

THE ALTAR OF ABRAHAM

~Other Speakers A-F: Andrew Bonar:

'And Abraham planted a grove in Beersheba,
and called there on the name of the Lord, the everlasting God'
Gen. 21:33

In that spot, half desert, but near a cluster of wells full of clear, clean water, Abraham planted a group of trees - a grove of trees. Now you see him, and you see a little band of pilgrims - we may call them, along with him, dwellers in that spot - entering that grove to call upon the name of Jehovah. You see them, day by day, passing into that grove and there enjoying rest and coolness, and calling on the name of the everlasting God. Brethren, it is Abraham that does this, with his faithful friends.

And there is an altar in that grove, an altar which always tells of sacrifice and of blood that flows; for they know they are a company of sinners, and they know that they need the blood of sacrifice as much as Abel did when he laid the lamb upon his altar. Look at that little company compassing their altar in the grove, compassing it round and round, their eye ever resting on the smoke and the fire that consumed the victim, or on the drops of blood that fall from the sacrifice. Look at that little company compassing the altar in meditation and praise and prayer and adoration. But we fail to read the writing on the altar, to read the words written on it : 'Jehovah the everlasting God, Jehovah Elohim' - God of eternity, the everlasting God. But, dear brethren, just as afterwards Jacob reared an altar and called it 'El-Bethel', God of Bethel, in memory of what had been long before there, so it was appropriate for Abraham, wandering from place to place, and having no abiding city here, to have an altar, and write upon it that name, 'The everlasting God', as if he said; 'I am every now and then missing friends, but I have a friend who calls me "My friend Abraham", a friend that will never, never fail or die, the everlasting God.'

Dear brethren, I invite you to take four steady looks at this altar. See Abraham leaning on it, and thinking there upon the days of his pilgrimage. he had been moving up and down, pulling up the pins and loosing the cords of his tents, oftentimes soon after they have been fixed. See Abraham doing this, and often feeling strangely that he is a wanderer, the hope of the promised land deferred, and meeting with much that annoys and troubles his soul ; but he enters that grove, that shady grove, and in the shadow of that grove he finds a quiet time for meeting with Jehovah, the everlasting God. In the eleventh of Hebrews we find it said that he, and such as were his, 'confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth'. He looked beyond the passing scene; and that grand inscription on the altar, 'Jehovah, the everlasting God', told where his heart and where his treasure lay. Let me ask, is life to you a sojourn, a pilgrimage? You are not settled down in this world ; you are but passing through it. If you are feeling somewhat like Abraham, the only steadfast thing you can point to is Jehovah, your friend, the everlasting God. And can you point to him and claim him? You see him not, but you know him.

But, take a second look at the altar. Here is Abraham leaning on it, and thinking of his fellow-pilgrims. They, too, belong to the family of the everlasting God. But, meanwhile, from time to time some of them are disappearing, and he knows that he may be left soon very lonely. The friends of his childhood, many of them are a-missing. He laid his father Terah in the grave at Haran. He came to this land, and he has seen there, yonder, the smoke of Sodom ascending, the smoke of the doomed city of the plain. Ah! but he has seen something that haunts him continually; he has seen the blight upon his nephew Lot - Lot, like a withered branch - and all this goes to his soul. And he has been constrained to part with Hagar and with Ishmael; and what more there is of change he cannot tell. But all this sends him back to his altar, and it is with unspeakable refreshment that he reads again and again, 'Jehovah, the everlasting God', 'with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.' Quietly resting there, how often has his friend Jehovah held communion with him. Do you thus repair in hours of sadness to the Lord, the everlasting God? Is it thus that you refresh yourself with 'Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and to-day, and forever'? Himself the same; his Word the same.

'Thou remainest', you know it is said of him. You read in the first of Hebrews : 'These heavens shall pass away, but thou remainest,' the everlasting God and Saviour.

I was one day sitting in my study when a visitor asked to be admitted. She came in and sat down. I saw she was under a cloud of sadness and sorrow from bereavement. I was interested. We talked just about two minutes, when I saw her countenance alter; it began to be bright; and then the visitor rose and said : 'Now I can go away, my load is gone.' And as she said it she pointed to the wall. There happened to be upon the wall, 'But thou remainest.' The visitor said to me : 'My eye caught these words half a minute ago; and it is enough, it is enough.' They had poured the oil of joy upon a wounded spirit. Is there anyone here sad and mourning? Read those words : 'Thou remainest.' Look at Abraham's altar and read the inscription, 'Jehovah, the everlasting God.'

But, take a third look at the altar. Here is Abraham leaning on it and looking onward to the eternal city; for we are told expressly in the eleventh of Hebrews that amid all his pilgrim life 'he looked for a city which hath foundations', and such foundation 'whose builder and maker is God'. In that city, he was told by his friend Jehovah, the everlasting God, that he would meet with those whom he had missed for a time. He was going on day by day, just as we are, saying in substance : 'Here we have no abiding city, but we seek one to come.' But when beset by foes; when disturbed by circumstances; when sore tried by the idolatries around him, he turned again to his altar and saw Jehovah, the everlasting God, abiding the same.

Brethren, we have had even more comfort than he, for we have had more tidings from the everlasting God conveyed to us than Abraham had, but even then Abraham got enough to give his soul refreshment and rest; and he would often rejoice, as that passage in Hebrews intimates, in the prospect of meeting in 'the city that hath foundations' with all who had been his fellows and friends here. That city - he would not quite know it : he did not know it so well as John in Patmos knew it. I dare say he often thought, when under the shady trees of the grove :

'What will it be to be there?'

Ah! brethren, we can say no more : we know about the city. And do you never think of what it will be to walk in that city, over its golden streets in the light of that - I was going to say the sun; but there is no need of the sun there. 'The Lamb is the light thereof' - of that city - in the bright beams that pour from the Lamb - walking there and sometimes saying, as we walk, to one another : 'The beams are too bright; let us go under the shade of this tree of life for a little, and let us talk together there.' Shall we not talk of the past? and shall we not understand the dealings of God then, and sing new songs from day to day as we get new insight into God's ways? These are our prospects. and, dear brethren, surely, having such prospects we ought day by day to be of good cheer, and go on rejoicing in this thought, that there is an abiding city, and one to come.

But, once more, take a fourth look at the altar. Would faithful Abraham (again at his altar! faithful Abraham!) the man who at once believed whatever word God spake; the man who acted upon any hint God gave him as to the path of obedience; the man who leapt for joy when he got just a glimpse of the day of Christ, rejoice in him : 'He rejoiced to see my day : and he saw it, and was glad' - leapt for joy, as the words mean. This is the man we now see again leaning on his altar. And what now? He is telling out his joy, and testifying against all idols. 'The everlasting God, Jehovah' was written on that altar, and none can come near without reading who it is that fills and satisfies Abraham. Abraham's God is an everlasting God. Even the worshippers of idols never supposed that they had more than a limited existence - a poor object of worship for an immortal soul! The immortal soul must have the God of eternity, if it is to be filled and satisfied. John says in his Epistle : 'Little children, keep yourselves from idols.' You and I may have idols, not, indeed, like the idols of the Canaanites : but, if idols, they are bad, and, like their idols, vanish away in smoke. But the everlasting God, Jehovah alone, himself, satisfies and fills our hearts. Oh! brethren, tell your fellow-men the blessedness of those who possess such a portion as this. Tell them that we have an everlasting God; and tell them that he brings out to us such blessings as these : eternal redemption; everlasting righteousness; salvation for ever; eternal life; everlasting loving-kindness, or (it is very forcible literally), the loving-kindness of an eternity - that is our portion. Tell men of these. Our eternal life; our songs and everlasting joy. Tell them of these, and eternal glory on its way, and almost come already. All this is our portion, the portion of those who know that altar, that sacrifice, and the everlasting God : our God through that sacrifice.

Unsaved man! it will not be good news to you to hear that God is the everlasting God, for you have to do with him; and if the atoning blood, of which the altar and its sacrifice was a type, be not sprinkled on you, what a prospect you have in that coming eternity. Do you know it is written in one place, 'eternal judgment'? The sentence passed - the judgment - eternal. Hebrews 6:2 calls it 'eternal judgment', never to be altered. Men say, and devils may say, and teach men to say - No; not eternal. But God says, 'eternal judgment', 'everlasting fire', everlasting as our everlasting God. More than once Christ used that word : 'everlasting punishment'; 'everlasting' - tremendous words, brethren - 'everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord'. The ruin, oh! sinner, unsaved sinner, the ruin of all your theories, all your schemes, all your hopes, ay, and all the joys that you have, such as they are, are swept away. 'Everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord,' that is the portion. 'Everlasting contempt,' also, says the prophet Daniel; not to be pitied, but despised to all eternity for your folly. Richard Baxter says a striking thing about that. He says : 'A wretch condemned to die tomorrow cannot forget it. And yet poor sinners who are uncertain that they will even reach tomorrow, and who are sure that, at any rate, very speedily they will have to stand before the holy majesty of the Judge, can forget all this. Oh! the stupidity of unconcerned souls. Oh! the wonderful folly and distractedness of ungodly men that they can forget.' I say again that they can possibly forget 'eternal joy', 'eternal woe', 'the eternal God', and 'the place of their eternal abode'. Oh! sinner, there is but a thin veil of flesh between you and that amazing state, yon gulf, the eternal gulf never to be crossed. Today hear his voice, and harden not your hearts.