

T. Austin-Sparks:

"By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed to go out unto a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he became a sojourner in the land of promise, as in a land not his own, dwelling in tents, with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for the city which hath the foundations, whose builder and maker is God... These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things make it manifest that they are seeking after a country of their own. And if indeed they had been mindful of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed of them, to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city" (Hebrews 11:8-10, 13-16).

We have seen that the first crisis step toward the ultimate entering the heart of God was when Abraham repudiated the old world. When God said to him: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house" (Genesis 12:1), it was God's repudiation of the old world. Therefore, the first step toward the full entering into the heart of God is our oneness with God in leaving the world behind.

Then we saw that when that step had been taken, the journey was not at an end. There was another great crisis step to be taken, because Abraham's father, brother and nephew had gone out with him, although God had said: "Get thee out... from thy kindred, and from thy father's house". That next step, then, was separation from the natural life, what the Apostle Paul called 'our old man' ... "Our old man was crucified with him (Christ)" (Romans 6:6) ... "Seeing that ye have put off the old man with his doings" (Colossians 3:9).

(Having spent so much time upon that, we will just leave it there for the time being.)

Now we come to the third phase of this spiritual journey, which is oneness with God in the heavenly nature of everything. Perhaps this is where we ought to read the verses we have already read, for they so clearly set forth the heavenly nature of the journey which Abraham was taking. Leaving for the moment the mistakes that he made because of the difficulties of this way, we look at it as a whole, and it is very comforting to notice that the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews, when speaking about Abraham, never mentions his faults. You have to go back to the Old Testament to find those, and we will do that presently.

First of all, however, let us look at it through the eyes of this writer of the Letter to the Hebrews. Of course, we cannot fully appreciate the meaning of what is written here, for we are not Abraham and have not got his background, but, even if we did understand it all, it is a very wonderful thing that Abraham did. God must have done a very great work in the heart of this man!

Abraham was born in a great city and he lived there for over sixty years, which is the greater part of any life in our time. We have seen that Ur of the Chaldees was a wonderful city. It was set in a very wonderful civilization, and it was there that Abraham was born and brought up. We could say that the city was in his very blood. He was not only in the city - the city was in him. Now he comes right out of that city and is brought into the country of Canaan - and God gave him not one foothold in that country. It was a good country, too; not a country to be despised, by any means, and in it there were a number of cities. You may think that Sodom and Gomorrah were not much in the way of cities and that Abraham had very little difficulty in refusing them, but there were other cities not as bad as they were. At any rate, the other cities might have suited him, but although he had been such a man of the city all his life, he never entered into one of those cities to become a citizen. Whether they might have been desirable from the standpoint of the natural man or not, and whether it might have been quite a good thing to take possession of some part of that country or not, Abraham neither took possession of the land nor of one city all his life. We have read that he was a sojourner in the land, living in tents, moving up and down the country and never far from a city, but although the country and the cities were there, he looked for a city and for a heavenly country.

God had done something very deep in this man's heart. If Abraham had looked at the country as his nephew Lot did, he might have said: 'Well this is quite good enough. Let us settle down here.' Or he might have looked at the cities and said: 'This is not a bad city. Let us go in and settle down here.' That is what Lot did, but Abraham looked at the country and said: 'No, this is not it. This does not answer to something that has been done in my heart. God has done something in me that makes me unable to settle down here.' The word is: "He looked for the city... whose builder and maker is God... They desire a better country, that is, a heavenly", and then the writer of this Letter to the Hebrews gathers it all up into this: "He (God) hath prepared for them a city".

The heavenly things had got such a hold on Abraham's heart that nothing else could satisfy that heart, and because heavenly things had got such a grip on him, earthly things lost their hold upon his life. This is a very real stage or phase in the spiritual pilgrimage.

I wonder if you understand this from experience! Of course, when we get old the things of this life and of this world do lose their interest for us, but I am not talking about the natural realm. This has to be just as true of the youngest Christian as it was true of Abraham. I do not know who may be the youngest Christian to whom I am speaking, but I want to say to that one, as to everyone else, that a real mark of the work of God in the heart is that we have been spoiled for this world. We have come to realize that there is nothing that can take the place of the heavenly things. I do wish this was true of all Christians, and especially of all young Christians: that heavenly things have become so real and precious to them that they would travel half across the world to get them, and that they are prepared to give up their holidays and all the earthly interests to get some heavenly things. Well, I think I am right in saying that that is why most of us are here now, that we have at least come this far on the journey: that there is nothing that can take the place of the things of God for us.

So what we are saying is that it is a very impressive thing that, although it was a country full of good things naturally, and although there were cities there, Abraham never settled down in any of it. God had done such a deep work in his heart, and that word 'never' went right on to the end of his life... "These all died in faith, not having received the promises".

Now you see our connection with the last message. We said then that oneness with God in repudiating the natural life is a step forward. It is a most unnatural thing never to want to settle down in some abode or residence on this earth! It may be all right to dwell in a tent for a little while, but the time comes when we say: 'Let us leave the tent and get home', where we have all the conveniences of a settled abode. I repeat: it is a very unnatural thing never to want a home, and Abraham, although he longed for a home, could never settle down in this world. That was a very unnatural thing: it was a spiritual thing.

So we see that in this journey we do have to come to this spiritual position of a gravitation toward the things of God and of heaven. God puts a law of spiritual gravitation into His born again children and, as surely as there comes a time when that law works in the birds of the air and they say: 'It is time we left this country', so in the true Christian the law of spiritual gravitation toward the heavenly things is a mighty work.

If we are moving with God we shall discover that He is never in favour of our having settled and permanent spiritual centres in this world. The horizon of the people of God is not the horizon of this earth. Perhaps you have heard of certain places where the Lord has given great blessing and you have said: 'Oh, if only I could go and spend the rest of my life there!' If you did that you would be making a terrible mistake. God is never going to allow any centre on this earth to be the end of the journey. We may get blessing there, it may be true that the Lord meets us there, but if we begin to think that this is the end of all things we are going to have a great disappointment.

And what is true of places is also true of experiences. Again and again in my own life God has given a new experience. When I had the first one I thought I had come to the end of all blessing. 'Surely', I thought, 'there can be nothing more than this!' But then, later on, the Lord did something else, and again I thought: 'Surely there is nothing beyond this! I must be ready to go to heaven now!' And yet again there was another movement forward, and every fresh experience of the Lord was something in advance of everything that had gone before. Be very careful that you do not come to any position which says: 'Now we have come to finality'. They "greeted them from afar" - there was always something more beyond, and this is a true mark of a spiritual progress toward the heart of God.

There are many times in the life of the people of God when they come to disillusionment. They think that they have now come to the thing which is everything, and then they suffer a great disillusionment. They find that this thing, after all, is not the final thing. Indeed, it is not what God puts into their heart as the thing that is what He is after. Although it may be something very good, and even wonderful, there is an element of disappointment about it. You see, there is a disappointment about everything and everybody on this earth. If you knew the truth about Abraham, or Moses, or about any of these great men, you would find that there was something to disappoint you in them. There is nothing, and there is no one, perfect here.

I must just make this statement and leave it there for the present. The fact is that the Lord must have us always going on. We are pilgrims and strangers, which means that we shall never come to finality here on this earth. If you are disappointed with what you thought was going to be the perfect thing, just remember that the Lord is

calling you on to something better. When we look at some of the mistakes that Abraham made we shall see more clearly what we mean.

We will close by just illustrating from the life of Moses. It says of him: "He supposed that his brethren understood how that God by his hand was giving them deliverance" (Acts 7:25). He had clothed his Hebrew brethren with a great idea that if only he presented himself as their leader they would all come round him and make a great fuss of him. So one day he went out to offer himself as the hero of the deliverance of his brethren. And the first Egyptian that he found badly treating them he knocked on the head and forced all the breath out of him. What did he expect? That all his brethren would rally round and say: 'Now we have got a champion', and they would all begin to treat the Egyptians as Moses treated that man. It was a very great surprise and disillusionment to Moses when one of his own brethren turned on him the next day and said: 'Who made you a ruler over us?' That was a great disillusionment to Moses. Why? Because God's way is a heavenly way and not an earthly way. We do not do God's work by throwing our own weight about. When it is done, it will be done from heaven and not by that kind of Moses. He only made things much more complicated and lost a lot of time by trying to do heavenly things on an earthly level.

So what we have to learn is that we are called to be a heavenly people whose weapons of warfare are spiritual weapons and not carnal, whose methods are not the methods of this world, but the methods of heaven. And to learn that lesson is a phase in a journey which will end right in the heart of God.

May the Lord interpret this word to our hearts and teach us what it means that we are "born from above" and have heavenly resources at our command!