

Abraham's Seed

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the transition from a natural understanding of Abraham's seed to a spiritual one, highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit and the importance of living by faith and resurrection power.

Scripture: Numbers 23:9, Acts 2:24, Acts 7:2, Acts 7:51, Romans 9:4, 2 Corinthians 1:9, Galatians 3:7-16, Colossians 2:12

Topics: "The Holy Spirit", "Spiritual Life"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the transformative significance of Pentecost, marking the beginning of a new spiritual era governed by the Holy Spirit. He contrasts the spiritual life that God desires with established religious practices, urging believers to heed the voice of the Spirit rather than conforming to worldly religious norms. Sparks highlights Abraham's role as a model for spiritual lineage, asserting that true children of Abraham are those who are spiritually alive and governed by the Spirit, not merely by natural descent. He stresses that the promise of God is linked to a spiritual seed, exemplified by Isaac, and that believers are called to live in the power of resurrection, which is foundational to their identity in Christ. Ultimately, he calls for a community of believers who are distinctively spiritual, marked by a heart circumcised for God, and responsive to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Transcript

We are considering the deeper and fuller meaning of what came in on the day of Pentecost - the nature and order of an entirely new day in this world's history, that nature and order being essentially spiritual: a new order and character introduced by the advent of the Holy Spirit to constitute everything immediately spiritual; not indirectly and ultimately, but immediately spiritual.

The Voice of the Spirit the Governing Factor

One of the primal features of this new day is this - take careful note of it because it is the key and the basis of everything - that the voice of the Spirit is to be taken account of rather than what is going on in the religious world around. It is that which cleaves things asunder, puts things into two different realms in this book. With this new age we see on the one hand in the religious world that which claims authority with power, position and influence, which has established itself and taken possession, but which is shown to be something which is not according to the Spirit of God. On the other hand, over against that, we see what is brought out into such clear, manifest relief, that to bear and to take account of the voice of the Spirit of God may be, and very often is, another thing altogether. You recall Stephen's defence. You know that he comprehends the whole of this history. He starts with Abraham. "The God of glory appeared unto our

father Abraham" (Acts 7:2). That is the beginning of this religious history, and he traces right through stage by stage until he arrives at the murder of the Lord Jesus, and he sums it up in one great declaration, sweeping away the whole ground of that established thing on the earth, and saying, as comprehending it all, "Ye stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears, ye do always resist the Holy Spirit" (Acts 7:51). Something spiritual, a taking note of the voice of the Spirit of God, is something very different indeed from an established religious order on this earth, and very often runs directly counter to it. That is a strong statement but it is said in order that we may immediately get to the very heart of what it is the Lord is seeking in this present age - a people of a spiritual life who are governed by the Spirit of God, who take account of what the Spirit says, and are obedient and conform thereunto. It is a spiritual people God is after in this age, not religious people. Paul has built a very great spiritual structure upon this very principle. A large part of his letter to the Romans and the whole of his letter to the Galatians and of the letter to the Hebrews - whoever wrote that letter, I think there is little doubt that the influence of Paul is found in it and it comes altogether into line with the other two on this very matter - is occupied with the sole object of pointing out that traditional religion is one thing and life in the Spirit is another; that religion as here on this earth in all its forms may be one thing, while what is of the Spirit of God may be altogether another thing. That is what Paul set out to make clear, and he built this tremendous edifice upon this fact. If you read Galatians carefully in the light of that, you will see that that is what he is after - to divide between this religious thing and this other which is of the Spirit.

You notice that Abraham has quite a place in this book of the Acts. Note, for example, the following fragment:

"For to you is the promise, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call unto him" (Acts 2:39).

If you want to know what that promise is, you have to turn to Galatians, and you find at once it is linked with Abraham.

"...that upon the Gentiles might come the blessing of Abraham in Christ Jesus; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:14).

"For to you is the promise." That is the word on the day of Pentecost, and it refers to the coming of the Spirit.

"...who are Israelites; whose is the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises" (Rom. 9:4).

Abraham has quite a place here in this book in relation to the Holy Spirit, the promise.

The Seed of Abraham

The first thing we see here is that the challenge of the new age, the new day and its meaning, was first presented to the seed of Abraham, and the nature of the challenge was that they should become a spiritual seed of Abraham as something more than a natural seed. The significance of the day of Pentecost is just that. Now by the coming of the Spirit a transition is to be made, a change is to take place. The natural seed of Abraham should become a spiritual seed of Abraham. There is a difference between the seed of Abraham and the children of Israel. The seed of Abraham is racial; the children of Israel is national. We shall speak about that when we come to the elect nation. Here the racial side of things, the

seed of Abraham, is in view; but Paul makes it perfectly clear in his letter to the Romans and to the Galatians that those that are of the Spirit are children of Abraham, not those which are of the flesh. We have said before that Paul's letters were all written and circulated before ever the book of the Acts was written, so that the spiritual things were already there established in the teaching of the Lord's people, and the people were able to interpret this survey of the history in the light of spiritual things; and that is exactly what we are doing now. We have the spiritual interpretation of Acts right in our hands. We have the letter to the Galatians in our hands before ever we approach this book of the Acts, and what does it say? Well, the challenge to the seed of Abraham is that they are not established before God on natural grounds: they can only be established before God on spiritual grounds. What they are naturally is not what God is seeking, but what they are spiritually. "First that which is natural; then that which is spiritual," and it is that which matters. That is the object of the Lord - a spiritual seed of Abraham.

A People Not Numbered Among the Nations

We have much by way of illustration as to what God's thought was for this spiritual seed. He chose sovereignly in grace. You know how Paul argues that the law did not exist when God chose Abraham and his seed; that choice was not on the ground of law at all, not of works, not of anything that was in them or that they did or tried to do. It was just in His sovereign grace that He chose and marked them out; and the remarkable thing is that that nation has borne its own natural characteristics right through history which have never been lost. I remember the late Samuel Schor saying that in any part of this world he could always, without a word, detect a Jew, no matter how much the Jew had been absorbed into the nation. That is saying a lot. I think he used the phrase "a son of Abraham"; that was his way of speaking. The mark is there, something which distinguishes, embodying a spiritual principle which is brought out in this new spiritual race belonging to this age - but not now of Christians marked off by their physiognomy nor by their language, nor by their particular country. There is no doubt that the hand of God was upon Balaam, although he was not a very willing and joyous prophet under the hand of God; but the Spirit of God made Balaam say about Israel as he looked from the top of the mountain: "It is a people that dwelleth alone, and shall not be reckoned among the nations" (Num. 23:9). There is surely a spiritual principle there that this spiritual seed of Abraham which has been brought in with the Day of Pentecost is a people distinguished from all other people, whether by physiognomy or not. I believe that if we are living in the radiance of Divine life, there will be something of it betrayed by our faces. At any rate, the world will know something if we are really living in touch with the Lord, and there will be a language which only the spiritual can enjoy and understand.

There will be those spiritual counterparts of the seed of Abraham, a people different from all the rest.

Now, the tragedy of what is called 'the Church' has so often been, and perhaps is more today than ever, that that distinctiveness is being lost. It seems today as if a set is being made in some way to remove all the offence and all the difference, and to get us near to people without anything that clashes, in the hope of winning them. Yes, that is what is going on in the religious world around; it is a conforming to this age. But what came in at Pentecost is fundamentally this, that this people of the Spirit are so utterly different in the very centre of their being, different altogether from all other peoples: and their power and influence lie in that fact. You cannot fit them in with other things, and it is not because they are awkward and difficult and deliberately irritate people, but there is that which, by reason of their spiritual constitution marks them off; and if they did but know it, this is the secret of their influence in the world. The progress and increase of spiritual life mean this, that the gap widens all the time between the children of God and those in the world who are not such. That is not to be taken literally in this sense, that we begin a mistaken system of

hiving off, shutting ourselves up, getting out of touch. That is a wrong application of the principle. The Lord Jesus is pre-eminently our example in that He could move in any circle, and He did so deliberately - publicans and sinners, all classes - He moved amongst them, but His power over them, was in His basic difference from them. Let us be careful how we are caught in this great movement of conforming to this age. To conform is to lose spiritual power. Well, spiritual seed is what God is after, a spiritual seed of Abraham.

A Seed of Promise

What was that seed? It is said to be according to promise. The Apostle marks it out by that word "promise." He distinguishes thereby between Ishmael and Isaac. God never promised Ishmael; he was not the son of promise, therefore he never stood before God in the fulfilment of His thought and intention. He came into conflict with the whole thought of God. But Isaac was the son of promise. What does that mean? It does not mean that God just said, I will give you a son. The promise means more than that. It means that God had taken His place with Isaac, God had committed Himself to Isaac. He never committed Himself to Ishmael. A promise is something more than a verbal understanding or undertaking. It is a committal. I have given my promise, and my name, my honour and all my resources are involved. If I am a man of honour, then I am committed, with all that I have, to see that the realisation of the purpose in that direction is brought about. I am committed up to the hilt when I have given my promise. God was committed to Isaac, and that is why it was not possible for Isaac to be eventually swallowed up of death; he must be a child of resurrection. If he dies, God's honour is involved and goes down with Isaac. Isaac was the son of promise in that sense, that God was covenanted to him. "In Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Gen. 21:12).

Now you know how Paul works that out in his Galatian letter, and it comes back into Acts. He works Acts out in his Galatian letter. Again, the seed of Abraham is not that which is natural, but that which is spiritual. "They that are of faith, the same are sons of Abraham" (Gal.3:7). They that are of faith are Abraham's seed. "He saith not, And to seeds, as of many: but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ" (Gal. 3:16).

God is committed to that spiritual seed, that counterpart of Isaac. He is that Son of resurrection. "...whom God raised up, having loosed the pangs of death: because it was not possible that he should beholden of it" (Acts 2:24). Why? Because God is bound up with Him, God is in Him, God is one with Him. And we are all children of Abraham in that sense by faith, and all sons of God through faith, in Christ Jesus (Gal.3:26). That is how it is worked out - the spiritual seed of promise to which God is committed, and which cannot therefore be engulfed of death, but must know all the Divine resource in the power of resurrection.

A Resurrection Seed

That brings in one of the major basic principles and truths of this spiritual seed, that it is a resurrection seed, and that its history is to be characterised by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. I cannot lay enough emphasis upon that. It is not just a truth enunciated, it is the most searching and testing thing that you and I can have to do with - that, if we are the spiritual seed of Abraham in Christ by faith, we are called to have our whole history based upon this fundamental law - the power of His resurrection. It is something stated as a truth, but it is something to be taken hold of by faith. Again and again in the course of our history we shall be at the place where there is no hope but in "God who raiseth the dead" (2 Cor. 1:9) if there is to be any future at all. We shall come there, in our own spiritual history, we shall come there in our own soul life - that we are at an end of our resources, mind, heart and will. We may come oftentimes in

our very physical life to the place where, if God does not do something, it is an end. We shall come there in the work of God - where everything seems to declare that this is the finish of the work, there is nothing more possible; but now is the occasion for the God Who raiseth the dead, the God of promise, the God of Isaac, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is not just a Bible teaching. This is searching truth. We have to have our life based upon it and to believe it, and when it begins to work we must remember what is happening. I have no doubt that we have all accepted it as a truth, we believe it as something set forth; but when it begins to work in us, somehow we lose the whole thing. When we really do get to an end and say, This is the finish! we begin to accept it as the finish, we agree that all is finished. Instead of that, we should not trust in ourselves but in God. "Should not trust in ourselves" - that is negative. The positive is - "We ourselves have had the sentence of death within ourselves, that we should... trust... in God who raiseth the dead." That is very practical. It will find us out many times, if we are men and women of the Spirit.

Now, you say: That is extraordinary - I always thought if only I was filled with the Spirit, if I really knew the meaning of Pentecost, I should always be on top in the full flood of life; surely there is a contradiction? Not at all! This resurrection life works primarily and firstly in our spirit, and it is from there that we have got to come up in mind and in body. The real working of the Spirit is like that. You are waiting and crying for the Lord to come and touch you on the outside, to lift you, to quicken you. You are waiting for something to happen that you can sense somewhere in the circumference of life. Death is there in the realm of your soul, your mind, your sensibilities, your body, your surroundings; you are waiting for the Lord to do something there. No, that is natural, that day has passed in the order of God. You have to know a touch of life in your spirit. It may come by a word from the Lord. If you are called to the ministry of the Word you may be completely dry and dark and dead for the next bit of ministry which looms ahead, but when God's moment comes, the word of the Lord comes to you and from that moment the ministry begins to open out and you fulfil it; that is spiritual ministry. Or in any other connection the principle holds good - the power of resurrection begins in our spirit. We have to know it there, and then in faith move on that, and we find that mind and body come into line for all that the Lord wants. "First that which is natural; then that which is spiritual." That is the law of the Lord now; this is the "afterward" day. The day of the natural passed with the day of Pentecost; things were all outward until then.

You know how true that was in Israel's case. They had only to do something outward and God responded. But not now; you cannot get anything by law now. You can observe all the ritual, but you never get anything from God that way. This is the "afterward," it is spiritual; it is now a life in and by the Spirit.

To reinforce what we have been saying, let us remind ourselves of the fact that God never committed Himself in this matter of the promise of Isaac until the thing was utterly impossible naturally. The promise was never given until the whole situation was a natural impossibility. Ishmael - "first that which is natural"; but God is looking on, He has in principle something more in view, He is after the spiritual, and so He gave His promise to Abraham, and with it committed Himself, only when things were absolutely impossible naturally for the realisation of His promise. Are you prepared to accept that as a working principle in life all the way along? You cannot have anything more testing than that. It is very real, it is desperately real, so real that when you are in it you can do any desperate thing. It is so real that if you are not alive to this other side, if you do not believe in God Who raiseth the dead, anything can happen. But the God of resurrection comes in only when resurrection is the only thing possible; and resurrection is God's prerogative alone. This is a matter for Almighty God alone, that is all there is to it. Unless Almighty God comes in, then there is no prospect, no hope, whatsoever. That is a law of life for the spiritual; that is the nature of things in this

new age.

The Sign of Circumcision

Now, God followed this up with a sign, an outward mark of a spiritual significance. He gave to Abraham the sign of circumcision. It became the mark of all the seed of Abraham, distinguishing them from all other peoples, and establishing a law. Let us be sensible about this, even if it is a delicate subject. It established a law that all the fruit of life from that time onward was to be wholly for God. That is the meaning of circumcision - to be wholly separated unto God. God was very meticulous about that. You remember that extraordinary incident in the life of Moses. Moses had met God in the bush, God had spoken to him about His intentions, and then God had commissioned him as the deliverer of His people, and Moses was on his way to fulfil his Divinely-given commission; and then you have this statement - "...the Lord met him and sought to kill him" (Ex. 4:24). An extraordinary thing that the man Divinely called, chosen and commissioned should be met by God with intent to slay him! God was saying, in effect: Yes, but, after all, nothing of it is possible; with all that vision, with all that purpose, with all that intention, it is all suspended until something has happened. And you notice what happened. It was made quite clear what the difficulty was - Moses had not circumcised his son; and when that was done, he went on and fulfilled his task. All the fruit of his life was to be held for God, everything was to be upon this basis, that the flesh is out of the way, and all is of the Spirit, the fruit of the Spirit, not the fruit of the flesh, for God. Oh, what a history is bound up with that! Paul takes that up again in the letter to the Galatians and says in substance: It is not circumcision of the flesh at all in this new day; that all belongs to the natural, that belongs to yesterday; we have come into a new day, and now circumcision is circumcision of the heart where everything is unto God, and the flesh put away. Writing to the Colossians, he explains that when he says we were "buried with him in baptism" (Col. 2:12), and in that connection he says "...ye were circumcised with a circumcision not made with hands, in the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ" (Col. 2:11). It is the Cross dealing with that self-life which will come even into the service of God, into a Divine, commission - that uncircumcised Philistine hand that will always be meddling with Divine things, even with the Ark itself. Yes, we are all capable of that. It is the peril that is always nearest to us of bringing our natural life in some kind of impingement upon Divine things, getting into the Lord's work ourselves, doing it ourselves, being interested in the Lord's things ourselves. It takes the Spirit of God in His perfect knowledge and understanding and insight to take the full measure of this self-life; we cannot do it.

But here is the point - this is the day of the Spirit, and those who are the spiritual seed of Abraham, who are now under the power of the Spirit, governed by the Spirit, will be made alive by the Spirit continually to that which is of the Spirit and that which is not. The more we go on with the Lord, the fuller and clearer will become our perception as to what is spiritual and what is natural, even in our Christian life. It is a whole life of education. Things that we thought at one time were quite all right, quite permissible, quite in line with the Lord's will, as we go on we come to find that even those things have come into a realm of question, the Spirit is not agreeing with them now. We have come to discover that He never did agree with them, but we were not enough alive to Him to know His mind about them. He deals with us as with children as long as we are children, but when it is time that we should leave childhood the Spirit begins to deal with us very drastically if we are going on with the Lord. It is this kind of people that the Lord is after in this age. Oh, what a difference it would make if all the Lord's people were really governed by this law of the Spirit of life in Christ, whose hearts were truly circumcised, that all the fruit of life should be wholly unto God; because this law of the Spirit is not outward, but inward.

I wonder if you are feeling the Lord touch your hearts in this matter? I am so anxious not just to heap words upon words and truths upon truths. I do feel the Lord wants to do something, not just to say things, and it does matter above everything else whether we are able to take account of the voice of the Spirit rather than to be actuated and governed by even the Christian and evangelical world around us. Yes, even in the evangelical world Christianity has become a very set thing; it has become fixed as an order, a system of things; you have to conform to it, and if you do not, well, you are not sound or you are in some way heretical. No, we shall not go wrong in being governed by the Spirit; but even there many good Christians may not be able to understand. Are you prepared for that? It is not conformity to a system of teaching or truths that is needed, but to be able to take account of the movement of the Spirit of God. That will not make us independent, a law to ourselves: the Lord will attend to that. But oh, it is more important than anything else in these days the Lord should have a people who know the Spirit, who hear His voice and follow Him; and all who do that will move in the same direction, will flow together. We said earlier that the reason for so much division and conflict is the fact that the Spirit is not Lord. Other things are Lord - Christian interests are Lord, interpretations are Lord, mental appraisements are Lord, all sorts of things have taken Lordship. Where the Spirit is Lord, we shall speak and think the same thing, there will be no mere individualism. I think I must stop there. Let us listen to what the Spirit says. Let us ask the Lord to make very sure in us that we are not being moved in our lives, in the course that we are taking, by what is religiously natural, but that we are really children of the Spirit and know the Spirit and are in conformity to God's thought for this present dispensation, true children of Abraham according to the Spirit.

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