

THE MAN IN THE LAND

Watchman Nee:

Fellowship is something we should highly prize because God prizes it highly. If there is life in me, and not merely pretence, and if the same is true of my fellow believers, then however simple they may be, when I meet them I should encounter life in them, and encountering it I should appreciate it. We must learn to value our fellow Christians and not engage in fault-finding or in exposing their weaknesses. For did not Jesus Himself show infinite patience with men, suffering much at their hands? Even His own disciples often put His self-restraint severely to the test.

As the Son over God's house, the Lord Jesus not only offers us strength and knowledge; He has set us also an example of submission and restraint. He was ever the Son, learning obedience to His Father by the things which He suffered; and He was ever the Servant, who, when He was reviled, reviled not again; when He suffered, He threatened not (Hebrews 5. 8; 1 Peter 2. 23).

In relation to the land of Canaan which was to be Israel's inheritance, Abraham was put to the test on three separate occasions. For he was a very ordinary man, just like you and me, whom God had selected and set apart for this special task, and his faith was no greater than ours. So the tests he went through brought him discipline at the hands of very varied kinds of people, and they are just the kind of experiences we go through.

Abraham's first test occurred not long after his arrival in Canaan, and soon after he had sacrificed at Bethel. He journeyed on towards the south, and when conditions became difficult through famine he arrived at length in Egypt. There he found himself in an embarrassing situation, and there he sinned in practising deception, with the result that he was severely rebuked by Pharaoh. He, a believer, was taken to task by a man of the world!

This test really turned on the question of the land. How truly did Abraham want 'this land' (12.7)? God had given it to him, but he had not yet realized the importance of keeping it, of staying on there. For him it was to be 'the land of thy sojournings', and as such, his everlasting possession (17. 8). Yet Abraham had not yet come to value it. God had still to establish him there. It is one thing to have the fullness of God as a gift, but quite another to be established in it.

In Egypt Abraham learned that there was no land like the land of Canaan. In Canaan he had had no need to side-step danger by the exercise of his wits and at the cost of rebuke by an unbeliever. Here in Egypt he found himself doing just that, and knew he had only himself to blame. He had landed himself in this trouble and he saw the wrong of it. He accepted the rebuff, even at the hands of a pagan monarch, and as quickly as possible he returned to Bethel.

Abraham had learned his first lesson, namely, that the land was precious. Now his second test arrived, and it was of a different character. Lot was still with him—Lot who had come as a kind of passenger on this journey of faith, and who would, after his death, leave behind him two of Israel's worst enemies. Here in Canaan Abraham and his nephew had begun to prosper, and soon the land was not big enough to support their combined flocks and herds. Because of the prevailing congestion, their servants began to fight.

In the matter of leaving his kindred, Abraham had never fully obeyed. He still held on to Lot. Now at last it became clear that through Lot God was disciplining him. He came to see that God's purpose concerned him alone, and did not include Lot. We can lead men into salvation. We cannot lead them into the calling and the service of God, for this is a personal thing. Abraham recognized this, and now at length proposed to Lot that their ways should part.

But we have just seen that Abraham had already learned his first lesson, which was that to him this land was of priceless worth. Surely then, if it was so precious, it ought to be held on to. Should he not keep it for himself, and send Lot back to Haran? No, he would give this younger man every chance to find the way of God for himself. So he showed him the whole land and offered him his choice.

Thus, on the one hand Abraham perfected his obedience in separating from his nephew; on the other he learned not to maintain his rights to the land by selfish, grasping methods. He was not to hold on to it for personal ends. The land was God's, not his.

Here is a most important lesson. We must learn to trust God to keep for us what He gives us, and must never seek to possess it by worldly means. Because we stand upon the earth for God, we are not therefore to become earthly. This land was God's gift to Abraham. To know this fact, and yet, knowing it, to let it all go and leave the

outcome to God - this is the work of the Cross in a man.

Lot chose the richest portion, and Abraham let him have it without demur, but it left Abraham still dwelling in the highlands of Canaan. Lot had not usurped his inheritance, for in the outcome the Plain was divinely excluded from it. Those who know God have no need to protect their rights. Because they believe in Him, they learn to bear the Cross daily and to rely upon Him for the outcome.

Abraham had advanced to this point in obedience and selfrestraint, and now at this juncture God spoke to him again. `The Lord said unto Abram, after that Lot was separated from him, Lift up now thine eyes, and look from the place where thou art, northward and southward and eastward and westward: for all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever. And I will make thy seed as the dust of the earth: so that if a man can number the dust of the earth, then shall thy seed also be numbered. Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for unto thee will I give it' (13. 14-17). Abraham had obeyed in the matter of Lot, and once again God established him in the land with not one whit of the promised territory diminished. It always pays to put things back into God's hands, for our battle is spiritual and not carnal. What God gives, He gives. There is no need to protect it ourselves. If we grip a thing tightly, we lose it. Not until we seem to have lost it altogether do we really have it.

With this test passed, God had a basis in Abraham for fellowship, and as we saw, Abraham moved his tent and came and dwelt at Hebron. He came without harbouring any reproach in his heart for Lot. It would be easy to let Lot go, but nevertheless to hope his conscience would trouble him. It might have seemed fitting, and even necessary, to say at least, `God will judge you.' We may reach the point of letting go of the land, but still not find it easy to let our brother go without rebuking him. Yet God required such a humble spirit if Abraham was to come to Hebron, with all that Hebron means. He is perfect in His dealings with His own.

Abraham's third test, and the last connected with the land itself, is of course the battle of the kings. Sodom, where Lot now dwelt, was raided, and Lot himself was carried off. Abraham went at once, with all his tiny forces, to his nephew's rescue.

How tempting it would have been to say, `You should have known! It is your own fault.' But even after Lot's departure, and his selfish and disastrous choice of Sodom as a dwelling place, he is still to Abraham a 'brother' (14. 14). Abraham was a true overcomer; he had conquered himself first of all. In him was no selfish individualism. He was still in Hebron, the place of fellowship, and all were his brothers-even Lot who lived for nothing and no one but himself. Only those standing in the position represented by Hebron can, like Abraham, wage spiritual warfare.

Lot was not changed at all as a result of being rescued from the kings; he went right back to Sodom. But victory was not a question of whether or not a change was wrought in Lot, but of the overthrow of those kings. Their power was broken that was what mattered. We are not to worry about whether the brethren are `improved' by the experience, so long as the enemy is defeated. That man in trouble is a brother; I love him in the Lord; however much he may in the past have injured me, I will still love and pray for him, and I will help him now. Here for the first time the character of Abraham really shines forth. May God teach us the lesson that he displays.

For it is so easy to conquer, and in conquering to rescue others, and having done so to be proud or self-righteous about it. `Didn't I tell you so!' we say sourly, or we look around for some reward, some congratulation, some coveted honour. So it is not surprising that this test includes another, a subsidiary one.

On his return from the discomfiture of the raiders, Abraham was met by the king of Sodom himself, who came out to him offering a very generous reward, namely, all the goods recovered. But Abraham had already learned that his resources lay elsewhere. His benefactor was in heaven. He maintained his clear stand therefore that, apart from God, no one could give him anything. This shows what a truly great thing God had done in him. We may stand in the position God has given, and know that none can hurt us; but do we believe that none could help us either, unless God sends them? Abraham had demonstrated the one; now he confidently affirmed the other. `I have lift up mine hand unto the Lord, God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take a thread nor a shoelatchet nor aught that is thine, lest thou shouldest say, I have made Abram rich' (14. 22, 23).

That title, `God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth', is most striking in this setting, and especially its last two words. It has just previously been used for the first time on the lips of Melchizedek, king of Salem. Now it is Abraham's testimony. The earth is the Lord's. Melchizedek had forestalled the king of Sodom and had come out to meet Abraham, not on the mountain but in the valley-the place of testing. He had come to him with bread and wine, the bread of heaven (John 6) and the new wine of the kingdom (John 2). These represent our complete

satisfaction with Christ Himself, and Abraham met the king of Sodom as a satisfied man. Earth was under the curse, and Sodom itself might be earth's darkest place, but Abraham could proclaim God as possessor of heaven and earth. God had got a man in the land. This was what made it possible.

That tremendous fact brings to a conclusion this section of the story in which the land is in question. At the risk of his life Abraham had overcome the invading kings and had rescued Lot. Thereupon his real motives had been put to the test. You cannot stand and fight for God if there is one scrap of worldly scheming or planning or ambition left in you. It is only when the world has lost its power to touch you that you can do this. To have yielded to the king of Sodom would have been a greater moral overthrow than to have failed to go out after the kings. But for Abraham the question was already settled, and God had His man where He needed him. Abraham in the land could begin to claim the earth for God.

No wonder God speaks to Abraham again. 'After these things the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.' He speaks to comfort and reassure Abraham. Why is this necessary for such an outstanding man of faith? Because Abraham was still a man, and his victory was a human one, not a superhuman one. Immediately after receiving the bread and wine it may have seemed to him easy to refuse the reward offered by the king of Sodom. Home again, however, away from the excitement of the great occasion, he would begin to think of the many enemies he might have made. Whenever God says 'Fear not' it is because there is cause for fear. 'I am thy shield.' None can touch you. 'I am thy reward' and 'reward' here is not an object but a title of God Himself. Yes, I am enough. All you have lost you have in me - and more!

But Abraham came back with a reply. 'My problem is not as simple as that! Lord, don't You understand? It is not just that I fear those kings, or grudge that reward. It is the question of a son. Nothing is any use unless I have a son.' One can sense Abraham's agony of heart in his double appeal to the Lord. 'Abram said, O Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and he that shall be possessor of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abram said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed: and lo, one born in my house is mine heir' (15. 2-3).

Did not God know that Abraham wanted a son? Of course He did; but there is something very significant here. For God wants you and me to be in a true sense His friends, to enter into His thoughts, to ask Him intelligently for that which He longs to give. Abraham knew that God's plan on earth could not be accomplished unless he himself had a son. He must have an heir by birth and not by purchase, a son and not a servant. God had shown him this, and now he in turn told God what must be done! This is friendship.

God answered him with a very firm assurance. 'He that shall come forth out of thine own loins shall be thine heir.' He brought him out under the sky and He said, 'Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to tell them. So shall thy seed be.' And now we are told, 'He believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness' (15. 6). Here is the first direct mention of faith.

It is, we saw, a fundamental fact that God's purpose is fulfilled only through those who are born of God. God wants a company of those who have looked towards heaven and believed, but He is content to begin with one. Abraham had been shown the fullness of the Lord's purpose and his heart had responded. In him God had His beginning.

Now once more God affirmed that His purpose with Abraham was in relation to the land. 'I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it.' And Abraham came back with the question: 'O Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?' (15. 7-8). It was not unbelief; he wanted to understand more, and on our behalf he was asking the way to the inheritance. There follows the incident of Abraham's vigil over the offering, and his vision during a deep sleep. The essence of God's answer was that Abraham's inheritance was where God's power operated. The way was the pathway of the Cross, the way of death. The sacrificial animals were to be divided. The recovery of the earth depended upon the laying down of a life. We cannot over-emphasize the Cross of Christ. For Him it meant the laying down of His own life on our behalf, and until the Cross has worked in us too, and our lives have been laid down, we cannot stand victorious in the land. We cannot be soldiers of the Cross unless the Cross has first done its work in us.

In the work of God it is not sufficient for us as young people to be zealous, to be good preachers of the gospel and to know our Bibles well. God wants clean vessels, not big or clever or efficient instruments. God wants purity, not mixture (compare James 3. 8-12). The messages God can use through His servants are not the impressive, specially prepared ones, but those that spring from and are backed by a life that is pure. For this we must know the values of the Cross. It is the death of Christ working in a man's life that produces such purity of

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spirit. And purity brings light.

Abraham experienced 'a horror of great darkness' (15. 12). When we see the holy purpose to which we are called, and then look upon ourselves, we too are utterly undone. Recall Peter's dismay when he saw the catch of fishes. Falling down at Jesus' knees, 'Depart from me,' he cried 'for I am a sinful man, O Lord!' (Luke 5. 8). To know as a fact that the work is too sacred for me to touch-that is the beginning of my usefulness. The road thither may be a road through death, but it is a road with Christ, and it leads to 'great substance' (Genesis 15.14).