

THE FURNACE AND THE LAMP

by Ray C. Stedman

In the country schoolhouses of old the common method of teaching writing was to use a copybook. Under a sample line of handwriting every student laboriously attempted to reproduce the original. It is not difficult to tell who learned to write by this method, for they all have the same general style. In a sense, our Old and New Testaments relate to each other this way. In the Old Testament, God's dealing with Israel forms a sort of copybook along which pattern the New Testament is written.

In our study of the life of Abraham, we are viewing the beginning of the scriptural account of God's dealings with Israel. As we trace through the stories of Abraham, we see that these are pattern experiences for the believer today. What literally and physically occurred to Abraham occurs spiritually in the Christian's life today. That is what makes these stories of such eternal fascination and benefit to us. This is why the early Christians, with nothing more than the Old Testament in their hands, could test and prove the doctrine which came from the mouths of the apostles and other leaders as to whether it was from God, for it was only repeating on a higher level of life the pattern written out on the pages of the Old Testament.

In Genesis 15 we have a chapter which condenses for us the whole doctrinal movement of Romans 4-8. Since this is one of the most important sections in the entire New Testament, this is also a highly important part of the life of Abraham. It begins, as we have seen, with that great principle which governed Abram's life -- a daily trust that God was able to do through him what he had promised. By this, he was counted righteous when he had no righteousness of his own. This is the truth so clearly presented by Paul in Romans 4-5.

The following chapters, 6-8, unfold the teaching of practical deliverance from the reigning power of sin. If our Christian experience ends in Romans 4-5, we are of all men most miserable, for we have not really entered into the fullness that Christ purchased for us. We need to learn by experience the process of sanctification, taught in Romans 6-8, and beautifully pictured for us in Verses 7-21 of this 15th chapter of Genesis. It begins with nothing else but heart hunger.

And he said to him, "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O Lord God, how am I to know that I shall possess it?" (Gen 15:7-8 {RSV})

God reminded Abram that he was the one who had called him to leave Ur and go into the Land of Canaan. Abram's response was, "Lord, how shall I know that this land will be mine? I have been here now for ten years. I have walked up and down the length and breadth of it as you told me to do. I've enjoyed portions of it, but I don't own any of it. Lord, how can I own the land that you said you would give to me?" This is an expression of the great desire in Abram's heart to possess what God has offered him. It is his by promise, but he longs to make it his by ownership.

The land, as we have often noted, is both literal and spiritual in its significance. Through his descendants, Abram is to possess the literal land, that is, through his natural seed. But through his spiritual descendants, he is to possess fully the land in its symbolic significance. This is the fullness of life in the Spirit: All that God intends us to have in Jesus Christ -- all the victory, the power, the abundance, and the fruitfulness that comes by the Holy Spirit. This is the land. It is already ours by promise, because we belong to Jesus Christ. Ah, but the question is, have we possessed it? Do we own it? Have we experienced it? And if not, our question is clearly that of Abram's: How can we come into the fullness of this experience?

Do you hunger for this land? Do you long to have what God offers you?

Abram says, "Lord God, how can I know that I shall possess it?" He is desirous of learning the process by which God's promise to him will find its fulfillment. His question is not one born of unbelief or doubt, but it

is a desire for further information. Like Mary, when told by the angel Gabriel that she was to have a child, replied, "How can I have a child when I have not known a man?" {Luke 1:34}. This is not unbelief, but wonder and an inquiry concerning the process. So is Abram's question, and God answers him by saying, in effect, "Come along, Abram, and I will show the whole procedure to you. I will reveal the means by which you, through your descendants, will possess the land."

He begins by showing Abram that the first step must be a consideration of a death!

He said to him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove and a young pigeon." And he brought him all these, cut them in two, and laid each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away. (Gen 15:9-11 {RSV})

Each of these animals and birds is a picture for us of Christ, our sacrifice. Our deliverance from the reigning power of sin must be based upon that sacrifice of Jesus Christ upon the cross. This is what we learn in Romans 6. We are told that Christ died for our sins in Romans 1-3. We learn that he died for sin in Romans 6. The perfect character of Christ is pictured for us by these animals and birds Abram brought, especially as it was poured out in death for us, so that we might have it. There on the cross, something took place that is able to break the control and dominion of sin over us and allow the Holy Spirit to produce the character of Christ in us.

In the heifer or ox, patience and strength are symbolized. Who does not need these qualities! The she-goat is the symbol of nourishment and refreshment for the soul. The ram is the picture of power, of might in warfare. The birds are a picture of gentleness and grace, the Spirit of God at work. It is significant that all the animals were to be three years old. This is a reference to the public ministry of our Lord which lasted for three years. All these qualities of his character were publicly made manifest during that time. Here, then, is a symbolic portrait of Jesus Christ in the beauty and full vigor of his manhood. All that he was was clearly told out and made evident by his life.

Now in the death of Christ, all that he was is made available to us. He laid down his life that we might have it! He poured out his soul unto death that all the fullness of his person might indwell my life and yours, that we might have all that he is. The slaying of these animals and birds and Abram's long contemplation of them is the beautiful picture of this for us.

Whether we view the land as literal or symbolical, the possession of it begins by a thorough understanding of what Christ has done that has made possession possible. On the cross, our Lord Jesus won the right to possess all the kingdoms of the earth. Some day the old hymn will be fulfilled, "Jesus shall reign where e're the sun does his successive journeys run." Israel, occupying the land of Palestine, will be the head of the nations at that time. They shall fully possess the land in accordance with the promise to Abram. But on the spiritual level, this is equally true. On the cross, the Lord won the right to fully possess the kingdom of the heart, so it becomes no longer a matter of my struggling to do the best I can, which is never good enough. A life is available to me that is all I need and ought to be. I am to consider him, therefore, as Abram did, until I see in Jesus Christ all that I need.

All day long Abram sat and watched the sacrificed animals, waiting, waiting, all through the long hot hours, considering the meaning of all this. When the Satanic doubts, as vultures, descended to rob him of his blessing, he drove them away, as we must do when doubts beset us concerning the work of Christ. All the long day, Abram watched and waited and out of his long contemplation there came the next step:

As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram; and lo, a dread and great darkness fell upon him. Then the Lord said to Abram, "know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years; but I will bring judgment on the nations which they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions. As for yourself, you shall be buried in a good old age. And they shall come back here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete." (Gen 15:12-16

{RSV}

As the sun touches the western horizon, Abram sinks into sleep and there comes upon him a great sense of horror and of darkness. In the midst of this mental depression, he is given a revelation of the oppression and enslavement of his descendants. This, as we know, was fulfilled to the very letter. His descendants did go down into Egypt (a land that was not theirs), and there they were oppressed, afflicted, and enslaved for the duration of time recorded here. Then, at last, God sent Moses to lead them out, Pharaoh and Egypt were judged, and Israel was brought back into the land of Canaan exactly as God had told Abram. With this revelation there is a personal word of encouragement to Abram, that he would not enter into this directly himself, but only his descendants would experience these things.

While we are still dealing with the literal fulfillment of this, let us note also the revelation of the great patience of God. He tells Abram that Israel must remain in Egypt for four hundred years because the iniquity of the Amorite tribes living in the land of Canaan was not yet full. That is, these vicious tribes were to be allowed to run the full course of their iniquity. All the depravity inherent in their hearts was to be allowed to exhibit itself to the full, so there can be no question of the righteousness of God in judgment. When Israel came, at last, into the land again, they were commanded to exterminate all of these people, male and female, adult and child alike. Skeptics have used this to picture God as exceedingly cruel, but the whole picture is that of a God who waits with patience until these tribes become a moral cancer threatening to infect the nations around, and have to be removed. Archaeologists have given us glimpses into the moral life of these people and it is incredibly foul. They indulged in fiendish rites in their worship, and their moral lives were polluted beyond description.

But we are primarily concerned with the spiritual interpretation of this revelation. Spiritually, this is a picture of the unveiling which comes to any seeking soul of the implacable tyranny of self in the human heart. When we seriously contemplate the cross of Christ, there comes to us a revelation of our own enslavement to sin and self within. So many Christians fancy themselves to be free, simply because they have received Christ. They may acknowledge a few minor weaknesses -- a little temper now and then, a degree of jealousy occasionally, a little lust, a tendency toward stubbornness or willfulness, but these are minor peccadillos we must all learn to live with. They can look down their noses at the unregenerate, unwashed, who have not yet come to Christ. Nevertheless, they are bothered with a sense of guilt and weakness which they do not understand. Then, gradually, they begin to see that they are mastered by self, that the choices they make are all with self in view. Ego, as an ugly monster, sits on the throne of their lives and though they pay lip service to the cause of Christ, self rules, cracking a remorseless whip and driving them to ever more selfish notions.

This is the self-revelation which Paul describes in Romans 7:24 {RSV}: "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" When this is our cry, we have begun to realize that we are, indeed, under the dominion of sin. We become aware of barrenness, fruitless activity, purpose without power, effort without effect. Our service becomes a job without joy. Worship is routine and mechanical. Life is a horror and great darkness. We wonder what is wrong, and cry out, "Who shall deliver me from this reigning power of self in my life?" It is right at this point that a new thing occurs -- a vision and victory:

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites." (Gen 15:17-21 {RSV})

At the place of self-despair, there comes deliverance! When we become aware of how much we are enslaved by selfishness, how little we really experience what God is offering, how much we are victims of our own self-indulgence, self-pity, and self-righteousness, then we are ready for victory. At the moment when the heart is cold and empty and the light of faith has gone out, something will precipitate a crisis, and suddenly you find yourself, without warning, in the midst of a smoking furnace:

- When Jacob met his brother Esau, he turned aside by the brook Peniel, and there the angel of God met and wrestled with him until he was broken.

- When David sat on his throne, Nathan the prophet came to tell him the story of an injustice in his kingdom. Suddenly, out of that story, there comes an arrow to the heart of David, "Thou art the man!" {2 Chr 12:7b KJV}. And instantly he was aware that he was in a smoking furnace.
- Paul, newly converted, is filled with the desire to be the apostle to Israel and looks upon himself as the chosen vessel by which God intends to reach that people and bring them to Christ. With confidence he preaches in the city of Damascus, but suddenly events take a turn for the worse. No one will listen to him and he must at last be let down over the wall in a basket at night like a common criminal. That began the smoking furnace in his life.

Perhaps with you, it may be a family crisis, a Bible conference, a trip away from home. Some such thing precipitates a crisis, and you become aware that God is speaking to you and there is no way to escape his voice. He is putting his finger on the thing which is wrong in your life. He is going through your life like a furnace of fire, searing, scorching, cleansing and you cannot escape. You must face yourself. You have to acknowledge, judge, and reject yourself. The instant you do, God is no longer a furnace but a lamp! You see everything clearly in a wonderful, illuminating light. What was confusing before is as clear as daylight now. You know what you have to do and you know how to go about doing it. Your true enemy is clearly defined. There before your eyes you see the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, and the Canaanites -- all those filthy tribes that inhabit the human heart. You see that you have been defending and protecting them, though they have been defiling and polluting you. Bitterness, sensitiveness, impatience, envy, self-righteousness, laziness, lust -- these are the enemies you see.

But you also begin to see that Jesus Christ is more than all of them, that he is adequate for them, and that you can stand up in the strength of the Lord and smite these enemies and they will go. You see clearly in his death that you died with him to these sins and can now refuse them a place in your thoughts. You will find Christ stands in their place and in the fullness of grace and truth becomes to you everything that you need -- your wisdom, your righteousness, your strength, and redemption. Suddenly you discover you are possessing the land! There is joy and peace in your heart. Something new has come in. You own what God has offered you. You have found the way of deliverance. Joy, peace, grace, glory floods your heart.

Now, this is the whole story of the Christian life after conversion -- a furnace and a lamp. That is the story of the nation Israel, throughout its history. It is a story of affliction followed by blessing. First Israel is in the furnace, and then the lamp is shining on them again. At the present they are in the furnace, and have been for nineteen hundred years, for they will not judge themselves. But the Scriptures say they will soon come to the place where, in the heat of the furnace, they will cry out for deliverance and God will become a lamp to them once again.

This, too, is the whole story of the Christian life. Once you begin to set foot on the land of Spirit-given power, you discover Jesus Christ is always a furnace or a lamp to you. When self begins to threaten, he is a furnace -- burning, scorching, searing. When self is judged he immediately becomes a lamp, flooding the whole life with radiance and glory.

Have you discovered this experience?

Have you found your way to this land of promise?

The one thing Abram had to do was to hunger for it. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be satisfied," (Matt 5:6 {RSV}). When we long for this blessing and freedom, then it is translated out of the realm of theology into experience.

As you may have discovered, it is quite possible to be an expert in teaching the truths of spiritual adjustment and know nothing of the reality of it in life. It is not enough to believe in the doctrine of human depravity. There must come a time when acknowledgment is made of the slavery of self in your life, a time when you have groaned and turned in disgust from the revelation God has given you of your own heart. Only then can there come the wonderful release, the glorious deliverance, the satisfying sight of watching Canaanites flee

before you. Habits you could not conquer before, you now master in the strength of the Lord and a whole new land of victory lies open before you.

Begin where Abram began. Say, "Lord God, how shall I know that I shall possess it? Reveal to me my own heart, and thy deliverance."

Prayer

Our Father, we know the transformed life of a Christian living in the strength of God is the most amazing, the most revolutionary thing this world has ever seen. How much we need this today. Lord, may we be people like this, that we may sing anew the songs of the early church, that we may know once again the transforming grace of the power of the Spirit in our lives, the impact that life can make upon life as we rub shoulders with those who do not yet know Christ. May we not be content to live on the edge of the land, or to merely sojourn in it, but make us restless till we own it, possess it, have it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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