

History of Abram

by John Nelson Darby

The sermon explores Abram's journey of faith, emphasizing the importance of God's promises, worship, and personal communion with Him.

Scripture: Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 13:14-15, Genesis 14:18-20, Genesis 15:6, Genesis 17:1-2, Genesis 18:17-19, Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6-9, Hebrews 11:8-10, James 2:23

Topics: "Faith and Obedience", "Personal Communion with God"

Description

John Nelson Darby explores the life of Abram as a profound illustration of the life of faith, emphasizing the distinction between public worship and personal communion with God. He highlights Abram's calling from darkness into the light of God's promises, his journey towards the land of promise, and the importance of trusting God amidst challenges. Darby notes that true worship arises from a personal relationship with God, which is cultivated through faith and obedience. The sermon also reflects on Abram's failures and restoration, illustrating the necessity of renouncing worldly influences to fully embrace God's blessings.

Transcript

I have been particularly interested latterly in the history of Abram; and I send you a brief outline of what has struck me in this history as a picture of many interesting elements of the life of faith. There is a difference between public worship and personal communion brought out in this history, and the intimacy of the latter, and the ground on which it is built, which have especially occupied me. But I can, on account of other occupations, only give the outline.

His life, in as far as it is presented to us as a life of faith, begins by his calling, when in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charan. The God of glory appeared to him, says Stephen. In a word, it was God's revelation of Himself to him, by which he was called into the path of life. Object of divine election, Jehovah's revelation of Himself to him calls him out of darkness and subjection to the power of Satan (for his family worshipped other gods beyond the flood out of the land of promise), and gives to him the promises, in connection with a faith which set out, on the simple word of God, to be led where God Himself should shew him his country and his home. He was to quit all for the word and promise of God. This is the first element and character of the life of faith. The Lord gives sufficient of the details of this history to shew that, till Abram had fully broken with all God called upon him to leave, he could not, though he had left much, and might plead the best claims of nature for the rest, attain the end for which he had left all the rest. He had left Ur, come to Charan, and dwelt there. However, after Terah's death, he left Charan, as the

Lord had said to him, and now comes to Canaan. This begins the second part of the life of faith: that which passes in the place of promise.

In that life we are called on to set out, trusting God towards the place of promise and hope, called by the blessed revelation of God to our souls. And we are called to walk with God in this place of blessing and communion into which we are entered in spirit. This is the second part of our Christian life. It is found here (chap. 12:6-8). Abram walks up and down in the place of promise - to us heavenly places. The Canaanite, the hostile power of evil, is still in the land. Joshua will, in time, root them out; but for Abram's walk of faith, they are still in the land, while he walks there in hope. How true it is, and how far we are from always sufficiently bearing it in mind.

135 The Lord appears to Abram; this is the ground of worship, as well as of walk. He does not evidently appear to him to cause him to set out, leaving all; for He appears to him when he is, though a stranger there, in the land to which God has brought him. But He appears to draw out to Himself the affections of him whom He has brought there. But it is not in that condition Abram is to possess or inherit it. He would have lost much by such a possession, his being a stranger there led his heart and hope, through grace, to a city which had foundations - a better country, that is, a heavenly. We can surely say, it was expedient for us that Christ went away. Oh, how sweet the heavenly associations and hopes to which He has drawn us, and into which He has introduced us by the Spirit He has sent down on His going up on high. How truly He has set man in heavenly places with God. How far better than the establishment of an earthly kingdom, however glorious it may be. There is something peculiarly excellent and blessed in a life of faith, dependent on God for enjoyment in what is not seen. A man of the world, one, at least, whose life was passed as such, a sage of their own, has said, "Whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future, predominate over the present, exalts man in the scale of intellectual being." How much more so when it is God who fills it all up, and that in the creating and unfolding of affections, which are awakened and formed by Christ and have Him, and the divine perfectness which is in Him, for their object and their source.

But to return to the history we are studying. The Lord appeared - made Abram feel practically that he was not to have the land - God, and confidence in Him was his portion - he was a stranger there; promise as to this, was his proper portion, but in his seed he should inherit it. There was a settled purpose of God, and this purpose he was thus to know. How blessed, thus, to rest in God, our heart founded on communications from Himself, and that He can bless us in teaching us to trust Him enough to live the life of faith, to be content with Him. The heart of a stranger, who has God with him, is, of all, the best in this world; it was, in the most perfect way and degree, Christ's judgment God will execute to introduce others into actual blessing; we have all with Him, and now, and indeed for ever, in Himself. We have no need of judgment to enjoy our portion, though we know judgment will issue and work deliverance for all else.* This is the church's place, and it is a very blessed one - she suffers with Christ. This position in Abram's case drew out worship. It is its true and real power for us. It was to the God who appeared to him that he raised his altar: the revelation of Himself by God in the place of promise, draws out worship; as the revelation of Himself, when we are far from it, sets us in the way to the place of rest that God is to shew us. It is this blessed revelation of Himself by God putting us into conscious relationship with Himself, flowing from what is known to faith only, which forms the ground of worship. It is His favour, direct interest in us, His having brought us by His revelation into connection with Himself, which in and by this confidence creates worship. Our worship answers to the revelation we thus have, while it is founded on the grace of it. The revelation of His purpose, and of the way of the accomplishment of His promise, accompanies and makes part of the revelation on which it is founded. But this puts the soul into permanent intercourse with God of this kind.

The worship, to Abram, realizes the various parts of the home promised to faith, to be possessed when pilgrimage is over; and when he realizes the enjoyment of it, his pilgrimage, his altar, is renewed. He goes around the place of promise and hope, where he is yet a stranger; but when he pitches his tent in the enjoyment of it, then he raises his altar too. This is a sweet and happy picture of the life and occupation of faith. These two elements - the setting out on the journey towards the place of promise, and the happy acknowledgement of God in it, form the two parts of the life of faith.

{*Note how this brings out in its true character the rapture of the church. If my portion is in anyway in this world, evil must be removed by judgment in order to enjoy it. But if I am entirely a stranger and a pilgrim' having no portion here, evidently there is no need of such judgment for my enjoyment of my portion. God Himself is this portion, for I have renounced all here. He has only to take me up to enjoy when the time is come in His counsels to do so.}

136 The rest of this chapter, on which I do not enlarge, shews the failure of the believer, who is apt, if the place of promise does not afford him all for present need which he wants, instead of consulting God, to go down to the world for help. This, though accompanied by outward prosperity - as it has been with the church - leads to further unfaithfulness. Abram has no altar here, nor till he returns to the altar he made at the beginning, where he had last had one - no new communion - no further acquaintance with the place of promise. All he can do is through grace to get back to the place he has left.

137 When Abram had returned to the altar he had left to go southward, he again gets into worship. Here, though perhaps the prosperity of Egypt had given occasion to the strife and sorrow, the conduct of Abram is beautiful and characteristic of one having the heavenly portion. If Egypt had betrayed him, it had at least taught him a lesson. Returned with this experience into communion with God, he has enough in this to give up all the rest in grace. There is a moment when our own faith is put to the test: often we walk by that of others; but our own state must be tried. Lot, a believer, chooses the world (and contrary to every right feeling), and vexes his righteous soul in the midst of what was the very object of coming judgment. As soon as the worldly-minded believer and his portion are together, the distinction, made by faith and faithfulness in the disinterestedness of heavenly happiness and grace, where God was a sufficient portion, was given effect to by the worldly wish of Lot. Abram is told to go over the whole place of promise, and know its length and breadth; northward, southward, eastward, and westward, all its extent - it all was his. That is, when once the heart has left all that selfishness would have of what might seem within the limits of the land, but was taken by the carnal heart to please itself, the full extent and blessed details of what we are to enjoy with God is made known to us - and experimentally. We have here, then, after the general character of the life of faith, and failure in it, an important experimental element of it: after failure and restoration to communion by grace, and complete victory over, and renunciation of the world, such a sense of the value of the heavenly and unseen things, as frees from the influence of the world. The consequence is, an escape from being entangled in what is the scene and object of judgment, and a full experimental knowledge of the inheritance of faith. Note, Abram escapes, and gets the increased privilege by walking in the path of faith, where there is no perception of the consequences. Abram had yielded through weakness and want of faith in trial; but his heart was right, and after the trouble his fault had occasioned, and his restoration, the very effect of this humbling experience is to give the superiority to all worldly influence which saves him entirely from the fatal mistake of Lot.* Here the Lord, though He does not appear as when He called, or revealed Himself in the land of promise, speaks to Abram. And Abram, after removing his tent, builds an altar where he comes to sojourn. For our worship is in the measure in which we enter into the details of our portion from God.

{*We have failure in each of these features of divine life. He does not quit his father's house, and therefore stops half-way, and is no way in the place of promise; and he goes down into Egypt. In the third case, Lot represents the failure, and Abram maintains his heavenly ground.}

138 We have here three, in a certain sense four, of these altars, in what we have hitherto read. Firstly, the one built on the Lord's revelation of Himself in the land, which gives the general character of the worship of faith. Secondly, one shewing the permanent abiding character of worship in his strangership. In Egypt, out of the place of promise and faith, none; then (what made me say, in a certain sense a fourth), the return to the place of strangership and worship in the place of promise; and, lastly, when his exercised heart had renounced all but God, and God (the worldly-minded believer having chosen the well-watered plain) had made him realize all the extent of the scene of promise, he builds an altar there to worship the God who had bestowed all on him, assured him in the possession of it, and given him the present knowledge of and enjoyment of it in hope.

But renouncing the world is the path to victory over it; the choosing of it is captive subjection to its power. Lot is carried away captive by the powerful ones of the earth, along with those among whom his worldly propensities had led him. Abram, free and walking in the faith of God, has more force from Him than all the kings, conquerors or conquered, and delivers Lot and the kings who could not help themselves. The full victory of faith is here presented - ours is not with carnal weapons, when it is gained; and what is figured will only be fully accomplished in connection with the Jews. This brings Abram under Melchizedek blessing, God taking the character, which is properly millennial, of possessor of heaven and earth. Praise and blessing constitute the priestly work of Melchizedek. This is the victory of faith, and the full blessing of Christ (priest and king over God's universal dominion) being established - all enemies being overcome. But it historically gives occasion, not merely to renouncing the world completely, but to the refusal of the least dependence on it. Abram depends on God for wealth and everything. In such a relationship - receiving from the world, depending on it, for advantage as its debtor, is pollution. Thus closes this part of Abram's history, and the worship which belongs to it.

139 Details of the most interesting kind are given in what follows; but they are the development of his personal relationship with God. What we have examined is, in its general characters, the public life of faith. What follows enters into the private and personal communion which belongs to the life of faith, through the divine grace which visits it. We do not find worship, but what we may be allowed reverently to call intercourse. In one place we are told God talked with Abram. Abram, no doubt, fell on his face, the fitting position in such intercourse; and even when he, in all liberty, pleaded with Jehovah for others, when Jehovah appeared to him in the form of a man, it was with the fullest recognition of the divine glory of Him with whom he spoke. Still it was not worship, but communications from Jehovah to Abram, and in return Abram's with Him.

This has evidently a peculiar character of blessing and privilege - a grace, an intimacy to which our highest and most adoring attention is due. And if we have the lovely picture here of this gracious familiarity of God with the earliest and, so to speak, infant movings of faith, surely in the riper knowledge of all His ways, and of all His grace, which we have by redemption, and through the gift of His Holy Spirit, this privilege is not lost. It may have a deeper character - a more reverent one, as filled with a deeper knowledge of God - more confiding, because His love is better known - less familiar, but more intimate; still it exists, and the gracious picture of it in Abram's case is not lost for our instruction. It has a Christian, not a patriarchal character; but the same God who loves us, and the same faith that trusts Him, meet through His grace to receive the gracious communications of that love, and to tell our wants and the feelings of our hearts, and

the wants of others too, to One on whom we know how to count. These communications have a very different character, both on the side of the Lord, and (in consequence of that) on the side of Abram, but they were all what I may call personal.

140 The first occasion of these communications from God was Abram's definite refusal to take anything from the world, even where he had rendered it the greatest possible service. He would have nothing to say to it from a thread to a shoe-latchet. His faith had got the victory over its power. His value for his own relationship with God refused its proffered reward. God meets this in Abram, and says, I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward. His defence in battle had been God; his abundant reward, not the poor and perishing gifts of a world, to which its debtor after all always owes something - at least, acknowledges that he will receive from it - but the Lord Himself. Such, in general, is the blessed announcement made by the word of the Lord to Abram.

There is a difference between the communications of chapter 15 and chapter 17. God does not, so to speak, personally visit Abram in chapter 15. He communicates to him what He is for him in a vision, a great and special blessing, but evidently different from the personal revelation of chapters 17 and 18. The two communications have this essential difference: in chapter 15 God declares what He is for Abram, in chapter 17 what He is: and this last leads to much deeper communion, and a larger unfolding of grace and imbuedness with the mind of God, than the revelation of chapter 15. This latter makes Abram's wants and desires the measure of His blessings, or, at least, they characterise these latter. Hence Abram is thrown back upon himself. God meets him there in full grace, but meets his wants and wishes. Now this is most precious. God shews His most tender condescension. He inspires us with confidence: we can tell Him our wants, open our hearts to Him, in consequence; and all the communication that results, while it makes us know God better, leads us up to that knowledge of Him which makes us see our own littleness in what we have presented to Him as the object of our desires, and gives us to find our joy in Himself, and draw our feelings towards others from Himself, and our assimilating enjoyment of what He is for ourselves.

Thus, when God had spoken to Abram of His being his shield, and his reward, Abram says, "What wilt thou give me?" The first want of his heart is presented to God. God had told Abram He Himself was his reward; but where our feelings and need are referred to, if God presents Himself as our portion, the human heart will turn, by the very confidence that is produced in it, to its own thoughts and its own desires. Abram's reward led Abram to Abram's wants and feelings and wishes. Though God, and even because God, had said He was his reward, the love and goodness was felt, but did not put aside, nor lead Abram, beyond, what Abram desired to have from that goodness, if it was there. God knew all this, and used it for the occasion of bringing out His own thoughts and purposes. This is the grace, then, that comes down to the heart of man himself, and draws it out in confidence towards God, but thereby leaves it in the circle of its own wants and feelings; but its wants and feelings, such as they can exist in connection with God; but then, remark, not going beyond this world, beyond what man wants as conscious of his position here.

141 The interference of God in goodness to us in this sphere is full of sweetness, but it is not in its object heavenly. As a man upon this earth, Abram wanted a son to continue his name, and posterity to inherit and enjoy the promises. God was fully minded to give this. The natural wish and desire of Abram, Abram connects with the testimony of divine favour. God had, in the revelation which Abram had received when in the land, promised a seed to Abram connected with the inheritance of the land. Abram naturally wished to associate the promised blessing and glory with his own descendants. If his desire had been merely to enjoy God in heaven, such a wish had had no place; the moment his thoughts rested on earth, and God had promised him blessing there, such wish came in. It fell in with God's purposes, but took, necessarily, if

the blessing was to be made precise, an earthly character. Our wants, whatever character they may have, necessarily have their place on earth. We may bring God into them, but it is into them we bring Him, and there indeed He is gracious enough to come.

I have said, that the answer of God when making His promise precise, necessarily took an earthly character. The fifteenth chapter of Genesis makes this evident. The numerous seed and limits of the land are given. Some principles are also given full of blessing, but which characterise the position of Abram; most blessed in themselves, but still meeting man's need and weakness, not properly communion in the truest and highest sense. God was communicating with Abram, and Abram speaking with Him; but it was not communion in the sense of the enjoyment of God Himself, and in conformity to His nature. Righteousness is imputed to Abraham; blessed truth! How could he stand before God, or be the blessed one of God, without it? He believes in the power of resurrection in God, and in His faithfulness to perform His promise, and it is counted to him for righteousness. It is the first time this great and all-important truth is taught in Scripture, or even the word for it found; and, I doubt not, intentionally so, though we know there were believers before. But now, in the great root of the tree of promise, this fundamental truth was to be brought out. The very ground of man's blessing was laid here, but it was still meeting man's need. He could not be before God or inherit the promise without it. He had it not in himself. God counts his faith to him as such.

142 Next, to assure the feeble heart of man, God binds Himself by covenant. Most gracious condescension, indeed; but what does it meet in this wondrously condescending grace? - "Whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it?" God then, while nature and man pass through the dark shadow of the power of death (and this Christ as man has done for us), passes between the pieces, and binds Himself in a covenant of death to accomplish this desire of the believer's heart, according to His own thoughts; and promise lays the sure foundation of it in Christ. The very limits of the land are pointed out, the power of those that held them is naught. In this very remarkable passage, we learn the blessed and perfect assuring of man in the righteousness of faith, and the immutability of the covenant; only it is not communion in life, but earthly, and meeting need, though the thing given was pure grace. God has a people, and He gives them a law.

Chapter 16 I pass over. It is not the life of faith, but the effort of flesh to obtain the blessing in its own way; the promised blessing, but under law. It is, typically, legal Israel. (Compare Gal 4.)

In chapter 17 we have the revelation of God Himself to Abram. Jehovah appears, but He does not appear as formerly, to call on him to leave all, and come to the land; nor merely to communicate promises. He reveals Himself in what was to be His own name of relationship with Abram - Himself under this name - and gives Abram a name in connection with Himself. This is the highest way of revelation. To us it is the communication of a still better name, a far nearer relationship. The Father's name is revealed to us by the Son, and we are called sons. This is the best and highest possible revelation of God in relationship, for it is that of the Father to Christ the Son Himself. Still we have, as to Abram, this kind of revelation. God does not here reveal what He is for Abram, but what He is. Abram was to walk before Him known in that character. "I am the Almighty God - walk before me." Hence Abram falls on his face, and does not ask for anything to meet the desires of his own heart. God talks with him. Such is the character of this wondrous interview. Jehovah reveals His intentions, and gives Abram a name in connection with them. God does not bind Himself through sacrifice, He only assures to Abraham the various blessings. But He puts Abraham into the condition of intercourse with Himself, as belonging to Himself, by the sign of the death of the flesh (there, of course, in figure, still he is thus placed in the enjoyment of the relationship). Thus God is

revealed to Abraham, and Abraham brought into personal relationship with God. He knows Him as none else does.

143 God is about to judge the world (chap. 18), and He now appears to Abraham to give him the immediate promise of the son as about to come. He comes in human form, with two others, angels also in human form. These latter went on to Sodom to execute judgment on it, and at the same time deliver Lot. But Abraham saw at once who approached, and would [detain] Him awhile. With exquisite propriety, he does not (while shewing unfeigned reverence) break through the disguise which hid from others the presence of Jehovah. The angels were there, Sarah was there, it may be others. He deals with the mysterious guest as He presents Himself, only with the utmost attention and reverence. However, promises belong but to One, and He it is who speaks to the patriarch. But, the word of present accomplishment being given, they rise up to go on their way; and now Jehovah will deal with Abraham as a man deals with his friend. He speaks with Abraham, of what concerned not himself but the world. It is not Abraham's wants, or even Abraham's walk, but the intention of God which He would have him know, opening His thoughts and counsels to him. (Compare Eph. 1:10, 11.) The two men go on towards Sodom; and Abraham and the Lord remain together. What a place of privilege and blessing! It is not worship. It is not a call to follow when the Lord led. This had all hid its place, It is communion, personal intercourse with God about what concerns Himself and His ways; intercourse founded on God's revelation of Himself, and on personal acquaintance with His character, grace working on the heart, and producing intercession.

144 The whole scene is instructive. His son and heir is promised as a present thing. That is our own hope. It is a settled one, independent of all that happens to the world; our own peculiar hope. We are in communion with God, on the ground of His special revelation of Himself to us, and the expected heir is revealed as coming. God then deals with us in the intimacy of friends, and tells us His purpose and plans, awakening in us, by the grace He exercises towards us and the confidence it imparts, the spirit of grace and intercession founded on what He is, on our knowledge of Him.

Abraham does not ask anything for himself here; he pleads for others. Indeed, what could he ask, when enjoying converse with God, and the certain and present promises of the son? He is in the place of blessing, and walking in the spirit of communion, and of the God he now knows. This began with the revelation of Himself by God. Now that Abraham is alone with Him all is boldness, though reverence, with one well known. The very silence of Abraham when others were there, and Jehovah had hid Himself, belonged to a knowledge of Him which none else had. Jehovah surely had clearer judgment, and even surer ways of deliverance and mercy than even Abraham knew; but we speak of the terms on which Abraham was with Him. It closed this wondrous conference; and when Abraham's words were exhausted, and the Lord had answered him to the end, He went His way, when He had done communing with Abraham. What a place for the child of faith to be in!

And such is our place. God has revealed Himself, yet more fully and nearly. He tells us the good pleasure of His will, according to the good pleasure He has purposed in Himself. He tells us of the soon-coming Son. He tells us, though but as a part of His will and counsels, of the coming judgment of the world. Our place is in grace with Him who communes with us.

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