

THE DEATH OF ABRAHAM

Genesis 25:1-26

None of the lives recorded in the Old Testament made a deeper impression or became more prominent in the succeeding ages than that of Abraham. He was the personal, definite and historic founder of the Jewish nation.

What is the choicest privilege in life? It is to be associated with God, as was Abraham; to be lifted up into union with God and into fellowship with His divine purposes of blessing for the world. Abraham is forever associated with God, and He is called "The God of Abraham." Such is the case with every believer. God lifts him out of the mire of sin and raises him to a position of high privilege, transforming his life and enabling him to realize the divine will. God's covenant was at the basis of everything with Abraham.

The one thing needful in life is not success, but sincerity; not glory, but goodness; not honor, but holiness. An earnest and consistent life, lived to the praise of God, is the greatest that can be lived. On the whole, this was the characteristic of Abraham's life. He witnessed to the reality of God and His grace. Faith is life's secret - faith believing God's Word and trusting God Himself. Faith rests on God, relies on God, responds to God, receives from God, rejoices in God and reproduces God's life and character. "By faith" is the simple but all-embracing secret of daily living.

The large number of Keturah's sons and descendants were not appointed by God to be heirs of the promise. This privilege was reserved for Isaac, the only son of Sarah. Since all these names were inserted in the Bible, we may be certain that God knew and cared about all of them and their descendants. About most of them we know nothing, but God knew all and loved them all. They were a cross-section of the human race, every member of which is known and loved by God. He does not forget any of His creatures.

"Abraham gave gifts, and sent them away." These are the two things that God does to those of His creatures who are outside the covenant. He showers gifts upon them. He is kind both to the just and to the unjust. He gives to sinners sunshine and rain, life and breath, and numerous other things. But He does not allow them to interfere with His great purpose of redemption. On the last day they will be told to depart.

While he lived Abraham made all the arrangements that he could. By faith he fell in with the purpose of God. He may have been as fond of all his sons as he had been of Ishmael, but he did not allow his natural affection, or any desire that he might have had to keep his children with him, to interfere with the known purpose of God.

At the ripe age of 175 years Abraham died. You will remember that he was seventy-five when he came into the land. Therefore, he had been in the land one hundred years. That means that he had been working with God for a century. What a life! At the end of that life it says he died in fulness. According to that, Abraham was having a better experience at the end of his life than he had earlier. That is the way it should be with the Christian life. If you have been saved twenty-five years, you ought to have a better understanding and a deeper experience and have more of the fulness now than you have ever had in all those years. We ought to go on from grace to grace, always stepping higher and understanding more.

"Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah." The burying-place was the only ground that Abraham possessed in the land of promise. Death brought the estranged brothers together to drink the cup of a common sorrow. They looked at each other with tear-dimmed eyes, and saw how paltry were the causes of their strife. When other means of reconciliation fail, death frequently makes brethren and friends kind.

The death of Abraham made Isaac the head of the family and put the inheritance into his hands. The blessing was given to Isaac because he was the child of promise. He dwelt by the well the name of which is translated "He that liveth and seeth me." In other words, Isaac dwelt in the presence of and under the eye of the living God. We are to live our lives as those who are always in God's presence. With verse eleven we have the conclusion of the story of Abraham.

Verses twelve to eighteen give us the very short account of Ishmael and his family. We know little, if anything, of the sons of Ishmael except their names. But God knew them through and through, cared for each one of them, and appointed the destiny of each. Many of his descendants were a sheep-breeding people. The Ishmaelites lived on or near the caravan route that connected Egypt with Assyria. Ishmael died at the age of 137 years.

Even though God's workmen die, He carries on His work. "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham that God blessed his son Isaac." God calls His servants home to be with Him, but His purposes abide. Abraham dies, but God lives, and the divine blessing continues to rest upon the son of His servant. Abraham's seed was already experiencing the commencement of the fulfilment of the divine promise, "In thee and thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed." We have now to follow the course of the divine purpose and see how it was carried out; how the unchanging God continued with His servants, blessing them and fulfilling His own word of truth and grace.

With verse nineteen the story of Isaac and his family begins, and it continues to the end of chapter thirty-five. Isaac was experiencing a great disappointment. It was now nearly twenty years since that memorable day when he first saw the wife of God's choice, and yet his home was still without a child. Year after year had passed and there was no fulfilment of the divine promise. This was a real trial and a definite test of his faith. The divine message had been clear that in Isaac, not in Ishmael, Abraham's seed was to be called; and yet now it seemed almost impossible that the promise could be fulfilled. However, God's delays are not necessarily denials. The fulfilment of the promise was not the only element in the divine purpose. The training of faith and the discipline of character was in view. Doubtless God delayed the fulfilment of His promise in order that all human hope which rested solely on natural power should give way, and the divine action might be made still more prominent.

In his difficulty and trial Isaac did the very best possible thing; he took it to the Lord in prayer. That was certainly the right thing to do. Isaac could make his request with confidence because he knew his own mother's experience, and he firmly believed that he could rely on the promises of God. God so moved the forces of nature in answer to prayer that barrenness was overcome. God often moves where science fails. God had not only been testing His servant's faith, but the gift of the children was a definite grant from God which made it still more evident that the promise to Abraham was by grace and not by nature.

Then it was Rebekah's turn to experience distress and perplexity. She could not understand God's dealings with her, and wondered as to the cause of it. Her barrenness for that long period was a blessing after all, because both mother and children would realize all their lives that their birth was an answer to prayer and therefore an act of grace and mercy. It ought to have given them a sense of the purpose of God in their lives.

Rebekah was told that she was to have two sons, not one. The two sons would represent two nations which would be opposed to each other from the very first; and that the elder was to serve the younger. Even before the birth of the boys their mutual antipathy became apparent. They were to be different in character and different in destiny. They were to typify the flesh and the spirit, which are perpetually antagonistic. They were to be the representatives of two nations. The one would be carnal and worldly in outlook. The other would be the unique covenant people. We may be content to know that in all of His elective purposes God acts as He does to bring glory to Himself, to bring the utmost ultimate blessing to all mankind and to prevent any glory accruing to the flesh.

Why the younger son should have been chosen instead of the elder we do not know. This goes to emphasize the simple but significant fact that the order of nature is not necessarily the order of grace. All through, God desired to display the sovereignty of His grace as contrasted with that which was merely natural in human life. The great problem of divine sovereignty is of course insoluble by human intellect. It has to be accepted as a simple fact. God acts "according to the good pleasure of his will."