

"GOD'S ADVANCE AGENT...ABRAHAM"

INTRODUCTION

When you hear of a family that produces men of eminence in two successive generations, as with the Beecher family or as with the Taft family, that is a rather conspicuous exception in the course of history. When you hear of a family that produces men of eminence in three successive generations, as with the Adams family of New England in the early days of our nation, that is even more phenomenal. But when you hear of a family that produces men of eminence in four successive generations, as with the family from Genesis of which Abraham is the patriarch, this is almost unparalleled in human history. (Some might say the Rockefellers qualify.) But there they are - one generation after another - and familiar names every one of them - Abraham, Issac, Jacob, and Joseph.

DEVELOPMENT

If you were reading the eleventh chapter of Genesis, you would find yourself in the midst of a very drab and dull genealogy. The names mean nothing, and the generations seem endless. Then all of a sudden there appears a name that rings a bell. This is what you read: "Terah...became the father of Abram". And here is the inconspicuous entrance into the record of a man who was to become one of the supreme figures in religious history, regarded by the people of Israel as the father of their race and honored for centuries now by humanity in general as a pioneer in faith and action.

His birth was probably greeted as indifferently as that of another Abraham in the 19th century A. D. Who saw much cause for excitement in the birth of a boy into the Tom Lincoln family on a February day in 1809? Strange, how God should quietly send an Abraham about the 19th century B. C. and then should quietly send another Abraham in the 19th century A. D.

We do not have the life story of the original Abraham in any detailed biography. What we do have is a series of portraits of this tall man of Israel which were preserved from generation to generation and at length set down by the writer of Genesis, perhaps around the 8th century B. C. There are details about these pictures appall us and astound us. Someone has said that if the patriarchs were living today, they would probably be living in the penitentiary, so much a part of their lives were polygamy and slavery. But it is possible to cut away that which dates Abraham as a man bound to primitive time and have left that which makes him a man independent of time.

HERE IS THE STORY

Here is the story as indicated by those dozen chapters in Genesis which tell us all that we know about Abraham. After the death of his father Abraham felt a divine compulsion to pioneer beyond the land in Haran where his father had settled. Presently, he found himself in Egypt, which was the land of opportunity in that time, but things didn't work out for Abraham and his clan in Egypt, and soon he was on the move again, still sensitive to the guidance of a hand beyond his own.

At length he came into the land of Canaan and settled down with his caravan near Bethel. There occurred an incident which gives us one of the clearest insights into Abraham's character. His nephew Lot was with him. Evidently each man owned certain cattle and certain possessions, and while Lot and Abraham seemed to get along well enough, their respective workmen and shepherds fell to feuding with one another. Finally Abraham said to Lot, "Look, this is foolish. We have all this countryside to claim as our own. Why don't you take the part that you want, and I'll take the other part?" So Lot, who was hardly of the

stature of Abraham, coolly calculated that the obvious better choice would be the Jordan valley, so fertile and so comfortable, and so convenient to the exciting cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. And Abraham was left with the more barren country stretches of Canaan, which he accepted without complaint.

Then it was that God moved in to stamp Abraham as his man. The Covenant, it is called - that summit meeting between Abraham and God wherein Abraham knew as he had never known before of God's faith in him and of God's hope for Israel. You get a clear picture of Abraham as a man of faith in one verse in particular,

"And Abraham believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Read on and you soon come to another incident in the life of Abraham that tells us again what manner of man he was. Do you remember how he interceded with God for the sake of the righteous people of the city of Sodom, which was doomed to destruction for its wickedness? What should he care what happened to Sodom? He didn't live near the city. He had given his nephew the choice, and Lot had elected to live close to the city. It wasn't any of his business what happened to those evil people, even to the relatively good people who lived there, or was it? Something in him cried out against the mass destruction of any people, and something in him insisted that what was highest in his own heart was his right clue to the very nature of God.

"The quality of mercy is not strained" - especially in the lives of the really great.

It seemed like a miracle to Abraham and Sarah when their son, Issac, was born. They had long given up any hope of children, and then after long years a son was born to them. You can understand a little of what that boy must have meant to those parents and with what pride they watched him grow. I suppose that most of us can't understand the struggle that Abraham went through in making his decision to sacrifice Issac to God upon an altar in the wilderness. We can't understand it because the thought of human sacrifice is so utterly repugnant to our religion. But Abraham lived in a day when human sacrifice was an actual custom among some of the Canaanite tribes, and as he watched Issac grow, he must have been plagued with the thought, "Do I really love God enough to sacrifice that boy?" And somewhere along the way, he must have gone through a Gethsemane in which he decided that he could and would. If we remember one particular story about Abraham from our Sunday School days, this is it - how just as he was about to bring the knife down upon his son, Abraham clearly understood that this was not God's plan at all. It seems rather incredible to us, but the story shows the utmost limits to which a man of faith would go.

That's about all that we have of the life story of Abraham. There are two brief obituary notices in succeeding chapters. "And Sarah died...and Abraham went in to mourn for Sarah and to weep for her". There is an everlasting timelessness about the fact of human pain and bereavement, and then the fact that one must go on in loneliness to face what life requires. Then a few chapters later this verse: "And Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people".

And the book of the life story of one of God's great men is closed, but his name and influence reach out across forty centuries. Look at some of the reasons, three in particular and think of them in terms of your own life.

UNORTHODOX IN HIS FAITH

For one thing, Abraham was unorthodox in his faith. That is a dangerous virtue to celebrate, for not all unorthodoxy is healthy or helpful. As Harry Emerson Fosdick once wrote,

"Some non-conformists are insufferable nuisances."....

and we know the kind, perpetual agitators for change who in their own personal insecurity reveal neither consistency nor sensitive spiritual discrimination at all. But Abraham was unorthodox in the finest meaning of that word.

He was one of those great spirits whose spiritual vision would not let him settle down with what had already been achieved in the name of religion. He wanted to go further, and that kind of spirit always calls for some daring and some risks. There is a kind of prophetic note in the first verse that follows the account of the death of Abraham's father,

"Now the Lord said to Abraham, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.'"

All his life it seemed that Abraham was pushing on to establish beachheads on the shores of the future. The author of Hebrews in the New Testament, as far removed in time from Abraham as we are now removed from the earthly ministry of Jesus, gave this thumbnail sketch of the patriarch's life,

"By faith Abraham...went out, not knowing where he was to go."

I think we can better understand that incident about Abraham's near sacrifice of Issac when we take into account this pioneering quality of his faith. All around Abraham were pagan worshipers who proclaimed that the ultimate test of faith was a willingness to sacrifice a loved one. He could not escape the question as to why he should not do as much, and in the torment of his soul he mistook the suggestion for the prompting of God. But all of a sudden Abraham became better acquainted with God, and the second of the soul's promptings was quite different from the first, and through that experience Abraham brought men a step closer in their understanding of God and their responsibilities to him.

Without people of Abraham's pioneering spirit religion tends to become routine and faith becomes a fossil. Jesus was the most unorthodox character of them all, shattering the complacent religionists of his time with, "You have heard that it was said....but I say unto you". Martin Luther and John Wesley were unorthodox Christians, asking embarrassing questions about the ruts into which institutionalized religion was sinking and being used of God to breathe some new life into the forms of religion.

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There was an unorthodox minister in the Church of England ~~thirty~~ years ago by the name of Dick Sheppard. He wrote a book entitled The Impatience of a Parson, and in the wake of it he wrote to his friend Lawrence Housman that he felt that he would be compelled to leave the Church because of his severely critical attitudes. Housman wrote back in violent disagreement urging Sheppard to "remain explosively within the Church".

There are some explosions in churches that are not caused by so great a spirit

as Dick Sheppard, whom the Archbishop of Canterbury described as "burning his way through the world of his time in a consuming flame of love". But for this kind of explosion and for Abraham's kind of unorthodoxy, with their daring and their risks, and with their utter contempt for conformity and caution and security - for that kind of pioneering faith the Church and real religion, I believe, are always the purer and the stronger!

UNSWERVING IN HIS FAITH

Another reason Abraham is remembered is because he was unswerving in his faith.

After all these years we see him as a man of great faith whose life was fashioned in partnership with God. But Abraham would never have been the Abraham of history if he had not steadfastly believed in advance what we today can see in retrospect.

Look at some of the disappointments that came to him. He went down into Egypt with all its opportunities and couldn't make a go of it, until at length he set out for the less desirable stretches of Canaan. Even in Canaan he saw his nephew grab the best land, and he settled down on what was left. There were years when Sarah and Abraham grieved because they were childless. And finally at the end Abraham was left alone, while his helpmate went on before him. Maybe Abraham did have his lesser moments and lower moods, but he never really gave into them. His characteristic mood was one of great faith that God was leading him through every experience.

It is one thing to laud that kind of faith in Abraham; it is another thing to live by that kind of faith in our own lives. But it is still the mark of great spirits to trust that closed doors and dark stretches in life are never beyond meaning or redemption. Abraham gives a deep hint of what faith really is - the confidence that life has meaning and that every part of it can be used by God to fulfill that meaning. There will be stretches in the desert and those nights of darkness which we do not comprehend at all - but wait - for the finished story, like Abraham's, reveals some purposeful design. How clearly Christopher Morley put it:

"Never write up a diary
On the day itself.
It needs longer than that
To know what happened".

UNSELFISH AS A RESULT OF HIS FAITH

One other thing to notice about Abraham. He is remembered because he was unselfish as a result of his faith. This thread of selflessness runs right through his life's story. It stands out in his dealing with Lot; it is evident in his concern for the inhabitants of Sodom; it is even there in his mistaken notion that he should offer his only child as a sacrifice to God. Abraham did not spend his life worrying about his own security or his own success. He spent his life in concern about someone else's comfort and well-being.

There is a strange parallel here between the spirit of the Abraham BC and the Abraham AD. We cannot really appreciate Lincoln's hold on our affections without taking into account this same magnanimous spirit. When almost everyone else was bitter, he was not. When many voices called for vengeance, his did not. About both Abrahams there was a glorious abandonment of self-seeking and self-centeredness and self-pity.

CLOSING Friends, the centuries and the circumstances have changed, but the choices have not. As I see it, every life is continually faced with choices between selfishness and unselfishness. Each day confronts us with examples of that choice.

Will a young person go into a profession in which he can make the most money, or will he go into a profession in which he can do the most good - for others?

Will a man or a woman take money or accept favors when his conscience tells him that principles are being sacrificed?

Will a person give generously of his time and his money in causes beyond himself, or will his first concerns be his own security and his own leisure.

As Lowell put it,

"Then it is the brave man chooses while the coward stand aside.
Till the multitude make virtue of the faith they had denied."

PRAYER And so, Lord, for a few minutes here this morning we have thought about Abraham - a man of great faith...a man of great action - adventurous, unorthodox, unswerving in his commitment to You, unselfish as a result of that faith. We ask that something of that man's faith may also be in us. In the spirit of Jesus, our Lord and Ma ster. Amen