

THIS THIRSTY WORLD

by Ray C. Stedman

As we are tracing through the Pilgrim's Progress of the Old Testament, the way God calls us from sinful rebellion to the land of fellowship with Christ, let us turn to Chapter 21 of Genesis. All that took place in the life of Abraham in a wonderfully accurate picture of what happens in our own spiritual progress. When Abraham in obedience to God's call came into the land of Canaan, it was a picture of the individual coming to the Lord Jesus Christ. Just as that was simply the beginning of God's work in this man's life, so when you come to Christ, that's not the end at all, but the beginning of God's work in your life. And there, in a sense, the real problem begins. We have an old saying,

"It is easy to take a boy out of the country,
but it is hard to get the country out of the boy,"

which exactly describes God's problem with Abraham. He called him out of the land of Ur of the Chaldeans, but it is hard to get Chaldea out of Abraham. It may not be difficult for some to come to Christ, but to get the old man subdued, to get the flesh controlled, and to learn instead to walk in the Spirit -- that is what takes grace. It is a process of heartache, interspersed with seasons of joy and blessings. The flesh dies hard and subtly fights back, inventing a thousand and one excuses to get us to leave it alone. But God never leaves us alone. I often rejoice in this, in my Christian life; the faithfulness of God will never let us stop short of the goal he has in mind, which is perfection, the image of Christ.

Now in the closing section of Chapter 21, we have a scene of relative quiet and peace. There are three different stories in this section:

- The story of Hagar and Ishmael out in the wilderness,
- The story of Abraham and Abimelech making a covenant, and, finally,
- The scene of Abraham and his family living around the well, enjoying the fullness of God.

The well around which these stories all occur is the central theme in each one. It would be easy to dismiss this as an unimportant detail in Abraham's life, except that nothing is unimportant in the Word of God. As Paul says, "All these things were written down for our instruction," (cf, 1 Cor 10:11). There is nothing included, even though it may seem to be a trivial detail, that isn't here because it illustrates or helps us to grasp some concept of spiritual life that we need to learn. So as you study your Bibles, be sure you learn how to interpret Scripture by Scripture. When you do, all becomes clear.

The spiritual significance of this well is easy for us to identify, since it occurs frequently in the Bible to picture the Word of God. The water in the well is always Christ in his refreshing aspect, the source of refreshment to the thirsty soul. Remember how the Lord said to the woman of Samaria as she came down to the well, "The water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life," (John 4:14b {RSV}). Wherever you find a well in Scripture it is always picturing that relationship.

With that as our clue, let us look at these stories and see how the well of Christ appears in various ways. The first one is what we might call the "well of promise":

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went, and sat down over against him a good way off, about the distance of a bow-shot; for she said, "Let me not look upon the death of the child." And as she sat over against him, the child lifted up his voice and wept. {Gen 21:14-16 RSV}

The boy was more than just a little boy at this point; he was about fourteen years old.

And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Fear not; for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him fast with your hand; for I will make him a great nation." Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink. And God was with the lad, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt. (Gen 21:17-21 {RSV})

Much is telescoped together in this passage, but we need to understand what this means beyond the mere history of an event. In Galatians, Paul tells us how to interpret Hagar and Ishmael, what they mean to us in the program of God. He says, "Hagar is a picture of Mt. Sinai in Arabia" (cf, Gal 4:25), from which the Law was given. She, along with Ishmael, is a picture of the present Jerusalem, that is, the nation of Israel who refused Christ and yet retained the promises and God's preserving care in their lives. Israel persecuted all those within the nation who turned to Christ in the early days of the church. In Romans, Paul tells us that after the nation had rejected Christ, blindness came upon a part of Israel which would last until all the Gentiles who would believe had come, (cf, Rom. 11:25-26). Here, in the Old Testament, two thousand years before our Lord came, this was told for us in the life of Abraham. The New Testament simply confirms what the Old Testament portrays. (This is what ties the Testaments together so we know that both are equally from the hand of God.)

Like Ishmael, the nation of Israel has wandered in the wilderness of the world ever since the day the people said during that Passion Week as they gathered before Pilate, "We do not want this man to reign over us," (Luke 19:14b {RSV}). And "His Blood be on us and on our children!" (Matt 27:25b {RSV}). And they turned and asked for a robber to be released in the place of Jesus.

Shortly afterwards the city of Jerusalem was destroyed, and the temple ransacked and demolished, and Israel was driven out into the nations. They wandered like Ishmael in the desert for centuries, without any central place of gathering, without any of the real worship of God they once knew back in the Old Testament days. They have been wandering in the wilderness ever since, perishing with thirst.

But a day is coming, as the New Testament tells us, when their eyes will be opened, just as Hagar's eyes were opened here, and she saw the well. The well, remember, is the Word of God, portraying Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Perhaps we are nearing the very hour when Israel, the nation which has been wandering in unbelief around the earth ever since that time, will have their eyes opened and behold Christ once again in their own Scriptures. Many have asked why the Jews do not believe in Christ if the Old Testament is so full of Jesus Christ. The answer is that "a hardening has come upon part of Israel," {Rom 11:25b RSV}. Not all Jews refuse to believe, but many of them, even with the testimony of their own Scriptures, do not believe Jesus is the Messiah. But God says that a day will come at last when their eyes will be opened and they will see in the word the very one they had once rejected and Israel will turn to the Lord. They will be refreshed with blessing and they will inhabit the earth; God will be with them, and, like Ishmael here, he will make them a great nation again. That is all portrayed in this little scene here.

In the next section we have the well appearing in a different aspect, one of great interest to us. This is what we might call the "well of contention":

At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, "God is with you in all that you do; now therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my offspring or with my posterity, but as I have dealt loyally with you, you will deal with me and with the land where you have sojourned." And Abraham said, "I will swear." When Abraham complained to Abimelech about a well of water which Abimelech's servants had seized, Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today." So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart. And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What

is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs which you have set apart?" He said, "These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that you may be witness for me that I dug this well." Therefore that place was called Beersheba; because there both of them swore an oath. [*Beer-sheba* means "the well of the oath."] So they made a covenant at Beersheba. Then Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army rose up and returned to the land of the Philistines. (Gen 21:22-32 {RSV})

What do you make of that? Isn't that a strange incident to be recorded here? We have met Abimelech, the king of the Philistines, before. The name of his commander, the general of his army, was Phicol. *Phicol* means, "the voice of all." Throughout the Scriptures the Philistine nation is a picture of the natural man concerned with religious matters, but exercising authority as though he were the voice of all.

In the light of the rise of the ecumenical movement of our own day and its claim to speak for all Protestantism, this exchange between Abraham and Abimelech is a very interesting one. Abimelech said in effect to Abraham, "I don't understand you evangelicals, yet it is evident that God is with you. You are sort of a mystery to me. You have a remarkable power to stir people up and to upset the apple cart. Because of this, I would like you to promise me something. After all, we Philistines are just as religious as you are, but we have different objectives. You are a pilgrim in the land, a sojourner; you don't want to stay here. You keep talking about a city which has foundations that we haven't yet seen. We are not interested in that city, but we have cities of our own right here, and we have great plans and programs to develop them and to make them nice places to live. Now, Abraham, I want you to promise me you won't get involved in our programs and plans and mess everything up. Will you promise me that? You have a lot of power and you are a strange person, but please promise me this."

Abraham said, "I'll be glad to. I have no interest in your programs or your politics -- but Abimelech, there is one little thing that bothers me." Abimelech said, "What's that?" And Abraham said, "See this well? It represents to me the book of God. This is the place of refreshment, where my soul meets God. And you know, your men have been trying to take this away from me."

Abimelech said, "Oh, no, we wouldn't do that. I've never heard a charge like this before. We never meant to take this well away from you. Don't say that."

Then Abraham says, "Now look, Abimelech, I want you to know how much this well means to me. You see those seven little ewe lambs over there? I want you to take those and offer them up as a perpetual reminder that this well means life or death to me. Whenever you think of taking the lives of those seven little lambs, remember that is what this well means to me. It means life to me in this land. And I cannot give up this well because this is the source of everything -- my refreshment, my strength, and my wisdom. I have need of the well. I found it myself. I dug it. I cannot give it up."

Now let's leave the story here for a minute and see its interpretation in our own lives: I find it significant that throughout the Christian centuries the disagreement between the world church and real believers in God has always been centered upon the "well of God," the book of God. The well is always a picture of the Word of God, containing and holding in it the waters of refreshment which speak of Christ to the soul. Regardless of what the different views of inspiration of the Bible may be, real believers in Christ have never been able to give up the Book. Here is what God has given us: a well in which we can find that which ministers to the deep, deep need of our soul.

Yet this has always been the ground of struggle and quarreling and disagreement with the worldly religious groups -- those who make authoritative pronouncements and declare that this Book is nothing but sage literature, or mythology, or a collection of old Hebrew stories put together, and that it has no supernatural significance to the heart. They deny its prophetic import and its ability to set forth a supernatural God involving himself in human life. Throughout the whole history of the Christian church, this is where the struggle has been.

Now to be very practical, this brings us to a problem we face today. I think we can receive some real help in solving this problem from this story of Abraham and Abimelech. How much should a Christian get involved in

the social program and improvement policies of the worldly religious groups? That is a problem we are facing today, isn't it? We recognize there are great injustices in the world in which we live. There are terrible, terrible conditions prevailing in the world today, not only in other parts of the world but here in our own land. To what extent should we involve ourselves in programs aimed at correcting these social ills?

Let's take a lesson from dear old Abraham. Abimelech said to him, "Now Abraham, you don't think like we do. You have a different objective." I'm amazed at the insight of this man. He at least saw this about Abraham's life. "You are here as a pilgrim and a stranger passing through, a sojourner. Now, Abraham, please promise that you will not get involved."

And Abraham said, "I'll be glad to." More and more I think this is the position Christians must take today. I want to be clear about this because this is an area in which misunderstanding can easily come. It is a case of the good being an enemy of the best. All these social programs are very good things and we cannot deny that a Christian is definitely responsible before his God for doing all that he can to alleviate human misery and suffering wherever he finds it. If we are not doing that, we are like the Levite and the Pharisee in the parable of the good Samaritan, (see Luke 10:33). Our Lord taught us to be responsive to these needs.

Nevertheless, we are not to get involved in the programs or the politics. If we do, we have no time left to be what we are supposed to be here on earth. God never called the church into being in order to make it a means of advancing human and political liberty in this world. This isn't what the church is here for. It is true that everywhere the church has gone preaching the gospel of Christ greater liberty has followed, but that is because the church has created an atmosphere in which these liberties can exist. This is the central theme the Word of God would bring forth for us here. Righteous Abraham, living in this land of the Philistines, was a greater source of strength in defense against the enemy of that land simply by being there and being what he was, a man of God in the midst of that scene, than all the plans, programs, armies, and defenses they were concerned about in their government.

This is true today as well. Our Lord tells us we are to be salt in the earth. We are to be concerned about the changing and transforming of men's lives by the preaching of the gospel. When the church gives itself to this task it discovers that it has created, and is creating, an atmosphere in which political freedom can flourish. Without that atmosphere, no amount of effort, organizing, committees, programming, and policy-making can ever succeed in establishing it. When we turn from the best to the next best, good as that may be, we are wasting the time God has called us to invest which will make all the rest possible.

This is confirmed, I think, in the last section. We read in Verse 33:

Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines. (Gen 21:33-34 {RSV})

This last scene is a picture of the "well of communion." Here is old Abraham just planting a tree and living by his well. Why are we told this? Well, it is symbolic of what is taking place in his heart and life. The tree immediately brings to mind that first Psalm which says of the man of God that he shall be like a tree planted by rivers of living water, bringing forth its fruit in season. Here is a life that is fruitful, that is concerned about those immediately around and is pouring out blessing into their lives and hearts.

Abraham calls on the name of Jehovah, the Everlasting God. I am increasingly convinced that if the church desires to do anything to help this poor, blind, bleeding, struggling world in which we live, it will only be as Christian people rediscover what it means to live daily in the strength, the power, the purpose, and the glory of calling upon the Everlasting God. This is what writes joy in our hearts, joy which the world is so vainly seeking to find.

I had the privilege of speaking on the radio one afternoon in Southern California on First Corinthians 10:13:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength, but with the temptation will also

provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. {1 Cor 10:13 RSV}

My concluding point was that in the midst of the hottest trials, God has provided a way of escape, not from the trials, but from defeat by the trials. The "way" is through rediscovering fellowship with Christ in the trials, just as those three Hebrew children found in the fiery furnace when the king looked in and found a fourth form there, "like a son of the gods," (Dan. 3:25 {RSV}). He didn't take them out of the furnace, but he was in there with them.

When I returned home, I received a letter from a man who had taken a whole sheet of paper and scrawled across the front of it this one sentence, "Dear Mr. Stedman: If it is true that God gives us grace to bear all our trials, then why is it there are so many long-faced Christians?" I thought that was a good letter. My answer was another question. "Dear Sir: If it is true the American soap companies have provided all the soap that we need in this world, why is it that there are so many dirty people?" The answer, of course, is that we are not using the soap that has been provided. The reason for long-faced and dour Christians is that we are not finding the joy of the Lord anymore.

Abraham found joy and thus he was the center of blessing to the land of the Philistines. In finding and rediscovering those springs of spiritual strength, he did more to advance the cause of social justice and welfare in the land of the Philistines than any of their programs and plans could have done.

The world about us today is looking for reality more than they ever have before. The world is desperately searching for men and women of conviction who will stand for what they believe and who will not hesitate to declare it and to say, "No," when it means involvement with something they believe is wrong.

The world is looking for men and women who have convictions, and convictions come only from a life that is involved in a living fellowship with a living God. This is what sent that new church in New Testament days out with such triumphant victory over every obstacle. They swept everything before them because they were in daily fellowship with the living God.

We must not leave the best for something less. That would be like a crowd of waiters in a restaurant going back to the kitchen and saying to the cook, "Look, cookie, we are having problems in getting this food out to these people. Why don't you leave the stove and come out here and help us?" If the cook is wise, he will say to them, "Fellows, the worst thing I could do would be to go out to help you. It is true that you have a problem, and you have to work it out, but if someone is not here cooking, there will not be anything to distribute."

If there is no fountain of morality in the church, if there are not lives which are discovering the strength and inner peace and power that comes from fellowship with Christ and a living God, there will not be anything to distribute. God calls us to discharge our duties as citizens and to do all we can when we have spare time to help. But, by all means, let us give ourselves anew to this supreme task of the church of Christ, which is the declaring of the good news of Jesus Christ, that men may be saved and their lives transformed by coming to know a living God.

Prayer

Our dear Father, we pray that we may rediscover with Abraham the secret of being a friend of God, men and women of God, by which lives are changed and atmospheres are created in which political freedoms may flourish anew. Help us, Lord, to find these out and to give ourselves supremely to this, above all knowing thee, our Lord and Savior. For we pray in Christ's name, Amen.

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