

VIII

THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM

SCRIPTURE LESSON: HEBREWS XI. 8-19.

"By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed."—HEBREWS XI. 8.

"By faith he became a sojourner in the land of promise."—HEBREWS XI. 9.

"By faith Abraham, being tried, offered up Isaac."—HEBREWS XI. 17.

OF the greatness of Abraham there can be no question. He is claimed by Mohammedanism, by Judaism, and by Christianity; and is held in profound reverence in each case. Someone has taken the trouble to go through the Koran, and has found that Abraham is mentioned therein no less than 188 times. He stands out in human history as one of the greatest personalities. It was of Abraham that James said, "He was called the friend of God." In the Old Testament there are two occasions upon which he is so described: once by Jehoshaphat, when in an hour of danger he was praying out of a full heart, and out of the sense of a deep necessity, he spoke of Abraham, the founder of the race, and said: "Abraham, thy friend forever." The other occasion is found in the prophecy of Isaiah; when the prophet was declaring the message of God, and repeating the words of Jehovah, he said, "Abraham, my friend." Of no other man is it ever recorded in that way. Of Moses it is said that he talked with

God as a friend; but here this is said of this one man, "the friend of God." I would not be misunderstood, for God has had His friends in all ages; but this is the one outstanding occasion when the declaration is made, and cited in the New Testament, thus corroborating the statement of the Old, that Abraham was a friend of God.

In this classic passage on faith, the writer has more to record about him than of any other. Beginning at verse eight, the story continues, with some parenthetical interpretations, to verse nineteen. This, of course, is a condensed story, and any consideration of the faith of Abraham must necessarily be a condensed consideration. In the story there are three great movements referred to, and they are indicated in the texts. They reveal a widening experience, or rather, a deepening experience in the life of Abraham. First, faith obeying: "By faith, Abraham, when he was called, obeyed." Faith, onlooking, sojourning in the land of promise, "by faith he became a sojourner in the land of promise." Faith offering: "By faith, Abraham, being tried, offered up Isaac." We may thus gather the whole story and consider the revelation of the force of faith in the life of this man Abraham.

Faith obeying. What is the background of the story? It is not here with any fulness. Even in the Old Testament record the references are slight, although very definite. It has been emphatically stated that this man Abraham never lived; that he was an eponymous hero, that he was an imaginary figure. By the same people it has been said that Moses could not possibly have written the Pentateuch, because writing was not known

in his time. That is all past now, and the world has grown through that stage, for today we know that Abraham is a figure in the actual history, springing from Ur of the Chaldees. Archæological excavation has revealed to us Ur of the Chaldees, and has shown a remarkable condition of high material and mental civilization existing there in Ur. Small facts illustrate. Some time ago, in the midst of the excavations, they dug up the remains of a house in which was a clay tablet which had been left unfinished, and on that tablet, whoever had been using it, was the working out of a problem in trigonometry, which problem they are still working out at Oxford and Cambridge. So it was not a barbaric condition on which Abraham turned his back when he left Ur of the Chaldees, but a high form of civilization on the material and mental levels; without any evidence of anything in the nature of high spiritual or moral standards. That is Abraham's background, and it was there he heard the call. "Now Jehovah said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee: and I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and be thou a blessing; and I will bless them that bless thee, and him that curseth thee will I curse; and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. xii. 1-3). That was the call Abraham heard, a call to leave kith and kin and country, and all the conditions there, that ultimately by going from those conditions he might be a blessing to all the world.

Now obedience to that call was only possible to faith, and in the surrender to that call faith was operating.

We may ask, How did he know it was God's voice speaking to him, as if he heard the voice of a friend, and not the voice of any Chaldean? I do not know, and I am not caring to know, or to find out. What I do know is that Abraham was convinced that the call had come to him to turn his back upon Ur, and that it was God's call. Of that he was perfectly sure. What processes of mind and thought in Abraham may have preceded this we can only infer. We can infer that he had come to an hour of disillusionment, of bitter dissatisfaction with life as it was being lived; and the order of life which is contrary to the high, and the noble and true. Somehow he had come to a consciousness of God, had come to know God; and there, in the midst of the conditions that obtained in Ur, he had known that it was God speaking to him. That one thing is certain, that a man knew God had spoken. When we see that, the wonder of his action fades away. It is the kind of action one would expect; yet it was only possible to faith.

In that twelfth chapter of Genesis, the next sentence we read is: "So Abram went out, as Jehovah had spoken unto him." In the Hebrews' reference, the writer says not only that he went out, but he did not know where he was going; but he is equally careful to say that though he did not know where he was going, he knew what he was going for, and why he was going. "He looked for the city which hath the foundations, Whose Architect and Frammer is God." But Ur had foundations? No, Ur had nothing but that which was material; and so evanescent was it that it was buried for long centuries in an accumulation of dust and rub-

bish. He sought a city that had foundations, whose order of life, Whose Architect and Builder was God Himself; and he went because God told him to go, and by faith he obeyed.

So we see faith obeying, a man going out to become a pilgrim and a stranger; going out to undertake a march without a map, on a progress without a programme, but going with God. That is the first element of faith in the man, and wonderful in itself. Application is hardly necessary. Can we get the vision this gives us, a man hearing God, hearing God's command to do a thing that seemed absurd? Yet that thought did not daunt him. He set up his standard of life, shook the dust of Ur from his feet, and went out on the march. Where? Never mind where, but go. No wonder he has been called the father of the faithful! That was a marvellous act of obedience.

We are apt to read the second text, and fail to notice that there is another element here. By faith he was able to obey, and by faith "he became a sojourner in the land of promise." Not a landowner, but dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob. We shall return to that reference to Isaac and Jacob later. Let us see Abraham, without a city, now become a sojourner. The idea of the word *sojourner* is arresting and suggestive. It is that of being a lodger, and not one owning the place. The word sojourner is a beautiful word, which we do not want to lose; but it means he was simply a lodger; a sojourner not in active possession.

How long did that last? By faith he became a sojourner, and he remained a sojourner. How long? Just about one hundred years. He was heir of the

promise. His title was the word of God to him; but when he died, after being a lodger for a hundred years, how much did he possess of the land? Machpelah, the burying-place of Sarah. That was all, but he had faith, and he was content to wait. By faith he was a sojourner, and when the end came to his life on the earthly plane, all that he owned in that land was a cave in a field. That was all. Read that story, and see that he declined to take it as a gift from aliens. He bought it, and insisted upon paying for it; and the transaction was legally done, and he became the owner of a burying-ground. That is all that Abraham himself ever owned in the country; but by faith he was a sojourner.

I thank God that all these stories tell us the truth about these men, of failure as well as success. His was wonderful faith, but there were some sad deflections from faith in the early part. Abraham went down into Egypt, and we know of his trouble there, and the difficulty created. If the pagan Egyptian king had not had some sense of honor, there would have been a terrible catastrophe. He could not trust God wholly with his future. Yet follow the story through, and in those hundred years he obeyed, waiting, trusting. By faith he became a sojourner. He had turned his back upon a great city, a great civilization. He had gone out seeking a city Whose Builder and Maker is God. He was seeking a country, a heavenly country, when he was pitching his tent, and dwelling, a sojourner, under the oaks of Mamre. Cities there were full of material property and wealth; but Abraham was not lured by them. Lot was, and that was where Lot broke down. He was a good man, but he allowed himself to be seduced by the

promise of a way by which wealth might be quickly accumulated. But Abraham sat under the oaks, unaffected by the lure of the cities. He accepted the unsettled life. He was a stranger and a pilgrim in the midst of things so contrary to vision that had come to him, and to the call he had heard. He was a pilgrim, travelling all the while. He

“Nightly pitched his moving tent,
A day’s march nearer home,”

the city of his heart, the passion of his life. Faith manifested itself in the fact that he was a sojourner for a hundred years. Whatever the difficulties, he never went back to Ur.

So finally we come to that which is the climax and central fact. “By faith, Abraham, being tried, offered up Isaac.” That does not necessarily refer to sacrifice by death. The word “offered” simply means he presented him, he yielded him to God. When God asked him to offer his son, he consented by faith, apparently sacrificing all his hopes. That is what this means. Apparently. That is how it looked. But Abraham did not measure things by the apparent way. He had waited long for Isaac, for a son; and the son had been given supernaturally. Isaac was born out of due season. He had seen this son grow up, at any rate at this time some thirty or forty years old; and he had to consent to the action of his father, which undoubtedly he did. When God said to Abraham, Give me thy son, he yielded Isaac to Him in the only way he saw, and that was by putting him to death. So Abraham journeyed with him—and what a journey it was! When they

neared the place of sacrifice, Abraham said to the men: “Abide ye here . . . and I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship, and come again to you.” He was going to offer Isaac, to the uttermost limit, even to death. Yet there was a confident assertion that that was not going to be the end. He was coming back and the lad was coming back with him. The father of the faithful!

What is the meaning of this? “By faith Abraham, being tried, offered up Isaac,” though in him were vested all his hopes. He followed what seemed to him the only course, the only way in which he could present that lad to God, in answer to the divine call. But he was “accounting,” reckoning, reasoning that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead. That is what he meant when he said: “I and the lad will go yonder; and we will worship, and come again to you.” He was willing to go to all lengths, and to slay him; and when the hour came he made the offering, reckoning that if he put Isaac to death, God would raise him up from the dead. The writer says: “From whence he did also in a parable receive him back.” That is the central, most precious thing he did: yielding, accounting.

Faith is not blind unbelief. Faith is not superstition. Faith works by reason. It does the thing that seems contrary to expectation, but it does it, reckoning on God by faith, being sure of God; being sure that after Abraham had done his utmost, and his sun was blotted out of his heaven, God was able to raise Isaac up. By faith Abraham offered up his son. That was the supreme activity.

Faith is conviction of God, and that He is the Re-

warder of them that diligently seek Him. This is wrought out all through the story of Abraham. As we watch faith in him we see it honored by God, in spite of faltering, and in spite of failure. We see God overruling the failure in man, and bringing everything to consummation. We do not wonder that Abraham is called the father of the faithful. The phrase is not found in Scripture but the teaching of the New Testament warrants it.

In the days of His flesh His enemies said to Jesus, in answer to His word that "the truth shall make you free," "We be Abraham's seed, and have never yet been in bondage to any man; how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free?" Our Lord said this startling thing: "I know that ye are Abraham's seed," but you are not his children. Mark that carefully. Only those who live by faith are the children of Abraham.

Paul said of Abraham, "who is the father of us all." He was writing to Christian people. So everyone today who believes, who lives by faith, and obeys when the call comes, waits, is content to make the offering God demands at whatever cost: such are the children of Abraham. Such are the souls who, by their faith in God, become God's instruments through whom He hastens the day of faith's final victory.