

THE GREAT ENCOURAGEMENT

Genesis 15:1-6

This chapter is closely connected with the previous one. Chedorlaomer, the King of Elam, had united his forces with those of three other kings in a league of conquest. Their military prowess seemed irresistible. Five kings with their forces combined went forth to engage the armies of Chedorlaomer, but they also were overthrown. In consequence the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were sacked, and Lot was taken prisoner. Then it was that Abraham went forth at the head of his three hundred eighteen armed servants and by a surprise night attack gained a signal victory. Chedorlaomer was slain, Lot was delivered, and the booty taken from Sodom and Gomorrah was recovered.

Then came the reaction, mental and physical. Abraham had good reason to conclude that the remaining followers of the powerful King of Elam would not abandon the enterprise which had only been frustrated by a surprise attack at night but that they would return and avenge their reverse. In defeating Chedorlaomer and his allies Abraham had made some bitter and influential foes. It was not likely that they would rest content until the memory of their reverse had been wiped out with blood. They who had been strong enough to capture the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were too powerful to be defied by Abraham and his insignificant forces. Thus alarmed and apprehensive Abraham received a special word of encouragement and reassurance: "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" (Genesis 15:1). In tender grace did God quiet the troubled and anxious heart of the one whom He was pleased to call His "friend."

After Abraham had defeated the King of Elam, and after he had been blessed and refreshed by Melchizedek, the King of Sodom offered to reward Abraham by suggesting that he take the recovered "goods" unto himself (14:21). Abraham declined to accept anything from him. Behold the sequel! God never permits His own to lose because they honor Him and seek His glory. When Abraham refused the spoil of Sodom, God more than made it up to him. His refusal to be enriched by the King of Sodom was more than compensated by a revelation from God, which greatly increased the joy of Abraham. How much are the Lord's people losing today because of their acceptance of the world's favors! Unto how few can the Lord now reveal Himself as He did to Abraham!

There were nine successive manifestations of God to Abraham of which this is the fifth. God's revelations to His people are always intimately connected with their needs, as we see in this case. Why did God say to him, "Fear not, Abraham"? He said it because Abraham had some fear. This is the first occurrence of God's "Fear not" which is afterwards found so often as God's message to His weary and tired servants. This admonition or its equivalent occurs in the Bible nearly one hundred eighty times. Believers have nothing to fear except to offend God. They need not fear men nor Satan.

The grounds for Abraham's confidence in God were stated pointedly by the Lord, "I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward." How appropriate to the need of the moment was this twofold revelation of God to His servant! God promised to be to him a shield against all foes. We have nothing to fear when God is interposed between us and our enemies. The greatest interposition was made for us at Calvary. There Christ placed Himself between us and Satan, between us and sin and between us and the curse of God. There the whole force of God's righteous wrath and the whole fury of our enemies fell upon our Saviour and Shield. On the basis of this divine interposition, the Lord remains our shield continually, as we pass along the whole of our journey through the world. God also promised Abraham to be his reward after victory. In God there is perfect, infinite and increasing satisfaction for every one of His children.

For the moment these great promises did not seem to have much effect upon Abraham. His attention was concentrated on his supreme personal problem. Is this not often the case with us? In His Word, God makes to us such precious promises, intended to embrace and cover and provide for all our problems and needs and much more besides. But, we overlook them, because we suppose that we have a supreme need and we want it dealt with specifically. Abraham appears almost to have questioned the possibility of reward, so long as his need or desire for a child was not satisfied. He was then at an age when he had little reasonable expectation of becoming a father. In spite of God's promise of fruitfulness, Abraham was afraid of remaining barren to the end. He seems to have almost lost hope and to have been settling down to the conviction that, after all, his steward would be his heir. Abraham meant that, as he had no child, Eliezer would possess all he had after he went away.

In verse three, Abraham simply stated to the Lord what was in his mind. He must have uttered these words in the belief that God was able to give him a child. If we have a fear, a longing, a problem or something that overmasters our lives as Abraham had, why do we not lay it in simple faith before God? Our utterance of the need implies a petition for its satisfaction.

God's answer to Abraham was immediate and ample. He gave him the promise that his need would be satisfied and his petition answered. The word of the Lord which came to Abraham had to do with God's eternal purpose in redemption, and it seems that he understood this. Notice that God's answer to the prayer of His servant was direct, definite and detailed. The Holy Spirit had given Abraham the faith and knowledge to ask for something that was in line with God's will and purpose. We too may expect such answers if we ask the Holy Spirit to help our infirmities by showing us what to pray for as we ought.

God encouraged Abraham greatly when He told him to look toward the heaven and observe the multiplicity of the stars. Abraham could not number even the small proportion of stars that he could see with the naked eye. What would he have said if he had possessed a modern telescope? There was much more concealed in God's promise than Abraham could even conceive. He had no idea of its extent. It is the same with us when God gives us promises. This promise of God was embraced by Abraham by faith, laid hold of, received and believed. It was an anchor to his faith when the days came in which it seemed that its fulfilment was impossible. Abraham's seed consists of all who belong to Christ. Paul wrote, "And if ye be Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise" (Galatians 3:29).

Verse six reveals a definite progress upwards in Abraham's spiritual experience. "Abraham believed." He had faith before, but now it was prominent and emphatic, a clearer, stronger, fuller trust in God. Faith is the correct response to God's revelation always. Following Abraham's trust in God, there was recorded for the first time in God's Word the fundamental principle of justification by faith. God accounted Abraham's faith as the channel for the reception of the gift of righteousness. He was originally destitute of righteousness but is here reckoned as righteous through faith in God. God was the object of Abraham's faith; the Word of God was the ground of his faith, and righteousness was the result of his faith.

Abraham was convinced that he would have a son. He did not reason about the natural impossibility that lay in the way of the realization of the promise, but he believed that God would act just as He had said. God had spoken and that was enough. Abraham's body might be dead and Sarah long past the age of child-bearing; nevertheless, he was fully assured that God had power even to quicken the dead. It was this faith which was counted unto him for righteousness. His belief in the Lord implied his acknowledgment that he did not possess any righteousness of his own. In other words, it implied that he was a justly condemned sinner. It also implied that he looked to the Lord to supply what he did not possess but sorely needed. "Righteousness" as used in this verse means a right standing with God and before the bar of His justice. It means the position of one in whose case the claims of God's law are satisfied. The righteousness which God imputed to Abraham was based on the satisfaction of all the claims of God's law against him made by Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary, which God foresaw,

anticipated and acted upon. There is no other way by which the claims of God's law can be satisfied in the case of any sinner. There is no justification apart from Christ. "Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: And by him all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39). Abraham believed the promise of God which pointed to Christ.

The possibility of spiritual despondency in the life of the believer in Christ is a reality. Spiritual disheartenment and depression are often used of Satan to lead us away from God into the paths of despair. Even though we never reach despair, our depression may easily bring discredit upon the name of God, and herein lies one of the most serious elements of the peril. Protection against spiritual discouragement is found first in God's continued revelation of Himself to our hearts, and then in our continued response in whole-hearted trust in Him and His Word.