

New Look at Consecration

by E.J. Alexander

The sermon presents a fresh perspective on consecration by examining the life of Abraham as a model of faith and obedience to God's will.

Duration: 34:50

Scripture: Genesis 12:1, Matthew 1:1-2, Matthew 6:33, Galatians 3:13-14, Hebrews 11:8-11

Topics: "Consecration"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the life of Abraham as an example of true faith and a friend of God. The speaker emphasizes that living a faithful life to God is not a quick and easy process, but rather a lifelong journey. The sermon highlights the language of birth and growth in describing the work of God in the soul of man. The speaker also discusses three failures in Abraham's life, including his lack of trust in God's promises and his tendency to put himself first.

Transcript

Well, I'm very grateful to Mr. Hacking for inviting me to come to the Young People's Meeting this morning. And I'm very glad to see you all looking very much younger than they used to do when I was at the Young People's Meeting, which my wife tells me is always a sign of great age. But it's very nice to be here.

Mr. Hacking and Mr. Carr are both amongst my older friends. And I am just very sorry to discover such a gap in Mr. Hacking's knowledge that he has not yet, after all the trouble we've taken with him in Scotland, become aware of which is the Glasgow University tie. Never mind.

He is gradually getting some of these refined qualities, which a prolonged stay in Scotland does give to people from south of the border. And we have high hopes for him yet. Now, I understand that during these mornings you've been taking a fresh look at some of the teaching of the Bible about living the Christian life, trying to discover together some of the things that we need greatly to learn about the kind of life that is pleasing to God.

And there are two ways of looking at the life that is consecrated and given over to God, the challenge of the Bible to Christian people to live a life that is pleasing to him. One of them is to try to sort out some of the great principles that you find in the New Testament and to seek to understand them and apply them to your own life. The other way is to see some of these great principles that are in the Bible for a life that is pleasing to God, clothed with flesh and blood in the life of one particular man, some of the great men of

God who sought to live lives that were committed and consecrated to the God who had brought them out of darkness into his light.

And it's the second way that I want us this morning to look at the meaning of a consecrated Christian life. And I want us to do it by trying to look together at the life of a man whose position in the Bible is probably more significant than that of any other individual our Lord apart. And I'm referring, of course, to the life of Abraham, the man who is described in the Scripture as our spiritual father, the man from whom we take our roots spiritually, as it were.

Now, of course, the story of Abraham is told in the Old Testament, as you know, from Genesis, the end of chapter 11 onwards. But there's an inspired commentary on it in Hebrews in the New Testament, chapter 11 and at verse 8. And I want us to read a verse or two from there, first of all. And then, if you will, if you would keep your Bible open at Genesis, chapter 12, we shall be looking at one or two verses there.

This morning I want to try to say some very simple things gathered from the evidence of the life of Abraham, a man who is described in the most remarkable categories as a friend of God, a man who is the example of true faith. If you want to live a life that's really faithful to God, you look at Abraham. That's the Bible's advice.

Well, what are the things that are characteristic of the life of Abraham? Well, you look at Hebrews 11, verse 8. By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed. And he went out not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise.

For he looked for a city which had foundations whose builder and maker is God. Through faith also Sarah herself received strength to conceive seed and was delivered of a child when she was fast-aged, because she judged him faithful who had promised. Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the seashore innumerable.

And verse 17. By faith Abraham, when he was tried or tested, offered up Isaac, and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said that in Isaac shall thy seed be called, accounting that God was able to raise him up even from the dead. From whence also he received him, in a figure.

Now the position that Abraham occupies in the Bible, I think, is something of tremendous importance, and I'm tempted to spend more time than we have upon it this morning. Let me just say this. If you put it very simply, perhaps too simply, the biblical record is the account of how God acted in history, all down through the years, to reclaim men from the ravages of sin and from the damage that sin had done, both to God's creatures and to God's creation.

And here and there throughout the whole of the Bible's record of God's activity in the world to redeem the world, you get certain very important moments and certain very significant people. And one of these very significant people is this man Abraham, and the choice and call of Abraham in the Bible is, in a sense, a watershed in the history of God's whole purpose to redeem the world from the results of sin. And we are told that the particular significance of Abraham is that it is out of Abraham's seed that redemption is to come, so that after Abraham there is a gradual expanding, as it were, of this sphere in which God is working, a great nation coming out of this man Abraham and those who were his descendants.

And then after this expansion, the great company, there is a narrowing down of God's interest, almost like one of these television cameras which goes over all of you and then finds one handsome figure and suddenly focuses on you. Yes, of course, it's you. And the camera comes down and focuses on it.

But this is what happens in the Bible. There is a focusing upon, first of all, one tribe, and then in that tribe, one family, and then within that one family, one individual, so that when you open your New Testament at Matthew chapter 1 and verses 1 and 2, you find that the concentration is on the one man, Christ Jesus, and he is called the son of Abraham. And when you find the New Testament explaining what God is doing when he is redeeming men by Jesus coming to die upon the cross as the curse, bearing the curse for our sins, you find that it's described in these terms.

Why did he die? So that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles, so that the blessing that we have in Jesus Christ is the blessing God promised when he dealt with Abraham in the days of the Old Testament. And the question that I want us to ask this morning of the pages of the Scripture we will be looking at is, how was Abraham blessed by God? Because, as I think it's the Reverend Alan Stubbs says in his very excellent little book on Abraham called *God's Friend*, published by the IVF, who can send me any excess profits for a little bit of publicity, he says, the way for Abraham to be blessed is the way for us to be blessed. The way for Abraham to be blessed is the way for us to be blessed.

Now let me just point out to you, first of all, why it was that Abraham was called by God and why it was that God worked in Abraham's life in the way that he did. The context of his consecration, if you like. You see, if you try to get to grips sometime with the story of Abraham, the purpose God had in all that he did in Abraham was not primarily to make Abraham happy or to solve all Abraham's problems.

It was something very much bigger than that. I think these things happen. But the basic drive of the purpose of God when he begins to work in your life is not simply to solve all your problems and to make you happy and send you along during the rest of your earthly pilgrimage on a flowery bed of ease.

The great point about all this background the Bible gives us to Abraham is that God called Abraham to a consecrated committal to himself in order that he might be caught up in the great ongoing purposes of a sovereign God who is working out his redemption in the world. That's why God called Abraham to the place of full and utter committal of himself, because he wanted Abraham to be part of the great ongoing purpose of God now. I suppose that none of us here this morning are likely ever to reach the prominence and the height of Abraham.

Abraham is a man of unique significance. But the fact is, and I want us to try to catch this this morning, that we all, no matter how unimportant we may think we are, how young we may be, whatever insignificant kind of sphere we may think we have in life, we all have a place in this great ongoing purpose of God in the world. And God seeks for his people to be committed and consecrated to him in order that they might have his place in his purposes in the world.

And there is nothing more tragic than to see a Christian man or woman in the formative days of their life, which is now, missing out on God's great purpose for which he brought you into the world in the first place. Just as the bird was made for the air and the fish was made for the water, you were made for the will of God. And you will never find the true happiness for which so many people in the world are madly rushing here and there to seek, but God meant you to find unless you are right in the center of his will and purpose for your life, whatever that may be.

Now, may we look, first of all, at the character of Abraham's consecration. It just seemed like, first of all, I suppose this is really secondly of all, but I have a great sympathy for the Apostle Paul. You know, when he gets about three quarters of the way through his letters in the New Testament, he says, now finally, brethren, and he's not really finished at all.

He just tries to soothe them over the next stage. This should really be point number two, I'm sure. We started with the context of Abraham's consecration.

This should be the character of Abraham's consecration. And there are one or two things, I suppose rather negative in one sense, but there are positive truths behind them that I want us to notice. The first is this, that consecration of his heart and life and will and mind and future to God for Abraham was not a wonderful kind of emotional and mystical experience bearing with it an exhilarating feeling.

What does Hebrews chapter 11 tell us was the mark of faith in the life of Abraham? Did you notice? By faith Abraham, when he was called of God, obeyed. For Abraham, consecration to the will and purpose of God was essentially a matter of moral obedience to the will of God. And this is what true faith in the New Testament is.

That's why it's married together in the Bible with obedience, and the phrase is used, the obedience of faith. There are many people who spend a great deal of their time looking for some kind of exhilaration, for a kind of Christian kick. But this is not what the New Testament means by consecration, you know.

There are many people who come away from meetings, and I've sometimes spoken to one or two of them at the end of the meeting, and they say, you know, I got a glorious feeling there. I felt wonderful when I went out. You know, it's very dangerous to mistake exhilarating experiences for true consecration to the will of God.

For Abraham, it was the challenge of moral obedience to what God had to say to him. This is why it's so important for you to get into the Bible and become a true student of the Word of God. That you might live in obedience to what God is saying, and that's how consecration is maintained.

Second, Abraham was not made a man of God overnight. His consecration, his godly character was not the business of a day, it was the work of a lifetime. And this too is a matter of great importance, as it seems to me.

You see, it's possible for us, and very natural for us, to seek some kind of crisis in our spiritual life, which is going to be the answer to all our problems, and make us men of God in three short steps. You know the series of books that you sometimes see on the bookstore. The golf secret, the exam secret, and so on.

And the implication is, if you just get this read up, your golf handicap will sink overnight. If you just read this, examinations will no longer be any problem. And of course, some of us have found to our cost that that's not at all true.

And there are many people who think that there's a quick, snappy secret into a consecrated Christian life, and my dear friends, there isn't. It's not the business of a day, it's the work of a lifetime. And the characteristic New Testament language to describe the work of God in the soul of man bears this out.

It's the language of birth and growth. When you come to know God through Jesus Christ, you are born again into his family. And the description of young Christians is babes in Christ.

And when we go on, it's said in Paul's epistles that we grow up into him. Therefore, we are told to take food to help us to grow. This is the kind of language.

So it is that that very wonderful biography that some of you may be acquainted with, the story of Hudson Taylor, was very rightly called the growth of a soul. Now, of course, there are crises within this process of growth. Let's never go to the other extreme of error and think that there is not an occasion when God comes into our lives with a real crisis to awaken us and do something in us that is going to make it possible for us to grow in a way that we didn't before.

I went into a hospital not terribly far from my own parish not long ago and saw there in a little cot in the middle of the hospital ward a tiny child. It turned out to be four and a half years of age. And I said to the sister in the ward, what's wrong with that child, sister? The child seemed shrunken.

Bones were sticking out. There were bruises here and there. And the wretched little child's stomach was swollen.

What's wrong with that child, I said to the sister. She said, malnutrition. And we're having a tremendous battle to save the child's life.

And surgeons and physicians worked with that child for a long time. Several weeks later when I was going in to see one of my congregation, I saw the child again. And after the critical days of treatment, because she'd been starved so long, she was beginning to grow again.

But you see the point. The crisis was not in order to make her a full-grown woman once the hospital treatment was done. It was to make growth possible.

This is a very important thing that I wish I had got sorted out in my own Christian life a long time before I did. Abraham had crises in his life. You only need to read the story very cursorily to find this out.

Let me try to just outline for you some of the crises that we sometimes have. I think one of the crises that matters more than many others in the lives of Christian young people is a crisis of truth. When suddenly by reading your Bible, it may be by reading some book, the truth of some issue dawns upon you.

I remember when this happened so many different occasions in my own life. It may be the deeper truth about the real meaning of the death of Christ and what God has done in Christ. When the truth dawns upon you and somehow or other your soul is liberated to grow and go on with God in a way that you weren't before.

There are sometimes crises of trial, difficulties, adversities, sudden situations with which you are faced when God speaks to you about something, and it's like a spiritual surgical operation. And through that trial, through that difficult experience, God sometimes brings you on to grow. That's what Abraham was experiencing when he was called upon to face the trial of offering up Isaac, of separating from Lot, and so on.

That kind of trial, of crisis, is often a crisis of repentance. When I fail and see what a wretched flop I am, and how utterly hopeless my life is when I rebel against God and try to go it alone. That can be a crisis which afterwards enables you, when you have turned from your sin and cast yourself in the grace of God, to go on and grow again.

There are crises of this kind in spiritual experience, but let's be very clear that there is no single crisis experience, no matter what you may call it, which is the key to suddenly becoming a mature Christian. I think it was Dr. Barnhouse, who used to speak many years ago here at Tethys, who said that the graph of Abraham's spiritual life was rather like the graph of the cost of living. It goes up gradually.

The overall picture is of a steady rise, as those of us who have lived as long as Mr. Carr and Mr. Hacking know. The graph is a steady rise. Sometimes it stops for a while and remains level.

Maybe it dips down for a while and then rises again. But the overall picture of Abraham's life, this is the thing, is a steady and gradual rise. That leads me to the next thing, which is this.

Very briefly, Abraham was not a figure of spotless perfection. This is where the honesty of the Bible is so encouraging, don't you find? God openly shows us Abraham's failures. He doesn't try to cover up the picture in all its reality.

He shows us Abraham's failures, and he does so for two reasons. The first is very important. It is that we might see where Abraham failed and take warning.

Cry to God for grace to be prepared for a similar attack from Satan and for readiness to ward it off. There is one way in which the failures of the men of God in the Bible are misused, and that is when they encourage us to feel, Oh, well, we're not so bad after all. We can just lie back in our oars.

They were just as bad as I am. That's not why God shows us the failures of men of God in the Scripture. He shows us them that we may be warned by them.

It could even happen to him, so beware. That's the second reason. God gives us a picture of these failures of men of God like Abraham in order that we might take encouragement and realize that out of such unlikely material, a man who lied about his wife in order to get himself out of a scrape, a man who failed to trust God in so many different occasions, that out of such unlikely material God made such a mighty man as Abraham became.

This is why we are told in the epistle of James about Elijah that he was a man subject to like passions as we are. Do you think that your nature is perhaps too difficult for God? Do you think that your problems are so exclusive that no Christian has ever experienced them before, and you could never become the kind of man that you sometimes dream about being, the kind of girl or woman that you would like to be? The testimony of the men of God in the Bible is that there is no twist in a man's character which God is not able to take as the potter takes the clay and make it into a vessel that he can use and bless. In outline, will you look at some of Abraham's failures that we might learn from them? First of all, Genesis chapter 11 verse 31, the failure of a partial obedience.

The tense in the authorized version of chapter 12 verse 1 is the right tense. The Lord had said unto Abraham, if you're learning Latin, it's the pluperfect tense. The Lord had said unto Abraham, go into Canaan, get thee out of thy country, and I will make of thee a great nation, and bring thee unto a land I will show thee.

And the land that God was going to show Abraham was the land of Canaan. But look what happened to Abraham. He landed not in Canaan, but in another place at the end of verse 31 called Haran.

They went from Ur of the Chaldees to go into the land of Canaan, and they came unto Haran and dwelt there. Why did Abraham stop in Haran? Most people seem to think it was because of a personal relationship. His obedience was incomplete because of a personal relationship, family ties in this case.

May we learn from that the principle that people can keep people from the full will of God for their lives. Could you be in a personal relationship just now that's doing that? That's the real test, you see, in a very real sense of the seal of God upon your relationship with somebody of the opposite sex. Are they going to lead me on nearer to God? In the biblical language, are they going to provoke me to godliness, or are they going to hold me back? People can keep people from God, and Abraham's obedience at the first was a partial obedience.

The second thing you'll notice was Abraham's failure to trust God in days of famine and trial. It seems as if Abraham had expected once he set out from Haran, stepping forth in obedience to the word of God, that everything was going to go smoothly. Trials and testings, wrestlings and adversities were out of place in Abraham's idea of things, and suddenly famine came.

We discover that in verse 10 of chapter 12, there was a famine in the land as Abraham journeyed. Abraham believed that this grievous famine could not be any part of the purpose of God for him. Wrestling with this was something he was not prepared to continue, and so he went down into Egypt.

One of the experiences of the saints of God is this, that these very trials and testings, some of the battles that we are waging, whether they are battles with the devil, with the flesh, with the world, whatever they may be, some of the internal conflict that you are knowing, some of the pressures of the world around you, the society in which you've got to live and witness to Christ, some of these very testings can be the very things that God takes and uses to make a real man of God out of you. You know that hymn, How Firm a Foundation, ye Saints of the Lord, listen to some words of it. I will be with thee, thy trials to bless, and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, my grace all sufficient shall be thy supply. The flame shall not hurt thee, I only design thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine. And so says the apostle Paul, I will glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me.

Third failure was the failure in the realm of putting himself first. You remember when he was in the land of Egypt, a place he should never have been in the first place. He found that one sin led to another, one lapse led him into more trouble.

And he came to the place where he began to fear, fear for his own skin, that with his beautiful wife, Sarah, he might get into trouble with the king and the Egyptians. And they will see you, says Abraham, they will say this is his wife and they will kill me but save thee alive, say therefore that thou art my sister. A thing that happened to Abraham more than once.

And so concerned was he for number one. Isn't it interesting, we never need to ask who number one is. So concerned was he with number one that he lied to other people, compromised the position of another, and found himself in the most atrocious spiritual mess.

Failure in the realm of putting self first. He did the same with his plans when Ishmael was born. This was Abraham's plan for fulfilling God's purpose.

And he began to rebel against God's idea, God's word, God's plan. And said oh that Ishmael might live before thee. Ishmael was the child of a little plan that Sarah and Abraham had concocted between them.

And God had another way and Abraham said here is my plan God, would you just put your seal of approval on this. Because I don't really care for your idea of how I should be consecrated to you and live for you in the world. I prefer my own idea, my own plan.

And Abraham failed. Just a word before we finish about the two sides positively of his consecration. First of all it's cost.

For there was a cost in the consecrated life that Abraham lived. The cost of being separated from all the luxury and affluence of Ur of the Chaldees, which was no broken down shanty town, but a great civilization. And Abraham was called to forego that and to go out with God.

May I just ask you in a word. Have you faced the issue of whether you are living for material gain, comfort, possessions, advancement and ambition. Or for the will of God.

Abraham found that the purpose of God as he was again and again separated from things that might have been dear to him. Was not to impoverish him, but to enrich him. He found that when he was faced with the question of separating from Lot.

Do you remember in Genesis 13 how he gave Lot the choice of the land and was ready to leave his life in the hands of God. And it seemed as if Lot had taken the fertile plain and Abraham was left impoverished. Do you ever feel that? As if men and women in the world around you are going to have so much more happiness and joy and so on.

Because they're not Christians than you have because you are. It's one of the lies of the devil you know and one of his most effective lies. That the purpose of God in calling you to consecrate yourself utterly to him is to impoverish you of the very things that are going to do you good.

Abraham found after he had separated from Lot that God told him lift up now thine eyes and look from the place where thou art. Northward and southward and eastward and westward and it will all be yours. His design was to enrich rather than to impoverish.

And there is a fullness in the life that is utterly given over to the will of God and to his purpose that you will find nowhere else under God's heaven. And the crux of the whole matter you'll need to read it for yourself for the time is gone. Was when God came and put his finger on the nerve center of consecration for Abraham.

I used to have a dentist who was a master at touching his drill on the nerve of my teeth. And when I'd come back down from the ceiling he'd say oh I think we got the nerve there didn't we? God put his finger on the nerve center of Abraham's consecration when he took him out to Moriah with Isaac his dearest possession. What is your dearest possession? What's the thing that matters more than anything else in the world to you? I once heard someone say you know what God wants is your Isaac whatever your dearest possession is in the world.

Whatever matters to you most he's calling you to lay it on the altar. But I don't think that's true. I think it's you God wants on the altar not yours.

But you is that where your life is going to be placed not just for Keswick. But forever from these days forward. Lord set the seal of thy spirit upon thy word and grant us that we may hear thy voice saying to us as Jesus said of old.

Come unto me and I will give you rest. Whatsoever he saith unto you do it. And the grace of the Lord Jesus be with us all.

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