

AH, FATHER ABRAHAM!

I do it regularly, on the first of January every year – review the mess of the previous year and declare loudly that it was *not good enough*, that this year would be different, that I am going to *turn over a new leaf!* All very commendable. The depressing thing is that, by the second of January, the new leaf is as blotted as the old one.

And that is exactly what happened after the Flood. Mankind, presented with a cleansed earth, proceeded to mess it up as badly as it had been before. Ignoring God's word to Noah to spread out and replenish the earth, men banded together to build a city with a high tower to "reach to the heavens" in order to establish a name for themselves and a way of life entirely of their own choosing. But man's attempt to reach up to God is never successful: here God came down in judgement and by the simple means of confusing their language, ensured that they fulfilled His will as they scattered from Babel over the face of the earth.

Read Genesis 11:1-9. Does this mean that the judgement of the Flood had no effect on mankind? Was it a waste of time for Noah to build the ark?

One of the cities rebuilt after the Flood was Ur. At that time the Persian Gulf cut much deeper into the Euphrates valley and Ur was virtually a seaport on the river. By Abraham's time Ur was the most magnificent city in the world, with a high level of culture and civilisation, a centre of manufacture, farming, shipping and extensive trade. It had a huge library and Abraham would have been well educated. The royal cemeteries excavated in the early 20th century yielded jewellery and art treasures of unbelievable beauty. But it was a godless city, worshipping not the one true God but the moon-god and his goddess.

Yet God had not forgotten man. He had another covenant to make, this time with one man whom He had chosen, to be the patriarchal head of a family, the founder of a great indestructible nation, the progenitor of kings, and the ancestor of the One in whom all other covenants would find their fulfilment – none other than the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

Time to Fly the Nest.

In Acts 7:2,3 the martyr Stephen declares, "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. 'Leave your country and your people,' God said, 'and go to the land I will show you.'"

How do you think God "appeared to Abraham", given that his father was an idol worshipper? How does He "appear" to us today? What inducements would Abraham have had to stay in Ur? What advantages would he have seen in leaving Ur?

It is interesting to speculate how God conveyed this message, and how Abraham recognized Him as someone to be trusted and obeyed. If we study a time-line from the time of Creation, we see that Adam was alive for 243 years after Methuselah was born, Methuselah died the year of the Flood, and Noah died about the time that Abraham was born in 2766 B.C. So Abraham could have learnt about God from some godly forebears – from Shem, perhaps, who was still living 75 years after Abraham entered Canaan.

We are used to the concept now of the younger generation moving out to live their own life, and fail to recognize the huge upheaval that historic call from God would bring. How casually a

young man or woman may leave home these days: with nothing more than a couple of sports bags and maybe a guitar slung over one shoulder, they are enviably mobile. Quite the norm to share with some mates to divvy up the rent, and equally convenient to pay a duty call home when one has run out of clean clothes or has a sudden yen for mum's roast dinner!

By contrast, the exodus of Terah and all his clan – which evidence indicates would have been quite large - would have been a major operation. It is interesting to note that God called Abraham, yet it was his father Terah, declared in Joshua 24:2 to be a worshipper of idols, who made the move to go to Canaan. In that patriarchal society it could be that Abraham, in spite of God's word to him, would have considered branching out on his own to be an act of rebellion. Maybe Terah's decision to go would have been a confirmation to Abraham of God's command. We still wonder why Terah chose to leave the many benefits of life in Ur to travel to an unknown destination. Travelling north-west along the Euphrates valley they came to Haran and Terah decided they had gone far enough. It was a flourishing caravan city and also worshipped the moon-god, so I guess Terah felt at home and decided to stay.

We learn from Stephen in Acts 7:4 that Abraham stayed with Terah in Haran until his father's death at the age of 205 years. We might think that Abraham should not have hesitated in his journey to the land God had promised him, yet with family ties so strong it was possibly obligatory on him to stay. Today it is a problem for many enthusiastic young people to follow God and yet not upset the apple-cart at home and there arises a tension between putting God's kingdom first while still honouring one's parents. The point is, that *God waited!* Sometimes the blessing may be delayed, but God is never unmindful of our particular circumstances. He understands.

How would you, (or did you) deal with problems arising from divided loyalties between family, business or friends, and the way you feel God is leading you?

Promise with a Challenge.

Read Genesis 12:1-8.

Abraham already had a large amount of stock. How much part did commonsense play in his decision to wander south and then settle? Do you think that was part of God's guidance?

So Abraham left Haran and turned southward to complete his journey to the land of Canaan. It would not have been easy, to leave all that was familiar and comfortable, and to venture out into completely unknown and dangerous territory, trusting only in Divine guidance. Yet with the cost came a blessing and God's first declaration of the covenant He would make with Abraham - "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." Genesis 12:2,3)

Compare Genesis 11:4 with 12:2. Men sought to make a name for themselves, but it was God who promised to make the name of Abraham great. Which one has the greater name today? Ambition is a natural part of human nature: therefore, is it sinful? What makes it wrong, or right? Does the motive justify it?

But note that Abraham was not only blessed for his own sake: it was so that he might be a blessing to others – in fact, "all peoples on earth." It is an impressive list – the Jews who have benefited our world. Nobel laureates, historians, scientists, philosophers, doctors, economists, musicians, writers, artists, lawyers. But by far the greatest fulfilment of God's promise, of course, is the fact that, descending from Abraham, Jesus himself would come into the world and redeem all peoples, Jew and Gentile alike.

So Abraham, in faith and obedience, took off, at the age of seventyfive, for the land of Canaan, taking with him his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot, who had become Abraham's responsibility through the death of his own father, Abraham's brother Haran. At Shechem he stopped and there God appeared to him with another clause in the covenant – "To your offspring I will give this land." Abraham's response was to build an altar to this God who was leading him. As we follow Abraham's story we can see that God made him several promises as He drew him nearer to Himself, once he had taken that initial step of obedience. Salvation comes through one decisive step but it is not a static state, as we continue our walk with God and grow nearer to Him in spirit.

Genesis 12:8 tells us Abraham moved on towards Bethel "and pitched his tent" – perhaps in these hills he found good pasture for his flocks: perhaps Sarah was enraptured with the view: perhaps he felt at last he had come home! Still he was responding to the God who had sought him: this time he built another altar and pro-actively "called on the name of the Lord." And so was developing the wonderful fellowship between God and man that caused James to label Abraham "the friend of God." (James 2:23).

Egyptian Interlude.

Read Genesis 12:9-20, 13:1-4.

We might imagine that Abraham was satisfied after his arduous journey. But it seems he was not. For some reason, as verse 9 goes on to tell us, he decided to move southward again towards the Negev. Was he searching for yet more land, better pastures for his herds? If so, he would have been disappointed to find only dry wasteland and then, to cap it all, a famine. What was he to do? Was this the glorious heritage God had promised him? There was only one commonsense thing to do – migrate to Egypt, where the ever-flowing Nile allowed for abundant crops.

Was it really commonsense, or a lack of faith in God's promise to him? God had said in 12:7 "To your offspring I will give this land": does that mean Abraham should have been content to stay there?

But once in Egypt a small problem arose in the person of Abraham's wife Sarah, still beautiful at sixtyfive years of age, even without the help of l'Oreal. The Bible records Abraham's charming compliment to her, "I know what a beautiful woman you are." Of course, he was just buttering her up before asking her a favour – simply to tell a little half lie and say she was Abraham's sister instead of his wife. Then, when the local lads admired her they could take her at will and leave Abraham unmolested and respected. The age of gallantry, no doubt.

Sure enough the Egyptians were quick to tell Pharaoh about this exotic beauty and he promptly took her as his own, Sarah apparently meekly moving into his palace without even a cry of "Votes for Women!" But God mercifully took a hand in the situation by sending a serious disease on all the household of Pharaoh, who quickly twigged that something was amiss. It is sad when a pagan has to rebuke a follower of God. Scornfully Pharaoh accused Abraham of deceit and ordered him and all his tribe out of the country.

Chastened, Abraham moved back north, right back to Bethel "where he had first built an altar. There he called on the name of the Lord." (Genesis 13:4). In other words, back in repentance right to the place where he could renew fellowship with his God.

When we make a mistake, does God just write us off, or does He give us another chance? What must we do to receive forgiveness and restoration?

Trouble Looms.

Read Genesis 13:5-18.

But that chapter goes on to tell us that trouble was brewing because the land could not sustain the combined livestock of both Abraham and Lot – sheep, cattle, donkeys and camels, not to mention a troupe of male and female servants. They would have to separate, and graciously Abraham gave the choice of land to his younger companion: at least he could be thoughtful of his nephew! Lot, not particularly made of patriarchal stuff, plumped for the lush green pastures of the Jordan plain, leaving Abraham the drier land of Canaan.

But God did not leave his servant unrewarded. Genesis 13:14-17 record more detail of His gracious covenant. “Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.” (That word “forever” springs to mind when we look at a map of the Middle East with its rich and powerful Arab nations, and tiny Israel still surviving in the centre of them all.) “I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, than your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.” This covenant was unconditional – the land was to be granted not only to Abraham but to his countless descendants for all time. Abraham’s response was to settle at Hebron, where once again he built an altar to the Lord in acknowledgement of the greatness and the faithfulness of his God, to whom alone he owed worship and allegiance.

In Genesis 14:1-12 we find that Lot’s choice of the lowland plains was a bad one, leading him into association with the wicked city of Sodom and then to capture by Sodom’s enemies. Lot was always a thorn in Abraham’s side. Should Abraham have left him to his own devices?

Read Genesis 14: 13-20.

Abraham, not only a farmer but a brilliant military strategist, marshalled the 318 trained men born in his own household, attacked the captors by night and rescued Lot, his family and all his goods. On his triumphant return he was met by a rather mysterious Bible character, Melchizedek, described as priest of God Most High, to whom Abraham paid the homage of one-tenth of all the plunder and in return received another blessing – this time from Melchizedek.

Would Abraham have felt encouraged by being blessed after his rescue of Lot? Have you felt God’s blessing after some sacrificial service for Him?

Read Hebrews 7:1-4, and verses 17 and 22. Melchizedek is described as a type of Christ, and Abraham acknowledged his lordship. How does he foreshadow Christ? Read verses 23-28 as a guide.

Read Genesis 14:21-24, 15:1.

Abraham may well have been fearful of reprisals from the kings he had vanquished in order to rescue Lot, and he had deliberately not gained anything from the battle except Lot’s freedom. But God, always gracious, appeared in a vision to Abraham to reassure him and to give him the best reward of all, His own protection and provision.

Why did Abraham refuse to accept any reward from the king of Sodom? What reward did he receive instead? What is our best reward for serving God?

Forgotten Promise?

Read Genesis 15:1-21.

But Abraham still had a problem – he had no son, no heir for whom God’s promises could be realised. Back came God’s reassurance – a son coming from his own body would indeed inherit those promises and his descendants would be as countless as the stars in heaven. So we have the lovely verse 6 of chapter 15, “Abraham believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness.” Yet in verse 8 the very human Abraham expressed some doubt, whereupon the Lord graciously gave him a dramatic sign that His word would come true, and a repetition of His covenant with Abraham in verses 18 and 19, detailing the extent of the land God would give him – a prophecy fulfilled in the reigns of David and Solomon.

Look up Romans chapter 4. Read verse 1-3. Does that apply today, and only to the Jews? Read verse 16. Are you a “child of Abraham” by faith? Then read verses 23-25. Through Whom is the promise made effective for all believers everywhere, for all time?

Read Genesis Chapter 16, where we see the mess caused by Sarah, who, as human as the rest of us, decided to give God a helping hand. So, the son was going to come from Abraham’s body, was he? Okay, what’s good for the goose is good for the gander: Sarah would lend Abraham out to some fecund lass who could present him with the son he needed. Her handmaid Hagar would do – no matter that she was an Egyptian, picked up no doubt during that ill-fated sojourn in Egypt. This was quite the custom at the time, and poor Hagar had no say in the matter.

But human nature does not change, and it was only natural that, once pregnant, Hagar should despise her barren mistress. With shameful unfairness Sarah blamed her cooperative husband, who weakly acquiesced to Sarah’s taking vengeance on the hapless Hagar. Fleeing in distress, Hagar was upheld by an angel of the Lord, who bid her return and be subject to her mistress. The angel’s prophecy about what sort of man her son Ishmael would be, “a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone ... he will live in hostility toward all his brothers” - is seeing its ongoing fulfilment even today. Better to let God do His own job in His own way!

It is always tempting to take matters into our own hands. What test can we apply to help us discern God’s will whether to wait or act? How much judgement must we bear as the consequences of our wrong choice? How can we live with the mistakes of the past? What solution does God allow us?

Promise Renewed.

Read Genesis chapter 17.

But in spite of their human interference, God did not renege on His promise. Genesis 17 tells how the Lord appeared yet again to confirm with Abraham His covenant that he would be the father of many nations, sealing the promise by changing his name from Abram to Abraham (meaning “father of many”) and Sarai’s name to Sarah, she who was to bear the promised son.

There were conditions: Abraham must be blameless in his walk with God, and he and his descendants must serve God and Him alone. This was the typical “suzerain-vassal” covenant as made by a powerful king with a subordinate, where the king would promise provision and protection in exchange for loyalty and tribute from the lesser power.

We have just seen that Abraham’s faith was counted as righteousness. Did he need to do good works too? Look up James 2:21-24. Would you agree that the only action that counts is the action that springs from faith? Do you keep this balance in your own life?

In Genesis 17: 6 and 7, the promise God made that “kings will come from you. I will establish My covenant as an everlasting covenant” finds its fulfillment in the seventeen kings of Judah whose descendants ran in an unbroken line to Christ, the King who will reign forever. God gave the land of Canaan as an everlasting possession to the descendants of Abraham and the generations to come, but He went further than that. He also gave *Himself*, as verse 8 says, “I will be their God.” The unfolding story throughout the Old Testament of the nation of Israel shows how He faithfully kept that promise, in love, guidance, patience, mercy and discipline.

The sign of this covenant was to be circumcision and the obedient Abraham carried out the order on all his household that very day, beginning with himself. We are never too old to learn and follow some new truth from God. In this case it was at some cost to Abraham but he steadfastly obeyed God and set an example for all his household. Why did God stipulate that circumcision should be carried out on the eighth day of a boy’s life? Simply because He had already made provision for that commandment – on the eighth day the blood-clotting agent in a baby rises to 110%, falling back to normal the next day. God knew what He was doing!

In Genesis 20 the unbelievable happened. Abraham once more moved south into the Negev region and settled for a while in Gerar. There he saw Abimelech, king of Gerar, as a threat because of the still beautiful Sarah, and once again asked her to pose as his sister, not his wife. You would have thought that, with God’s assurance that Sarah would be the honoured vessel through whom He would fulfil His promise, Abraham would be eager to guard the purity of his wife – but apparently not at the cost of his own skin! How very human was Abraham – as human as we who take what God has consecrated for His own purposes, and sully it with our lesser desires! But in the grace of God Abimelech was kept from sinning, and once again this “pagan” returned the untouched Sarah to her husband with a sharp rebuke and even a handsome gift!

And so we come to ***Genesis 21***, where, twentyfive years after His initial promise, with Abraham at the age of one hundred and Sarah at ninety, God delivered on that promise and Sarah bore a son. His name, as chosen by God, was Isaac, significantly meaning “he laughs.” Isaac was not only the fulfilment of their dreams, the bringer of personal happiness and joy – he was the Covenant Child, the living symbol of God’s promise kept, the next big step in the Abrahamic line whose ultimate destiny was the Messiah, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Why do you imagine Abraham - and Sarah! – had to wait 25 years for God’s promise to be fulfilled? Have you ever waited that long to see God working in your life? Was it worth the wait?

Prayer and Praise.

Thank God that, through Abraham’s faithfulness, God’s promise to him has come right down to us today. Thank Him for the Jewish nation that has preserved this story which tells us so much about God, and pray for the Jews as God’s people still. Pray that our actions will always reflect our faith in the promise-keeping God.