

Abraham, My Friend: 05 Looking Forward to the City

by Ron Bailey

Abraham's journey to the city is a symbol of our own journey to faith and dependence on God.

Duration: 15:37

Scripture: Genesis 4:17, Genesis 11:4, Isaiah 14:13, Matthew 6:33, John 14:2, John 15:5, Hebrews 11:10

Topics: "Abraham"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker explores the life of Abraham and his journey towards becoming a praying man and a friend of God. The importance of the first step in any venture is emphasized, as mistakes in the foundation can be costly to rectify. Abraham's perseverance and enthusiasm were sustained by his desire and hunger for the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God. The sermon also contrasts the city built by Cain in defiance of God's punishment with the city that Abraham looked forward to, highlighting the importance of expectation and anticipation in faith.

Transcript

Well, hello again. You're listening to a Bible Base podcast, and I'm your host, Ron Bailey. These 60 or so meditations on the life of Abraham were first published on the Sermonindex.net website, where you can still find the original text versions.

The aim of the series is to discover the way in which Abraham became a praying man and the friend of God. This is Abraham, my friend, number five, looking forward to the city. A journey of a thousand miles, say the Chinese, begins with the first step.

The beginning of any venture is vital. If there are mistakes in the foundations, it can be very costly to rectify. This is especially true of spiritual buildings and journeys.

How often God has to bring us back to a place where we began wrong, before he can take us onwards in his will. But the first step is not the whole journey, and to begin is no guarantee that we will arrive. How can that initial enthusiasm be sustained? Desire is the dynamic of progress.

Ultimately, desires determine direction, and direction determines destiny. In elemental terms, we follow our hungers. We shall not understand Abraham's perseverance unless, in our more modern phrase, we

can discover what made him tick.

Abraham was torn out of his context with a command to get thee out, and a promise that his destination would be the land that I will show thee. What gave him the courage to start, and subsequently sustained him? Again, we found the answer not in the Genesis narrative, but in the Spirit-inspired commentary. In Hebrews 11 and verse 10, it tells us he was looking for the city having foundations, whose architect and builder is God.

This is a fascinating phrase which has deep roots biblically. Even the tense is interesting. He was looking for.

This is the imperfect or continuing past tense. He was continually looking for the city. From the remainder of the verse, we see that the statement covers his exodus and his perpetual sojourning.

This was the abiding pattern of his life. From the moment of his leaving Ur of the Chaldees, he was constantly looking for the city. I have restored the definite article, too.

This was not just any convenient city which he might stumble into. This was THE city. The city would be distinguished from all other cities by the fact that its architect and builder was God himself.

What was Abraham looking for? And where did he expect to find it? The word looking for is not the word for search. Abraham was not searching for the city, and the word is used elsewhere in the New Testament and earlier in the book of Hebrews. It says, This man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins, sat down on the right hand of God from henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool.

That's Hebrews chapter 10. Here the same word looking for is translated expecting. It has the sense of expectation, anticipation.

It's not looking for but looking forward to. Expectation and anticipation is a vital ingredient of faith. This was not some weary, dogged plod through hundreds of miles of sand.

This was a man with an excitement and hunger which drew him on in every step. He was fully expecting to see the city. In some ways, the Bible is a tale of two cities.

The first city was called Enoch and was built in direct defiance of God's punishment. We'll read that in Genesis chapter 4. Its architect and builder was Cain. He had murdered his brother, and God's sentence was that Cain would be a fugitive and a wanderer.

Cain is fearful that man's vengeance might be more summary than God's, and complains. God marks Cain as a man under God's sentence, not man's. Cain leaves God's presence and heads eastwards, but he refuses to remain under God's sentence and defends himself against those he fears by building the world's first city.

This man is refusing to submit to God and is ensuring his own safety. The human race is obsessed with security. We feel vulnerable and exposed, so we build our cities.

We need a 4,000 year mindset transplant here. In our 21st century, everyone is heading for the country because of the dangers in the cities. In Abraham's day, people lived in cities to secure themselves against the dangers of the country.

Biblically, the city becomes a symbol of arrogant security. Man is secure against God himself. The cities became vast enterprises fitted for every danger.

They could sometimes withstand sieges for years. They come to represent absolute systemised independence. The city comes to symbolise the world, not evil necessarily in its most obscene forms, but the evil that is independence from God.

There's a wonderful cameo of the rich man captured in Proverbs 18. The rich man's wealth, it says, is his strong city and there's a high wall in his own conceit. As to say the rich man needs nothing and no one, his riches are his strong city.

It's a powerful picture. The rich man can buy, for the most part, protection, health, provisions. He is secure in his independence.

The world is rich. Its technology, strategy, science, education, religion provide a powerful defence. Some years ago, a member of the British royal family addressed a meeting of farmers.

He spoke of their industry, their skills, their machinery, and their miracle crops. He summed up the confidence of the industry with the phrase, we don't need God now. That is the spirit of the world, not essentially entertainment, philosophy or even anti-religious, but independence from God.

The ultimate among cities in the development of the arrogant independence from God, biblically, is Babylon, with its tower. And they said, go to, let us build as a city and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven. And let us make as a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth, Genesis 11.

Their project echoes the even older blasphemy of the power behind Babylon's king, captured in Isaiah 14, I will ascend into heaven. Lest we are too quick to point the finger, we should examine our own resources, our own riches. Many are rich in character, spiritual experience, Bible knowledge, communication skills, musical ability, counselling expertise.

If God didn't turn up to the meeting on Sunday, how would we know? How far can we manage without him? The real answer to that question is the measure of our worldliness. Christ's own testimony was of myself. I can do nothing.

Abraham had seen cities. If he left Heran at 75 years of age, that would put his birth pretty much in the middle of the dynasty of Ur-Nammu. Ur-Nammu himself reigned from BC 2112 to 2095, and his family reigned until the fall of Ur in BC 2004.

Ur-Nammu was one of the great builders of the ancient world, the great ziggurat of Ur being his greatest remaining work. Abraham's growing years were spent among the evidences of empire, as they came under attack. He saw Ur in its finest hour and watched as it began to be destroyed.

The builders of the day built on solid enough foundations and tried to include spiritual foundations too. The British Museum has an Ur-Nammu foundation peg, this is a small bronze peg perhaps, pushed into the ground by Ur-Nuhim himself, depicting him as a priest providing a foundation for the city. Abraham had seen its glory and was watching its fall.

He had seen with the unearring sight of revelation that on earth we have no continuing city. In its place had grown a hunger for spiritual reality, not just another city but the city, a city which would be all that Ur could never be, a city with solid foundations like no other, a city that had God as its architect and builder. To Abraham this city was more real than any earthly city.

He hungered for a security which could be found in God alone. Henceforth he would put his confidence not in the works of the earth but in heavenly things. There's a worldly wise saying that suggests that a man or a woman can become so heavenly minded that they are no earthly use.

The opposite is the more pressing danger. If we would become friends of God we will need to become those who have discovered that heaven is more real than earth and live our lives on earth with the hourly expectation that heaven will break through. The sacred record comes to its end with the book of revelation and human destiny finds its consummation in a breathtaking vision.

The translations hardly do full justice to John's words. And I John saw the city, the holy one, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband, Revelation 21. A city not prepared to withstand attack but prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.

She will find her consummation not in the defiant arrogance of self-sufficiency but in the submission of love. I heard it testified of a certain man that of all men he would find transition to heaven the least difficult. Surely these are the men and women of whom God will say, welcome my friend.

Abraham looked forward to the city for the whole of his pilgrimage. That hope and expectation sustained him and the day came when a single next step carried him through its open gates. As the new year opens may we walk its days with such consciousness of heaven's nearness that we feel the very next step may see us home.

Amen. Have a blessed 2007. If you'd like to find out more about Bible Base do come and join us on www.biblebase.com. We look forward to seeing you.

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