

The Heir and the Proof of Time

by Watchman Nee

Our work for God is worthless if it is not done in dependence on Him and in His timing.

Topics: "Faith", "God's Timing"

Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the significance of God's timing and the source of our actions in his sermon 'The Heir and the Proof of Time.' He illustrates Abraham's struggle with faith and impatience as he sought to fulfill God's promise of an heir, leading to the birth of Ishmael instead of Isaac, the child of promise. Nee highlights that true faith requires waiting for God's timing and recognizing that all good works must originate from God, not from our own efforts. The sermon draws parallels between Abraham's journey and the Church's role in bringing Christ into His inheritance, stressing that only what God does through us can truly satisfy Him. Ultimately, the message is about surrendering our striving and allowing God to work through us, as exemplified in the birth of Isaac at the appointed time.

Transcript

BY the time we reach chapter 15 of Genesis a new idea has come into the forefront of the narrative. The land is still in view, with all that that signifies of God's claim to have a kingdom on the earth, but from now onwards attention centres on the son, expressed in the term 'thy seed'. Abraham's problem, seeing he is childless, is, Who is to inherit this land? 'Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and lo, one born in my house is mine heir!'

'This man shall not be thine heir,' replied the Lord. 'He that shall come forth out of thine own loins shall be thine heir. Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to tell them: so shall thy seed be.' And then it is said of Abraham that 'he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness.'

Now when we come to the letter to the Galatians and this passage is dealt with, the apostle Paul makes the point that God speaks of 'thy seed', using a singular noun. The promises were to Abraham and his seed. 'He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ' (Galatians 3. 16). The promise pointed not only to Isaac but to Jesus Christ. The one son, Isaac, is the heir, yes, but in the long term it is Christ who is to have the land. He alone has the strength to take and keep it for God. He is the One who does God's work of recovery. This gives an altogether deeper meaning to the promise to Abraham of an heir, for when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth his Son' (Galatians 4. 4). Without Him the whole plan would collapse.

Nevertheless it is also true that Abraham's seed are to be countless as the stars. 'For ye are all sons of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus. And if ye are Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, heirs according to promise' (Galatians 3: 26, 29). Today, we who believe owe everything to Christ; and yet in another sense we stand in the position of Abraham. As His Church we are called of God to bring Christ into His inheritance in the land. The question with Abraham was, Could he become God's vessel to bring in Isaac? And it is the same question today: Can the Church become God's vessel to bring Christ into His place? The Church counts for nothing in herself, save as a vessel to bring in Christ. God's purpose is in the Son.

But how, we ask ourselves, can we become such a vessel, to give God's Son the opportunity to display His power in the great work of recovery? Abraham, we find, underwent three further tests, this time in relation to his own son, to prepare him for this very task. In these three lie the answers to that question. We shall look now at the first of them.

In relation to the son, Abraham's first test was the test of time. As we have seen in Genesis 15: 4, God had promised him an heir. The time went by. Abraham, we are told, had believed; but he was not superhuman, and his faith was still in process of developing.

At the age of eighty-five he had been in the land for ten years (16: 3). He felt it was time his son arrived, if he was going to have one at all. So he adopted Sarah's suggestion, and took her handmaid, Hagar, to be a second wife. Hagar's son was born when Abraham was eighty-six.

What he did not know was that God had planned for him to have a son by Sarah when he himself was one hundred. Instead he had Ishmael fourteen years earlier. So we can say that Abraham was defeated in his first test. He had not seen that to exercise faith is to cease striving. He believed, but he thought he must help God, and that in taking Hagar he was ensuring that her child should be the fulfilment of God's promise. There were many things he knew he could not do, but surely he could do this, for this was what God wanted!

What Abraham overlooked was that this matter of the son went deeper than the mere question of his having one. What was vital was from whom the son came, Who gave him? It is not a question of whether we are active or not, but of who originates the actions and whose power is behind them.

Unless Abraham's son was God's gift, what use was he to God? Is it wrong to help people? No, but we need to be sure that the help they receive is help from God. Is it wrong to preach the Good News? Certainly not! But the question is, who is doing it? Is the word preached God's word? God does not only want right things done; He wants us to be the medium of right things that He is doing. The source of the action, not just the activity itself, is the important thing. A thing may even be God's will, just as it was certainly God's will that Abraham should have a son; nevertheless what matters is who is doing that will.

All Abraham got for his efforts was Ishmael. True, Abraham was intended to be a father; but this meant essentially that he was to discover the meaning of the word 'father' by learning the fundamental lesson that everything comes from God as Father. Only so would he himself be worthy to be the father of them that believe. The source is everything because it is the source that gets the credit. What I do, I get credit for; after all, it is I who did it! So after a piece of service, however fruitful, the ultimate question is not, 'What are the results? but, 'Lord, who has done this?-You or I? No matter how expertly we may do it, we shall invite not praise but rebuke from God. Purity or otherwise in our work depends on how much of God and how much of ourselves there is in it. If we are truly God's servants we know perfectly well that we get no peace or joy from what we have done by striving. When He quietly puts us aside, we praise Him

because what has been done is something we have had no part in. The origin was God Himself.

I am afraid this is not a popular thing to speak of. Preach to stir men to more evangelizing, more activity, more sacrifice, and they will listen and agree. But talk about the worthlessness of our work for God, even when it is not sinfully but well done, and we meet disapproval and misunderstanding. Yet this is the central point in service. Whether we can bring in Christ to be God's vessel of recovery depends on whether we can get out of the way to make room for Him. Nothing good work, service, preaching the Word, even doing His will -can satisfy His heart if we are the source of it. Only what He does in us and through us can satisfy Him.

We watch a child making models out of mud. He may have real imagination and produce some quite recognizable models, but we say, 'They are nothing but mud. It is only childish play.' Yet the difference between that child and ourselves is very trifling compared with the difference between ourselves and God. He is God. We are men. He uses us-and rejoices to use us-as His instruments, but that is all. He uses us.

In Galatians the apostle Paul draws an interesting parallel with this passage. Hagar, he says, represents 'the Law'. The Ten Commandments are of course ten things that God requires. In Abraham too we have a man seeking to give God what He requires. He has set out to please God. Yet those who do so, Paul says, put themselves under a curse (Galatians 3. 10) The only effect therefore of Abraham's good works is that Ishmael is born 'of the flesh' (4. 29).

God had said that the son should be Sarah's. Isaac was the child of promise (4. 23), a work of God's grace. And grace is God working instead of me. When God worked, Isaac was born 'after the Spirit'. At eighty-six Abraham's natural strength had been still there. At one hundred 'his body was as good as dead' (Romans 4. 19). There was no longer any way for him to have a son naturally. Then Isaac came. We too need to reckon ourselves dead before we can believe fully in the God who gives life to the dead. Abraham was shown that he himself was not the father, the source, of anything. God waits until we have reached an end of ourselves, and then Isaac comes. There is something of the atmosphere of Genesis 1 here. There is no other chapter in the Bible like that one. 'God saw everything that he had made, and it was very good.'

With Isaac it was altogether a matter of time-God's time. We often think it would be good if we could start work for Him sooner, but when we know Him, we know what it is to wait for God's time. It is Isaac, not Ishmael, who is the one to fulfil God's purpose and maintain His witness in the earth. Not only was Ishmael valueless to God; none have so injured God's people and their witness, or so fought against God Himself, as has Ishmael. To try to help God can be to injure His work.

There may be many Ishmaels, but there is only one Isaac. We can bring Ishmael on to the scene at any time; there is only one time for Isaac-God's time. Shall we decide to wait for Isaac, or shall we determine to have Ishmael in his place? Any time is convenient for Ishmael.

For God to have complete dominion over us means coming to the extreme end of ourselves. And yet to know that God has spoken through us Himself, even once, is better than a lifetime of our own service. Don't compare yourself with others. Recognize one thing only, the difference between man's work and God's. It is a question of source, and it is a question of time. If God sets us aside even for three months, we cannot bear it. Yet Abraham had to wait for his son fifteen years.

Before Abraham was eighty-five his faith was far from perfect. Yet we read that he exercised this deficient faith: 'He believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness' (Genesis 15. 6). Praise God, he was justified by faith! It is sufficient just to believe. But in the fifteen years that followed he learnt some tremendous lessons, and how he glorified God when at length the impossible happened and Isaac was given! Paul says that when Isaac was conceived, Abraham already considered himself 'dead' (Romans 4. 19). He had given up! The more utter the impossibility of doing a thing ourselves, the more glory we give to Him who does it. And what God does is always 'very good'.

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