men of Sodom were evil, sinning greatly against the LORD.*

Lot chooses to dwell in prosperity, while Abram chooses to dwell in the land of Promise. This is a choice Christians make every day – to choose immediate prosperity or to dwell in the faith-promise. The full abundant Christian life is very, very difficult, perhaps not all the time, but often enough to be significant. It was difficult for Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it was difficult for Joseph and Moses and David and Daniel and it involved the cross for Jesus and persecution for the apostles John Peter and Paul.

In fact Paul says life will be difficult for every committed Christian:

2 Timothy 3:12 HCSB *In fact, all those who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*

Lot chose the immediate gain, he chose by what his eyes saw, not by what God said. This is typical of people who make poor life-decisions!

In the 1960's Walter Mischel of Stanford University created a simple test of the ability of four year old children to control impulses and delay gratification. Children were taken one at a time into a room with a one-way mirror. They were shown a marshmallow. The experimenter told them he had to leave and that they could have the marshmallow right then, but if they waited for the experimenter to return from an errand, they could have two marshmallows. One marshmallow was left on a table in front of them. Some children grabbed the available marshmallow within seconds of the experimenter leaving. Others waited up to twenty minutes for the experimenter to return. In a follow-up study (Shoda, Mischel, & Peake, 1990), children were tested at 18 years of age and comparisons were made between the third of the children who grabbed the marshmallow (the "impulsive") and the third who delayed gratification in order to receive the enhanced reward ("impulse controlled"). The differences were huge, even larger than would be predicted by IQ tests. The "impulse controlled" group scored an average of 210 points higher on the SAT (university entrance) test, and were far more mature and less likely to get into trouble.



<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assertive• Cope with frustration• Work better under pressure• Self-reliant, confident• Trustworthy• Dependable• Delay gratification• Academically competent• Respond to reason• Concentrate• Eager to learn• Follow through on plans• SAT: 610 verbal, 652 math	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Indecisive• Overreact to frustration• Overwhelmed by stress• Lower self-image• Stubborn• Impulsive• Don't delay gratification• Poorer students• Prone to jealousy & envy• Provoke arguments• Sharp temper• Give up in face of failure• SAT: 524 verbal, 528 math
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Source: Shoda, Michael, & Peake, 1990

The life of faith is all about "impulse-control" and delayed gratification! There are sometimes very long times of waiting for God. In fact Abraham had to wait 25 years for the promise of Isaac to be fulfilled!

Back to Lot. Lot liked comfort, and ease and prosperity and the lush pastures near

Sodom. It would prove his eventual ruin. Lot would end up living in a cave in the mountains and committing drunken incest with his daughters. In his heart Lot was righteous but he was not wise, and did not make good life choices. Lot lived by sight, rather than by faith. Lot ate the first marshmallow!

Now Christians often have to make career choices and sometimes are faced with the choice between a lucrative job with a compromising corporate culture, and a lesser paid job in a more honest and reputable firm. Will the Christian take the money and "pitch their tents near Sodom" or will they take the promise and take the lesser paid job knowing that God will bless them more in the long run?

Lot at first lived "near Sodom" but a few chapters later he is "in Sodom" in the very city itself. He had been absorbed by the surrounding culture! He became a resident in the midst of flagrant sin and wickedness. Now Lot had a strong personal faith and God saved him when the city was about to be destroyed, and Christians can still keep their faith in the worst of places and God may rescue them. But there is a price, a steep price, for hanging out with the wrong crowd, or working for the wrong company. Eventually God judges that city, or group of people and your "investment" in them is destroyed along with them. A Christian may rise in an Enron (and some did) but they will fall with it as well (and several good Christians went to jail).

Abraham chose to trust in God, to take the land that was not as fertile, and to dwell along way from Sodom and Gomorrah. In fact as we shall see later he wanted nothing to do with the prosperity of Sodom and would not take even "a thread or a sandal".

Genesis 14:21-24 HCSB *Then the king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the people, but take the possessions for yourself." (22) But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have raised my hand in an oath to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, (23) that I will not take a thread or sandal strap or anything that belongs to you, so you can never say, 'I made Abram rich.' (24) I will take nothing except what the servants have eaten. But as for the share of the men who came with me--Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre--they can take their share."*

There is a time to refuse prosperity, if it is linked with evil, and to trust God and take the promise instead. Christians need to wait, to take the delayed reward, to trust the Lord, and to love righteousness more than cash.

Abram Is Promised The Land

Genesis 13:14-18 HCSB *After Lot had separated from him, the LORD said to Abram, "Look from the place where you are. Look north and south, east and west, (15) for I will give you and your offspring forever all the land that you see. (16) I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if one could count the dust of the earth, then your offspring could be counted. (17) Get up and walk from one end of the land to the other, for I will give it to you." (18) So Abram moved his tent and went to live beside the oaks of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the LORD.*

First came the sacrifice (of giving the best land to Lot), then came the blessing (being given the entire land of Canaan forever). The blessing is always a hundred-fold greater than the sacrifice:

Matthew 19:27-30 HCSB *Then Peter responded to Him, "Look, we have left everything and followed You. So what will there be for us?" (28) Jesus said to them, "I assure you: In the Messianic Age, when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, you who have followed Me will also sit on 12 thrones, judging the 12 tribes of Israel. (29) And everyone who has left houses, brothers or sisters, father or mother, children, or fields because of My name will receive 100 times more and will inherit eternal life. (30) But many who are first will be last, and the last first.*

However sometimes the blessing is delayed far beyond the earthly life-span on the recipient. In fact the vast bulk of the blessings Christians will receive will occur AFTER Christ returns! In the above verses the "houses and lands" are during the Millennium restoration of all things. Abram did not receive Canaan until hundreds of years after his physical death, though he certainly lived on with God. In fact the heroes of faith look to the resurrection as their hope of full reward:

Hebrews 11:35-40 HCSB *Women received their dead raised to life again. Some men were tortured, not accepting release, so that they might gain a better resurrection, (36) and others experienced mockings and scourgings, as well as bonds and imprisonment. (37) They were stoned, they were sawed in two, they died by the sword, they wandered about in sheepskins, in goatskins, destitute, afflicted, and mistreated. (38) The world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts, mountains, caves, and holes in the ground. (39) All these were approved through their faith, but they did not receive what was promised, (40) since God had provided something better for us, so that they would not be made perfect without us.*

Faith relies on the fact that we will live forever and that future blessings will greatly outweigh present pain, even a whole lifetime of pain. Thus this life is NOT the measure of our faith or of our spiritual success.

Romans 8:16-18 HCSB *The Spirit Himself testifies together with our spirit that we are God's children, (17) and if children, also heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ--seeing that we suffer with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him. (18) For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is going to be revealed to us.*

The Christian lives for that which is eternal and permanent and glorious and knows that this world and its so-called rewards and suffering - is passing away:

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 HCSB (16) *Therefore we do not give up; even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day. (17) For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. (18) So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen; for what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

Now Abram is given the land but his only portion of it that he inherits in his lifetime turns out to be the (rather expensive) cave of Macpelah where he buries Sarah. Abram does not so much as own a square foot of permanent farming land during his whole life. Yet, by the promise of God, this is Abram's land forever. You see God sees us as we will be in five hundred years time. We are continuous beings in his sight. He can make a promise to us now and fulfill it hundreds of years hence – because we are still around and will still be in fellowship with Him then.

It takes great faith to truly believe this. We want “faith” to produce cars and houses and plasma TV sets in this life - and the sooner the better. Faith that will be rewarded in five hundred years time seems silly faith. Why would anyone believe God for a land they would only inherit generations later and after 430 years in Egypt? But Abram did! God is faithful to us and Abraham is alive and well and looking at his land today. In Matthew Jesus teaches that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were still alive in Moses day four hundred years later and in John Jesus says that Abraham saw Jesus' ministry and thus was alive in His time as well

Matthew 22:31-32 HCSB *Now concerning the resurrection of the dead, haven't you read what was spoken to you by God: (32) I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living."*

John 8:56 HCSB *Your father Abraham was overjoyed that he would see My day; he saw it and rejoiced."*

Thus Abraham is still alive now and so are Isaac and Jacob, David and Peter and Paul and they are observing Christian ministries and the Church and the progress of the gospel which is why after the list of heroes in Hebrews 11 we find the author saying:

Hebrews 12:1-2 HCSB *Therefore since we also have such a large cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us lay aside every weight and the sin that so easily ensnares us, and run with endurance the race that lies before us, (2) keeping our eyes on Jesus, the source and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that lay before Him endured a cross and despised the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of God's throne.*

God's promise to Abram was fulfilled as all His promises will be. Not one of them will fall short. God gave Abram and his descendants the land of Israel forever and that still applies today. In fact most of the current occupants of Israel would consider themselves “children of Abraham” either through Isaac or Ishmael or through Jesus Christ. In the end the Jews will all be saved (Romans 9-11) and the land will belong to Messianic Jews who are BOTH descendants of Isaac and recipients of grace through Jesus Christ.

{For the biblical basis of the above see: <http://aibi.gospelcom.net/ebooks/Israel%20And%20The%20Church.htm> }

First Abram had to believe the promise and then Abram had to do something to receive

the promise: "Get up and walk from one end of the land to the other, for I will give it to you." Abram had to act as if he already owned it! He had to act walk around the land 'as if' it was already true. Abram had to walk into the land and around the land to possess it. This is the spiritual principle of believing that we have received!

Later Moses instructed the Israelites to press on into their promise:

Deuteronomy 11:24-25 HCSB (24) *Every place the sole of your foot treads will be yours. Your territory will extend from the wilderness to Lebanon and from the Euphrates River to the Mediterranean Sea. (25) No one will be able to stand against you; the LORD your God will put fear and dread of you in all the land where you set foot, as He has promised you.*

And Joshua was told to do a similar thing: **Joshua 1:3 HCSB** *I have given you every place where the sole of your foot treads, just as I promised Moses.*

Satan tries to bluff us into being apathetic about our victory or timid to occupy the land: **2 Kings 13:14-19 HCSB** *When Elisha became sick with the illness that he died from, Jehoash king of Israel went down and wept over him and said, "My father, my father, the chariots and horsemen of Israel!" (15) Elisha responded, "Take a bow and arrows." So he got a bow and arrows. (16) Then Elisha said to the king of Israel, "Put your hand on the bow." So the king put his hand on it, and Elisha put his hands on the king's hands. (17) Elisha said, "Open the east window." So he opened it. Elisha said, "Shoot!" So he shot. Then Elisha said, "The LORD's arrow of victory, yes, the arrow of victory over Aram. You are to strike down the Arameans in Aphek until you have put an end to them." (18) Then Elisha said, "Take the arrows!" So he took them, and he said to the king of Israel, "Strike the ground!" So he struck the ground three times and stopped. (19) The man of God was angry with him and said, "You should have struck the ground five or six times. Then you would have struck down Aram until you had put an end to them, but now you will only strike down Aram three times."*

So when God gives you a firm promise be faith-full, firm and strong and go and act on it! God wants people of faith to truly believe they will receive, either in this life, or in the life to come:

Mark 11:22-24 HCSB Jesus replied to them, "Have faith in God. (23) I assure you: If anyone says to this mountain, 'Be lifted up and thrown into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that what he says will happen, it will be done for him. (24) Therefore, I tell you, all the things you pray and ask for--believe that you have received them, and you will have them.

1 John 5:14-15 HCSB Now this is the confidence we have before Him: whenever we ask anything according to His will, He hears us. (15) And if we know that He hears whatever we ask, we know that we have what we have asked Him for.

A Formidable Foe

Genesis 14:1-16 HCSB *In those days Amraphel king of Shinar, Arioch king of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goiim (2) waged war against Bera king of Sodom, Birsha king of Gomorrah, Shinab king of Admah, and Shemeber king of Zeboiim, as well as the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). (3) All of these came as allies to the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Dead Sea). (4) They were subject to Chedorlaomer for 12 years, but in the thirteenth year they rebelled. (5) In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him came and defeated the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, (6) and the Horites in the mountains of Seir, as far as El-paran by the wilderness. (7) Then they came back to invade En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh), and they defeated all the territory of the Amalekites, as well as the Amorites who lived in Hazazon-tamar. (8) Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) went out and lined up for battle in the Valley of Siddim (9) against Chedorlaomer king of Elam, Tidal king of Goiim, Amraphel king of Shinar, and Arioch king of Ellasar--four kings against five. (10) Now the Valley of Siddim contained many asphalt pits, and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, but the rest fled to the mountains. (11) The four kings took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food and went on. (12) They also took Abram's nephew Lot and his possessions, for he was living in Sodom, and they went on. (13) One of the survivors came and told Abram the Hebrew, who was at the oaks belonging to Mamre the Amorite, the brother of Eshcol and the brother of Aner. They were bound by a treaty with Abram. (14) When Abram heard that his relative had been taken prisoner, he assembled his 318 trained men, born in his household, and they went in pursuit as far as Dan. (15) And he and his servants deployed against them by night, attacked them, and pursued them as far as Hobah to the north of Damascus. (16) He brought back all the goods and also his relative Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the other people.*

Chedorlaomer king of Elam (Persia) was an extremely powerful warrior and empire builder. He had defeated everything in his path including the Rephaim, Zuzim and Emim – races of giants like Goliath and known major aggressive nations such as the Horites, Amalekites and Amorites. He was allied with Amraphel king of Shinar (Babylon) probably the grandson of Nimrod and had gone on an extensive campaign of pillaging throughout the Middle-East. Moses (the author of Genesis) summarizes this campaign very briefly and focuses it on his encounter with Abram (who would defeat Chedorlaomer with just 318 men).

Now Chedorlaomer did not come all that way just to invade Sodom and Gomorrah and the five cities of the plain – these were just five ripe plums that he shook off the tree and unknown to this mighty king, in Sodom was Lot, the nephew of Abraham. By capturing Lot he was making Abram his enemy, and by making Abram his enemy he was making God his enemy and invoking the curse portion of Genesis 12:3:

Genesis 12:3 HCSB *I will bless those who bless you, I will curse those who treat you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.*

As mighty as Chedorlaomer was, he was bound to lose, because he was not fighting against man, but against God.

(14) When Abram heard that his relative had been taken prisoner, he assembled his 318 trained men, born in his household, and they went in pursuit as far as Dan. (15) And he and his servants deployed against them by night, attacked them, and pursued them as far as Hobah to the north of Damascus.

This was no small battle, the initial conflict is in the very south of Israel, near the tar-pits at the top of the Dead Sea around Sodom and Gomorrah. Abram then pursues Chedorlaomer as far as Dan in the very north of Israel and finally up north of Damascus in Syria! Abram had his own army "318 trained men" - apparently highly trained warriors of some sort. So the battle involved both human skill and the mighty power of God. Abraham's trained farm hands against the mightiest, giant-killing imperial armies of ancient Babylon, Persia and Syria! And Abram routed them! This was at least 200 miles of fighting and probably took at least a couple of months. By the end of it the empire of mighty Chedorlaomer is broken and Israel is entirely freed from his grip.

Chedorlaomer comes from the north, invaded as far south as Kadesh-Barnea and the Amalekite territory (verse 7), he then wanders across to Sodom where Lot is captured and Abram gives chase. So Chedorlaomer was in control of all the territory that Joshua would later conquer. By defeating Chedorlaomer Abram is spiritually claiming all this land - from Kadesh-Barnea to north of Damascus as Abrahamic land. In today's terms Abram has conquered Jordan, Israel, the Golan heights and Syria as far as "*Hobah to the north of Damascus*". So with this battle Abram went from being an old wandering prophet to being the military liberator of the Ancient Middle East.

The grip of Shinar (Babylon) and the descendants of wicked and predatory Nimrod and his political allies is destroyed. Apparently up until this point the whole post-Flood world was in terror on Nimrod, his Tower, his occult powers and his imperial reach. His allies rode all over the ancient world exacting tax and tribute. Now Abram liberates a huge swath of fertile territory from this hundreds of years old tyranny. The dark occultic influence of ancient Babylon is rolled back and a new world of faith emerges briefly in Canaan. This was not unlike the moment in the Lord of the Rings at the end of the Two Towers when the wicked wizard in the Tower is defeated. Evil was not completely defeated but it was been dealt a major blow.

Abram's victory was complete - "*He brought back all the goods and also his relative Lot and his goods, as well as the women and the other people.*" Both people and goods were taken from the hands of the marauding kings. There is a spiritual principle here - God's victories are victories of complete restoration. Yet a question hangs in the air - would Sodom repent and change its ways? Would liberation from oppression lead to liberation from sin? That is still a question in many countries where political liberation seems so urgent. Political liberation, without spiritual liberation - is totally worthless.

Melchizedek Blesses Abram

Genesis 14:17-20 HCSB *After Abram returned from defeating Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). (18) Then Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine; he was a priest to God Most High. (19) He blessed him and said: Abram is blessed by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, (20) and give praise to God Most High who has handed over your enemies to you. And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.*

The Evil Empire has been vanquished and peace now reigns in Canaan. Abram's victory over the five kings was clearly supernatural and this is acknowledged by both Abram and Melchizedek (though not by defiant Sodom). Into the victory celebration comes a priest with bread and wine. (Later on as Christ instituted a new covenant in His blood He also instituted a new priesthood, which we will see was a priesthood of the order of Melchizedek, with these same elements of bread and wine.) Melchizedek was a "priest to God Most High" who is also called "the Creator of Heaven and Earth."

In these days it was believed by most people that the "gods" dwelt in a hierarchy with a Zeus like figure at the top, a number of middle gods like Poseidon (the sea God) in the middle and numerous lesser gods like Mercury (the messenger god) just above divinized humans such as Hercules (a legendary Greek strong man and hero) and Achilles (a mighty warrior) and human kings and princes. All of these were to be given due fear and reverence. The whole world was sensitive to these various spiritual levels and the fine distinctions between them. (The gods would not have had these names in Abram's day but I am just using the Graeco-Roman names as examples familiar to at least a few readers. The system was much the same.)

Now Abram had just supernaturally vanquished five kings which put him, in the popular mind of the times, in at least the "Hercules" category. But it was well-known that Abram did not reverence ANY of the major pagan deities of the day. So how did Abram get his supernatural power if he did not fear or worship any of the known gods? Who had given Abram such a powerful blessing that he could shatter all the occult powers on Babylon and a huge army? In the animistic world of ancient times this would have been a burning question. Who was this "hidden god" that had such awesome power?

Into this animistic spiritual perplexity steps Melchizedek with a simple statement: *"Abram is blessed by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, (20) and give praise to God Most High who has handed over your enemies to you."*

The spiritual power behind Abram was "God Most High" and so great was His power that He was "the Creator of Heaven and Earth" - a singular God, who was the sole Creator of all things. Thus Zeus and Baal and Dagon and Ashtoreth and Tiamat and all the gods of Babylon and the Enuma-Elish and Olympus were outranked! There was a higher God, even a most High God, and this God had blessed Abram! If this God was the most powerful God, then He also must be worshiped, in fact He alone should be worshiped!

Now Abram, the mighty warrior, the one endowed with power from God Most High does two extraordinary things:

a) He accepts the blessing from Melchizedek and since the greater blesses the lesser, Abram is acknowledging Melchizedek is greater than him!

b) He gives tithes of all the plunder to Melchizedek thus confirming the honor and clearly saying that Melchizedek was priest even to Abram!

So in Melchizedek we have an Old Testament character who is clearly spiritually greater than Abraham! This presented a huge problem for the Jews, for all their priests were descendants of Aaron - who was far lesser than Abram. So in Melchizedek here was a priesthood that was greater than the Aaronic priesthood! Even in the time of David this was noted in Psalm 110 which refers to the coming Messiah:

Psalms 110:4 ASV *Jehovah hath sworn, and will not repent: Thou art a priest for ever After the order of Melchizedek.*

This order of Melchizedek was the order of Christ's eternal priesthood and Hebrews has three main passages on this which we shall examine at some length:

Hebrews 5:5-10 ASV *So Christ also glorified not himself to be made a high priest, but he that spake unto him, Thou art my Son, This day have I begotten thee: (6) as he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever After the order of Melchizedek. (7) and having been made perfect, he became unto all them that obey him the author of eternal salvation; (10) named of God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.*

These verses tell us that God alone ordains people to the "order of Melchizedek" and that he so appointed Jesus Christ as the permanent and abiding High Priest of this order. Now if Christ is the High Priest then who are the other priests? That's us - for we have been made a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5,9) and "kings and priests to our God" (revelation 1:6, 5:10, 20:6). Note that Melchizedek was both a King and a Priest. This "royal priesthood" was impossible under the Jewish Law where Kings came from the tribe of Judah and priests came from the tribe of Levi. So God appointed Jesus Christ as the High Priest of the royal priesthood of Melchizedek, this is an eternal priesthood, constituted of those who have eternal life.

Hebrews 6:19-20 ASV *...a hope both sure and stedfast and entering into that which is within the veil; (20) whither as a forerunner Jesus entered for us, having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek.*

The veil here is the veil of the Temple in Heaven (not on earth) and Jesus entered into this place, the true eternal holy of holies, as the eternal High Priest of the order of Melchizedek. Thus this order ministers in the heavenly tabernacle, not the earthly tabernacle and is the highest possible order of priesthood. And it remains eternally and does not pass away.

Hebrews 7:1-17 ASV *For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of God Most High, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, (2) to whom also Abraham divided a tenth part of all (being first, by interpretation, King of righteousness, and then also King of Salem, which is King of peace; (3) without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like unto the Son of God), abideth a priest continually. (4) Now consider how great this man was, unto whom Abraham, the patriarch, gave a tenth out of the chief spoils. ...(7) But without any dispute the less is blessed of the better. (8) And here men that die receive tithes; but there one, of whom it is witnessed that he liveth. ... (15)*

And what we say is yet more abundantly evident, if after the likeness of Melchizedek there ariseth another priest, (16) who hath been made, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life: (17) for it is witnessed of him, Thou art a priest for ever After the order of Melchizedek.

This passage points to Melchizedek as an eternal being: "without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like unto the Son of God" but does not go as far as saying that Melchizedek and Jesus are one and the same. Melchizedek is "like unto" a son of God, not "the son of God". Jesus Christ is called 'another priest' "after the likeness of Melchizedek there ariseth another priest," that is Christ is "another priest" like (but not the same as) Melchizedek - but sharing the same spiritual order and many of the same characteristics.

Melchizedek's name means "King of righteousness" and "King of peace" and these are also Messianic titles of Christ:

Isaiah 9:6-7 ASV *For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (7) Of the increase of his government and of peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of Jehovah of hosts will perform this.*

Isaiah 32:1-3 ASV *Behold, a king shall reign in righteousness, and princes shall rule in justice. (2) And a man shall be as a hiding-place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest, as streams of water in a dry place, as the shade of a great rock in a weary land. (3) And the eyes of them that see shall not be dim, and the ears of them that hear shall hearken.*

Now this "order of Melchizedek" is only entered by those who have eternal life: "who hath been made, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life". In this case "endless life" is better translated "an indestructible life":

Hebrews 7:16 HCSB *who doesn't become a priest based on a legal command concerning physical descent but based on the power of an indestructible life.*

Jesus had a life that could not in any way be destroyed – even by crucifixion. He rose from the dead, and thus entered into the priesthood of Melchizedek and we rose with Him (Romans 6) and entered into the same priesthood and we are seated with Him in the heavenly realms (Ephesians 2:6). We also have an indestructible life, we shall be raised from the dead and we shall be "more than conquerors" and death shall lose its sting! Now Melchizedek, was priest of "God Most High, Creator of Heaven and Earth", such a vast and powerful God does not dwell in houses made with human hands or have any need of sacrifices and offerings. He is a God who is completely above and outside the "religious system" and is served with the simplest of natural elements – bread and wine. Paul made this point very clearly when he spoke to the Athenians:

Acts 17:22-31 HCSB *Then Paul stood in the middle of the Areopagus and said: "Men of Athens! I see that you are extremely religious in every respect. (23) For as I was passing through and observing the objects of your worship, I even found an altar on which was inscribed: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD Therefore, what you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you. (24) The God who made the world and everything in it--He is*

Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in shrines made by hands. (25) Neither is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives everyone life and breath and all things. (26) From one man He has made every nation of men to live all over the earth and has determined their appointed times and the boundaries of where they live, (27) so that they might seek God, and perhaps they might reach out and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us. (28) For in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, 'For we are also His offspring.' (29) Being God's offspring, then, we shouldn't think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image fashioned by human art and imagination. (30) "Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God now commands all people everywhere to repent, (31) because He has set a day on which He is going to judge the world in righteousness by the Man He has appointed. He has provided proof of this to everyone by raising Him from the dead."

The above verses are, I think, a clear statement of the ancient patriarchal and universal faith of Abram and Melchizedek:

1. There is one God, who is unknown to most people, and He is the Creator of Heaven and Earth.
2. This God has no need of any religious system or of shrines or temples or offerings from human hands, in fact He needs nothing from humanity at all.
3. This God is sovereign, He gives life and breath to all things, and is charge of genealogy, history, nations and boundaries.
4. We are His offspring. Since His offspring is living and personal we can infer that this is a living and personal God, not an animal or an object of wood or stone.
5. Idols are no part of the worship of this God.
6. This God is righteous and will call all human beings to account on a set Day.
7. The Judge will be "*the Man He has appointed*", Jesus who He raised from the dead.
8. Therefore we should repent, seek God and live righteous lives, free from idols.
9. He is not far from each of us. In Him we live and breathe and have our being.
10. So if we reach out we have a reasonable chance of "finding Him".

This is the very simplest gospel presentation. It is very similar to the "eternal gospel" that is announced by an angel in the end times as the wrath of God is being poured out: **Revelation 14:6-7 HCSB** *Then I saw another angel flying in mid-heaven, having the eternal gospel to announce to the inhabitants of the earth--to every nation, tribe, language, and people. (7) He spoke with a loud voice: "Fear God and give Him glory, because the hour of His judgment has come. Worship the Maker of heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water."*

This God – the Creator of all things, this is the One who blessed Abram, and who gave him victory over the armies. It is this God that defeats the nations of the world and all their idols. This is the God of Melchizedek, Abram, Jesus and of the Christian faith.

Abram Rebuffs The King Of Sodom

Genesis 14:21-24 HCSB *Then the king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the people, but take the possessions for yourself." (22) But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have raised my hand in an oath to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, (23) that I will not take a thread or sandal strap or anything that belongs to you, so you can never say, 'I made Abram rich.' (24) I will take nothing except what the servants have eaten. But as for the share of the men who came with me--Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre--they can take their share."*

In Ginzberg's collection of Jewish legends from the Talmud and other sources we find this interesting narrative:

"Somewhat arrogantly the king of Sodom set out to meet Abraham. He was proud that a great miracle, his rescue from the slime pit, had been performed for him, too. He made Abraham the proposition that he keep the despoiled goods for himself. But Abraham refused them, and said: "I have lift up mine hand unto the Lord, God Most High, who hath created the world for the sake of the pious, that I will not take a thread nor a shoe-latchet nor aught that is thine. I have no right upon any goods taken as spoils, save only that which the young men have eaten, and the portion of the men who tarried by the stuff, though they went not down to the battle itself." The example of Abraham in giving a share in the spoils even unto the men not concerned directly in the battle, was followed later by David, who heeded not the protest of the wicked men and the base fellows with him, that the watchers who staid by the stuff were not entitled to share alike with the warriors that had gone down to the battle.... As a reward for the sanctification of the Holy Name, which Abraham had brought about when he refused to keep aught of the goods taken in battle, his descendants received two commands, the command of the threads in the borders of their garments, and the command of the latches to be bound upon their hands and to be used as frontlets between their eyes. Thus they commemorate that their ancestor refused to take so much as a thread or a latchet. And because he would not touch a shoe-latchet of the spoils, his descendants cast their shoe upon Edom."

Now while we should not take such legends with utter seriousness, and certainly not as Scripture, this legend does point out that Abram's actions were interpreted as "the sanctification of the Holy Name" or as we say "hallowing the name of God." Abram's separation from the ways of Sodom was seen as an act of sanctification and of respect towards the name of Yahweh.

There are lines that we must not cross if we are to give glory to the name of God. Imagine if a church took money from Playboy magazine and put a bunny icon on its building and called itself Playboy Christian Fellowship. This would be shameful! It would not hallow the name of God. Instead it would drag it through the mud! This is the sort of choice Abram faced when dealing with the unrepentant, ungrateful, swaggering King of Sodom. To take anything from Sodom would be to taint all that Abram stood for! Abram eschewed that which would taint his witness and cause people to say "Sodom has made Abram rich". Abram wanted God to get ALL the glory and fir it to be absolutely clear that the reason that he was rich and victorious was solely because God had blessed him and delivered him!

This principle of separation from evil is outlined by Paul in the New Testament:

2 Corinthians 6:14-18 HCSB *Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness? (15) What agreement does Christ have with Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? (16) And what agreement does God's sanctuary have with idols? For we are the sanctuary of the living God, as God said: I will dwell among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be My people. (17) Therefore, come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord; do not touch any unclean thing, and I will welcome you. (18) I will be a Father to you, and you will be sons and daughters to Me, says the Lord Almighty.*

There is a time to stand distinct as Christians, and we are to be both salt and light:

Matthew 5:13-16 HCSB *"You are the salt of the earth. But if the salt should lose its taste, how can it be made salty? It's no longer good for anything but to be thrown out and trampled on by men. (14) "You are the light of the world. A city situated on a hill cannot be hidden. (15) No one lights a lamp and puts it under a basket, but rather on a lampstand, and it gives light for all who are in the house. (16) In the same way, let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.*

Christians are to avoid that which is unseemly, evil, compromised or sinful, instead we are to expose them and then avoid them, walking in the light of God:

Ephesians 5:11-14 MKJV *And have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them. (12) For it is a shame even to speak of those things which are done by them in secret. (13) But all things that are reprov'd are made manifest by the light, for whatever makes manifest is light. (14) Therefore he says, "Awake, sleeping ones! And arise from the dead, and Christ shall give you light."*

We are not to live in the ways of the world – whether it be dubious business practices, alliances with criminals, marrying an unbeliever, taking money from gambling interests, or living the “Hollywood lifestyle” of promiscuity, glitz and glamor.

1 John 2:15-17 HCSB *Do not love the world or the things that belong to the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in him. Because everything that belongs to the world-- (16) the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride in one's lifestyle--is not from the Father, but is from the world. (17) And the world with its lust is passing away, but the one who does God's will remains forever.*

The old Quaker ethic of godly separation and simple living has a great deal of biblical backing! Abram chose to live far from Sodom - even though the pastures were well-watered there. He moved away from the environment of sin, because he did not want any part of it. Lot's choice to remain it resulted in him being “tormented day and night by what he saw” (2 Peter 2:7,8). For all his dwelling among them Lot a) did not convert anyone and b) lost his family. This is a warning to those who choose to dwell among the wicked “in order to be a witness”. Compromise converts no-one and just endangers those around you who are of weaker faith.

The particular example I have in mind is Christian young people going to wild nightclubs “in order to be a witness”. Not only are the clubs too loud for proper conversation but what they do in order to fit in only leads them very close to the edge of disaster and

younger Christians who go with them often fall away as a result. Jesus cared for sinners and prostitutes but He never entered a brothel (though with the Roman occupation Israel was full of them)! Jesus' conversations with sinners were on safe neutral ground in people's homes, out in the open fields, or where He could be seen by others. They were safe "backyard barbecue" style settings.

If we are to "hallow God's name" then we must live like sacred people, as reverent God-fearing folk who have boundaries, and who do not consort with wickedness. Now it cost Abram a huge amount of money to do this. He had just spent a few months fighting a war over hundreds of miles of territory with a small army of men but he would not take a single cent for it.

But Abram did not impose his values on some of his neighbors (Aner, Eschol and Mamre) who went with him - they could take their share. We have to walk according to our own conscience, making sacrifices without asking everyone else to approve or applaud.

Believing The Impossible

Genesis 15:1-6 MKJV *After these things the Word of Jehovah came to Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram, I am your shield and your exceeding great reward. (2) And Abram said, Lord God, what will You give me, since I am going childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? (3) And Abram said, Behold, You have given no seed to me. And behold, one born in my house is my heir. (4) And behold, the Word of Jehovah came to him saying, This one shall not be your heir. But he that shall come forth out of your own bowels shall be your heir. (5) And He brought him outside and said, Look now toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them. And He said to him, So shall your seed be. (6) And he believed in Jehovah. And He counted it to him for righteousness.*

Jesus, as the "Word of Jehovah" appears to Abram in a vision. This may sound weird and even shamanistic but visions are fairly common in Scripture. They are part of the language of the spirit world that Abram was so sensitive to. In this vision the Word of Jehovah says: "*Fear not, Abram, I am your shield and your exceeding great reward.*" Which makes one ask - why did He need to communicate this to Abram who had just vanquished an army some ancient Jewish writers have put at 700,000 troops - with just 318 men?

1. Abram had just conducted a long expensive military campaign against the superpower of the day, and then refused to take any reward for himself. He was unrewarded in material terms for all his effort.
2. The superpower just might come back - and he still only had 318 men!

So Abram might have been feeling something like: "I just go and do this huge good deed and liberate a sizable chunk of the Ancient Middle East from tyranny and now I'm sitting here broke and scared! So much for being the nice guy!" This is what we call "the cost of ministry" and Abram has this life pattern of big sacrifice followed by even bigger reward which we see with leaving Haran, giving land to Lot, fighting the battle, and of course the offering of Isaac on the altar. So Abram is feeling unrewarded and vulnerable and God turns up with a statement that he can take either way. To someone in Abram's position "*Fear not, Abram, I am your shield and your exceeding great reward*" could be

very annoying and get a "so what?" kind of response, or it could get a response of faith (which it did). It is easy to under-rate the promises of God. But Abram believed it!

Knowing that God was speaking to him in the vision and was favoring him Abram lays out his central dilemma: *And Abram said, Lord God, what will You give me, since I am going childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? (3) And Abram said, Behold, You have given no seed to me. And behold, one born in my house is my heir.*

"*Lord God, what will you give me?*" is a very good question! It respectfully acknowledges the goodness, kindness and generosity of God, while leaving the answer in His hands. Now Abram had been given many things by God – silver, gold, cattle, wealth, victory, a huge estate and even a private army – but Abram still felt the need of one essential thing – an heir to all that God had given him. This need put everything else in the shade. There are times when the entire goodness of God in our life seems to depend on just one request. If "it" is fulfilled, then all is well, if "it" is not answered then nothing can compensate. God understood this need of Abram's and answered it!

(4) And behold, the Word of Jehovah came to him saying, This one shall not be your heir. But he that shall come forth out of your own bowels shall be your heir. (5) And He brought him outside and said, Look now toward the heavens and count the stars, if you are able to count them. And He said to him, So shall your seed be.

Here Abram is faced with a tough choice between a) believing something that seemed utterly impossible or b) calling God a liar. God had said it – now would Abram believe the Voice in the Vision? Or would he shake his head in disappointment and disbelief? Abram decided that while it was highly improbable that he would have descendants, it was totally and utterly impossible for God to lie. God was truthful, and that was that, so Abram would believe the "impossible".

God is light and in Him there is no darkness. God is truth and in Him is no deceit. God is faithful and in Him is no unreliability. In Jesus all the promises of God are "Yea and Amen"! (1 John 1:5, Numbers 23:19, 2 Timothy 2:13, 2 Corinthians 1:20). God's absolute truthfulness means we can believe His words to us, and that we can commit our life to them.

This does not mean that we can invent promises about fame, success, or other matters and then say that God is unfaithful if He does not bring them about. We have to believe His words that come to us, not our own wishful desires. God is completely faithful to you, even though you may doubt it and even not realize it. God may call you to patiently believe some incredibly impossible thing. Noah had to believe in, and preach regarding, a world-wide Flood for one hundred and twenty long years. That is a long time to wait for God's Word to come true!

We are sometimes called to choose between, on one hand, "walking by sight" and believing the spreadsheets and the number-crunchers and the Gantt charts (which have their place) or on the other hand "walking by faith" and believing a Word from the Lord. Do we call God a liar, or do we call our own best human judgment a liar? It is a tough call but when push comes to shove, I am fallible and fallen and God is holy and truthful and I must believe His Word. Early on in my Christian life I was doing some post-graduate research in Chemistry and wondering about evolution as I walked across the

central court of Queensland University. Just then God said: "Are you going to believe My Word, or will you believe the scientists?" I then replied "I know scientists are fallible because I am one of them, and so are my friends, but You are infallible" and that settled the question for me - forever. I simply chose to believe in Creation because I was convinced that God was completely truthful.

And he believed in Jehovah. And He counted it to him for righteousness. When we believe in God, over and above our own best judgment and knowledge, then God knows that we really, truly trust Him, and He accounts it to us as righteousness. When we truly believe that God can do the impossible in our life we are "hallowing God's name" and honoring God's truthfulness, faithfulness and goodness. We are saying that it is impossible for God to lie, or to be unfaithful, so we will trust Him and believe in Him despite the facts before us. This is the action of a righteous and selfless person, a person more concerned with God's honor, than with anything else.

God responds to trust. His power will be unleashed in your life when you trust Him. On the other hand His power will diminish as you doubt, distrust or test Him.

James 1:6-8 MKJV *But let him ask in faith, doubting nothing. For he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven by the wind and tossed. (7) For do not let that man think that he shall receive anything from the Lord; (8) he is a double-minded man, not dependable in all his ways.*

Abram believed God, and God's power started working in Abram's life through his unwavering faith. The trust opened the gate to Heaven's goodness appearing in his life:

Romans 4:18-22 MKJV *For he who beyond hope believed on hope for him to become the father of many nations (according to that which was spoken, "So your seed shall be"). (19) And not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body already dead (being about a hundred years old) or the deadening of Sarah's womb. (20) He did not stagger at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strong in faith, giving glory to God, (21) and being fully persuaded that what God had promised, He was also able to perform. (22) And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness.*

True Abrahamic Christian faith is not just cognitive adherence to a set of doctrines. It is believing that God will so act in reality, in true accordance with those doctrines, and do so in your life, and especially at your point of deepest need.

The Covenant of Pieces

Genesis 15:7-21 MKJV *And He said to him, I am Jehovah that brought you out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give you this land to inherit it. (8) And he said, Lord God, by what shall I know that I shall inherit it? (9) And He said to him, Take Me a heifer of three years old, and a she-goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon. (10) And he took all these to himself, and divided them in the middle, and laid each piece against one another; but he did not divide the birds. (11) And when the birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away. (12) And it happened as the sun was setting, and a deep sleep fell upon Abram. And, behold, a horror of great darkness fell upon him! (13) And He said to Abram, You must surely know that your seed shall be a stranger in a land not theirs, and shall serve them. And they shall afflict them four hundred years. (14) And also I will judge that nation whom they shall serve. And afterward they shall come out with great substance. (15) And you shall go to your fathers in peace. You shall be buried in a good old age. (16) But in the fourth generation they shall come here again, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full. (17) And it happened, the sun went down, and it was dark and behold, a smoking furnace, and a burning lamp passed between those pieces. (18) In the same day Jehovah made a covenant with Abram, saying, I have given this land to your seed, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, (19) the Kenites, and the Kenizzites, and the Kadmonites, (20) and the Hittites, and the Perizzites, and the giants, (21) and the Amorites, and the Canaanites, and the Girgashites, and the Jebusites.*

Here is something many of us find strange, if not difficult. Visions, dreams, sacrifices, a "horror of great darkness" and solemn apparitions and prophecies that go far into the future. It is a deeply mystical moment quite unlike "normal church life in the suburbs". And here is a problem. Which is right? Dangerous mysticism or safe suburban Christianity? The paranormal or the absolutely normal? Are we to engage in animal sacrifices? Some African independent churches do!

The experience of God is a vast field that includes prophets like Ezekiel and his wheels, and Isaiah walking naked and barefoot for three years or David dancing shamelessly before the Ark. It includes Peter walking on water, Paul seeing the resurrected Jesus, and healings, miracles and prophecies by the dozen. How do we fit this in with four hymns, an offering and a sermon? Do we all become snake-handlers? I press this point because we seem to have an automatic filter that blocks out the stranger parts of the Bible in an effort to create a highly cognitive theological system that can be reasonably discussed over coffee in a seminary cafeteria!

In his Narnia series C.S. Lewis has this wonderful little scene concerning the lion Aslan (Jesus) who stands blocking Lucy's way to a much needed drink of water:
"Then he isn't safe?" asks Lucy.
"Safe?" replies Mr. Beaver. "Course he isn't safe. But he's good."

God, in His Book, is definitely not safe. He sends Jonah off to dreadful Nineveh, makes Paul go hungry, thirsty and naked and crucifies His own beloved Son! God is good but risky and "dread-full" a numinous being of great unpredictability, totally free and stranger than the four living creatures in the throne room scenes of the book of

Revelation (see chapters 4 & 5). Hence the burning pot and the horror of great darkness that came upon Abram.

This strange ceremony is a solemn pact between God and Abraham by which God binds Himself to do certain things especially that He will give to Abram's descendants all the land between the river of Egypt and the Euphrates River (which flows through Baghdad). This vast territory covers Israel, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq and depending on interpretation – possibly the entire Arabian peninsula. God made a pact with Abraham that would have everlasting consequences and is still having an impact on global politics today.

This promise was going to take place “in the fourth generation” (v13) or after 400 years (v.16) thus equating a generation to about 100-120 years, which is consistent with the declaration of the Lord in Genesis 6:

Genesis 6:3 MKJV *And Jehovah said, My spirit shall not always strive with man, in his erring; he is flesh. Yet his days shall be a hundred and twenty years.*

The reason for this delay was “for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.” God was going to bring the judgment of Joshua on the Amorites when their iniquity had grown to a point that God calls “full”. There is a point, decided beforehand by God, when He has “had enough” and calls down judgment – but in this case it was going to take four hundred years of idolatry and paganism to bring it about. We have a very patient and long-suffering God!

This theme of judgment also applies to Egypt: “*And He said to Abram, You must surely know that your seed shall be a stranger in a land not theirs, and shall serve them. And they shall afflict them four hundred years. (14) And also I will judge that nation whom they shall serve. And afterward they shall come out with great substance.*”

How can God allow His precious people to undergo four hundred years of affliction? People would live and die, generation after generation, without hope and oppressed. Surely God is unjust to make an entire lifetime miserable? And then their children's lifetime as well? Just because he was giving the Amorites a chance? If the entire purpose of our existence is in this lifetime, what we do during seventy or so years on earth, then four hundred years of oppression is intolerable. But if, on the other hand, we are eternal living beings who are God's offspring and live and move and have our being in Him then it is a small blip, a drop in the ocean of our existence. If consciousness persists forever then those years, those terrible times, can be “made up” - and indeed we do endure! Jesus indicates that Abram, Isaac and Jacob are still alive today, dwelling in eternity with God and were able to see Moses at the burning bush and Jesus in His ministry.

Matthew 22:31-32 HCSB *Now concerning the resurrection of the dead, haven't you read what was spoken to you by God: (32) I am the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living.”*

John 8:56 HCSB *Your father Abraham was overjoyed that he would see My day; he saw it and rejoiced.”*

God's purposes for us stretch far, far beyond this lifetime. If you do not understand the purpose of your life it may be because your highest purpose lies outside of this life. This

earthly life may just be training you for an eternal future of great glory.

Finally God is a covenant-making God. He is a God who binds Himself to His people with solemn promises about what He will do for them. He is not just a "force" that can be tapped into, but a personal loving God who makes and keeps commitments. God has a fixed eternal resolve to bless us and to do us good, and He is prepared to put that into covenant specifics.

God has entered into a New Covenant with us for the forgiveness of sins. The sacrifice was Christ and at the cross a great darkness came over the land. The earth shook and the veil was torn in two with the death of God's Son. The cross was the solemn covenant making ceremony. God has promised Himself to you, committing Himself to forgive your sins and to bless you.

Now I have deliberately not answered my provocative question about the "strange" and mystical elements of our faith. I do think there is more to Christianity than our imaginations can ever comprehend. I don't think God will ever fit into a neat theological, doctrinal or ecclesiastical box. In fact God can be very uncomfortable. But God is always good and you can trust Him!

Hagar

Genesis 16:1-3 MKJV *Now Sarai, Abram's wife, did not bear. And she had a female slave, an Egyptian, and her name was Hagar. (2) And Sarai said to Abram, Behold now, Jehovah has kept me from bearing. I pray you, go in to my slave woman. It may be that I may be built by her. And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. (3) And Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her slave woman, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife (after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan).*

After ten years of waiting Sarai grows impatient with the promises of God and asks Abram to have sex with her Egyptian maid Hagar. The phrase "that I may be built by her" indicates that she saw Hagar as her property and thus any child of Hagar's as her property also. In Sarai's eyes Hagar was not much more than a surrogate mother. Sarai initiates the whole thing and "takes" Hagar and gives her to Abram to be his wife – albeit a second and inferior wife.

"And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai." This is peculiar. It is reminiscent of Adam's sin:

Genesis 3:17 MKJV *And to Adam He said, Because you have listened to the voice of your wife and have eaten of the tree, of which I commanded you, saying, You shall not eat of it! The ground is cursed for your sake. In pain shall you eat of it all the days of your life.*

Abram, the wise and aged patriarch was supposed to know better, but he too may have been desperate for a son, and maybe Hagar was attractive also. Abram certainly loved and blessed Ishmael and took responsibility for him later (Genesis 17:18-20).

There certainly seem to be strong cultural precedents for remarrying if one's wife was barren. Yet monogamy was the patriarchal ideal (even though Jacob was tricked into

marrying Leah) and none of them accumulated numerous wives for themselves despite their wealth and their power in the land. They knew God's love and on the basis of this entered into deep faithful covenant relationships with those around them e.g. Isaac and Rebekah. We see Abram being highly committed to Lot, Eliezer, to his close friends (Mamre, Eshcol and Aner) as well as to Sarah, Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael. Abram seems to be a very relational and hospitable person who would never break faith with anyone. So why did he take Hagar as a second wife?

Abram was now 85 years old. Sarah was not much younger, time was running out. God had said "one from your own body" but had not mentioned Sarah explicitly. It was culturally acceptable. And it seemed "the only way" though I think they knew it was not God's way. And God let the marriage go ahead.

A lot of culturally acceptable but yet unethical behavior gets indulged in by some Christians: sex before marriage, gambling, travel sex, mild (and not so mild) pornography – these are legal behaviors but they are none the less ungodly ones. And in the long run, they all spell trouble.

The flip side of the marriage to Hagar is that God was not thrown off by it. God did not stop loving Abram, or change His covenant promises, or reduce His blessings, or stop answering Abram's prayers. God in fact made Ishmael into a mighty nation and his descendants are with us today in the Arab world.

God's loving purposes were not changed in the least by Abram's foolish behavior. God did not "go to plan B" or swap from Abram to someone else in His redemptive strategy. God just moved around the problem and blessed Abram anyway. Abram could not "get out of God's will" no matter what. His destiny still came true because his destiny did not depend on the performance of a man, but on the faithfulness and power of God.

It seems that after the great high points when God appears to Abram, he then hits a low point soon after. After his call, he has the incident with Sarah and Pharaoh, after the covenant of the pieces he marries Hagar, and after his becoming a friend of God and a prophet and interceding for Lot and for Sodom and Gomorrah he has the incident with Abimelech. It is up and down all the way. And it teaches us that spiritual highs do not make us invulnerable to sin. In fact sexual misbehavior often accompanies revivals and with their high spiritual emotions. It is on Monday morning after I preach that I often feel the worst spiritual attacks - and I believe this is common for preachers.

God does not need perfect copybooks to accomplish His purposes. Let's do a short exercise to prove this. Think of "the perfect Christian" of modern evangelical culture. Nice guy, beautiful wife, great marriage, good job, big house, two perfect kids who do well at school and play the piano and have straight teeth, deacon at church, tithes, sits in the front row, attends prayer meeting and bible study, has no discernible faults, and is totally organized. Now compare this with the heroes of faith:

Noah – drunk with wine

Abraham – two wives, numerous mistakes

Isaac – kids feuding and out of control, Esau is a redneck who marries an unbeliever.

Jacob – two wives, twelve difficult kids, they sell the youngest into slavery.

Joseph – does prison time and practices divination with a cup

Moses – murders an Egyptian, divorces Zipporah and marries a black Ethiopian woman.

Rahab – a harlot

Samson – numerous sexual escapades

Gideon – makes an ephod that becomes an idol

Jephthah- sacrifices his daughter

Job – goes bankrupt, complains against God, nearly loses his faith from suffering, not a triumphant witness.

Eli and later Samuel – sons out of control

Saul – goes insane, rebels against God.

David – fourteen wives, commits adultery and murder and orders a census out of pride, sons kill each other and rape one of his daughters (Tamar)

Solomon – a dictator who imposes heavy taxation , has 300 wives and introduces idolatry to Israel.

Isaiah – goes naked and barefoot for three years (Isaiah 20)

Jeremiah – single, does prison time, overly emotional, tries to leave the ministry

Daniel – a vegetarian dream interpreter who is in charge of the astrologers of Babylon

John the Baptist - single and strange, vagrant, does prison time, politically incorrect

Mary – pregnant out of wedlock

Peter – impulsive, foot-in-mouth disease, denies Christ

Paul – persecutes the Church, spends time in prison, not a family man, possibly divorced

Timothy – probably single, timid, needed stirring up.

John Mark – a mission field drop-out

John – goes into hiding for nearly sixty years after his brother is beheaded

Of the major biblical heroes with substantial biographical information, there is not a single one that I can find, who would be easily accepted for ministry by most modern evangelical/charismatic/Pentecostal denominations or missions agencies. There is not one who exactly fits the modern evangelical model and who would pass the ordination requirements and cultural, psychological, theological and lifestyle expectations.

From start to finish God's heroes are sinners saved by grace in whom He works by faith to fulfill His purposes. God draws straight lines with bent sticks.

Domestic Stress

Genesis 16:4-6 MKJV *And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her eyes. (5) And Sarai said to Abram, My wrong be upon you. I have given my slave woman into your bosom, and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes. Jehovah judge between me and you. (6) But Abram said to Sarai, Behold, your slave woman is in your hand. Do to her as it pleases you. And Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her face.*

The “sophisticated” solution turns into a poignant problem: Abram has sex with Hagar who conceives, Hagar gets proud and despises Sarai, so Sarai then attacks Abram, and Abram backs down, then Sarai takes her revenge and mistreats Hagar so badly that she heads for the desert. It is a script straight out of “Days of Our Lives”!

We often under-estimate our humanity. We think we can be “cool” and act above things. Sarai probably thought that she could cope with Hagar becoming pregnant to her husband, otherwise she would not have suggested the idea. She probably didn't factor in Hagar getting cocky and proud and despising her. The situation quickly became volcanic. And who gets the blame? Abram! And she is furious:

“And Sarai said to Abram, My wrong be upon you. I have given my slave woman into your bosom, and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes. Jehovah judge between me and you.”

(As a rule of thumb when something goes wrong women blame their husbands, and their husbands blame God or the government, whichever is easier. An exasperated husband once said that when things went badly his wife always blamed him, but when things went well his wife just said “praise the Lord” so that he got all the blame and none of the credit!)

Well Abram was smart enough to know that: “Well actually darling it was your dumb idea in the first place” was not the right answer! Sarai was looking for justice and empowerment – and she got it. Abram affirms her power over Hagar: *But Abram said to Sarai, Behold, your slave woman is in your hand. Do to her as it pleases you.*

If Abram had just called in Hagar and told her to be more respectful to Sarai, he would not have empowered his wife, Sarai still would have been weakened. Every subsequent infraction would have to be brought back to Abram. Sarai would have had no power to correct things herself on the spot. Instead Abram reinforces his wife's power and enables her to use her own judgment to fix things. Now the fact that Sarai abuses this power does not diminish the wisdom of Abram's empowering Sarai to solve her own problem. Sometimes when we bring a problem to God He just says: “I give you the power and authority to solve this one yourself, just use your wisdom.” It might be raising your children, or running your firm, or even casting out a demon from someone. God wants us to mature into people who can reign with Him and rule over the nations. That means we have to develop ethical, wise, godly judgment and the ability to implement constructive solutions to common problems.

“Please God solve my financial mess” might get the reply “You have the power to draw

up a budget, to earn a bit more, to spend a bit less, to give wisely and to see a Christian accountant. Do that first." As we exercise responsibility and self-respect and good judgment, then we will grow and mature and become Christ-like, which is what God intends. As you do this God will help you to master your impulse buying, your cravings, your "unconscious" spending, your lack of discipline and all the other factors that lead to a financial crisis.

Now Sarai had gotten herself into this mess and she was going to get herself out of it by being so mean to Hagar that Hagar would just go away. And for a while Hagar did go away until God sent her back, and humbled her and changed her attitude toward Sarai. As Hagar changed the problem resolved and they all lived "happily" for another thirteen years or so (until Ishmael's attitude got them thrown out).

The other part of the domestic dispute is a disrupting of the natural order of relationships:

Proverbs 30:21-23 *Under three things the earth quakes, and under four it is not able to bear up: (22) for a servant when he reigns; and a fool when he is filled with food; (23) for a hateful (rejected) woman when she is married; and a servant girl that is heir to (or supplants) her mistress.*

Hagar's sudden promotion from servant, to Abrams; wife and mother of the only heir caused her to be "unbearable" in her behavior. Every time we see Hagar she has the mentality of a young servant girl. She is alternatively cocky, then sulky, then runs away, is then defeated and desperate and is finally submissive. Hagar was quite unable to psychologically bear the social implications of the role Sarai thrust upon her. The new role filled her with pride, then plunged her into despair. Paul sees a similar trap for new converts who are asked to assume spiritual leadership;

1 Timothy 3:6 HCSB *He must not be a new convert, or he might become conceited and fall into the condemnation of the Devil.*

There is a proper natural order for human relationships and when this is disrupted things quickly go out of kilter. The triad of Abram, Sarai and Hagar was never going to be entirely stable. It had to go back to being a dyad. Sarai had to be demoted back to being a maid and no longer fully a wife - which is what lay behind Abram's dictum: "Your maid is in your power" - it put things back into a more stable configuration that everyone was used to and could cope with.

There are long-term consequences for the arrangements we make in our relationships and if we think we can mess around with God's natural order of things we will find out we were wrong – the hard and painful way!

God Hears Us, God Sees Us

Genesis 16:7-16 MKJV *And the Angel of Jehovah found her by a fountain of water in the wilderness, by the fountain in the way to Shur. (8) And He said, Hagar, Sarai's slave, where did you come from? and where will you go? And she said, I flee from the face of my mistress Sarai. (9) And the Angel of Jehovah said to her, Return to your mistress and submit yourself under her hands. (10) And the Angel of Jehovah said to her, I will multiply your seed exceedingly, so that it shall not be numbered for multitude. (11) And the Angel of Jehovah said to her, Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son. And you shall call his name Ishmael, because Jehovah has heard your affliction. (12) And he will be a wild man. His hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him. And he shall live in the presence of all his brothers. (13) And she called the name of Jehovah who had spoken to her, You are a God of vision! For she said, Even here have I looked after Him that sees me? (14) Therefore the well was called The Well of the Living One Seeing Me. Behold, it is between Kadesh and Bered. (15) And Hagar bore Abram a son. And Abram called his son's name, which Hagar bore, Ishmael. (16) And Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.*

First a bit of technical detail about "the messenger formula" as it relates to angels. Messengers in the ancient world spoke the exact first-person words of their master. So Joe's messenger Isaac would run down the road and say to Sam "I, Joe, invite you Sam to a barbeque at lunch-time". Isaac would speak "in Joe's name" as if he were Joe himself. This is known as the "messenger formula". It is often used by the prophets when speaking in God's name "Thus saith the Lord..." or by messengers of ancient Kings "Thus says King Cyrus".

[You can find a brief article on the messenger formula here:
<http://www.bible.gen.nz/amos/literary/genre.htm#997606>]

Now the "angel of the Lord" presents a particular problem as he is a divine being who speaks for God, and uses the "first-person" and sometimes does not add "Thus says the Lord". However the title "angel of the Lord" means "messenger of the Lord" (angel means messenger" and so it should be understood that the messenger formula is being used. However the great glory of the angel of the Lord and this first person speech as if God was speaking sometimes causes bible characters to say "I have seen God and lived" while in fact they have "seen a divine being and lived". No one has seen God at any time:

1 John 4:12 MKJV *No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwells in us, and His love is perfected in us.*

Even the glorious being in Revelation 1 is not Jesus Christ but His glorious angel, with symbols of Christ, – and towards the end of the book this same angel even prevents John from worshiping him. Thus the 'angel of the Lord" passages are not appearances of God, but of his most glorious messenger angel who speaks in His name.

Hagar learns a number of huge lessons about God:

- a) That though she is just a runaway slave, God cared for her and for her unborn child.
- b) That God hears people's cries – hence the name Ishmael – God hears.
- c) That God sees people's situations and knows their futures.

Notice how the formula for naming Ishmael is strikingly similar to the well-known formula used to name Jesus:

Genesis 16:11 MKJV *And the Angel of Jehovah said to her, Behold, you are with child, and shall bear a son. And you shall call his name Ishmael, because Jehovah has heard your affliction.*

Matthew 1:21 MKJV *And she shall bear a son, and you shall call His name JESUS: for He shall save His people from their sins. (see also Luke 1:31)*

In both cases an angel announces the birth and the name and why the name was chosen. The only other person I can find in Scripture that this happens to is Samson.

The Abrahamic line is so important to God that even a pregnant runaway slave merits an angelic visitation! God is watching over the process of redemption with infinite care and when you get "in on the story" by participating in God's plans you will find that God "hears" your prayers and "sees you situation" and that amazing things start happening in your life. Hagar, though humble, would become the mother of a great nation and an innumerable people – the Arabs.

The angel's prediction of the proud, independent, contentious Arab nature of Ishmael is true even to this day: **Genesis 16:12 LITV** *And he shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against all, and the hand of everyone against him; and he shall live before all his brothers.*

Such natures are given spiritually and are not just a product of genetics and the environment - or the Arab nature might have changed by now, four thousand years later! There is a spiritual realm that determines the natures of people and places and their destinies and whether they are blessed or cursed and how things will turn out. Ishmael was predestined, by God, to be a great nation of a certain nature and to share some of the Abrahamic blessing. Once God speaks, it happens!

However natures are not totally permanent, natures can be changed spiritually by a decree from God, or by the new birth or by the intervention of the Holy Spirit:

1 Samuel 10:9 MKJV *And it happened when he had turned his back to go from Samuel, God changed him with another heart. And all those signs came on that day.*

Daniel 4:16 MKJV *Let his heart be changed from man's, and let the heart of an animal be given to him. And let seven times pass over him.*

Why then has not God just given everyone a meek, humble and loving nature? Partly because God has His plans for us and loves a great diversity of humanity, partly so we could love Him freely and without manipulation, and partly because He freely offers us a good nature - through repentance and faith and His inner working that produces the fruit of the Holy Spirit.

I am "by nature" intelligent, cynical, sarcastic, and depressive. However I cannot let it just rest at that and say "well that is just the way I am!" Instead I have to ask God to transform me in both my strengths and weaknesses so I become wise, full of faith, gentle, perceptive, discerning and generally optimistic.

God even addresses Hagar's nature and tells her to return and submit to Sarai her mistress. The path to glory lay in being part of the Abrahamic line and to do that Hagar would have to stop being proud and flighty and start being humble and strong.

The Covenant of Circumcision

Genesis 17:1-14 MKJV *And when Abram was ninety-nine years old, Jehovah appeared to Abram and said to him, I am the Almighty God! Walk before Me and be perfect. (2) And I will make My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly. (3) And Abram fell on his face. And God talked with him, saying, (4) As for Me, behold! My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations. (5) Neither shall your name any more be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham. For I have made you a father of many nations. (6) And I will make you exceedingly fruitful, greatly so, and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come out of you. (7) And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your seed after you in their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be a God to you and to your seed after you. (8) And I will give the land to you in which you are a stranger, and to your seed after you, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession. And I will be their God. (9) And God said to Abraham, And you shall keep My covenant, you and your seed after you in their generations. (10) This is My covenant, which you shall keep, between Me and you and your seed after you. Every male child among you shall be circumcised. (11) And you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin. And it shall be a token of the covenant between Me and you. (12) And a son of eight days shall be circumcised among you, every male child in your generations; he that is born in the house, or bought with silver of any stranger who is not of your seed. (13) He that is born in your house, and he that is bought with your silver, must be circumcised. And My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant. (14) And the uncircumcised male child whose flesh of his foreskin is not circumcised, that soul shall be cut off from his people; he has broken My covenant.*

The circumcision that puts Christians into the Abrahamic covenant is the circumcision of baptism, the circumcision of the heart by the Holy Spirit – physical circumcision is no longer relevant:

Colossians 2:10-12 MKJV *(10) And you are complete in Him, who is the Head of all principality and power, (11) in whom also you are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ, (12) buried with Him in baptism, in whom also you were raised through the faith of the working of God, raising Him from the dead.*

Galatians 5:6 MKJV *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any strength, but faith working through love.*

Galatians 6:15 MKJV *For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision has any strength, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation.*

1 Corinthians 7:18-19 MKJV (18) *Was any called having been circumcised? Do not be uncircumcised. Was anyone called in uncircumcision? Do not be circumcised. (19) Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God.*

Romans 2:28-29 MKJV *For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that outwardly in flesh; (29) but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is of the heart; in spirit and not in letter; whose praise is not from men, but from God.*

So the covenant given to Abram here is modified by the death and resurrection of Christ. Now all who have faith can come into it, and into the blessings of Abraham. But what are these blessings:

- a) I will greatly multiply you
- b) I will make you exceedingly fruitful
- c) I will make nations of you, and kings shall come out of you
- d) And I will give the land to you - all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession.

This is the Great Blessing formula that begins in Genesis 1 with Adam- "Be fruitful, multiply, and have dominion - and I give you...". This Great Blessing is repeated in various forms to Noah and later to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It marks God's choice of a great line of action. These are the vehicles God will use to achieve His purposes and they will carry His message and bear His Name. (Firstly Adam is made "in the image of God" and through humanity God works out His purposes on earth, then through Noah the earth was given rest from wickedness and the curse and was repopulated, and through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob came Israel and the Messiah.) Because God's great purposes will be accomplished through them they are given the blessing and the power that they require. They are made fruitful, multiplied and given dominion and a realm of privilege and authority.

When we undertake the purposes of God we are blessed and given power to accomplish those divine purposes. And this blessing will often involve the four elements above:

- a) Fruitfulness – our efforts will not be barren or sterile, we will see converts, disciples and spiritual fruit.
- b) Multiplication – the ministry will grow exponentially, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32, 64 etc
- c) Dominion - we will overcome obstacles and enemies and succeed and be the head and not the tail and establish a 'niche' and name for God.
- d) Gifts – God will give spiritual gifts and gifts of "territory" in which to operate and gifts of spiritual and temporal power and authority.

However there are some conditions on these blessings. Firstly we must be in Christ and sons of Abraham by faith. Secondly our hearts must be circumcised by the Holy Spirit. Thirdly we must walk in the Spirit and aim at spiritual maturity - or as God says to Abraham: *Walk before Me and be perfect.* As part of this maturity we will take on the plans and purposes of God as our own.

Now when God chooses someone for His purposes He frequently gives them a new name such as Simon being called Peter or Saul being renamed Paul. In this case God renames Abram to Abraham - *Neither shall your name any more be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham. For I have made you a father of many nations.* Abram meant "high

father" whereas Abraham means "father of a multitude" thus indicating that nations and kings and numerous descendants would come forth from him. Immediately the change is reflected in the Scripture and from that verse on he is known as Abraham.

While God is certainly a God of new names and blessings and gifts of territory and children and wealth and honor, we cannot take this flippantly as some do. This covenant was God's initiative towards a very honorable and godly man who has ventured "out on a limb" numerous times for his faith and for the honor of God. We do not "earn" blessing and it is God's completely sovereign act, for He will bless whom He will bless and curse whom He will curse. Yet blessing reliably flows to those who truly have faith and who "identify" with God and with His purposes.

God can change your barren life and make it fruitful and multiply the works of your hands and set you on high. God can give you a new name and a new destiny. The key is faith, persistent long-term faith in the nature and goodness of God and the veracity of His promises and the goodness that is in Christ. Walk before Him and be perfect!

Isaac & Ishmael

Genesis 17:15-27 MKJV *And God said to Abraham, As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah. (16) And I will bless her, and give you a son also of her. Yes, I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations, kings of people shall be from her. (17) And Abraham fell upon his face and laughed, and said in his heart, Shall a child be born to him that is a hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear? (18) And Abraham said to God, Oh that Ishmael might live before You! (19) And God said, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son indeed. And you shall call his name Isaac. And I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him. (20) And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall father twelve chiefs, and I will make him a great nation. (21) But I will establish My covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time in the next year. (22) And He left off talking with him, and God went up from Abraham. (23) And Abraham took his son Ishmael, and all that were born in his house, and all that were bought with his silver; every male among the men of Abraham's house; and circumcised the flesh of their foreskins in the same day, even as God said to him. (24) And Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. (25) And his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. (26) In the same day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised. (27) And all the men of his house, that were born in the house, and bought with silver of the stranger, were circumcised with him.*

Sarai becomes Sarah – the name change means that the princess (Sarai) becomes the queen (Sarah). This is an increase in dignity given by God. God is not just interested in "keeping us humble" - He also exalts us in due time:

1 Peter 5:5-7 MKJV *Put on humility. For God resists proud ones, but He gives grace to the humble. (6) Therefore be humbled under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you in due time, (7) casting all your anxiety onto Him, for He cares for you.*

Our cares and anxieties about our progress in life are to be humbly cast upon God who

will exalt us in due time – as he did to Abraham and Sarah with the birth of Isaac.

Isaac means to “laugh” because both Abraham (above) and Sarah (in chapter 18), laughed at the notion of Sarah having a son in her old age. They were stunned that God could promise such a thing - yet they believed and saw the miracle.

The miracle child – Isaac was also to be the child of the covenant and the line of promise: *And you shall call his name Isaac. And I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his seed after him.*

God sovereignly selects and determines His covenant line, and the spiritual line of inheritance. Yet this does not mean that God has absolutely rejected Ishmael! Abraham prays “O that Ishmael may live before You” and God replies: *And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall father twelve chiefs, and I will make him a great nation.*

The Arab descendants of Ishmael are numerous and “great nations” today though they do not carry the line of spiritual blessing through the prophets, David and thus to the Messiah - Jesus Christ. Christians should not hate Arabs or Muslims, even if they are supporters of Israel – because God has blessed Ishmael as well!

In Church history we sometimes find God moving down a particular line of blessing, or being with a particular denomination or spiritual movement in power. It is tempting to conclude that this group is “right” and all the other Christian groups are somehow “wrong”. That is not necessarily the case. God blesses according to His sovereign will, and may see a great deal of good in the other denominations, yet chooses to send revival to just one, for His own particular reasons. Isaac and Ishmael are not a case of right versus wrong but of sovereign election by God's grace.

The promise of Isaac was delivered according to God's timing not man's: *But I will establish My covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this set time in the next year.*

God had a “set time” for Isaac to be born – when Sarah was in her nineties! God's timing and our human timing can be vastly different. On a human scale all opportunity was past and all hope for that blessing was gone – but it was not so with God! With God all things are possible and at all times. Children can be born to the aged, and people can be raised even after they have died. Nothing is final until God makes it so. God's set times for our exaltation can be puzzling and difficult to understand but He works them in with His vast plans for human redemption.

God is sovereign in His choices, His covenant making and His timing. We do not control God, rather He sets our times and seasons and “in Him we live and move and have our being”. Somehow we have to trust a God whose ways are past finding out and who does things that we do not expect.

Abraham simply goes along with God's instructions and enters into the covenant of circumcision along with his whole household – which would have been very physically painful. Abraham simply obeys God's “strange instruction” regarding circumcision and imposes it on all under his authority. This is leadership in action. It may seem

undemocratic, harsh and painful to us but it was just simple, direct obedience to God's instruction.

There are times when we have to do what is right, and to ensure that others under our authority also do what is right.

Abraham and the Three Visitors

Genesis 18:1-8 MKJV *And Jehovah appeared to him in the plains of Mamre, and he sat at the tent door in the heat of the day. (2) And he lifted up his eyes and looked, and lo, three men stood by him. And when he saw them, he ran to meet them from the tent door, and bowed toward the ground. (3) And he said, My Lord, if now I have found favor in Your sight, do not pass away, I pray, from Your servant. (4) Let a little water, I pray, be brought, and wash Your feet, and rest under the tree. (5) And I will bring a bite of bread, and will comfort your hearts. After that You shall pass on. For this is why You have come to Your servant. And they said, Do so, as you have said. (6) And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, Make ready quickly three measures of fine meal; knead it, and make cakes. (7) And Abraham ran out to the herd and brought a calf, tender and good. And he gave it to a young man. And he hurried to dress it. (8) And he took butter and milk, and the calf which he had dressed, and set it before them. And he stood by them under the tree, and they ate.*

Three visitors appear, one of whom is the Lord, they appear suddenly and one reading of the text is that they "stood above him" as if they had just come down out of the sky. Undetected by Abraham's servants or the animals they suddenly appear in front of him "and lo..three men" standing there, in the mid-distance (Abraham ran to meet them) in the heat of the day (when few travel in such hot climates). These are unusual visitors, mystical visitors - and Abraham being a person of deep spiritual intuition and faith senses this.

Sometimes the miraculous comes in ordinary disguise: **Hebrews 13:1-2 MKJV** *Let brotherly love continue. (2) Do not be forgetful of hospitality, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.*

God sends angels, prophets, apostles and wise men into our midst to test our reaction to them. They may come in a multitude of disguises. They may seem ordinary to most folk, but to those of spiritual intuition there gleams a sense of the divine presence. Hospitality is the right first reaction – to welcome in the stranger and to give them food and drink.

Abraham though a man of great age, wealth and dignity is extremely deferential to his visitors. He runs to meet them, bows down, uses respectful language, hastens to prepare the best food in the house, and then stands to one side while they eat it. This is true worship – as the great patriarch humbles himself before the three men who he senses are sent from God. This is respect, not just in word, but in action. Abraham displays no ego here. The guests come first, second and third and are the total focus of attention. He is the completely solicitous host.

Who we really are comes to the surface in how we show hospitality to others. As a missionary hospitality is a big part of my life and nearly every week someone stays with us overnight (as many of our missionary friends travel through Los Angeles). I also get

to receive wonderful hospitality when I travel. Yet there are times when I sense that people are less than sincere! There is fake hospitality and selfish hospitality and even manipulative hospitality and of course there is hospitality that is simply an excuse to display wealth and achievement! Abraham does not fall into any of these traps and even understates things *"Let a little water, I pray, be brought, and wash Your feet, and rest under the tree. And I will bring a bite of bread, and will comfort your hearts. After that You shall pass on."* (Instead he bakes bread and kills a young calf!)

Abraham "makes a fuss" over his guests, running here and there and giving orders and ensuring they receive the very best. This is not normal the "comfortable" hospitality of old friends – it is the sort of careful hospitality that is given to dignitaries. Who then were these three men? There are a two main possibilities:

1. They were a symbol of the Trinity - Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
2. One was the Lord, the other two were the two angels of judgment that visited Lot and brought him and his family out of the city.

This second possibility has the support of chapter 19 and fits the overall data much better. The Lord seems to be of a much higher rank than the other two, who head down to Sodom while the Lord talks to Abraham. I think it is forcing the passage to read the Trinity into it (though I of course support the doctrine of the Trinity from other more apposite passages e.g Matthew 28:18-20).

The three visitors accept Abraham's hospitality with a terse statement: *Do so, as you have said*. They clearly see themselves as able to command the great patriarch and are not in the least disturbed when Abraham stands to one side while they eat in front of him (verse 8).

"Do so, as you have said" is a spiritual clue. God looks to us to serve Him according to our own words, from our own mouth. We make plans, promises and resolutions – and we are to fulfill them. What we say indicates what we know of God's will. God does not judge us by His understanding of the Christian ministry, but by ours – and our ability to carry out what we say we will carry out for Him.

Matthew 12:36-37 MKJV *But I say to you that every idle word, whatever men may speak, they shall give account of it in the day of judgment. (37) For by your words you shall be justified, and by your words you shall be condemned.*

Abraham does not promise much with his words just "some water...a little bread.." but he delivers a feast! O that the servants of God would do this! So many ministries do the precise opposite - they promise a spiritual feast and deliver only crumbs! Let us understate our ministry in words - and overstate our ministry in actions and results!

Let us have a healthy fear of the Lord in what we say about what we or others "should do" in ministry. Let us keep our words and expectations modest and sober so that on the Day of Judgment we will not be embarrassed by all the proud things that we have said!

Sarah Laughs

Genesis 18:9-15 MKJV *And they said to him, Where is Sarah your wife? And he said, Behold, in the tent. (10) And He said, I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and lo, Sarah your wife shall have a son. And Sarah heard in the tent door which was behind Him. (11) Now Abraham and Sarah were old, far gone in days, and it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. (12) Therefore Sarah laughed within herself, saying, After my being old, shall I have pleasure, my lord being old also? (13) And Jehovah said to Abraham, Why did Sarah laugh, saying, Shall I, who am old, truly bear a child? (14) Is anything too hard for Jehovah? At the time appointed I will return again, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son. (15) Then Sarah denied, saying, I did not laugh; for she was afraid. And He said, No, but you did laugh.*

God tells Abraham that Sarah will have a child in her old age, and Sarah laughs, to which the Lord replies "Is anything too hard for Jehovah?" - a rhetorical question which expects "No" for an answer.

Isaac means "to laugh" or "to cause to laugh" because, on different occasions both Abraham and Sarah laugh at the possibility of their having a child in their old age, and, when Isaac is born others laugh at Abraham and Sarah having children so late in life. God does that which causes laughter - the sudden and the surprising, and the ridiculously impossible.

The fertility of a woman in her nineties is a "ridiculous" idea, it is plainly absurd - but God is the God of the absurd and the impossible. Here are just a couple of examples:

Albania was the world's first completely atheist state which killed thousands of Christians by putting them in barrels and dumping them in the bay of the local sea. The government boasted that there were zero Christians in Albania. However one Christian did survive - a small woman who was a schoolteacher and she joined the Roman Catholic church. Now women in the Catholic Church have only one role - as nuns. Eventually this woman went to India to work among the poorest of the poor in a large tough city noted for destroying Christian witness - Calcutta. Of course that woman was Mother Teresa. Now what are the odds of an obscure Albanian, a woman in the Catholic church, doing lowly work among lepers - becoming world famous and powerfully influential? Ridiculously small? But God did it!

In the sixties Birmingham, Alabama was noted for its racism, and one little African-American girl, a Presbyterian ministers daughter, grew up and did her schooling at the worst possible time - during the reign of Sheriff "Bull Connor". That girl is now the American Secretary of State - Condoleezza Rice. At that time if you had said "An African-American girl from Birmingham, Alabama will become Secretary of State" everyone would have said "Ridiculous!". But God does the laughable, the ridiculous and the impossible.

God does such things not because He is a divine prankster but because He wants us to "think outside the box" and to consider possibilities that are far beyond human calculation. God wants us to believe in Him and in His surpassing power!

Paul caught a glimpse of this when he wrote to the church at Corinth:

1 Corinthians 1:25-29 MKJV (25) *Because the foolish thing of God is wiser than men, and the weak thing of God is stronger than men. (26) For you see your calling, brothers, that not many wise men according to the flesh are called, not many mighty, not many noble. (27) But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; (28) and God has chosen the base things of the world, and things which are despised, and things which are not, in order to bring to nothing things that are; (29) so that no flesh should glory in His presence.*

Mother Teresa in her simplicity, poverty and weakness was more powerful than some of the richest and most powerful men in the world because: *God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty.*

Moses must have looked ridiculous saying to Pharaoh "let my people go!" and John the baptist must have looked ridiculous as the "voice crying in the wilderness" and even Paul says that he was a "fool for Christ's sake":

1 Corinthians 4:9-13 MKJV (9) *For I think that God has set forth us last, the apostles, as it were appointed to death; for we have become a spectacle to the world and to angels and to men. (10) We are fools for Christ's sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are honorable, but we are despised. (11) Even until this present hour we both hunger and thirst and are naked and are buffeted and have no certain dwelling place. (12) And we labor, working with our own hands. Being reviled, we bless; being persecuted, we suffer it; (13) being defamed, we entreat. We are made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now.*

God uses Gideon to defeat the Amalekites and David to defeat Goliath and so on and so forth. If diligently doing God's will ends up with our being in some "ridiculous" situation where the whole world laughs at us and we are a "spectacle to men and angels" then we can be well assured that some mighty miracle will soon take place because God does not let His servants be put to shame! (Now this does not satisfy mere silliness, sin and lack of wisdom, it only applies to being a holy fool that is - "a fool for Christ!".)

Abraham was indeed one such "holy fool" hearing voices from God, having dreams and visions, wandering in tents, seeking a Promised Land and having a child with Sarah when both were in their nineties - and finally being prepared to sacrifice that child in response to a mystical vision from God. Abraham is either a very foolish old man who hears voices, or a very great man of God, the founder of Judaism, Christianity and Islam and the father of many nations. The results vindicate his holy folly. The miracle of Isaac must have shut many mouths of all who thought him strange. Here was something truly extraordinary! Abraham was not crazy or delusional, the child arrives, Sarah is pregnant. Isaac was a sign God was with Abraham, the man they laughed at - and Abraham's God was doing amazing things!

God Confides In Abraham

Genesis 18:16-21 MKJV *And the men rose up from there, and looked toward Sodom. And Abraham was going with them to bring them on the way. (17) And Jehovah said, Shall I hide from Abraham the thing which I do, (18) And Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the persons of the earth shall be blessed in him? (19) For I know him, that he will command his sons and his house after him, and they shall keep the way of Jehovah, to do justice and judgment, that Jehovah may bring upon Abraham that which He has spoken of him. (20) And Jehovah said, Because the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and because their sin is very grievous, (21) I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which has come to Me. And if not, I will know.*

God confides His plans for the doom of Sodom and Gomorrah to Abraham and Amos says that this is typical of how God operates:

Amos 3:7 MKJV *For the Lord Jehovah will do nothing unless He reveals His secret to His servants the prophets.*

Before Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians God sent prophet after prophet to Israel, and before the ten northern tribes were captured by the Assyrians many great prophets including Elijah and Elisha were sent to Samaria. And before any major city or nations such Nineveh or Babylon or Egypt were judged prophets were sent to warn them. Thus before any major move of God, He reveals it to His prophets, who then convey it to us.

This also happened in the New Testament with the prophet Agabus warning of a great famine (Acts 11:28) which took place during the reign of the emperor Claudius. In recent times a young boy warned many Armenian Christians to flee in time to escape the Turkish massacre of 1.4 million Armenians that occurred during World War 1. The spiritually sensitive hear God and sense what He is doing in the earth, while others are given explicit warnings by the Holy Spirit.

God trusted Abraham with this information because of Abraham's place in redemptive history – as someone who would become a great nation and would raise a family that feared God. God does not confide in everyone, rather He confides just in a few, who are closest to Him, and we should listen carefully to them.

The expression “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do..” has the feel that it would almost be a breach of trust in God's relationship with Abraham if He concealed what was going to happen to Sodom and thus possibly to Lot, Abraham's nephew. (We see later that Abraham's prayer saves Lot from destruction - Genesis 19:29) There was a relationship between Abraham and God that made such a sharing right and proper.

God knew something about Abraham that was of immense importance: *For I know him, that he will command his sons and his house after him, and they shall keep the way of Jehovah, to do justice and judgment, that Jehovah may bring upon Abraham that which He has spoken of him.*

God knew Abraham as someone who would make sure that His will was done. Abraham

would "command his sons and his house after him". That is he would be a person of considerable moral authority whose example and commands would last for generations. This moral authority is characteristic of all the prophets. It should also characterize all Spirit-filled Christian workers and when it is absent, then something terrible has happened!

The fulfillment of the Abrahamic promise is dependent on practicing righteousness and social justice: *to do justice and judgment, that Jehovah may bring upon Abraham that which He has spoken of him*. Salvation by faith does not mean that we are free to be unjust, greedy and wicked. If we want God's will fulfilled in our life and the blessings of Abraham to descend (for we have inherited them in Christ see Galatians 3) then we must "do justice and judgment". That is we must act rightly in all our ways.

In the Hebrew "justice" here is tzedekah which is equivalent to "righteousness" that is to be straight and ethical. "Judgment" is mishpat which involves applying legal precepts to everyday life so that it is ordered correctly. Thus both internal righteousness and correct living and social justice are meant here. It is not enough to merely believe the right things, one must also have those beliefs internalized, and then have them acted out in daily living.

God is not hasty to judge but actually goes down to Sodom to see if the outcry against it is true. *I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which has come to Me. And if not, I will know*. This is a good example for church life where rumours can destroy reputations and lead to actions against innocent folk. I once knew of a pastor who was blacklisted by a certain denomination because of a rumour that he had a "Calvinistic" book on his shelves! We need to be slow to judge, and keen to always check the facts first.

In this glimpse into how God relates to a prophet / friend of God we find that:

1. God confides His plans for major events to those who are close to Him.
2. That God desires His leaders to exercise moral authority
3. That the complete fulfillment of God's blessings depends on both internal righteousness and outward obedience and justice.
4. That we are to be slow to judge and keen to check the facts first.

This lifestyle of intimacy with God, moral authority, personal righteousness, social justice and a patient and just verification of things is the mark of a true man of God.

Abraham Intercedes For The Righteous

Genesis 18:22-33 MKJV *And the men turned their faces away from there, and went toward Sodom. But Abraham still stood before Jehovah. (23) And Abraham drew near and said, Will You also destroy the righteous with the wicked? (24) Perhaps there are fifty righteous within the city. Will You also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are in it? (25) Far be it from You to act in this manner, to kill the righteous with the wicked. And far be it from You, that the righteous should be as the wicked. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right? (26) And Jehovah said, If I find in Sodom fifty righteous within the city, then I will spare all the place for their sakes. (27) And Abraham answered and said, Behold now, I have taken upon me to speak to Jehovah, who am but dust and ashes. (28) Perhaps there will be five lacking from the fifty righteous. Will You destroy all the city for lack of five? And He said, If I find there forty-five, I will not destroy it. (29) And he spoke to Him yet again, and said, Perhaps there shall be forty found there. And He said, I will not do it for forty's sake. (30) And he said, Oh let not Jehovah be angry, and I will speak. Perhaps there shall be thirty found there. And He said, I will not do it if I find thirty there. (31) And he said, Lo now, I have taken upon me to speak to Jehovah. Perhaps there shall be twenty found there. And He said, I will not destroy it for twenty's sake. (32) And he said, Oh do not let Jehovah be angry, and I will speak only once more. Perhaps ten shall be found there. And He said, I will not destroy it for ten's sake. (33) And Jehovah went His way as soon as He had left off talking with Abraham. And Abraham returned to his place.*

Abraham has a problem with God destroying Sodom (where his nephew Lot dwelt) which he phrases as: *Will You also destroy the righteous with the wicked?*

For Abraham, and for the whole of the Scriptures, there are two fundamental categories of people – the righteous and the wicked, and God treats these two fundamental categories in totally different ways, rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked.

The “world” however has two very different categories – the rich and the poor. The “world” is amoral and immoral. It erases the distinction between good and evil so that the wicked prosper and the righteous are persecuted. The “market forces” of the world reward the rich and powerful independently of any moral virtue or vice they possess. These same forces crush the weak and poor (again independently of any virtue or vice they possess).

2 Timothy 3:10-12 MKJV *But you have fully known my doctrine, manner of life, purpose, faith, long-suffering, love, patience, (11) persecutions, afflictions, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, at Lystra. What persecutions I endured! But the Lord delivered me out of all. (12) Yea, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*

So there is a fundamental question that echoes throughout the Bible and especially in Psalms - “when will God's justice prevail and God make a distinction between the righteous and the wicked”.

The answer to this is in a Day of Judgment, a day of the Lord, when God visits and calls His Creation (a person, city, or nation) to account and which reflects the Great Day of the Lord when Jesus will return with His holy angels to mete out heavenly justice. The

destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is often used as a type of this.

Like many of us Abraham is nervous about these "days of judgment" and especially the one that was about to come to Sodom. Was Lot going to be caught up in it? Would God judge the wicked city as a whole – or would He spare the righteous in it? So Abraham appeals to God and God answers that He would not destroy Sodom if there were any righteous people in it. (The "bidding" eventually went down in "tens" so when ten was reached it could not go any lower, the next "bid" being zero. Also by then the trend was obvious)

Abraham's intercession was effective and Lot was spared by angelic intervention:

Genesis 19:29 MKJV *And when God destroyed the cities of the plain, it happened that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot lived.*

Back to the problem of justice: **Genesis 18:25 MKJV** *Far be it from You to act in this manner, to kill the righteous with the wicked. And far be it from You, that the righteous should be as the wicked. Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?*

The question "shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" implies that God sets a time of judgment and then carries it out carefully and justly so that a true and proper distinction is made between the righteous and the wicked. It is not just wholesale demolition, there is a fairness and a righteousness to it. This theme is also taken up by the apostle Peter who shows how Noah and Lot were spared in times of overwhelming judgment:

2 Peter 2:4-9 MKJV *For if God did not spare sinning angels, but thrust them down into Tartarus, and delivered them into chains of darkness, being reserved to judgment. (5) And He did not spare the old world, but saved Noah the eighth one, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly. (6) And turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah into ashes, He condemned them with an overthrow, setting an example to men intending to live ungodly. (7) And He delivered righteous Lot, oppressed with the lustful behavior of the lawless. (8) For that righteous one living among them, in seeing and hearing, his righteous soul was tormented from day to day with their unlawful deeds. (9) The Lord knows how to deliver the godly out of temptation, and to reserve the unjust for a day of judgment, to be punished,*

The word temptation here is peirasmos which also means testing / affliction / hard times. God knows how to deliver us, just as He delivered Noah and Lot. This is sometimes quoted as proof of the Rapture and I have come to believe that Christians are spared from the final cataclysmic bowl judgments - but will be around when the Anti-Christ first arises and for at least the first stages of "Mark of the Beast" (this is a mid-tribulation rapture position). Whatever your end-time theology I think that it should include some form of deliverance for the saints and a distinction being made between the righteous and the wicked. If Abraham's dialogue with God can give us a clue there will be no righteous folk left on planet Earth when Jesus finally returns in flaming fire to punish the ungodly and the very elements themselves "pass away with a roar".

Right up to the last God will make His appeal so that "all may come to repentance":

2 Peter 3:9-13 HCSB *The Lord does not delay His promise, as some understand delay, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance. (10)*

But the Day of the Lord will come like a thief; on that day the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, the elements will burn and be dissolved, and the earth and the works on it will be disclosed. (11) Since all these things are to be destroyed in this way, it is clear what sort of people you should be in holy conduct and godliness (12) as you wait for and earnestly desire the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be on fire and be dissolved, and the elements will melt with the heat. (13) But based on His promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness will dwell.

The Sin of Sodom

Genesis 19:1-11 HCSB *The two angels entered Sodom in the evening as Lot was sitting at Sodom's gate. When Lot saw them, he got up to meet them. He bowed with his face to the ground (2) and said, "My lords, turn aside to your servant's house, wash your feet, and spend the night. Then you can get up early and go on your way." "No," they said. "We would rather spend the night in the square." (3) But he urged them so strongly that they followed him and went into his house. He prepared a feast and baked unleavened bread for them, and they ate. (4) Before they went to bed, the men of the city of Sodom, both young and old, the whole population, surrounded the house. (5) They called out to Lot and said, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Send them out to us so we can have sex with them!" (6) Lot went out to them at the entrance and shut the door behind him. (7) He said, "Don't do this evil, my brothers. (8) Look, I've got two daughters who haven't had sexual relations with a man. I'll bring them out to you, and you can do whatever you want to them. However, don't do anything to these men, because they have come under the protection of my roof." (9) "Get out of the way!" they said, adding, "This one came here as a foreigner, but he's acting like a judge! Now we'll do more harm to you than to them." They put pressure on Lot and came up to break down the door. (10) But the angels reached out, brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. (11) They struck the men who were at the door of the house, both young and old, with a blinding light so that they were unable to find the door.*

Sodom is a picture of a society that was completely depraved with "the whole population" involved in perversion: "the men of the city of Sodom, both young and old, the whole population, surrounded the house." There are two perspectives here – Lot saw the angels as vulnerable people in danger and treated them with respect, honor and protection. The citizens of Sodom saw them merely as potential sex objects – possibly because the angels were unusually physically attractive in some way.

This is the difference between (what Martin Buber calls) an I-Thou relationship (typified by Lot who sees common humanity) and an I-It relationship that sees people as objects to be used for various purposes. Christianity is always about covenants, fellowship, justice, love and common humanity and thus focuses on I-Thou relationships. When we turn a person into an object, a customer or even a "prospective convert" we have violated the basic tenet of how God wants us to treat people! Yes we must engage in evangelism – but out of love, treating people with all dignity!

The rapacious sexual appetite of Sodom was for male-to-male group sex and homosexual rape. The Scriptures make quite clear that they were judged not for lack of hospitality but for immorality. The people of Sodom had "abandoned that which is natural" (Romans 1:18-23) and gone "after other flesh" (Jude 1:7) and engaged in immoral acts (2 Pet 2:6,7).

Jude 1:7 MKJV *as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities around them, in like manner to these, committing fornication, and going away after other flesh, laid down an example before-times, undergoing vengeance of everlasting fire.*

2 Peter 2:6-7 HCSB *and if He reduced the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes and condemned them to ruin, making them an example to those who were going to be ungodly; (7) and if He rescued righteous Lot, distressed by the unrestrained behavior of the immoral*

The problem was widespread aggressive homosexual promiscuity. I am fully aware that is not a “politically correct” statement but it is none the less the testimony of Scripture. For more on what the Bible says about homosexuality go to: <http://aibi.gospelcom.net/articles/homos.htm>

The men of Sodom were not interested in Lot's daughters but only in the men (Genesis 19:8,9) and the reaction of the homosexual community to Lot's plea was to call Lot “judgmental” (Genesis 19:9).

Lot was clearly confused in his actions and should have stayed inside. Like many well-intentioned people Lot tried to reason with pure evil - and found it unreasonable.

The men of Sodom persisted in evil even after being struck blind by the angels “so they wearied themselves trying to find the door”. There was not a shred of repentance or remorse. There is no pleading to have their sight restored, just an unwavering lustful ambition. The physical blindness imply reflected a much deeper spiritual and moral blindness that had overtaken that community.

The sin of Sodom was systemic and city-wide. It was not just individuals but a whole spiritual and cultural ethos. God judged the city because the whole city was rotten to the core. God does not just judge individuals but also often judges whole communities who have entered into negative spiritual realities of sin, injustice and unbelief. For more on this see the following articles:

<http://aibi.gospelcom.net/urban/cities.htm>

<http://aibi.gospelcom.net/urban/citytheol.htm>

This even applies in the New Testament:

Matthew 11:20-24 ISV *Then Jesus began to denounce the cities in which most of his miracles had taken place, because they didn't repent. (21) "How terrible it will be for you, Chorazin! How terrible it will be for you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that happened in you had taken place in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. (22) Indeed I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you! (23) And you, Capernaum! You won't be lifted up to heaven, will you? You'll go down to Hell! For if the miracles that happened in you had taken place in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. (24) Indeed I tell you, it will be more bearable for the land of Sodom on the day of judgment than for you!"*

Thus we see that entire unbelieving communities enmeshed in sexual immorality are in fact in danger of divine judgment. A fairly modern example of this may be the Jamaican city of Port Royal which was a center for piracy and “the richest and wickedest city in the world” before a massive earthquake which caused the city to slide into the sea. Attempts to rebuild it have met with numerous disasters. For more on how violent sin seems to have cursed this city see the following Wikipedia article:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Port_Royal

The whole idea of judgment for immorality, and the pouring out of God's wrath on entire cities may seem antiquated and rather "fundamentalist" but it follows the spiritual principle that nature and history follows after spirituality and it works both ways - Isaiah makes clear that when Israel returns to God, the desert blossoms and the political and social realm is at peace. When they are engaged in wickedness even the animals and plants "languish" and chaos reigns in the social and political realms. God's word created the world and sustains it and the spiritual world undergirds the material world. So when God is appalled at human behavior then it makes sense that the very spiritual fabric of that place will be altered and the physical and political realms will be thrown into chaos. When the very deepest parts of God's order is twisted and turned upside down then judgment will occur and an end will be made to that part of Creation.

We are entering an age when, following Nietzsche, many are declaring the "death of God" and of the concept of "good and evil" saying that we are beyond such concepts as "absolute Truth, good, evil and bourgeoisie morality". To such people God's wrath is a joke or an offensive idea and they say the words of the Sodomites: "Get out of the way!" they said, adding, "This one came here as a foreigner, but he's acting like a judge! Now we'll do more harm to you than to them."

The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah

Genesis 19:12-26 MKJV *And the men said to Lot, Have you anyone here besides yourself? Bring your sons-in-law, and your sons, and your daughters, and whatever you have in the city, bring them out of this place. (13) For we will destroy this place because great is the cry of them before the face of Jehovah. And Jehovah has sent us to destroy it. (14) And Lot went out and spoke with his sons-in-law, who married his daughters, and said, Get up and get out of this place, for Jehovah will destroy this city. But he seemed as one that mocked to his sons-in-law. (15) And when the dawn rose up, then the angels hurried Lot, saying, Rise up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, lest you be consumed in the iniquity of the city. (16) And he lingered, the angel laid hold upon his hand, and upon the hand of his wife, and upon the hand of his two daughters (Jehovah being merciful to him), and they brought him forth and set him outside the city. (17) And it happened when they brought him outside, He said, Escape for your life! Do not look behind you, nor stay in all the plain. Escape to the mountain lest you be consumed. (18) And Lot said to them, Oh no, Lord, (19) please now, Your servant has found grace in Your sight, and You have magnified Your mercy, which You have shown to me in saving my life. And I cannot escape to the mountain, lest some evil take me and I die. (20) Behold now, this city is near to flee to, and it is a little one. Oh let me escape there (is it not a little one?) and my soul shall live. (21) And He said to him, See, I have accepted you concerning this thing also, that I will not overthrow this city for which you have spoken. (22) Hurry and escape there! For I cannot do anything till you have come there. Therefore the name of the city was called Zoar. (23) The sun had risen upon the earth, and Lot entered into Zoar. (24) Then Jehovah rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire, from Jehovah out of the heavens. (25) And He overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and that which grew upon the ground. (26) But his wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt.*

God rescues Lot – even sending angels to physically drag him out from the city and the impending judgment. But even then Lot hesitates and his wife looks back and is turned into a pillar of salt. This is truly the story of “a brand plucked from the fire” (Zechariah 3:2) and illustrates the workings of God's careful salvation of the righteous. Lot is timid and vacillating yet the Lord saves him. This is grace – for none of us are saved for our merits and all of us are saved despite our sins and our weaknesses.

Lot was different from the other inhabitants of Sodom in that he clearly possessed a conscience and a clear sense of the right treatment of other people and was hospitable, self-sacrificing and kind. He stood out from the predatory licentiousness of Sodom, and was removed from the judgment that fell upon that wicked city.

The judgment came when the righteous had left the city. When Christians leave a certain place then judgment often follows. For instance as Christians have left the inner cities of America, drugs, crime and lawlessness have moved right in.

This has huge implications for the Middle East where the Christian population is emigrating as fast as they can – partly due to the opportunities afforded by globalization and partly due to the rise of militant Islam. In many places such as Israel, Iraq and the Palestinian territories the Christian population is a half or even a tenth of their previous traditional levels.

In today's world educated people have a choice about where they can live and they are leaving the disorderly nations and heading to the peaceful nations. On the other hand the pirates, terrorists and smugglers are leaving places with effective policing and moving to failed states, rogue states and countries run by corrupt military elites. Thus the world is slowly but surely sorting out into two camps – the righteous and the wicked, those who desire the rule of law, and those who wish to escape the rule of law.

Without setting dates, it is still obvious that this world is being prepared for an imminent final judgment and that God is slowly but surely beginning to deal with some of the major obstacles to the gospel - such as militant Islam, atheistic Communism and controlling anti-Christian dictatorships.

The final verses of the book of Malachi talk of such a final judgment and promise that:
Malachi 3:18 HCSB *So you will again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.*

Jesus takes up this theme of final separation in the parable of the wheat and the tares and the parable of the dragnet:

Matthew 13:47-50 HCSB *"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a large net thrown into the sea. It collected every kind of fish, (48) and when it was full, they dragged it ashore, sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but threw out the worthless ones. (49) So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out, separate the evil people from the righteous, (50) and throw them into the blazing furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

In Sodom the separation was relatively easy – the removal of Lot's family from the city that was about to be destroyed. At the end of the age this may involve a rapture in which "some are taken and some are left" - those that are left face the wrath of God just like the inhabitants of Sodom did.

Matthew 24:37-42 HCSB *As the days of Noah were, so the coming of the Son of Man will be. (38) For in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah boarded the ark. (39) They didn't know until the flood came and swept them all away. So this is the way the coming of the Son of Man will be: (40) Then two men will be in the field: one will be taken and one left. (41) Two women will be grinding at the mill: one will be taken and one left. (42) Therefore be alert, since you don't know what day your Lord is coming.*

Lot's wife is a person who should have been saved, but was not. She was called, but not saved because she did not appreciate the urgency of the hour or the value of her salvation but instead looked back with her heart set upon the things of the world.

Lot's wife represents the carnal Christian who devalues the things of the Spirit. It is interesting that the angels grabbed the hands of Lot and his two daughters but nothing is said about them grabbing hold of Lot's wife. She was the one who was free to choose, the one given "free will" and who in exercising it doomed herself. God's constraints are for our good and for our salvation, and the angels that drag us away from destruction are really our friends.

In Luke's gospel Lot's wife is used by Jesus as an illustration of how NOT to behave in the last days:

Luke 17:28-37 HCSB *It will be the same as it was in the days of Lot: people went on eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, building. (29) But on the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all. (30) It will be like that on the day the Son of Man is revealed. (31) On that day, a man on the housetop, whose belongings are in the house, must not come down to get them. Likewise the man who is in the field must not turn back. (32) Remember Lot's wife! (33) Whoever tries to make his life secure will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. (34) I tell you, on that night two will be in one bed: one will be taken and the other will be left. (35) Two women will be grinding grain together: one will be taken and the other left. (36) [Two will be in a field: one will be taken, and the other will be left.] (37) "Where, Lord?" they asked Him. He said to them, "Where the corpse is, there also the vultures will be gathered."*

When Jesus returns we must flee as Lot fled Sodom without any turning back. There is a holy urgency to salvation of all sorts and we should flee the world and run to Christ every day.

Grace Resisted

Genesis 19:27-38 MKJV *And Abraham got up early in the morning to the place where he stood before Jehovah. (28) And he looked toward Sodom and Gomorrah, and toward all the lands of the plain, and saw, and, lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace. (29) And when God destroyed the cities of the plain, it happened that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow, when He overthrew the cities in which Lot lived. (30) And Lot went up out of Zoar, and lived in the mountain, and his two daughters with him. For he feared to live in Zoar, and he and his two daughters lived in a cave. (31) And the first-born said to the younger, Our father is old, and there is no man in the earth to come in to us in the way of all the earth. (32) Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, so that we may preserve seed of our father. (33) And they made their father drink wine that night. And the first-born went in, and lay with her father. And he did not notice when she lay down nor when she arose. (34) And it happened on the next day, the first-born said to the younger, Behold, I lay last night with my father. Let us make him drink wine this night also, and you go in and lie down with him so that we may preserve seed of our father. (35) And they made their father drink wine that night also, and the younger arose and lay with him. And he did not notice when she lay down nor when she arose. (36) So both the daughters of Lot were with child by their father. (37) And the first-born bore a son, and called his name Moab. He is the father of the Moabites to this day. (38) And the younger also bore a son, and called his name Ben-ammi; he is the father of the sons of Ammon to this day.*

Why didn't Lot head over to uncle Abraham's farm? Why a cave? Why the utter degradation? It is evident that Abraham was concerned for Lot, but Lot was too ashamed to go to his uncle Abraham.

We see this so often with children afraid to ask for help from their praying and caring parents or those who have stumbled into sin, to ask for help from their pastor. The Devil tells them they will be chided and cast out, when in fact they would be received with grace and love.

Abraham must have been devastated to wake up and see the smoke rising like a furnace from the land, and knowing that Lot was down there somewhere, and was possibly dead. Just a word from Lot would have lifted his heart and perhaps it took months for him to find out the truth that Lot was alive. Even so Lot never came back to the fold to stay with Abraham on his estate. Lot resisted grace.

Lot resisted grace in another way – he did not stay at Zoar, the city which God spared for him. He was afraid, and did not trust the Lord's assurance and followed his fears into the mountains to live as a 'wild man' in a cave, with his two daughters. When Lot was with Abraham he had vast herds, and many servants, now he lived alone, like a homeless man, and ends up committing drunken incest.

Whenever Lot had a choice of trusting in grace and blessing, he turned aside and went his own stubborn way. If like Lot did, we leave the place of divine blessing for the "greener grass" - the place of commercial profitability, then when the "market" crashes and Sodom burns, we can be left with nothing. Grace endures while gold vanishes.

Some people have a churlish resistance to the goodness of God. God provides Zoar, but Lot chooses a cave. Abraham's hospitality lies a day's walk away, but Lot chooses isolation and misery instead. There are people who sit at home on Sunday mornings being miserable when they know a church just down the street would welcome them. There are others that complain about loneliness when they know they can phone friends and family for a chat, but who never do so. It is almost as if human kindness is an unbearable assault on their pride and independence.

There is both right and wrong independence. Right independence is grounded on a solid work ethic and is the godly ability to provide for one's self and for others. Wrong independence is based on a desire to separate from others out of imagined pride or injury. This wrong independence characterised Lot when he first separates from Abraham in Genesis 13, and was perhaps reinforced by his being rescued by Abraham in Genesis 14. We see no word of gratitude in Lot's response to the rescue. Lot was going to "be his own man" and "go his own way". Throughout Genesis Abraham is always being kind to Lot, and it seems that Lot is always resenting it.

Lot's inability to handle grace or to wait on the Lord in the place of blessing, seems to have been transmitted to his daughters who take affairs into their own hands, get Lot drunk, and then father children by him. Despite this inauspicious start the children become founders of the nations of Moab and Ammon (traditional enemies of Israel). Interestingly these nations inherited the same independent, proud and grace-resisting characteristics and were some of the worst idol-worshippers in the OT especially of the god Chemosh that was associated with Moab and Molech that was associated with Ammon. However, possibly because they were of Abrahamic lineage, they were spared when Joshua invaded Canaan.

Lot did not have to end up in degradation. He could have stayed in the place of blessing with Abraham, and he could have left Sodom after the battle of the five kings, when the writing was on the wall. He could have, at any time, gone over to Abraham's estate. He could even have stayed at Zoar. Somehow he always made the worst of grace! God is constantly showering His grace upon those of us who believe in Him, and it is up to us to "make the best of grace" by believing in Him and being soft and sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

We need to swallow our pride and independence and head to the place of grace where our soul will be refreshed. We need to stay with the program, to abide with God, and accept His gifts and His kindness to us and to walk in His commandments. We need to see blessing as of far greater value than silver or gold or the greener grass of Sodom. We need to stay with our spouses and our families and our churches and all the other sources of blessing and let God cause us to "bloom where we are planted". Let us not resist grace, instead let us cherish it and let it do its good work in us. For the stubborn independent spirit just leads to inevitable isolation and to decline.

The Prophet And The King

Genesis 20:1-7 MKJV *And Abraham moved from there toward the south country, and lived between Kadesh and Shur, and stayed in Gerar. (2) And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister. And Abimelech the king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. (3) But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, you are about to die, for the woman whom you have taken; for she is a man's wife. (4) But Abimelech had not come near her. And he said, Lord, will You also kill a righteous nation? (5) Did he not say to me, She is my sister? And she, even she herself said, He is my brother. In the sincerity of my heart and innocence of my hands I have done this. (6) And God said to him in a dream, Yes, I know that you did this in the sincerity of your heart. For I also withheld you from sinning against Me. Therefore I did not allow you to touch her. (7) Now therefore, restore his wife to the man. For he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you, and you shall live. And if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you, and all that are yours.*

The ancient world had church-state conflicts in the form of conflicts between prophets and kings. Here a prophet – Abraham, is being (accidentally) mistreated by Abimelech, an ancient regent of the Philistines who had taken the attractive Sarah into his harem. In God's judgment the king must restore Sarah or die, along with all his household. Now this is the precise reverse of worldly logic which says that kings have much more power than old prophets.

God appears to Abimelech in a dream with the startling words "*Behold you are about to die.*" and despite Abimelech's protestations concludes with the dire predication: "*And if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you, and all that are yours.*" This is serious business. God is about to take a whole family line to the grave because of an accidental sin. Abimelech repents quickly and of course restores Sarah to Abraham as we shall see later.

Abraham was so important to God that He would wipe out anyone who touched His prophet. Interestingly Abraham is called a prophet but makes no end time predications and there is no known book of Abraham's prophetic writings. He was a prophet in the sense of receiving dreams and visions from God and hearing God directly in holy conversation and prayer. Abraham was one who heard the voice of God and knew the actual literal word of God. This was the privilege of the "nabi" – to know the word of the Lord. They were the literal communication link between man and God.

This hearing of the voice of the Lord and knowing the word of God in dreams and visions and having intimacy with God was quite rare in OT times. However the New Covenant has opened it up in a much greater way to those who believe and a gift of prophecy was found to be quite common in New Testament churches:

Acts 2:16-18 MKJV *But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel: (17) "And it shall be in the last days, says God, I will pour out of My Spirit upon all flesh. And your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. (18) And in those days I will pour out My Spirit upon My slaves and My slave women, and they shall prophesy.*

1 Corinthians 14:29-31 MKJV (29) *And if there are two or three prophets, let them speak, and let the others judge. (30) If a revelation is revealed to another sitting by, let the first be silent. (31) For you may all prophesy one by one, so that all may learn and all may be comforted.*

This is a result of the Holy Spirit coming to dwell in our hearts and reveal the things of God to us (1 Corinthians 2:9-16, 1 John 2:20,27).

Back to Abraham, because of his sacred knowledge he was highly esteemed by God so that even earthly rulers such as Pharaoh (Genesis chapter 12) and Abimelech (Genesis 20) had to defer in honor to Abraham, thus making Abraham literally the top of the totem pole in the Ancient Near East. In a conflict of possession between Abraham and the most powerful rulers in the land – Abraham always won. In Genesis 12 and 20 Sarah was the cherished “possession”, and in Genesis 14 when Abram defeats the five kings it was Lot. (People were viewed as “possessions” of their feudal overlords back then).

Thus when the prophet Abraham faced all the might kings of the earth that he humanly feared and dreaded, God always defended him, so that in his lifetime Abraham won significant conflicts with the rulers of the Egyptians, Syrians, Babylonians, and the Philistines thus covering virtually the entire map of the ANE (Ancient Near East).

This has a huge bearing on Church-State issues. God was prepared to kill a king in order to deliver a prophet. The genuine prophet who hears and speaks God's very words is far higher in God's esteem than those who dispense even good and wise human laws. God is thus a true defender of His intimate covenant relationship with Abraham,

The Spirit-filled ministry is thus a very high calling especially when the word of God is heard clearly and is spoken accurately. God will defend His servants and thinks very highly of them with love. Too often we think of Christian workers as being close to the bottom of the social pecking order, far below millionaire CEOs and senators. But God has another opinion, and it has nothing to do with human opinion, for God values His servants, cherishes them and defends them.

The power Abraham wielded was the power to intercede for others and in Abimelech's case this was literally the power of life and death: *For he is a prophet, and he shall pray for you, and you shall live.* God conferred the acting out of the blessing or curse to Abraham and his prayers. If Sarah was restored and Abraham prayed for Abimelech, then he would live. If Abraham did not pray for him, he would die!

People live or die depending on our prayers. They are spared or cursed, saved or lost, and healed or not depending on the intercession of the saints. Prayer is a mighty thing and by it alone Abraham the prophet ruled over the kings of his day.

Abimelech's Reaction

Genesis 20:8-18 MKJV *And Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ears. And the men were greatly afraid. (9) Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said to him, What have you done to us? In what have I offended you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done. (10) And Abimelech said to Abraham, What did you see that you have done this thing? (11) And Abraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place, and they will kill me for my wife's sake. (12) And yet truly she is my sister. She is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother. And she became my wife. (13) And it happened when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, This is your kindness which you show to me, at every place where we shall come, say of me, He is my brother. (14) And Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and men-servants and women-servants, and gave them to Abraham. And he restored him Sarah his wife. (15) And Abimelech said, Behold, my land is before you. Live where it pleases you. (16) And to Sarah he said, Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. Behold, he is to you a covering of the eyes, to all that are with you, and with all this, you are reprov'd. (17) And Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave women, and they gave birth. (18) For the Lord had closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.*

After the last devotional someone wrote and asked if God thought Abraham's behavior was wrong. I think this passage makes clear that it was! In verse 9 Abimelech is furious and says: *"You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done."* and afterwards adds *"and with all this, you are reprov'd"*. Abraham's behavior was wrong, but it was a wrong done out of of weakness and fear, rather than out of greed or oppression. And God delivered Abraham from the mess that his fears got him into. This is a sign of grace, even great grace, that God delivers us even when we do stupid things out of great fear.

This was a different age, an age when kings would chop off someone's head for burning the turkey. This was the generation of the Tower of Babel (not so long before) and of Nimrod the mighty predator. Abraham believed "rationally" that Sarah was so beautiful and he was so vulnerable, that powerful people would kill him in order to take Sarah as a wife. So he came up with his strange pact:

(12) And yet truly she is my sister. She is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother. And she became my wife. (13) And it happened when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, This is your kindness which you show to me, at every place where we shall come, say of me, He is my brother.

Technically Sarah was his half-sister so he could call her "sister" - but it was still self-preserving and wrong. Amazingly God showed His power to protect Abraham not only from evil, but from his own stupidity.

There are times when we get into a mess of our own making - a taxation blunder, a major social gaffe, or even a disastrous marriage out of fear of being alone. God can redeem even our worst mistakes. God loves us even when we are "dumb" and will help us to recover and to 'do better next time' and knows our levels of fear, desperation and gullibility - the factors that so often lead to these errors. Perhaps an analogy from the smaller to the larger will help - this afternoon one of our beloved cats decided to run

away from home for a few hours and sent us all over the neighborhood looking for him. So we "sought out that which was lost" and were just plain glad when he was found. Many of our errors go unpunished, and that is a good thing. God's gracious lovingkindness is available to all who are in covenant relationship with Him through faith in Christ Jesus - for we are not under law but under grace. Our sin is "covered":

Romans 4:5-8 MKJV *But to him not working, but believing on Him justifying the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. (6) Even as David also says of the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness without works, (7) saying, "Blessed are those whose lawlessnesses are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; (8) blessed is the man to whom the Lord will in no way impute sin."*

Abraham was the type of "the man to whom the Lord will in no way impute sin". Even though Abraham did something that was clearly wrong, God refused to impute sin to Abraham or to punish him, but rather delivered him from the situation. Abraham's lawless deeds were forgiven and his sins were covered. And we have the blessings of Abraham through faith in Christ Jesus - including the righteousness that comes through faith alone.

Abraham is not only saved from the situation but comes out of it much wealthier than before: (14) *And Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and men-servants and women-servants, and gave them to Abraham. And he restored him Sarah his wife. (15) And Abimelech said, Behold, my land is before you. Live where it pleases you. (16) And to Sarah he said, Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. Behold, he is to you a covering of the eyes, to all that are with you, and with all this, you are reproved.*

God works everything for good for Abraham, His chosen prophet and the bearer of His Word and the recipient of His covenant love. Abraham may have faltered ethically, but he is still beloved for his faith.

Abraham then prays to God for Abimelech: (17) *And Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave women, and they gave birth. (18) For the Lord had closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.*

Abimelech was totally at the mercy of Abraham's prayers. As we saw last time if Abraham had not prayed for him Abimelech and his whole household would have been killed, and as it were they were all barren. In fact nothing would work in Abimelech's life until things were made right with Abraham the man of God. This is what it truly means to "touch the Lord's anointed". Some people are so holy that to mess with them, is to mess with God.

Isaac Is Born

Genesis 21:1-7 MKJV *And Jehovah visited Sarah as He had said. And Jehovah did to Sarah as He had spoken. (2) For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. (3) And Abraham called the name of his son that was born to him (whom Sarah bore to him) Isaac. (4) And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. (5) And Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. (6) And Sarah said, God has made me laugh, so that all who hear will laugh with me. (7) And she said, Who could have said to Abraham, will Sarah suckle children? For I have borne a son to him in his old age.*

At long last God's promise is fulfilled, when Abraham is 100, Isaac is born, and the Scriptures note: *And Jehovah did to Sarah as He had spoken.* God's word is always fulfilled in our lives, though we may have to wait for it to come to pass.

Abraham stays with God's instructions and has Isaac circumcised on the eighth day, which later became Jewish custom, and was (according to Luke) also applied to Jesus. This is simple obedience, like being baptised. You can question, ask why, and fuss around with it, but god says it, and you must do it. That's why, and that is the only reason anyone needs.

Isaac was born *at the set time of which God had spoken to him* – God's promised are fulfilled in God's exact timing. God is never too late. And with Christ, the Messiah was also born at precisely the right moment in history:

Galatians 4:4-5 MKJV *But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, coming into being out of a woman, having come under Law, (5) that He might redeem those under Law, so that we might receive the adoption of sons.*

There is a precision in God, like a surgeon waiting for exactly the right moment to operate, or mission control waiting to the exact second to fire the after-burners, God watches the situation seeing all the variables, seeing everything develop, then chooses His moment, His person and His course of action.

Abraham called his son Isaac which means to laugh – at the sheer absurdity of the whole situation. God uses the absurd, the ridiculous and the crazy. Many things seem absurd – from David fighting Goliath, to the sending out of the seventy-two as “innocent babes” - and God's plans often involve things that astonish people and leave them incredulous.

God uses prayers to move mountains, and rejected stones to overthrow kingdoms. God uses fishermen to head His church and tax-collectors to write gospels. He is not limited by what we think is appropriate, sane and sensible. God does what He wants with whoever He wants. He even uses an unjustly crucified man as the Savior of the world. Now Abraham was 100 years old – twenty five years into the journey of faith, twenty five years in tents, twenty-five years of gradually conquering the entire ancient world and making fools of the mighty kings of Egypt, Syria, Babylon and Philistia, of seeing cities burned to the ground and of talking with angels and making covenants with God. Yet the high point is the birth of Isaac, and 'anyone can have a child'. But who can have a child when they are one hundred years old with a wife well into her nineties? This is a most

unusual thing, the first indication we have in Scripture that God will do something that is entirely outside of normal natural processes. It is like Joshua telling the sun to stand still.

Sarah seems to say it best: *Who could have said to Abraham, will Sarah suckle children? Who could have thought it! It was not just laughable, it was almost unimaginable, even unthinkable. But God loves doing things that are so big that we cannot even think of them:*

1 Corinthians 2:9 MKJV *But as it is written, "Eye has not seen, nor ear heard," nor has it entered into the heart of man, "the things which God has prepared for those who love Him."*

Ephesians 3:20-21 MKJV *Now to Him who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, (21) to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, forever. Amen.*

Romans 11:33-36 MKJV *O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments, and His ways past finding out! (34) For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who became His counselor? (35) Or who first gave to Him, and it will be repaid to him? (36) For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things; to Him be glory forever! Amen.*

Sarah laughed and thought the whole world would laugh with her. Isaac was a startling joy, an amazing child, the kind of pleasant shock that makes you laugh. Isaac was a very public child of a prominent patriarch. It was a princely birth. It also justified Abraham , who, up to this point may have seemed rather eccentric. The voice of the Lord came true at last and there was no denying it, though Abraham "heard voices" and received revelations they were now proved to be the True Voice and Abraham was God's man.

Through his faith relationship with God Abraham had prevailed over barrenness, over disappointment, over skepticism and unbelief and brought joy to birth. Isaac was inexplicable, a living proof of living faith. Abraham's wealth may have had an explanation, even his military victories, but there was no explaining Isaac away! Isaac was a startling joyful splendid miracle of God.

Ishmael Is Cast Out

Genesis 21:8-13 MKJV *And the child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast the day that Isaac was weaned. (9) And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian (whom she had borne to Abraham) mocking. (10) And she said to Abraham, Cast out this slave woman and her son. For the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son, with Isaac. (11) And the thing was very evil in Abraham's sight, because of his son. (12) And God said to Abraham, Let it not be grievous in your sight because of the boy and because of your slave woman. In all that Sarah has said to you, listen to her voice. For in Isaac your Seed shall be called. (13) And also, I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman, because he is your seed.*

Abraham ends up divorcing Hagar and expelling Ishmael – things that were totally against his nature and instincts and his love for the boy, but which nevertheless were from God. That which was “*very evil in Abraham's sight*” was yet of God.

Sarah would have made it impossible for Hagar and Ishmael to stay. The two could not live under the same roof. There was no choice, Hagar would have to go. And Abraham disliked the idea utterly for he was a kind and compassionate man who seems to have abhorred such conflict.

Life has some shocks and surprises, and sometimes the very things that displease us, are yet from the hand of the Lord. For instance a parent may ban a child from going to bible college, and that young student may obediently take some other course, which in time turns out to be used by God. When life blocks our way, with great intransigence, and we can do nothing about it, then we have to trust that somehow it is from the Lord.

Just yesterday I found that a small mission agency I had founded in another nation, and funded, and put much work into, had been dissolved by the national board members - without consulting me. Initially I was deeply disappointed but then what could I do? It was over, it was God telling me to “move on” from there - and so I will. Somehow it will prove to be for the better! God does not always do that which we like!

Ishmael was to be rejected from the direct Abrahamic inheritance, but yet Ishmael was to be blessed and also made into a great nation, but the line of Ishmael would not be the line that would lead to the Messiah! This was not total rejection, it was simply second place. The gold medal would not be shared by Isaac and Ishmael – instead Ishmael would have to take the silver medal instead. The “gold” would go to Isaac, and now Ishmael's descendants are the Arab peoples – a numerous and great nation indeed.

In Galatians Paul sees in this incident a parallel between Christians and Jews. Christians are born into freedom – and thus are Isaac, while the Jews are born into the bondage of the Law – and thus are of Ishmael spiritually! This must have deeply offended any legalistic Jewish readers!

Galatians 4:21-31 MKJV *Tell me, those desiring to be under Law, do you not hear the Law? (22) For it is written: Abraham had two sons, the one out of the slave-woman, and one out of the free woman. (23) But, indeed, he out of the slave-woman has been born according to flesh, and he out of the free woman through the promise; (24) which things are being allegorized; for these are the two covenants, one indeed from Mount*

Sinai bringing forth to slavery, which is Hagar. (25) For Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and answers to Jerusalem which now is, and is in slavery with her children. (26) But the Jerusalem from above is free, who is the mother of us all. (27) For it is written, "Rejoice, barren one not bearing; break forth and shout, you not travailing; for more are the children of the desolate than she having the husband." (28) But brothers, we, like Isaac, are children of promise. (29) But then even as he born according to flesh persecuted him born according to the Spirit, so it is also now. (30) But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave-woman and her son; for in no way shall the son of the slave-woman inherit with the son of the free woman." (31) Then, brothers, we are not children of a slave-woman, but of the free woman.

Christians are the "Isaac" - the children of miracle and promise and freedom and inheritance, while those bound up in legalism and old religious traditions are Ishmael and are "in bondage" and "of the flesh" trying to please God in their own strength, pride and willpower - which simply cannot be done. Paul tells us that we are a heavenly people "from the Jerusalem above" and citizens of heaven. We are not tied to the physical earthly Jerusalem below and to priests and temples and human ordinances.

Ishmael who was "of the flesh" taunted and persecuted Isaac who was "of promise / of the Spirit" and so legalists (and Jews in NT times) will always persecute those who have the freedom of the Holy Spirit. *(29) But then even as he born according to flesh persecuted him born according to the Spirit, so it is also now.* Thus "control freaks" in religious circles have always opposed outbreaks of revival!

The Scriptural remedy proposed by Paul is harsh - *"But what does the Scripture say? "Cast out the slave-woman and her son; for in no way shall the son of the slave-woman inherit with the son of the free woman."* In other words the legalists need to be "cast out" - though often the reverse happens and those who have the Spirit are ejected from the denomination. Just as Christianity had to leave Judaism, so those with the Spirit have to part ways with those of the Law. Ishmael and Isaac cannot dwell together though many old wise Abraham's wish that they could.

But the inheritance is through the Isaac, that is the future and the path to glory. Now I do not wish to promote schism here, but simply to point out a powerful and often recurring spiritual reality - that fleshly mocking legalism and real Holy Spirit of promise gospel living, cannot abide long together. Once the new movement comes of age, and is "weaned" then the separation will occur, just as when the early church started to come of age, it was cast out of Judaism by the Sanhedrin. New movements may begin in old structures but they do not long abide therein.

God Hears Ishmael

Genesis 21:14-21 HCSB *Early in the morning Abraham got up, took bread and a waterskin, put them on Hagar's shoulders, and sent her and the boy away. She left and wandered in the Wilderness of Beer-sheba. (15) When the water in the skin was gone, she left the boy under one of the bushes. (16) Then she went and sat down nearby, about a bowshot away, for she said, "I can't bear to watch the boy die!" So as she sat nearby, she wept loudly. (17) God heard the voice of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What's wrong, Hagar? Don't be afraid, for God has heard the voice of the boy from the place where he is. (18) Get up, help the boy up, and sustain him, for I will make him a great nation." (19) Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the waterskin and gave the boy a drink. (20) God was with the boy, and he grew; he settled in the wilderness and became an archer. (21) He settled in the Wilderness of Paran, and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.*

Ishmael and his mother Hagar are cast out from the household of Abraham without inheritance. Abraham is grieved by Sarah's anger and gives them bread and water and sends them away. Soon the supplies are gone and it seems that the situation is hopeless.

However Hagar forgets that previously God had promised that Ishmael would become a great nation (Genesis 17:20) and that her offspring would be "too many to count" (Genesis 16:10). If God was true to His Word then they would not both die there in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba! And of course God was true to His Word!

Hagar was also blinded by the circumstances. The water was already there, she just had to have her eyes opened in order to see it. Often the solution is right in front of us but pain, panic and despair blind us to it. We cannot see the obvious solution because we can only see the problem and its probable outcomes (in this case death from dehydration).

The well was right there, right under their noses, but it took an angel of God to show it to them!

No human rejection (such as being cast out of Abraham's family), or terrible circumstance (such as being in the desert and running out of water), can stop God's plan for your life. God fulfilled His plan for Ishmael despite the inauspicious circumstances of his birth and upbringing. God made him into the Bedouin Arab peoples of today!

When God speaks an authoritative word over your life it must come true. God is never thwarted, and God can make all His promises "yea and amen" in Christ Jesus. Now that does not mean that every human desire or wish will come true. But that which God has planned for you and truly spoken over you will come true for you as it did for Ishmael.

At critical points God will point out a solution, a "well in the desert" that you may not have even known was there. He does this in response to intense, prevailing prayer "for I have heard the cry of the boy". God wants us to press on into Him and to call earnestly upon Him for grace, salvation and life's solutions. God allows the crisis, that produces the prayer, that leads to the solution.

God wants to get us to pray from our spirit, to call out from the depths of our beings to Him, to make spirit-to-Spirit contact with the Almighty - and that often requires a crisis. From Moses at the Red Sea, to Jonah in the belly of the whale, and to Hezekiah faced with the Assyrians - the great prayers are prayed in crisis and amidst life's most grievous pressures.

The crisis molds us and stamps us with God and builds our faith as we see His care and as our prayers are answered. If there had been no crisis would the Hebrews have remembered the events at the parting of the Red Sea? The drama is part of the learning!

Hagar would remember the two occasions on which God turned up for her in the desert (Genesis chapters 16 & 21) as the God Who Sees, and the God who answers prayer. Her theology was that God was there, watching, even in the wilderness. God was always gracious to her and always had a solution for her difficulties. This indeed was a God worth serving!

Ishmael grows up in the wilderness of Paran and becomes an archer – a highly skilled warrior. He comes back into the picture in Genesis 25 when he returns for the burial of Abraham and his twelve sons are recorded in the same chapter along with the attribution “he lived in opposition to all his brothers”. (The two main sons of Abraham were Isaac and Ishmael but Abraham also had sons by a later wife Keturah and with his many concubines, these sons he sent away to the East – see Genesis 25).

Ishmael seems to have a deep 'spirit of rejection' from being cast out that permeated his life, dwelling away from people in the wilderness, being an archer and a warrior, and living in opposition to the rest of his family. To some extent this spirit of rejection still lives in many of the Arab peoples to this day!

Rejection is not easy to overcome and forgiveness and reconciliation is essential. You have to let go of the past and make a conscious decision to love and to trust and to move on. As a Christian you need to realise that you are acceptable to God, part of His household and designed for fellowship with God and with His saints. No Christian needs to live in a state of isolation and rejection for God loves them! Even family rejection can be overcome by the love of God!

Psalms 27:10 MKJV When my father and my mother forsake me, then Jehovah will take me up.

The Everlasting God

Genesis 21:22-34 MKJV *And it happened at that time, Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, God is with you in all that you do. (23) Now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son. Do to me according to the kindness that I have sworn to you, and to the land in which you have lived. (24) And Abraham said, I will swear. (25) And Abraham reprov'd Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech's servants had violently taken away. (26) And Abimelech said, I do not know who has done this thing, neither did you tell me, neither have I even heard of it, except today. (27) And Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and both of them made a covenant. (28) And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves. (29) And Abimelech said to Abraham, What are these seven ewe lambs which you have set by themselves? (30) And he said, For you shall take these seven ewe lambs from my hand, so that they may be a witness to me that I have dug this well. (31) This is why he called that place Beer-sheba, because they swore, both of them, there. (32) So they made a covenant at Beer-sheba. Then Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, rose up. And they returned to the land of the Philistines. (33) And Abraham planted a tree in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of Jehovah, the everlasting God. (34) And Abraham lived in the Philistines' land many days.*

This is an official treaty between the Philistines and their army, and Abraham and his forces. It gives Abraham some independence in the land and freedom from marauding Philistine forces and it gives Abimelech and the Philistines political security from a possible takeover by Abraham who had become very powerful and wealthy.

The Philistines recognize God's supernatural intervention on the behalf of Abraham and tremble at it. "*Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, God is with you in all that you do.*" As we have seen with earlier devotionals Abraham had humbled the major political powers of his day including Pharaoh and the kings of Assyria and Babylon. Abraham had done this because of divine favour and so by now had a definite 'mystique' about him – a someone who could not be oppressed or defeated, as someone that the whole Ancient Near East was forced to respect!

The peace treaty of mutual friendship is signed and sealed by Abraham trading large herds of animals in return for peace and secure borders. During the negotiations Abraham brings forth his case about a disputed well that had been seized by the Philistines. In those days this could have led to war, but the dispute was settled amicably and the well returned to Abraham. This was the famous well of Beer-sheba.

After the peace treaty was signed Abraham was finally at rest in the land that God had given him – with no-one to disturb him. He had wells and livestock and a peace treaty with his powerful neighbor, Isaac was born and the scene was set for a peaceful existence and indeed it was such! He dwelt in the land of the Philistines "many days". The continuity of this peaceful and prosperous life is reflected in two things that Abraham does. Firstly he plants a tree! The tree symbolizes continuous growth and a confidence that he would be around to see the tree grow, develop and bear fruit. It is saying "I will be in this place a long time, my nomadic days are over, this will not be a six month or two year stint. I will be here until this tree grows up." The translation of the word for "tree" is a bit uncertain but it may have been a grove of tamarisk trees.

The second things Abraham does is establish a pattern of worship: "he called on the name of Jehovah, the everlasting God." This is the God of eternity, of constancy, of faithful lovingkindness and abiding grace. This is a God who does not vanish into the air, like a demon, or fade away like a spirit of the times, but who abides, century after century and who watches over covenants and treaties, and a God who is faithful to all His promises.

God is there "from age to age" and does not vary or change. He is the only absolute constant in the entire Universe and everything flows from Him. Heaven and earth may pass away but His words abide forever. James puts it this way:

James 1:17 MKJV *Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness nor shadow of turning.*

And Malachi prophesies:

Malachi 3:6 MKJV *For I am Jehovah, I change not. Because of this you sons of Jacob are not destroyed.*

God is not fickle or immature! His purposes stand through the ages and His Word can always be relied upon. Even today we can see how ancient Bible prophecies have both come true and are coming true!

Because God is everlasting He can bestow everlasting life on all who call upon His name. His gospel is as true now as it was in the days when Jesus walked the earth!

Hebrews 13:8 HCSB *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.*

The everlasting God can give us an everlasting and stable peace in our hearts and in our lives. He can bring us to the place of rest and peace as He did for Abraham at the end of his wanderings. The word that God spoke to Abraham was now becoming full and breaking forth into obvious reality. It was the same God that spoke so many years ago, that Abraham called on now towards the end of his journey.

God is consistent despite our inconsistencies! God is with us all our days and will be still with us when we leave the body and go to be with Him.

Faith Obeys God

Genesis 22:1-8 HCSB *After these things God tested Abraham and said to him, "Abraham!" "Here I am," he answered. (2) "Take your son," He said, "your only son Isaac, whom you love, go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about." (3) So early in the morning Abraham got up, saddled his donkey, and took with him two of his young men and his son Isaac. He split wood for a burnt offering and set out to go to the place God had told him about. (4) On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place in the distance. (5) Then Abraham said to his young men, "Stay here with the donkey. The boy and I will go over there to worship; then we'll come back to you." (6) Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering and laid it on his son Isaac. In his hand he took the fire and the sacrificial knife, and the two of them walked on together. (7) Then Isaac spoke to his father Abraham and said, "My father." And he replied, "Here I am, my son." Isaac said, "The fire and the wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?" (8) Abraham answered, "God Himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." Then the two of them walked on together.*

First of all let me give a warning – do not do this at home! Do not think that God is calling you to sacrifice your children or to kill anyone at all. This was an exceptional and unusual “once event” and is never enjoined on believers as normative! Some mentally ill or religiously zealous people have taken this passage to establish a doctrine of “extreme sacrifice” as pleasing to God. The only sacrifices asked for after the cross are mentioned in Hebrews and are hardly extreme:

Hebrews 13:15-16 HCSB *Therefore, through Him let us continually offer up to God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of our lips that confess His name. (16) Don't neglect to do good and to share, for God is pleased with such sacrifices.*

Christ has done the sacrificing for us. We may have to endure hardship or persecution but we never have to offer a person or animal to God in worship or “give up” any good things in our life just to please God. God in fact wants us to enjoy life.

1 Timothy 6:17 HCSB *Instruct those who are rich in the present age not to be arrogant or to set their hope on the uncertainty of wealth, but on God, who richly provides us with all things to enjoy.*

What this passage does teach us is that faith obeys God. When God clearly says “Do X” then the person of faith obeys promptly. For instance Philip the evangelist:

Acts 8:26-31 HCSB *An angel of the Lord spoke to Philip: "Get up and go south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to desert Gaza." (27) So he got up and went. There was an Ethiopian man, a eunuch and high official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of her entire treasury. He had come to worship in Jerusalem (28) and was sitting in his chariot on his way home, reading the prophet Isaiah aloud. (29) The Spirit told Philip, "Go and join that chariot." (30) When Philip ran up to it, he heard him reading the prophet Isaiah, and said, "Do you understand what you're reading?" (31) "How can I," he said, "unless someone guides me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.*

Here we see Philip promptly obeying first and angel of the Lord, and then the leading of

the Holy Spirit. This is true faith in action, obeying God!

Abraham's obedience both obeyed God and trusted God. The epistle to the Hebrews tells us that Abraham solved the problem of God asking him to sacrifice Isaac by thinking that God would raise Isaac back from the dead in order to fulfill His Word.

Hebrews 11:17-19 HCSB *By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; he who had received the promises was offering up his unique son, (18) about whom it had been said, **In Isaac your seed will be called.** (19) He considered God to be able even to raise someone from the dead, from which he also got him back as an illustration.*

So Abraham did not doubt God, but obeyed Him and worked out a solution, Abraham found a way in which obeying God in this difficult matter was both possible and consistent.

Faith is thus not merely creedal but, when mature, it displays itself in action. How could Philip say that he believed in God – and then disobey the angel or fail to heed the voice of the Holy Spirit? Faith trusts God enough to act on His clearly revealed Word.

This does not mean that we have to do everything that Bible characters do! For instance Isaiah the prophet walked around for three years naked, with his buttocks uncovered! (Isaiah 20:1-4) Isaiah obeyed a particular Word from God, that certainly does not apply to all Christians – but Isaiah did obey! The fact that God tells one person to be a missionary to China does not mean that every Christian has to be a missionary to China. (We also need missionaries to other places too!)

Then there are more general commands that apply to every Christian – encourage one another, be holy, abstain from immorality, pray without ceasing, and so forth. These commands are repeated in many different places and times in the Bible and form an overall pattern that tells us they are for all Christians, in all countries, climes and ages.

Faith also obeys these commands and commits itself to living out the Christian life and to obedience to the gospel. Such obedience is tough, and you may feel like you are literally “putting Isaac on the altar”. It can be hard to give up an illicit affair, or to be honest with the tax man or to ask forgiveness from someone that you have wronged – but faith walks in the truth – and eventually obeys!

Abraham's obedience was prompt, private, and prayerful and grounded in the belief that God was going to provide, and that it would turn out for good in the end (Romans 8:28). The faster we obey, and the more deeply we think and pray about it, the easier it will be for our faith to be translated into holy action that glorifies God!

James 2:26 HCSB *For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead.*

The Lord Provides

Genesis 22:9-14 HCSB When they arrived at the place that God had told him about, Abraham built the altar there and arranged the wood. He bound his son Isaac and placed him on the altar, on top of the wood. (10) Then Abraham reached out and took the knife to slaughter his son. (11) But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" He replied, "Here I am." (12) Then He said, "Do not lay a hand on the boy or do anything to him. For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your only son from Me." (13) Abraham looked up and saw a ram caught by its horns in the thicket. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it as a burnt offering in place of his son. (14) And Abraham named that place The LORD Will Provide, so today it is said: "It will be provided on the LORD's mountain."

God provides a ram, often called "the ram of pride" as a sacrifice instead of Isaac. God is merciful, kind and good and does not demand human sacrifice! But He was testing Abraham to see if he truly 'feared God', and when the test is completed then great blessing flowed as we will see later in this chapter.

God provided in response to complete and prompt and faithful obedience. He provided for Abraham because Abraham was totally His: **Matthew 6:33 HCSB** *But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you.*

God's provision is most clearly seen among those who faithfully serve Him, doing God's will in God's way. Or as the missionary Hudson Taylor used to say "God's work, done in God's way, will never lack God's supply."

In this case God's provision was also symbolic. The ram was an ancient Hebrew symbol of pride, independence, strength and virility. It was the epitome of self-sufficiency. The sacrifice of the Ram is thus symbolic of the sacrifice of the self-life, and of pride and of the old nature and of all its self-serving ways. The ram thus becomes the main sacrifice for individual sin in the O.T.

The application is fairly obvious. God does not want us to sacrifice money or animals or our families and careers – He wants us instead to be "crucified with Christ" - to slay the old nature, to kill the ram of pride and self-sufficiency and to embrace the God who fills us with new life.

Now God may still ask us to give money or to change careers, but these are secondary things and come later. The primary thing, the things which MUST come before all others is to be born-again, to die to the old religious life and be born into a new Spirit-filled life, which is precisely what Jesus asked of Nicodemus, the Jewish religious expert, in John chapter 3.

God wants us to fear Him and love Him so that our faith is made strong and we are obedient to all His will, as Abraham was. Abraham held back nothing from God, not even his own son. This is also of course a type of the sacrifice of Christ.

Yet God did not make Abraham go “all the way”. He simply tested his motives, his obedience and then intervened. This is the Lord's merciful provision and the text tells us that in “the mountain of the Lord it will be provided”. Well what are some of the characteristics of such a place of provision?

- It is the place of faith
- It is the place of obedience
- It is the place of worship
- It is the place of death to self

If we want God's provision then we need to walk in faith, be obedient, live in an attitude of God-fearing worship and also take up our cross daily.

This is not easy, in fact it requires a fairly radical break with this world and its ways. Abraham went way out on a limb for God, then the provision came! This is not the stuff of safe suburban respectable church living. This is outside of most cultural and religious norms.

The mountain of the Lord is a high place. Few desire to go there and we admire those who do. It is like passing through a curtain into another world of humility, grace and mustard-seed faith – and to a land of great holiness and glory.

God turned up, the encounter happened, and Isaac was saved through the provision of the Lord. Isaac was never asked to do the same sacrifice with Esau or Jacob, and no human has ever been asked to do this again in the whole history of redemption. It was a once occasion. But a very glorious one.

Faith can take us to some very strange places, but it is in those strange and wonderful places that God often turns up and pronounces a great blessing. It is in the stress of faith and the struggle of God-fearing obedience that self is crucified and ego is put away from us and new life starts to circulate within us.

Somewhere in this sacrificial obedience Abraham is perfected. The narrative of Abraham's life winds down from this point, in chapter 23 Sarah passes away, in chapter 24 there is the transition to the next generation with Isaac's marriage to Rebekah, and in chapter 25 Abraham goes to be with God.

Here we see faith taken to the human limit of costly obedience. It is as if one man actually managed to please God for one moment. The spot became the site of the Temple and now lies in the Mosque of the Dome of the Rock. And the rock on which Isaac was “sacrificed” is known as “the foundation stone of the world” . For this whole world is founded on the faith of those who fear God and upon God's providence.

The Great Blessing

Genesis 22:15-24 MKJV *And the Angel of Jehovah called to Abraham out of the heavens the second time, (16) and said, I have sworn by Myself, says Jehovah; because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only one; (17) that in blessing I will bless you, and in multiplying I will multiply your seed like the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is upon the seashore. And your Seed shall possess the gate of His enemies. (18) And in your Seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice. (19) Abraham returned to his young men, and they rose up and went together to Beer-sheba. And Abraham lived at Beer-sheba. (20) And it happened after these things that it was told Abraham, saying, Behold Milcah! She also has borne children to your brother Nahor: (21) Huz his first-born, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram, (22) and Chesed, and Hazo, and Pildash, and Jidlaph, and Bethuel. (23) And Bethuel fathered Rebekah. These eight Milcah bore to Nahor, Abraham's brother. (24) And his concubine, named Reumah, she also bore Tebah, and Gaham, and Thahash, and Maachah.*

Upon Abraham's obedience in the matter of Isaac, God releases a might blessing. This blessing of Abraham has come upon all who are in Christ (see Galatians 3) and belongs to those who, like Abraham, are of faith:

Galatians 3:6-9 MKJV Even as Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness. (7) Therefore know that those of faith, these are the sons of Abraham. (8) And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the nations through faith, preached the gospel before to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all nations be blessed." (9) So then those of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham.

Galatians 3:29 MKJV *And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise.*

Ephesians 1:3 MKJV *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ;*

The above three verses tell us that those who are of faith, and thus in Christ, are:

- a) sons of Abraham
- b) blessed with faithful Abraham
- c) Abraham's seed
- d) heirs according to promise
- e) blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms.

So the mighty blessings that came upon Abraham at the "sacrifice of Isaac" are ours, not through our sacrificing, but through the sacrifice of Christ upon the cross, which was a "once-for-all-time" sacrifice. So let us look at the components of this might blessing:

that in blessing I will bless you: Blessing is God's favor on all that a person does. It is effortless increase and easy success in life. It is also the blessing of knowing God and having our sins forgiven and being people who God will not hold anything against. The Christian is in God's favor and in the very center of His love.

and in multiplying I will multiply your seed like the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is upon the seashore: Multiplying is unlimited exponential non-linear expansion, it is seeing success upon success, it is super-abounding blessing, it is extending one's boundaries. It means that God's work in our life, and through our life, can be virtually infinite and that one person can have great influence if God is with them. It also is the paradigm for the mustard-seed expansion of the Kingdom.

And your Seed shall possess the gate of His enemies: This primarily refers to Christ and to the Church for "the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). This is the equivalent of the blessing of "dominion" in Genesis and means that the Church has authority to conquer evil. This blessing is the "new section" in the Abrahamic covenant. Dominion is what was uniquely won through Abraham's extreme obedience. Christ of course won dominion over evil by His work on the cross (Colossians 2:13-15)

And in your Seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed: In Galatians Paul explains that the Seed is Christ and the blessing is the promised Holy Spirit: **Galatians 3:14-16 MKJV** *so that the blessing of Abraham might be to the nations in Jesus Christ, and that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (15) Brothers, I speak according to man, a covenant having been ratified, even among mankind, no one sets aside or adds to it. (16) And to Abraham and to his Seed the promises were spoken. It does not say, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, "And to your Seed," which is Christ.*

The nations of the world were to be blessed through Jesus and through the Holy Spirit being poured out upon them! This was God's intention, and He wrapped it up inside the Abrahamic Covenant!

These great and blessings are ours in Christ, through faith. They are the blessings of those who have the "faith of Abraham" that obeys God and believes Him for "impossible" things. It is a deep unshakable faith in the nature and character of a good and righteous God who keeps His Word. It is the faith that the nature and character of God will be manifest in real and practical ways in the midst of our daily lives.

The chapter ends with what seems like an inconsequential list of names of Abraham's relatives. These "names" became nations, competitors to Israel and often enemies (like Aram) that came and went in history. These once mighty nations are now forgotten while Israel endures. And the Church endures. The gates of Hell have not prevailed against them. The blessing of Abraham is not just a bunch of nice words, it has come true in history, and it has come true in Christ. It is real, it worked, and it still shapes world history. You can rely on the Word of God!

Abraham Buries Sarah

Genesis 23:1-20 RV *And the life of Sarah was an hundred and seven and twenty years: these were the years of the life of Sarah. (2) And Sarah died in Kiriath-arba (the same is Hebron), in the land of Canaan: and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her. (3) And Abraham rose up from before his dead, and spake unto the children of Heth, saying, (4) I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a buryingplace with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight. (5) And the children of Heth answered Abraham, saying unto him, (6) Hear us, my lord: thou art a mighty prince among us: in the choice of our sepulchres bury thy dead; none of us shall withhold from thee his sepulchre, but that thou mayest bury thy dead. (7) And Abraham rose up, and bowed himself to the people of the land, even to the children of Heth. (16) And Abraham hearkened unto Ephron; and Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the audience of the children of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant. (17) So the field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field, and the cave which was therein, and all the trees that were in the field, that were in all the border thereof round about, were made sure (18) unto Abraham for a possession in the presence of the children of Heth, before all that went in at the gate of his city. (19) And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre (the same is Hebron), in the land of Canaan. (20) And the field, and the cave that is therein, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession of a buryingplace by the children of Heth.*

This cave and its attendant field became the only "official purchased property" belonging to Abraham and his descendants in the land of Israel. Abraham was 'as a mighty prince' but he was a "squatter" who simply used vacant agricultural land "as if" he owned it, and who was too strong and powerful to be easily dislodged.

In ancient times property was owned by families who passed it down the line of inheritance. Since Abraham was from Ur of the Chaldees he had no official inheritance in Canaan. The land all officially belonged to other people and families. Up until this time Abraham had simply been able to move from place to place and not needed a permanent dwelling but with the passing of Sarah he needed a permanent and inviolate grave-site. He had to have land that he owned and which would not return to the ownership of another person. Eventually Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Leah, Isaac and Rebekah would all be buried there (Rachel was buried near Bethlehem after dying during child-birth).

(To see the archaeological site: <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsourc/Judaism/machpelah.html>)

This site, which has been preserved intact for three thousand years, means that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are not just fictional characters. They were real people, who are buried a particular plot of ground, to the east of Hebron. The Bible is not a myth, it is about real people in real places. It is grounded in reality!

Abraham, the man of faith says " *I am a stranger and a sojourner with you*". The author of the book of Hebrews (probably Paul) commented on this "sojourning" as follows:

Hebrews 11:8-16 RV *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. (9) *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: (10) for he looked for the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (11) By faith even Sarah herself received power to conceive seed when she was past age, since she counted him faithful who had promised: (12) 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. (13) 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. (14) For they that say such things make it manifest that they are seeking after a country of their own. (15) And if indeed they had been mindful of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. (16) But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed of them, to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.*

Abraham and his descendants are called: "a sojourner in the land of promise", "dwellers in tents in a land not their own", "strangers & pilgrims on the earth", and "as desiring a better country, a heavenly one". Let's look at each of these terms in turn!

All faith-filled Christians are "sojourners in the land of promise" in that in Christ all the promises of God are Yea and Amen. We live by His promises and stand on the promises of God. Our entire Christian journey is not the inheriting of a literal land but an inheriting of eternal life and of heavenly things.

We dwell in tents – the tent of our flesh that is our tabernacle here on earth. Both Peter and Paul refer to their bodies as a tent or tabernacle, a temporary dwelling place:

2 Peter 1:13-14 HCSB *I consider it right, as long as I am in this tent, to wake you up with a reminder, (14) knowing that I will soon lay aside my tent, as our Lord Jesus Christ has also shown me.*

2 Corinthians 5:1-5 HCSB *(1) For we know that if our earthly house, a tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. (2) And, in fact, we groan in this one, longing to put on our house from heaven, (3) since, when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. (4) Indeed, we who are in this tent groan, burdened as we are, because we do not want to be unclothed but clothed, so that mortality may be swallowed up by life. (5) And the One who prepared us for this very thing is God, who gave us the Spirit as a down payment.*

So Christians are on a pilgrimage in a "tent" the tent of their own bodies, which will be laid aside when they receive their permanent dwelling, the resurrection body, on the Last Day.

Christians are also "strangers and pilgrims on the earth" or as the old spiritual says: "This world is not my home I am just a-passing through, my home is laid up, way beyond the blue".

1 Peter 2:11-12 MKJV *Dearly beloved, I exhort you as temporary residents and pilgrims to abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul, (12) having your conduct honest among the nations, in that which they speak against you as evildoers, they may glorify God in a day of His visitation, seeing your good works.*

Our true citizenship is in heaven and we are not to be attached to this world and its lusts!

The last phrase from Hebrews, that is applied to Abraham is: "as desiring a better country, a heavenly one". This should knock prosperity theology out cold! Our desire is not to be for this world, but for the heavenly realms! Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did not seek Palestine, they sought after Heaven! Let's look at this again:

Hebrews 11: 14-16: *(14) For they that say such things make it manifest that they are seeking after a country of their own. (15) And if indeed they had been mindful of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. (16) But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed of them, to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.*

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob sought after the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of God, the place of eternal life and the direct Presence of God in great joy and eternal bliss. If we absorbed this fact we would stop chasing after this world and start chasing after God! On the way we would have peace in the Middle East because the land was not the real issue for the patriarchs. God, and the heavenly Jerusalem was the real issue!

My wife and I do not yet own our own home. If we eventually do, then that is fine. But our life is focused on being pilgrims, sojourners and missionaries on this earth while waiting for the Hope that is to come. Home ownership is a worthy goal, but not an ultimate goal. For what use is a wonderful house to a lost soul!

Let us be like Abraham, faith-filled pilgrims focused on our heavenly reward in Christ!