(A sermon by Watchman Nee, as adapted and preached by F. M. Perry, February 20, 1977.)

The Old Testament scriptures tell us how God secured a people (the Jews) to Himself. It tells how He delivered them from bondage and separated them to Himself in a unique way. When God appeared to Moses at the burning bush, to tell Moses that he had been chosen to lead the Jews from Egyptian bondage to serve Himself, God identified Himself as, Â“The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.Â” (Ex. 3:6).

A little later when God sent Moses to the Israelites to announce His intention, He said to Moses, Â“Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, Â‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob has sent me to you.Â’ This is My name forever, and this is my memorial-name to all generations. Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them, Â‘The Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has appeared to me....Â’Â” (Ex. 3:15-16).

God wanted Himself to be known in association with three men, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He said, Â“This is My name forever ... the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.Â”

Later in the New Testament, our Lord Jesus Himself used the same expression when He said, Â“But regarding the resurrection of the dead, have you not read that which was spoken to you by God, saying, Â‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.Â’ God is not the God of the dead, but the God of the living.Â” (Matt. 22:31-32).

Why does God name Himself in such a way? What is the significance in the mind of God that He wants us, who read His holy word, to think of these three men when we think of Him? Here is something that is brought to our attention in both the Old and the New Testaments. This suggests that there is indeed some significance to the fact that God identifies Himself in association with these particular three men, some significance that can give us instruction and encouragement.

The Old Testament is full of Â“typesÂ” and Â“principlesÂ” that illustrate GodÂ’s eternal truths that we need to learn. This suggests that in the old dispensation and the new, God is working to one identical principle.

In the Old Dispensation God appeared to Moses with the intention of calling Israel out of Egypt to become His chosen people. God called Israel out of Egypt to become a Â“newÂ” people. In the New Dispensation Jesus appeared in resurrection from the dead to a nucleus of a Â“newÂ” people of His own choice. If now it is true that we who have been saved by His grace are of that Â“newÂ” people, may be not expect therefore that He is working with us under the same principle?
What does God mean when He speaks to us today of “Israel” in the pages of the New Testament? In Galatians 6:15-16, Paul writes to the new creation in which there is neither Jew nor Greek, but where all find their peace and mercy in the cross of Christ. And Paul, speaking of all people today who belong to Christ, calls them “the Israel of God.” Christians of today are one with all the true Israel since the time of Jacob Himself, and not a separate people of God.

Before Jacob was led by God to become known as Israel, he was prepared by God to receive that title. He was prepared through a history which was the history of the lives of his grandfather (Abraham), and his father (Isaac), and finally himself (Jacob). Then Jacob’s offspring became Israel as God had planned. If God has chosen us to be a part of His own Israel, then we must ask ourselves what experience, or what history, must we pass through under God’s hand to constitute us as His own people. We find the answer as we study the lives and the experiences of these three significant men. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob held a special status in the providence of God. To them God gave the privilege of being vessels to lead us to God through the principles that God worked in their lives.

First, let us note that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were just ordinary sinful men, much like you and me, before God laid hold on them. They were not some special kind of super men. Therein lies the first great lesson for us. If God could take ordinary men like these three and create through them His own Israel, what can God make of us? If God could take an ideal father like Abram (later known as Abraham); and a weak passive man like Isaac; and a strong, self-willed, natural man like Jacob; and make of them men with whom He wanted His name to be associated for eternity; then we know that we too can serve God’s purposes and God can make of us “a people for His own possession.” (1 Peter 2:9).

God began the creation of a special people with Abraham. But He did not possess that people until Isaac’s and Jacob’s history was completed and the twelve tribes were in view. The history of just one of these men, or of only two of them, is not enough for us to see the divine requirements fulfilled. It took the experiences of all three of them to bring about God’s chosen nation.

We Christians, as a part of the spiritual Israel of God today, must have, in a measure, the full experience of them all. It is the intention of God that each of His true people should say of themselves personally, “God is the God of Abraham, and of Isaac, and of Jacob.”

Many of us seeking to be a part of God’s church today certainly feel that we are not yet complete, that we are lacking something that God wants to give us. We are conscious of a need. Yet, often we are unable to define what it is exactly that we need. Perhaps it is not one thing only that we need, but actually three, and they can be found in the history of these three patriarchs. For God does have for His people a three fold blessing which is illustrated in the lives of these three men.

The Life Of Abraham Illustrates That God Must Be The Originator.

Let us look first at the life of Abraham. As we study Abraham’s life we learn that God is the Originator of all that matters in life. That is what Abraham had to learn. And that is what God taught him. Abraham (at first called Abram) was just an ordinary man living in the Land of Ur of the Chaldeans. He was an idolater just like his neighbors. Yet God chose him. Abraham had no beginning of his own. God took the initiative.
We learn in Acts the 7th chapter that Abraham was called by God while he lived in Ur of the Chaldeans. Jesus’ disciple Stephen is quoted as saying, “Hear me, brethren and fathers. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran … then he departed from the land of the Chaldeans, and settled in Haran. And from there, after his father died, God removed him into this country in which you are now living.”

The call of Abraham and the reason for his response lay in God. Abraham beheld the God of glory and believed because God had revealed Himself to him. Thus it was by faith that Abraham, when he was called, obeyed to go out.

We today think of Abraham’s faith as being very great. One of us might think, I can never have faith as great as Abraham’s. But let us look closely at Genesis chapter 11 to see just how great was Abraham’s faith at first. God told Abraham to leave his country, leave his relatives, leave his father’s house and go to a new land he would be shown. But we read that Terah, Abraham’s father, took Abraham and his wife Sarah, and Lot, and they all went out together from Ur in order to settle in the land of Canaan; and they went only as far as Haran (part way) and settled there. We are told that Abraham heard the call and believed. Yet his father, Terah, took him out. That was the size of Abraham’s faith at the beginning. He left his country but he only left a part of his kindred and none of his father’s house. It was his father who led him out of Ur.

Abraham’s bringing with him (or accompanying) his parents and their grandson Lot when he went out from his home in Ur was wrong insofar as obedience to God’s call. Abraham was told by God that only he, himself, was called to be a chosen vessel for God’s purpose, a purpose designed to bring blessings to all the families of the earth. There was no way for Abraham to take with him into this purpose others who were not chosen. Abraham believed, but his understanding was faulty and therefore his faith was deficient. In other words, he was not an exceptional believer. He was just like you and me.

Abraham allowed himself to be taken by his father only about half way to Canaan, then the movement stopped. The Bible says, “They went as far as Haran and settled there.” Abraham had heard God’s call but, apparently, he did not appreciate the goal to which that call was leading, and so he saw no reason to pay such a price of loneliness from his family. Is this not the way that we go about to carry out God’s commands to us? We often see no reason to pay the price of loneliness.

This is the history of how a man, Abraham, was changed from just an ordinary man to a vessel of honor for God. A valuable vessel, or a well-finished tool cannot be created without a high price being paid. Only poor quality goods can be produced cheaply. So let us not misunderstand God’s dealings with us. Abraham did not really know what God wanted to do with him. Nor do we know what God wants to do with us.

So Abraham only went half way to Canaan, to Haran, and settled there. The time in Haran was wasted. Terah, Abraham’s father, influenced Abraham to stay in Haran. The very name “Terah” means “delay.” Finally the years of Terah’s life ran out in Haran, and they were years that God did nothing through Abraham.

God is, indeed God must be, the great originator of everything. But we are thankful He is also patient and persistent. God had chosen Abraham. Abraham needed only to follow. His following was faulty. So when Abraham was 75 years old, God called him a second time. Steven, in his sermon in Acts 7, tells us, “And from there, after his father died, God rem
oved him into this country in which you are now living." And so finally Abraham came to live in Canaan. We must thank God for that.

In the Haran of our lives everything comes to a standstill. Nothing is more precious to us than the divine persistence. That is why we are Christians today. That is why we get up and continue even after dwelling in Haran for a long time. God's patient persistence brought Abraham to the land of Canaan. Let us not be ashamed to admit that in this life of call and response, nothing is of ourselves. All is of God. What amazing grace, that Abraham could still become "the father of all them that believe" even after the wasted years at Haran.

God is the great originator. That is what Abraham had to learn. And the principle was also taught to Abraham through his son Isaac. Isaac came from God. Isaac had to be given to Abraham in a unique way. Nothing that originated from Abraham himself, including his other son Ishmael, could serve God's purpose. But Abraham had to learn this and it took many more years of his life to learn it.

At the age of 85 Abraham had lived in the land of Canaan for 10 years, and, apparently, he felt it was time for his promised son to arrive. But Sarah could not have a child, or so Abraham and Sarah thought. So Abraham took Sarah's suggestion and took her handmaid, Hagar, to be his second wife. Thus, Hagar's son, Ishmael was born when Abraham was 86.

What Abraham did not know was that God had planned for him to have a son by Sarah when he himself was 100 years old. Instead he took matters into his own hands and had Ishmael 14 years earlier. He believed God, but he thought he had to help God. He had learned that there were many things he could not do, but surely, he thought, he could do this, for this was what God wanted!

But this matter of a son went deeper than the mere question of how to have one. Abraham did not know it, but it was vital who gave him. God is the great originator. Unless Abraham's son was God's gift, what use would he be to God? Abraham was very active now in trying to serve God, but his own personal power was behind the action, not God's power. So Abraham's efforts were not fruitful. In our lives today, it is not just a question of being active, but it is a question of Who originates the action, and Whose power is behind the action.

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? The source of the activity, 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 have a son), nevertheless what matters is Who is doing that will.

All Abraham got for his own efforts was Ishmael. And during 13 years after Ishmael's birth God did not speak to Abraham. God left Abraham alone and let him get on with the thing Abraham insisted on doing. Again there were wasted years in Abraham's life. What we try to do on our own, God leaves us to get on with that. He has given us free wills. He will not usurp our wills. When we finally see our own failures and submit our wills to God, then He will get on with His work through us. We can be blinded by our own passionate soul's desires to do God's work for Him. And then, even His work can become a stumbling block to us.
But when Abraham finally “contemplated his own body, now as good as dead since he was 100 years old” (Rom 4:19), when he could no longer have a son if he wanted one, God spoke to him again and got on with His plan.

The starting point of all progress is God’s gracious call; not our desires. Abraham had not repented. Rather, Ishmael was growing more precious to him year after year. Abraham had not realized his wrong, nor had he sought after God during those 13 years since Ishmael’s birth. So, from our point of view now, measuring him by the success of his own activities, there was not much hope for him. But God was still at work on him. He had not let him go altogether. Abraham’s hope depended not on what he wanted, but on the fact that God had chosen him and God wanted him. We need to learn, as Abraham finally did, to commit ourselves to the hand of the Almighty God who is the Originator of all things.

The Life of Isaac Illustrates That Everything Must Be Received From God.

Next we come to Abraham’s son, Isaac. As we study the life of Isaac, we learn the principle of receiving from God.

First of all, Isaac, himself, was a gift from God. He would not have been born to 100 year old Abraham and 90 year old Sarah if God had not performed a miracle. Beyond the fact that he was a gift from God, Isaac was a very ordinary man. There was nothing special about him. As you read from the book of Genesis, You cannot find any great feature by which Isaac is distinguished. Look at these facts. Abraham, we are told, amassed much wealth. Isaac did not. Isaac only received the inheritance from Abraham. Isaac did nothing for his wealth, nothing to bring it into being. What in fact did he do? We are told that he dug certain wells, but when we look at the story in Genesis 26 it appears at once that he only unstop ped (or opened up) some wells that his father Abraham had previously dug and which had been filled up with dirt. Yet Isaac served God’s purpose and was precious to God.

Isaac teaches us that we have nothing which we were not given. We saw by Abraham’s life that nothing is really origin ated by us. Now by Isaac’s life we see equally that nothing is achieved for God by our own personal attainment. Attain ment in this life for God is something that we must be led into by God. As Paul said to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 4:7), “What do you have that you did not receive?”

And Isaac is pre-eminently the son. He illustrates in a remarkable way the work of God in Christ. Jesus said in John 8:28, “I always do what pleases Him.”

We should note that God brings about our spiritual birth today in a similar manner in which He brought about the birth of Isaac. This is made clear to us by Paul in Galatians 4 where Isaac, the heir of Abraham, is said to have been born “according to the Spirit” and in Galatians 3 where we who “belong to Christ” are called “Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise,” like Isaac.

Abraham’s experience is very dear to us, teaching us that God is our Father, the source of everything. But Abraham’s experience without Isaac’s experience is not enough. God is also the Son, the Giver. We all know that forgiveness of past sins is a gift that must be received. But, so also is our continuing growth day by day in victory over sin. We have noth ing of ourselves that is not fundamentally God’s gift to us. So we find that to Isaac, God promised precisely what He had already given to Abraham (Genesis 26:3-5).
Isaac was born into wealth. So we are born into spiritual wealth. We do not advance into it by striving, we are born into it. This is true of every spiritual gift we have as Christians. For example, "The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" which set us free from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8) is a gift from God which we can possess in Christ Jesus, but not in ourselves. It is not ours as something we have attained; it is something we have received at our new birth into Christ Jesus.

So the principle of Isaac's life is the principle of receiving. Even Isaac's wife was given to him. His father chose her, sent for her, and paid for her dowry. Isaac never even saw Rebekah before she was chosen. In his role as son, Isaac received everything. And we too, before God, possess nothing that is not His endowment.

The Life of Jacob Illustrates That Our Strength Must Be Broken.

So we come to Jacob. The life of Jacob illustrates the natural strength of man inherited from Adam, and how this strength had to be broken by God before he could finally be useful to God. Jacob's natural strength had to be broken by God before Jacob could be useful to God as the Israel of God.

Many of us see that God is the source of everything. And we accept, in theory at least, that we have to receive everything from God. Why then is it that so many of us do not just take the gift, but go on struggling for it? The answer lies in "the Jacob principle," the principle of natural strength which so dominates us. We are so sure that it will be by our own efforts, or by use of our own strongest natural talents, that we shall achieve God's purpose in our lives. Jacob learned differently.

Jacob was most clever, able man. There was nothing he could not do, he thought. He cheated his own brother, deceived his father, and contrived to relieve his uncle Laban of all his possessions (Gen 30). But this cleverness, this talent for self advancement, had no place in the will and plan of God. And Jacob had to learn that.

Thus, everything Jacob set his hand to went wrong, even from his birth. When he and his twin brother Esau was born, Jacob's hand was found to be holding his brother's heel as if to be holding back his brother's birth. Yet he was not born the eldest son. He sought by guile to secure the birthright. It was God's plan that Jacob should rule. Jacob discovered that. He recognized the importance of God's plan, and that it involved him and not his brother. But Jacob wanted to make sure by his own strength that God's plan was accomplished. So Jacob bargained with Esau for the birthright, but in the end it was he who had to leave home and flee. He had set his heart on Rachel as his bride, but found himself first of all married to Leah. He set out eventually from his uncle Laban's house with much wealth, most of it gained by quest ionable means, but he had to be prepared to give it all away to Esau on his journey home in order to save his own life. God was disciplining Jacob, and this illustrates the discipline of God's Spirit in our lives. People who are especially clever have to learn, through suffering if necessary, that it is not by wisdom of men that we live, but by God.

But when Jacob was on his way to meet Esau with a clever plan to save himself, he met God. He dared to wrestle with God, insisting that God bless him. And God touched Jacob and lamed him. Up to that day he had been Jacob, "the sup planter" (one who usurps the position of someone else). From that day onward he was "Israel, a prince with God." This was the beginning of the kingdom of Israel. Jacob was a changed man from that day onward. He who had deceived others was now deceived by others, even by his own sons. The old crafty Jacob would easily have seen through his son
Â’s deception. But the new Jacob was completely taken in. He believed his sons concerning their story about Joseph, and wept saying, Â“It is my sonÂ’s coat; an evil beast has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn in pieces.Â”

This is the point to which all GodÂ’s people must come. Jacob wrestled with God and it was the undoing of his natural man. When we try to strive in our natural man for God, we will come to naught. This is the discipline of the Spirit. We must accept this discipline and learn it to cease our clever striving.

Abraham saw God as Father. He proved Him to be the source of all things. Isaac received the inheritance as a son. It is a blessed thing to have a gift bestowed on us by God. Yet we may seize upon it and spoil it. Jacob attempted to do this and was saved only by having his natural strength undone. There must be a day in our experience that this happens. Those who truly know God have learned to have no faith in their own competence, but to rely only on God.

Friends, God is not expecting to find us naturally Â“born goodÂ” when we are first added to His church. He knows well that folks like that are not to be found. He chooses ordinary folks like you and me (like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) to receive from Him His gift of grace, and makes use in His kingdom of those who are willing to submit to His discipline.

So let us take great encouragement from the fact that our God calls Himself the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We are so like them. He will be our God too.

With love, F. M. Perry.