

Abraham - a Great Pioneer

by T. Austin-Sparks

Abraham's life is a testament to the power of spiritual pioneering, demonstrating the importance of faith, heavenly vision, and living every moment out from God.

Scripture: Hebrews 11:13

Topics: "Faith", "Spiritual Pioneering"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes Abraham as a great pioneer of the heavenly way, highlighting his profound sense of destiny that drove him to seek God's best rather than settle for second-best. Abraham's journey was marked by a holy discontent that propelled him forward, despite the challenges and conflicts between the spiritual and the temporal, as well as the carnal influences represented by Lot. Sparks illustrates that true spiritual pioneers, like Abraham, are characterized by their faith in the impossible, their capacity for adjustment after mistakes, and the working of a heavenly power within them. This pioneering spirit is essential for believers today, as they navigate a world that often pulls them away from their heavenly calling. Ultimately, Abraham's life serves as a model for those seeking to explore and embrace the fullness of God's promises.

Transcript

Reading: Hebrews 11:13-16

We return now to Abraham as one of the representative pioneers of the heavenly way. We begin by reiterating one thing which was so true of Abraham, but which must be true, and is always true, of every spiritual pioneer, of every one who is moving on to explore and exploit the heavenly kingdom: that is, his sense, his deep, inborn sense, of destiny. Stephen has told us, concerning Abraham, that "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham" (Acts 7:2) when he was in Ur of the Chaldees. We do not know how the God of glory appeared unto him. It may have been in one of those theophanies common to the Old Testament and common to Abraham's later life when God came to him in man-form. We do not know. But we do know from his whole life that the effect of it was to bring to birth in him this tremendous sense of destiny - the sense of destiny which uprooted him from the whole of his past life, and which created in him a deep unrest, unrest of a right kind, a deep and a holy discontent.

Discontent may be all wrong, but there is a right kind of discontent. Would to God many more Christians had it! There was started in Abraham an urge which grew and grew through the years and made it impossible for him to settle down and accept anything less than the full meaning of God. He could not

accept a second-best in relation to God. Of course, the consciousness of that had to grow. He had to come progressively to realise what it meant. It came in this way: that he arrived at a certain place, and perhaps thought that here was it, and then he found it was not, and he had to move; and then perhaps he thought, 'Now, this is it - but no, it is not. There is still - I do not know what it is, I cannot define, explain, but I know within me there is still something more that God has'. "Not that I have already obtained, or am already made perfect: but I press on" (Phil 3:12); it was this urge through the ages - so very real in the case of the man whose words I have just quoted. He was never able to accept God's second-best. God has a second-best. Again and again in history God has found it impossible to realise His 'first best', His very best. People would not go on. He said, 'All right, you shall have My second-best', and they had it; but pioneers never do that. Abraham could not do it.

Now, do not misunderstand or misinterpret this. This was not natural or temperamental instability. Do not think that, if you are a person who is never contented, that is a Divine discontent. It may be temperamental. You may be one of those people who can never stick at a thing for very long, who are always jumping from one thing to another. You will be an entire misfit, both in the world and in the kingdom of God. It was not that sort of thing with Abraham. There was something of heaven working in him, the proof of it being that he was always on the upward move; he was not on the horizontal, he was on the upward move. He was making progress, not only on the earth level, but spiritually, all the time.

Now you see, alongside of Abraham there was Lot, and Lot was a man who was always seeking security here. He sought the city; he sought a house. He disliked this tent life. He wanted to be settled in this world, and he sought to be settled. But Lot was the weak man with all that. Abraham who was always moving in a tent was the strong man. This was not natural at all, it was spiritual. This urge from heaven, this mighty working of a spiritual force in Abraham brought him into the very hard school of the heavenly. To the natural, to the earthly, to the flesh, the heavenly is a very hard school, and Abraham was brought into it by this urge from heaven.

CONFLICT BETWEEN THE SPIRITUAL AND TEMPORAL

In the first place, there was the conflict between the spiritual and the temporal, the conflict between the seen and the unseen - and that is a very fierce conflict. In Abraham's life it was sometimes pressed to a very fine issue. You see, on the one hand Abraham was blessed of the Lord, he was prospered of the Lord, there were the signs that the Lord was with him. There was increase, enlargement, great enlargement, yes, embarrassing enlargement. His flocks and his herds multiplied; he was a very prince in the land - and yet, and yet, that very blessing of the Lord was at times brought to the point where the whole thing could in a moment be wiped out - by famine, acute, devastating famine. Why had God blessed and increased and enlarged, and then allowed something that could wipe it all out in no time? That is rather a difficult problem, is it not? Would it not have been better to have been kept small and limited than to see all this threatened? Abraham found the problem very acute. It was that that brought about one of his failures. He went down to Egypt.

It was a hard school.

What does it mean? It seems that God gives with one hand and takes away with the other: prospers and blesses - and then throws in something that threatens to destroy the blessing. Is God a contradiction? Is He denying Himself? You know the temptations at such times to try to interpret. Are we, after all, but the pawns in a game? Are we, after all, but the children of chance, of fortune or misfortune? After all, is the

Lord in this? Can this really explain the Lord, a consistent God?

It is a hard school. But, you see, it is wholly in keeping with what God is doing.

What is He doing?

Well, if He blesses, there are two things bound up with it. In the first place, Abraham's blessing and prosperity and increase and enlargement had to find its support from heaven and not from earth. God is introducing the great heavenly principle. Oh, the Lord may bless and enlarge, but God forbid that ever we should assume that now we can support ourselves, now we can carry on, now we have got going and can maintain our going by our own momentum. He will see to it that, however He may bless, if a thing is of Himself - however great, however enlarged, however increased it may be - it can perish at any moment if heaven does not look after it. That is a lesson. Do not presume; do not take anything for granted. Live every moment out from heaven. As truly in the day of blessing as in the day of adversity, cling to heaven.

And then there is this other factor. God was so training Abraham that he could be safe for blessing, and that is something - to be safe for blessing. Such discipline, such trial of faith, such testing! And yet it does not matter to Abraham how much God blesses him, he does not allow the blessings to obscure the heavenly vision and halt him on the way. That is a tremendous triumph. Oh, the devastating perils of blessing! Perhaps you may feel that you do not know much about those perils as yet. But God wants to make us safe for His heavenly kingdom, safe for spiritual enlargement, safe for being used mightily; and we are never safe if things less than God's ultimate can hold us up, never safe if the good is the enemy of the best. With Abraham it is perfectly clear, that, whether in prosperity or adversity he was never allowed to settle and never allowed to seem to have arrived. If at any time he did feel he had now arrived, that was very quickly exploded. "These all died in faith, not having received... but having seen... and greeted... from afar".

Another thing about Abraham is this: that he never allowed the apparent difficulties, however great they were, ultimately to stay his spiritual onward and upward march. We will come back to that again in a moment. Do you not see how all that was taken up by Joshua and Caleb? Think again about Joshua and Caleb. These were most certainly men who had been in that school. If they had not been, they would never have taken the next generation into the land. God only knows what those men went through. You see, the story is told in so few verses, about the spies going out, and the minority report, and the taking up, or proposal to take up, stones, to stone these men and kill them. But you have got to add to that the long, long years while that whole generation was dying out, with only two men holding on to the heavenly vision. That is a hard school. They might easily have lost heart and given up and said, 'It is a hopeless outlook'; but they did not: the heavenly had got a grip upon them in their innermost being and held them. It held them, even in the greatest adversity, and they came through; they 'overcame the world'.

THE CONFLICT BETWEEN THE SPIRITUAL AND CARNAL

Then, again, with Abraham there was the conflict between the spiritual and the carnal: not only between the spiritual and the temporal, but between the spiritual and the carnal. This conflict came right inside what we may call the domestic circle. It was in the family, in the blood. It was in Lot. I am speaking spiritually. I interpret Lot as representing something that is not only objectively in the Christian family (which is of course quite true) but is in our own natures, subjectively, the carnal setting up conflict with the spiritual, the earthly with the heavenly.

Here, you see, is Lot, and he is of the same blood as Abraham; but right in the blood, right in the family - if you like, right in the Christian family - there is this streak of carnality: Lot and his worldliness, his worldly-mindedness, his worldly vision, his worldly ambition, his worldly longings. There is no heavenly vision with Lot; and he is right alongside, so closely alongside, Abraham. Abraham finds this menace of an argument against his spiritual course right in his blood. It is there; it is in us, and it is in the Christian family. It is right alongside, very near all the time - this craving to settle down, to have things here and now - quick returns - things seen - the gratification of the soul; that rest which is not rest, but which we think of as rest.

Many of you know what I am talking about. You know how sometimes naturally we crave for rest, and we try to get it - and we do not get it until we get to the Lord. We find our real rest in the things of heaven, not in having holidays. But there it is, and it is always trying to draw us away, get us away, make us run away. 'Oh, to get out of it! If only we could live on some island alone - how restful, how peaceful! To get away from it all!' And it never happens. Our rest is in heavenly things. We only find our real satisfaction in the things of the Lord. You Christian go and have a surfeit of the world: you know you will come back and say, 'No more of that!' You know you cannot do it. But that craving is with us all the time. The carnal influence is in our blood. And it is in the whole Christian family - the Lot side, that wants to have a Christianity of this world, always dragging and pulling downward and away from the heavenly. Abraham knew all about that.

That constitutes the very ground of this pioneer work, pioneering for the things of the Spirit. It is this warring the things of the flesh, as though we were always carrying about a corpse, some lifeless thing to be dragged about and subdued every day. We have to say to ourselves 'Come on, none of that!' It is the way of the pioneer. You can settle down, but you will lose your heavenly inheritance. The carnal has very, very subtle ways - very 'spiritual' ways.

Is that a contradiction? It is a spurious spirituality, but what is interpreted as spirituality. I think of the great battle that Paul, the heavenly man, had with the Corinthians, the earthly church. And yet the Corinthians were supposed to be spiritual. They had all the spiritual gifts; they had the miracles, the healing, the tongues. But Paul said "I... could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal" (I Cor. 3:1). The carnal can have very 'spiritual' ways, apparently. The fact is that their carnality was taking hold of spiritualities, and making the spiritualities serve their carnality; giving them soulish gratification, in display, in show, in demonstrations; pulling the heavenlies down to the earth. Do not let us blame the Corinthians. How we long to see, how we long for evidences and proofs! Why do these things gather such a following? Because there is something in human nature that is gratified, and it is so infinitely more difficult to walk the heavenly way where you do not see and you do not know; but that is the way of the spiritual pioneer who is going to inherit for others.

THE PROOF OF THE REALITY OF HEAVENLY VISION

Finally, the proof of Abraham's vision: the proof of this sense of destiny being real, true, genuine, being really of God, and not just his imagination: how is that proof given in his case?

(a) FAITH IN THE GOD OF THE IMPOSSIBLE

First of all, Abraham's attitude toward the impossible. As we said in the last chapter, the New Testament gives us the full story. In the Old Testament it looks as though he gave way, broke down in the presence of the impossible.

We shall come to that in a minute. The New Testament tells us quite emphatically that Abraham looked the impossible squarely and straightly in the face and believed that it was possible. His attitude to the impossible over Isaac proved that there was something more than just imagination; there was something mighty in his sense and consciousness of destiny. If we give up when a situation begins to appear to be impossible - that is the ultimate test of whether we really have had registered in us a sense of heavenly vocation. The fact is that, although you feel you want to give up, you are not allowed to give up. Something in you just does not let you give up. You have been on the point of writing your resignation a hundred times. Again and again you have said 'I am going to get out of this; I cannot go on any longer or any further; I am finished'; but you have gone on, and you are going on, and you know quite well that there is something in you stronger than all your resolutions to resign. How necessary is that sense in us - and it is proved to be something, not of ourselves, but of God. "According to the power that worketh in us" (Ephesians 3:20) - it is that.

(b) CAPACITY FOR ADJUSTMENT WHEN MISTAKES ARE MADE

Then consider Abraham's capacity for adjustment when he made mistakes. This man, this pioneer, made mistakes, and they were big mistakes. What is the temptation of a servant of God who makes a glaring blunder; of one carrying responsibility who makes a terrible mistake? What is the immediate reaction? 'Oh, I am evidently not fit for this, I am not called to this; God has got hold of the wrong person, I was never meant for this; I had better find another job, I had better get out.' But although Abraham made the mistakes - and they were very bad ones, grievous lapses and failures not excused in the Bible, shown to be what they were, never rubbed out by God; there they are on record - and not only on record in the written Word, but on record in history: look at Ishmael today! - although they were seen for what they were, there was that in Abraham which reacted to adjust. 'I have made a mistake in going down to Egypt; but I will not give up in self-despair and refuse to go back again; I will get back. I have made this mistake over Ishmael - I must get back and recover my ground.' He was a great man for recovery and adjustment in the presence of heart-breaking disappointment with himself.

(c) THE WORKING OF A HEAVENLY POWER WITHIN

What does all this say? There is a working of a heavenly power in this man. This is not natural, this is not the way of nature. If only we knew the tension and the stress, if only we knew all the hardness of that school that Abraham was in! I never fail to marvel when I read Paul on Abraham. "Without being weakened in faith he considered his own body now as good as dead (he being about a hundred years old)... yea, looking unto the promise of God, he wavered not through unbelief, but waxed strong through faith, giving glory to God, and being fully assured that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform" (Romans 4:19-21). "... the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all... before him whom he believed, even God, who giveth life to the dead" (Romans 4:17). He proved his faith by binding his only son and taking the knife to slay him. In an instant more the son, in whom all the promises were centred, would have been dead. I say, I marvel. It is one thing even for God to do a thing like that - to take away; it is another thing for us to have to do it, to give it up to God: but Abraham did it. There is something not natural here. This is not the way of the world, the earth. It is the heavenly way. Abraham is pioneering the heavenly way. And so he occupies that tremendous place, not only in the old dispensation, but in this, and for ever. A great pioneer of things heavenly - that is what it means.

That may explain a great deal in our own experience. God needs people like that in this day of terrible downward, down-grade spiritual movement to the world on the part of His Church. With all its good

intentions, perhaps even its pure motive, it is nevertheless adopting the framework and form of this world in order to do the work of heaven. There must be a reaction to that, and there must be vessels who can prove that it is not necessary to go to this world. Heaven is sufficient for all things.

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