

# THE BEGINNING OF FAITH

by Ray C. Stedman

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There is a simple secret that ties together the Old and the New Testaments and makes the study of the Old Testament a never-ending delight. The Old Testament is designed to be a picture book, illustrating with fascinating stories the spiritual truths presented in the New Testament. This is especially true of the books of Moses (Genesis through Deuteronomy) and the book of Joshua, for in the life histories of men like Abraham, Jacob, and Moses, we also have a symbolic representation of the progress of spiritual growth.

One of the most convincing proofs of the inspiration of the Bible is the facility with which the Spirit of God takes simple history -- facts as they were lived out day by day -- and recorded them in such a way as to weave together a totally accurate pattern of the development of spiritual life. In other words, what took place physically in the Old Testament is a picture for believers today of what takes place spiritually in their own growth in grace.

It is not imagination to view the Old Testament in this manner; ample proof is found in the New Testament itself to indicate that God planned the structure of his book in this manner. In the tenth chapter of First Corinthians, Paul refers to many incidents in the history of Israel and concludes the account with these words:

**Now these things happened to them as a warning [literally, *type*], but they were written down for our instruction, upon whom the end of the ages has come. (1 Cor 10:11 {RSV})**

And in Romans 15:4, he says,

**For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. {Rom 15:4 RSV}**

The letter to the Galatians, as well as our Lord's own use of these stories, further indicates clearly that they were regarded as a type, depicting by accurate analogy the course of intended spiritual development.

There is need, of course, to be on guard against wild and fanciful interpretations. We must move with care, so as not to overstep the laws of interpretation. But it would be a pity to miss, for example, the Old Testament illustrations of the great truths of the Christian faith reflected in the book of Romans and elsewhere:

- Abraham's life beautifully portrays the truth of justification by faith;
- Isaac is the man who teaches us what it means to be a son, a child of God;
- Jacob's life is designed to show us how God works in sanctification to deliver us from the reigning power of sin; and
- Joseph is a most beautiful picture of what it means to be glorified by resurrection and thus enter into the challenging and exciting task that awaits the day of the manifestation of the sons of God.

Perhaps the clearest and most helpful of all these Old Testament portraits is the record of Abraham's life, beginning in distant Ur of the Chaldees, and ending at last in the cave of Machpelah near Hebron, in Canaan. Abraham is clearly the pattern man of faith. Again and again, in the New Testament, he is held up in our view as the example of how God works in the life of a man to fulfill his promises of grace. He is obviously chief of all the heroes of faith recorded in Hebrews 11, and in addition to the Christian faith, two of the great religions of the earth hold him in high esteem.

Therefore, we may well begin the study of this man's life with a sense of excitement. In Abraham, we will find ourselves reflected. In tracing his life's story we shall discover the very secrets by which the Spirit of God intends to transform us from faltering pilgrims to men and women of stalwart faith, worthy to stand beside the heroes of Hebrews 11.

Abraham is first introduced to us in the closing verse of Genesis 11, and the opening verses of Genesis 12. His name was originally Abram, and it was not until years later that it was changed to Abraham. The reason for this change was highly significant, and we shall examine it in due course, but for the present let us get acquainted with young Abram. The Spirit of God passes over his early life in Ur of the Chaldees with but the briefest notice, and begins the sacred record with his encounter with God. This is where life truly begins!

We know from Stephen's great speech, recorded in the seventh chapter of Acts, that this call came to Abraham when he lived in Ur of the Chaldees. It was once thought that Ur was a very primitive city. I have read several books which attempt to depict Abram as an ignorant, unlettered nomad of the desert who lived in a very primitive mud-walled village. We could hardly expect to find in such a man much more than the primitive searching of a barbaric man struggling to discover God. But the spade of the archaeologist has since turned up the ruins of Ur, and we have learned that this was a city of great wealth and considerable culture, containing a library and a university. The city was devoted to the worship of the Moon Goddess, and it is almost certain, that Abram was an idolator, a worshipper of the moon. The book of Isaiah more than hints at this.

Stephen declared that the God of glory appeared to Abram there in Ur. We have no knowledge of the form this appearance took. But whatever it was it is important to note that the initiative was with God. This is true throughout all human history. Man may think he is feeling after God, but that feeling itself is the drawing of a seeking God. Here was God, then, suddenly breaking into the life of the man Abram, as he lived in Ur, worshipping the moon and kneeling before his dumb idols.

In this meeting Abram came face to face with a command and a promise; he was commanded to go, and he was promised a land. There is no question but that the land to which he was to go was a literal place, and the promise to make his name great and to make him the father of many nations has been literally fulfilled. I stress this now because I am not going to mention it hereafter in this study. I believe in the literal fulfillment of these promises as history has already amply confirmed them. The study of how God literally fulfilled these to Abram is an area of truth that is helpful and illuminating, but our concern here is to discover another dimension in this historical account. We will follow the warrant given to us by the New Testament (in the Scriptures already quoted), and make spiritual application to our own lives of what we see here.

Above all, we must not make the mistake which is so common today of taking these literal promises of the Old Testament and applying them literally to the believer today. When Israel, for instance, was told that they were not to intermarry with other races, God meant that literally. But when we try to apply that literally to nations today, we get into all sorts of absurdities. Some of the false concepts on which the doctrine of racial segregation is based come from an attempt to apply the literal instructions of God to Israel in a literal way today. All these things were written for our spiritual instruction. As we read this great command and promise to Abram, we may see ourselves here. For this is nothing more nor less than what God says to every person today, in a spiritual sense.

Abram was commanded to do three things; leave his country, his kindred, and his father's house. This is exactly the command that comes to every person who hears the call of the gospel today:

1. We are called to leave our country -- the place where we have been living, our residence since birth. That is not, of course, our physical residence, but rather the old life with all its ambitions, its loyalties, its worship of money and fame and power, its imagined independence which is really slavery -- all that we have been by nature since birth. There comes a command in the gospel to leave our country. This is clearly a picture of the world -- organized society with its satanic philosophies and value systems.
2. Abram was also told to leave his relatives. In the spiritual sense these are the moral forces that shape

our lives. Just as blood relatives affect us greatly on the physical level, so these moral forces at work today change our lives constantly and color all that we think and do. The opinions of others, the traditions of men, the pressures from family and friends, the attitudes of our employers and others around us -- these are the kindred we must be willing to forsake when we hear the call of God. When God confronts us with his call, these are not to count any longer. We are to renounce this concern about what others think and be preeminently concerned about what God thinks.

3. The third thing Abram was to leave was his father's house -- that is, the ties with the "old man." Our father, in this sense, is Adam, the father of us all. What theologians call our "Adamic nature" is the father's house in which we all live. We are called to leave this, no longer put any dependence upon our looks, talents, or any of our normal resources, but to begin to walk in dependence upon another to do through us what we cannot do ourselves.

This is where a man stands when he first hears the gospel. He may have grown tired of the land of Ur, for it is a land of darkness, of weariness of soul, of spiritual hunger and death. Yet when the call of the Word of God comes to him, there is much that seems desirable in the old life. He hesitates to leave, feeling the pull of these things upon him. Undoubtedly, Abram felt this hesitancy. The land to which he was called was unknown. It could not be known until it was experienced. But he could not deny the reality of God, and he could not evade the clear command: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you."

Have you heard this command of God in your own life? Have you heard the Living God, the God of glory, say to you,

"You must no longer depend upon what you have been depending on -- the opinions, the attitudes, the philosophy in which you have been reared. These are wrong. They are based upon the lies of Satan and you must not live on this basis any longer. You must learn to accept the truth reflected in the Word of God, though it cuts right across the philosophy of this world. You must, above all, leave your father's house, that is, dependence upon yourself."

It is a simple but vital decision -- you cannot stay in Ur and go to the land at the same time.

Now with this command comes a mighty promise. It, too, is three-fold:

**"And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves." (Gen. 12:2-3 {RSV})**

The first promise, that God would make of Abram a great nation, was literally fulfilled in Israel. But what does it symbolize spiritually, to us? What is a nation? It is simply the life of a man expanded and enlarged to great proportions.

In our modern times, a nation may be made up of a thousand strains from many different family groups, all living together in a heterogeneous society. Such is not the biblical nation; in the Bible, every nation begins with a man; then there is the family, and as the family grows and expands, there is finally the nation. Every nation is but the continued, expanded life of a man.

This promise, then, becomes for us a picture of eternal life, which is in fact the first promise of the gospel. "The wages of sin is death," (that is the old country of Ur), "but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord," (Rom. 6:23 {RSV}). Leave your country, your kindred, and your father's house, and what happens? "I will give you eternal life," God says. "I will make of you a great nation. I will make your life one of constant expansion and enlargement -- life will take on universal proportions for you."

The second promise, "I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing," meant several specific things to Abram. As we trace the story of his life, we find it meant he would have riches, he would

find honor, and he would be a blessing to others: that is, he would become influential and effective.

Now this is exactly what God is offering men today. Of course, if you are thinking in terms of dollars and cents, you are on the wrong track; this is never promised to a believer. God never commits himself to make us wealthy when we become Christians, but he does promise us the riches of Christ. Paul says, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom. 11:33 {RSV}). These are, indeed, wonderful riches. This is the adventure the world is striving for more than anything else. Men are earnestly looking for something that will satisfy them within, and change them without, and they will pay any amount of money for it. But money cannot purchase it. Only in Jesus Christ can you find the possibility of being what God intended you to be, of fulfilling the beauty of your womanhood, or the glory and strength of your manhood. These are the riches of Christ.

Then God offers honor, but not the honor of men. If you are looking for big crowds and excitement and the praises of men, you might consider running for political office, but if you are looking for honor, genuine honor, then listen to the words of Christ: "If any one serves me, the Father will honor him," (John 12:26b {RSV}). The honor he will give makes you the very nobility of earth; your name will be listed with those in Hebrews 11:38, "of whom the world was not worthy."

Then God offers this, the choicest of all: "I will make you a blessing." This is the glory of being used to bless others, the joy of a fruitful life. There is nothing more wonderful than that. It has been my privilege on a few occasions to have God use my life in a way that has opened up and blessed the hearts of others, and I tell you there is no other joy like it on earth. It is the most thrilling experience to feel that God has used you -- the words you have spoken, the things you have said -- to solve someone's desperate problem, to make life begin to unfold for them, to see homes reunited, and hearts brought together again and problems solved. This is what God offers every believer in Jesus Christ; all these -- riches, honor, and blessing -- are part of the second promise of the gospel.

But there is yet a third part: "I will bless those who bless you and him who curses you I will curse, for by you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." What is this but the truth of identification, of sonship?

It is what every parent thinks of his child: "I will bless those who bless him, and those who curse him I will curse." We are wrapped up in our children. They are the apple of our eye, and whatever touches them touches us. So John writes, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God" (1 Jn 3:1 {RSV}). God says, I will identify myself with you. What concerns you, concerns me. But listen to this again, "I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse." That is, we will be identified with God in the eyes of the world. We will be, like him, a creator of crises. Everywhere you go, you will be either a blessing or a curse, but no one will ignore you. God will make your life to be so vitally in touch with himself that you will have the effect he has when he touches human life.

It was so with Jesus of Nazareth. No one ever came into contact with him and remained neutral. This is what God says to each pilgrim in the life of faith: "If you will leave your country, your kindred, and your father's house, I will make you into this kind of person, so that you will affect every life you touch for better or for worse. They will bless you, or they will curse you." Surely this is what Paul means in Second Corinthians 2:15-16:

**For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? {2 Cor 2:15-16 RSV}**

This is God's design for the Christian. Your life will be vital with that vitality that God himself possesses. Then all the families of earth will be blessed through you. That is universal usefulness. God will take any one human being and touch the world in some sense through him. This is a vast and marvelous promise, is it not? Perhaps now you can see that in these brief words to Abram of old, God has encompassed truth about life that is written in the pages of Romans, Ephesians, Galatians, and Corinthians -- in all of the New Testament. It includes all God offers to do in us through Christ.

Note that it is all of God. Abram was to do nothing except obey, God would do everything else. If Abram would but set his face toward the land, leaving the old things behind, God would do the rest.

Now what is the land? This we must recognize, for we are going to meet this land of Canaan throughout the Word of God.

Perhaps you have heard it described as heaven. It is not heaven, except in the sense that heaven begins here on earth. It is not some state that we must wait until we die to enter. It is intended that we should, like Abram, enter it at the beginning of our Christian life, and live in it all our days.

What is the land then? It is simply life in Christ. It is what the New Testament calls the fullness of the Spirit. It is life controlled by the Spirit of God, reflecting the glory of Christ. We enter it by conversion, but we do not experience the fullness of its blessing until we learn, like Abram, to adjust ourselves to its peculiar demands. But it is the land of promise, the land of fulfillment, the land of God's blessing and power, The whole of the Bible is written for no other purpose than to bring the people of God into the land of God. This is where he called Abram to go.

At this point in the record there comes a little interlude which we must consider. We are told that Abram obeyed God and started out for the land, but he stopped along the way. The record of those wasted years at Haran is found in Genesis 11:31-32:

**Terah took Abram his son and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife, and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran. {Gen 11:31-32 RSV}**

As far as we know from the record, Terah never heard the call that Abram heard. He left Ur, not in order to enter the land of Canaan, but simply to get away from Ur! The call of Abram made him recognize that Ur did not offer a life that was satisfying to the heart, and when he saw that his son was determined to leave, Terah said, "I'll go along." So, as the father and head of the family, he went out, but only as far as the land of Haran, half-way to Canaan. How clearly this pictures those who attempt to gain the promise of the gospel by leaving Ur (the world and its ways), but who never enter Canaan.

There are thousands today who have left Ur and come to Haran and settled down there, who will die there. The word *Haran* means "parched," and it is indeed a parched and barren place to live. Many, like Terah, have left the world and its ways; they have joined a church. They have got religion. They live moral lives, while they sing the songs of Zion and go through the outward motions of faith. But they will never go farther than Haran. They are dying there; they are religious, but not born again. What a parched experience that is.

But Abram was there, too! He had left Ur by faith and was on his way to Canaan, but he wasted many years of his life in Haran. While he was there, there was no discernible difference between him and his father. In New Testament terms, he was converted, but he was not yet regenerated. He was not yet ready to fully obey God, for he had not left his father's house -- dependence on his own resources -- as God had commanded. As a result, he wasted seventy-five of his one hundred and seventy-five years in Haran. Finally Terah died, and when the old man died, Abram was then free to go on into the land of Canaan.

I hope you follow the typical significance of this. If we depend upon our own resources to be acceptable to God, he must take them all away. He will let us go on for a long time so that we may learn the weakness and folly of such a life, but, finally, he will take them away. When he does, we think it is a dreary day for us, but it is the greatest day of our lives, for then we are free to enter the land where we may learn to be dependent upon God alone.

Now as Abram comes into the land, we have a revealing description of life in the land:

**So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was**

seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions which they had gathered, and the persons that they had gotten in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place called Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. Thence he removed 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 on the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb. (Gen. 12:4-9 {RSV})

This is more than just a record of what happened to Abram when he first entered the land. It is also a very accurate picture of the conditions of a Spirit-filled life. The first thing we are told is that Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. These names are most revealing. Shechem means "shoulder," and the shoulder is to the Hebrew a symbol of strength. We think of the shoulder of a mountain in the same way. The name Moreh means "instruction" and when we combine these two words, we get our first glimpse of what it is like in the land. Only as we are taught the Word of God by the Spirit of God do we find strength to live.

**Like newborn babes, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation; (1 Pet 2:2 {RSV})**

The second picture we have here is that life in the land is to be a life of constant conflict. We read, "At that time the Canaanites were in the land." These Canaanites were the pagan tribes which afflicted Israel all through their history. When Israel came back into the land after their stay in Egypt, God ordered the extermination of these tribes, but Israel failed to carry it through. Therefore, these people hounded and bothered and afflicted Israel as a thorn in their side the whole of their history. They are thus an accurate picture for us of those manifestations of evil we live with and continually wrestle against. They are named for us in the New Testament in many places: lust, envy, jealousy, impatience, intemperance, irritability, touchiness, etc. They are our daily enemies -- these manifestations of self which make our existence a life of continual conflict.

Thirdly, it is also a life of continual cleansing, for we next read, "So he built there an altar to the Lord." We think of an altar as a symbol of worship, which it is, but that is not the essence of its meaning. An altar is first a place of cleansing, which provides the basis for worship. The reason for a daily altar is the urgent need for cleansing in the pilgrim life. Every pilgrim needs the cleansing of blood, the cross of Christ, to which he can come and judge self as it exhibits itself in his life. So many Christians seem to feel they need the cross only at the beginning of their Christian life, but we need it every day, for it is the word of the cross which is the power of God in daily life. This is why Paul cries, "I die every day," (1 Cor 15:31b {RSV}). Therefore, this life of the Spirit's fullness must be a life of continual cleansing by the cross of Christ.

The fourth point is that this is a life of unending choice. Abram pitched his tent between Bethel and Ai. Bethel means "the house of God," Ai means "ruin." This is just where we must live the Christian life, ever looking either to the things of God, or to the ruin of the flesh. We can choose to go to Bethel or to Ai, to Christ or self -- it can never be both. I am either pleasing myself, or pleasing him. I am either at Bethel, the house of God, or at Ai, the place of ruin. I must continually choose.

The last characteristic is represented by the tent. What did Abram do when he got to the land? He journeyed on! He never stopped for long. He lived in a tent because he was a pilgrim in the land. He could never settle down; he could only sojourn for awhile. All through the New Testament the Christian pilgrim is exhorted to walk in the Spirit. Walk, walk, walk! When you have learned a lesson from God, that is not the end. That is just another step. Tomorrow there is another step to be taken, and another the day after that, and another the day following. How the flesh resents this. We are always delighted when the Spirit of God drives us to the place where we achieve some victory, overcome some habit, take some needed step. And then we want to settle down there. We say to the Lord, "You go on for awhile and leave me here. I want to enjoy this for a bit." But he will not let us stop. Life in the land is a life of continual progress, a never-ending journey.

Everyone is living in one of three places -- Ur, Haran, or Canaan.

Where do you live? What a question to search the heart!

Ur is the land of death and darkness, the land into which we were born. Haran is the half-way house where we gain the outward appearance of being religious but where there is no inward reality. Canaan is the land of power and blessing, the place of the Spirit's fullness.

Have you entered the land?

### **Prayer**

Our Father, we pray you may use these lessons from Abram's life to lead us out, that we may rise up to go into the land of the fullness of blessing in Christ. May we fully realize that every word you say here is true and that every promise can be fulfilled. May we hear your voice saying, "Arise, get up, go out from your country, your kindred, and your father's house, into that land which I will show you!" We ask in the name of Jesus. Amen.

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