

A Man for the Hour

By David H. Roper

It would be interesting to know how many of you this past week have been thinking of moving up to Oregon or Washington, buying a farm, and getting out of this God-forsaken place. I am sure that when we think of the moral climate of the Peninsula area, and think what an environment like this is doing to our kids, all of us would like to get out. I have comforted myself recently by realizing that even Jeremiah wanted to get away from Jerusalem and buy a cabin up in the highlands. But I am more and more convinced, regardless of what I would like to do, that God has a purpose for us right here. The fact that we are in this particular place and the particular job that we have, and our home in our particular neighborhood, at least for right now, is God's will. He has a purpose for us. We have come to the kingdom for such a time as this.

J. R. R. Tolkien, in his wonderful little trilogy, tells a story of an impossible assignment given to a little hobbit who shrank from the task because it was far more than he wanted to handle. He was talking to his friend, Gandalf the wizard, bewailing his commission. "Why was I called at a time like this?" he asked. Gandalf said, "You've been called for a time like this." Tolkien is a Christian, and I think he is saying something to us that is said in scripture time and time again. It is no accident that we are living in this environment. We have been called into being, at a time like this, for a particular task. In the next few weeks we will look at some Old Testament accounts of just this sort of thing: men against their time. The more I learn of the background of scripture the more I see that God raised up men at a particular time for a particular purpose.

This morning we want to look at Abraham, who was called "the friend of God", and see why he is given that name, what it means to be a friend of God, and what sort of things will cause us to be called a friend of God. It would be great to have this said of you. I would like to have such a saying as an epitaph on my tombstone, "He was the friend of God." There are some things said of Abraham that tell us what this means and how one becomes the friend of God. Turn to the first three verses of Genesis chapter 12.

Now the Lord said to Abram,

"Go forth from your country, And from your relatives And from your father's house, To a land which I will show you; And I will make you a great nation, And I will bless you, And make your name great; And so you shall be a blessing; And I will bless those who bless you, And from your relatives And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

That is a very familiar portion of scripture, the first mention of the promise given to Abraham that is restated to Abraham a number of times throughout the book of Genesis, and then to the other patriarchs. It recounts the call of Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees. Ur was an ancient city of southern Mesopotamia, the cultural and commercial center of that day, a highly sophisticated, very complex city. There were ziggurats, temples, office buildings, and whatever the ancient equivalent of modern rapid transit was--they had it all. It was a highly literate civilization. Abraham was no farm boy; he was raised in a highly complex civilization.

Abraham was called out of Ur shortly before it was destroyed, traveled through the Fertile Crescent to the northwestern part of Mesopotamia to Haran, and there he remained until his father died. He probably remained there until it was possible for him to leave the family clan, recognizing that he had responsibilities to his father, even though his father was an idolater (probably a moon worshiper), certainly not a follower of the Lord. But after a period of time, we are told, his father died, and when Abraham was seventy-five years of age, he went down into Canaan, and settled there.

Genesis 12 recounts his journey from the northern part of Canaan to the south. There are several things told us in this section. Verses 1-3 relate the specific promises that God made to Abraham. It is interesting to think these things through in terms of historical fulfillment. God said to Abraham, "I will make you a great nation." That certainly has been fulfilled in the numerical growth of the nation of Israel. We have no way of knowing how many millions of Jews have been born since the day of Abraham, four thousand years ago--perhaps billions. There are at least twelve million Jews living today.

But I think God had in mind more than mere numerical expansion. I think he was referring also to the influence that the Jewish people would have on their world. They have been great not only in numbers, but in their impact. Someone told me the other day that twelve per cent of all Nobel prizewinners were Jews. They have been poets, philosophers, scientists, kings, and warriors and have made a tremendously vital contribution to the world, wherever they have gone. Of course, through the Jewish people came our scriptures. Every book in the Old and New Testament was written by a Jew or under the supervision of a Jew. And more importantly for us, as Christians, Jesus the Messiah came through the Jewish nation. So the Jews have truly made a great impact upon the world. This prophecy literally has been fulfilled. God made from Abraham a great nation. That is why those of us who know the Lord ought to love the Jewish people and have a tremendous respect for them.

Second, Abraham is told that God will bless him. The term which is translated "blessing" in our Bibles comes from a word which means "to bend the knee". The meaning comes out of a very interesting social custom. The patriarch of the tribe, knowing that death was imminent, would pass on to the eldest son the inheritance. The young man would kneel before the patriarch, and the patriarch would bestow on him all the goods of the family. He would be given twice the inheritance of the others, the authority and power that the patriarch bore, and the responsibility for the leadership in the tribe. Because this picture is behind the word, "bending the knee", the word itself came to include the idea of wealth and value, of worth, of well-being, and ultimately of happiness, because happiness would be the result of well-being, wealth, or value. The Beatitudes in the New Testament could well be translated, "Happy is the man who seeks first the kingdom of God." "Blessed" encompasses the idea of value that makes one feel peaceful and satisfied and happy. In listening to Ray Stedman's exposition of Romans, it has been interesting to see how synonymous these terms are in scripture. Righteousness, sanctification, holiness, and now this term "blessing" all basically seem to have the same idea of worth or value, a sense of well-being that grows out of the fulfilled, complete life. God said to Abraham, "I am going to bless you, I am going to make your life worthwhile."

Then God gives Abraham the third promise, "I am going to make your name great." Of course, that has been fulfilled, too. Abraham's name is great; it is known around the world. Wherever you find Jews or Moslems or Christians, Abraham's name is great. The interesting thing is that Abraham's name is very common, found throughout the literature of the ancient Near East. In Abraham's time the name Abram was as common as our Smith or Jones. I think God chose Abraham out of that particular culture to be given a name that was borne by perhaps thousands of men. That name, meaning "exalted father", was given to him by his idolatrous father, in commemoration of some god. But Abram was a common name. I think this is God's way of saying that he deals in terms of nobodies, people who are John Does, just common ordinary individuals, with very little significance, and he makes something great of them. He wants you to be somebody. It is not wrong to want your name to be great. It is wrong to promote yourself; but the desire to make an impact upon your society, to be remembered, to do something significant, is not wrong.

God called this man Abraham into a relationship with himself, called him out of a civilization just like ours, just as decadent, just as complicated, just as difficult to live in. He called him out of that environment, called him into a relationship with him, and he promised him, "I will make you a great nation, I will make your name great, and I will bless you." Historically those promises were fulfilled in the life of Abraham and his descendants.

Then Abraham is told, in the last line in verse 2, "be a blessing". It seems as though this is a consequence of the other promises, and it certainly is. But it is a command. "Abraham, in view of what I have given you, be a blessing. Wherever you go, bless the world. Transmit to others the same sense of worth and value and meaning that I have given to you. This blessing is not something you are to receive and enjoy for yourself only, but you are

to be a blessing wherever you go.

Then in verse 3, God tells Abraham that he will bless those who bless him. That is, God will bless those who respond positively to Abraham. God will give to them that sense of worth if they listen and pay heed to Abraham.

But, God says, "He that curses you I will curse." In the New American Standard version, the margin notes say there are two different words that are translated "curse". The first means to take lightly or indifferently; the second means to make sterile. God is saying this: Those who treat you indifferently, who do not take you seriously, will become sterile. That is the opposite of blessing, of fruitfulness. If they respond positively to you and your message, I will bless them. If they ignore you, are indifferent to you, they will become sterile. That is the import of these promises. This, I am sure, is not new to many of you.

What is new is to see something of the background from which these words were spoken, because one of the most significant things about the commission given to Abraham is the condition of his times. It was no different than the condition of our times, if not worse. Historians tell us that three things were developing at this time. I have already mentioned the technological developments of this particular era in history. Vast empires were being built. The Egyptian empire had just gone through its great classical age. They had been building pyramids, writing literature, doing exquisite things in art. The same was true in Mesopotamia. They were doing geometry long before the Greeks and Arabs. They knew how to construct the arch and the vault and the dome. They were doing things that we cannot do today, from an architectural standpoint. It was a highly complex, sophisticated, technological society. That, of course, corresponds closely with our age today.

There was also a moral decline. Their literature shows that, as a people, morality was going by the board. In Egypt they were worshiping the dung beetle. The literature of the area Abraham came from shows a terrible decadence. In Canaan they had a degraded sort of cultic worship that was far worse than anything the world has seen since. There was sacred prostitution of both sexes and homosexual guilds, and most of their literature was frankly pornographic. At a class I attend on Tuesday night we were reading some of this literature and people were turning green. It is horrible stuff. It comes right out of their civilization. But it is no worse than the girly magazines that hit you today when you walk into some stores. That is the way that society was, just like North Beach in San Francisco.

There was also a terrible spirit of despair. I am convinced that God not only has preserved the scriptures for us, but also has preserved secular writing so we can know what was going on in these times. The literature produced in Egypt and Samaria at this time reveals such terrible despair. Man was nothing but junk. No one cared. I want to take a moment to read a couple of things I think you will find interesting. They are brief, but they reveal the spirit of that age. This is a bit of Egyptian writing by a sage who I believe was a contemporary of Abraham. He certainly was of the same period. This sage is having a dialogue with his soul, much as David does in the Psalms. He is blaming his soul for his misfortunes.

To whom can I speak today? Faces have disappeared. Every man has a downcast face toward his fellows. [That is, there is no one who will respond to me in a time of trouble--they have their own problems. They are so burdened themselves that they cannot respond to my need.] Hearts are rapacious. No man has a heart upon which one may rely. There is none righteous. [That is interesting, in view of Romans 3] The land is left to those who do wrong. There is lack of an intimate friend. [That is reminiscent of James Taylor's song, "You've Got A Friend". There is no one who cares.] One has recourse to an unknown, to complain to him. [That is, you have to go to a counselor, you cannot go to a friend--because there are no friends.] There is no one contented of heart. Every man with whom one went, he no longer exists. [That is, my old companions are gone. They no longer exist.] I am laden with wretchedness for lack of an intimate friend. The sin which treads the earth has no end. [Do you know what his conclusion is? The only logical conclusion, he says, is to commit suicide.] Death is in my sight today like the recovery of a sick man, like going out into the open after a confinement. [It is like being sick, and then going out into the sunshine. Death is that sort of release to him at a time like this.]

This is two thousand B.C. It is no different from what you read today. My neighbor, four houses down, a 33-year

old postdoctoral student at Stanford, committed suicide three weeks ago. He had everything to live for, but nothing to live by. That is the spirit of this age. Man is just part of the machine. In "The God Who Is There", Francis Schaeffer tells us that according to the world's philosophy of our day, life has no meaning; there is despair across the land. Another man by the name of Ipu-Wer, a sage who lived at the time of Abraham, wrote the following words. He addressed himself to the king. He really rebukes the king, for he is saying, "King, I wish you were like this." He is talking about the ideal king.

He will bring coolness to the heart. Men shall say, "He is the herdsman of all men." Evil is not in his heart. Though his herds are small, he spends the day caring for them. [Do you see what he is saying? Someone who will care about me, as insignificant as I am, that is the sort of king that we are looking for.] Would that he might perceive the character of men. Ah, that he would know men. Then he would smite down evil. He would destroy the seed of evil, and their inheritance.

It is interesting when you couple that with Genesis 3:15, the promise of the Seed who would crush the head of the serpent. He cries out for someone who will destroy the seed of evil. Listen to this:

There is no pilot in this hour. Where is he today? Is he sleeping? [There is no one to lead us out.]

That was the spirit of the age. With all their immense educational development, technology, literary accomplishments, and their beautiful sculpture, all was despair across the whole Near East. And in that situation, God raises an unknown, a nobody by the name of Abram. He calls him out of that situation and leads him right into another one, into Canaan, which was the very heart of all that decadence and despair, and says, "Abraham, be a blessing." He changes his name from Abram, "exalted father", to Abraham, "father of a multitude." He gives him the promise, gives him a place to minister, and says, "Be a blessing right there." In the midst of its despair, the world needs a pilot who will be a blessing. Now isn't that interesting? Is that not what God calls us to? You see why God has placed you where you are? You are not here to be shocked and turned off and resistant to the evil around you, the cultural things that occur in our environment and turn you away. No, God put you here in order that you might be a blessing, that you might share in this hour, in our times, the wholeness that we have because of our relationship to him.

In verse 4 we learn how Abraham went about fulfilling this commission.

So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

At a time when most of us are picking up our social security checks, he is just getting started on his life's work. Verse 6,

And Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh.

This was a soothsaying oak. The word "Moreh" means teacher. This oak was an ancient Canaanite site where a soothsayer sat, one who was involved with all these Canaanite practices. The scripture underscores this in a number of ways. It says this was a site of Shechem. The word "site" means a shrine, a Canaanite sanctuary devoted to Baal or Asherah or Astarte, or one of the gods or goddesses that they worshiped right by the oak of Moreh. Verses 6b-9 continue,

Now the Canaanite was then in the land. And the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." [This land that belongs to the Canaanites.] So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him. Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on, continuing toward Negev.

Abraham goes from the north to the south, living in a tent and erecting altars and calling on the name of the Lord. The expression, "calling on the name of the Lord" does not mean merely prayer, or even worship. It means

preached in the name of the Lord. That may be a bit strong, but that was the idea. People did not live in tents in those days. We often think of all the people in these ancient times as semi-nomads, living in tents. They did not; they lived in cities. Canaan was dotted with city-states, great cities. Along would come Abraham, and he would make proclamation wherever he went. It means more than preaching; it means he began to live out, through his life and through his word, the relationship that he had with his God. The blessing that he had received, he began to share with others. He did it through a tent and through an altar.

Abraham moved his tent alongside these cities. The people in the cities were permanent dwellers, but Abraham lived in a tent. He never put his roots down. The only ground he bought in Canaan was his family burial ground. He never bought into Canaanite society, never put his roots down, but he was there in the middle of it. I have often thought of the patriarchs living completely aloof from the Canaanite society, certainly not intermarrying with them, having nothing to do with them, never talking to them, just abhorring everything about them. But that is not the picture that you get with Abraham. He moved right into the middle of their society, pitched his tent right next to their towns, and began to make proclamations in the name of the Lord.

I think we believe that only in the subsequent generations was the promise fulfilled that the nation of Israel would be a light to the nations, and ultimately that Christ who was the Light to the nations, would come. But the promise was first fulfilled in the life of Abraham. He made proclamations wherever he went. He spoke by life and by word of the grace that he had received from God. In that sense, he was a blessing. When people believed, when they responded to him, they were blessed. God, in his gracious way, left this patriarch in the land for a hundred years, and then his descendants for another hundred and fifty years, to preach to the Canaanites.

Shortly after this period, God told Abraham that eventually he was going to judge the Amorites, because they were locked into this evil system. But for now, Abraham was to be God's man in the midst of this corrupt civilization, and he was to be a blessing. He was to worship God everywhere he went. The picture that we have here is so subtle and yet so meaningful. He was not rash, he was not rude; he was sensitive to their culture. But wherever he went he worshiped God. He let God be God in him. He received all the blessings that God gave, the wholeness that came from his relationship with God, and he shared that with the Canaanites around him. It is interesting to see how Abraham's family grew. Shortly after this he was able to engage in war with some of the mightiest kings of the Mesopotamian valley. Some of these mercenaries were of his family; but others were evidently Canaanites who were blessed because they blessed Abraham. He was a blessing to his own generation as well as to us. What happens is revealed in the paragraphs that follow. Although we do not have time to develop this fully, we read in verses 10-13 that there was a famine in the land (also very contemporary).

...so Abram went down to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. And it came about when he came near to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, "See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman; and it will come about that when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, 'This is his wife'; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you."

You know what occurred. Because of Abraham's deception, Pharaoh took Sarai into his harem. Later, plagues broke out (verses 17-20).

But the Lord struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go." And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they escorted him away, with his wife and all that belonged to him.

Pharaoh threw Abraham out. He was not welcome. He was a plague. "Let's get rid of this guy before he kills us." Now I do not know about this, but I am going to venture to share a feeling that I have. Nowhere in scripture does it say that Abraham sinned in going to Egypt. As a matter of fact we are told that he went there to sojourn, and the particular term that is used always is used for a temporary residence. I do not think that Abraham sinned in going

to Egypt; but he sinned when he got into Egypt. There is no record of a tent. He does not pitch his tent until he comes back to Bethel, in verses 3 and 4 of chapter 13,

And he went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place of the altar, which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord.

So when he got back, he called on the name of the Lord, and began to make proclamation in the Lord's name. But while he was in Egypt no tent is mentioned. He evidently lived in the city. He got entangled with the life-style of the Egyptians, their way of thinking; he began to deceive and to lie and give away to the same despair that characterized the world. Do you see that? He fidgeted, got anxious, and said, "What am I going to do? They're going to kill me." So instead of acting on the basis of the blessings that God had promised, he tried to manipulate, lie, deceive; there was no altar, he made no proclamations, and they threw him out. He was a curse instead of a blessing.

This is the balance of the Christian life. The only way we can lick this terrible environment is to live in a tent and to build an altar. If we are concerned about our children standing tall in this particular society, then we need to teach them these facts. We are to be in the midst of society, not running from it, not aloof from it, not turned off by its evil, but loving people and being sensitive to their needs. But we are to be living in a tent. We are not to put down roots, identifying with them and their lifestyle; we are to be building altars and worshiping. That is the only thing that will bless our age.

Jesus is such a great example of this balance. There is no sense that he was hustling, anxious, or desperate. There is a quiet obedience to the Father, a restful relationship with God. He could go anywhere and talk to a high Jewish official or a prostitute on the street--he was not embarrassed. He was sensitive to their needs. Everywhere he went he worshiped the Father. And that is what we are called to do. We are to live in a spiritual tent, not put down roots and become a part of the system. We are to erect an altar. We are to make proclamation through our lives, through our quiet obedience to the Father; and, through our words, we are to share with people the blessings that we have in Christ.

God is the one who made us--a bunch of nobodies--somebody. He wants us to have an impact upon our age. That is what we are called to. That is why God called you to this particular place at this particular time. Jesus said, "He who believes in me, out of his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water." You do not have to force the flow, or try hard. If you get up tomorrow morning and say, "God, thank you that you have blessed me. May I be a blessing wherever I go," God will lead you into situations where you will be able to sense their need and share a word in season with weary people. You will be able to point them to the One who is the Pilot for this hour.

Someone was telling me the other day about Antonio Fellini's movie, the "Satyricon." I have not seen that particular movie, but it is evidently a critique of the classical age. Fellini is saying that if you think the classical age was the place to live, forget it. Life was horrible back then. There is one scene at the end of the movie where the hero is standing over his fallen friend, killed in meaningless combat, and says to the gods, "O gods, how far he lies now from his destination." My friend who was relating the story tells me how this haunts him. It is the condition of our age. This is what men feel today. How far they lie from their destination. God has given every man an idea of what he ought to be, and how to be fulfilled; and each man knows how far short he falls. We see that in Romans 3 "All have sinned, and fall short of God's expectation." We fall short of our expectation; we know it. There is only one answer: the blessing of Abraham. God can fulfill us. By knowing God through Jesus Christ as Lord, every man can be fulfilled, be made whole, be blessed. God has put us in this age, to be that sort of blessing.

Father, we thank you for this reminder again that we are in the right place, that we have not somehow missed our calling, that we are here where you want us to be, and that it is your desire that we be a blessing in this age. That is the hunger of our heart, and we ask that you would fulfill it. Thank you that we can ask in confidence, because you have promised that, and we can ask it in expectation, knowing that you are going to fulfill every desire of our heart. We pray this week, as