

THE ABUNDANT ENTRANCE

by Ray C. Stedman

I suppose it might be proper to begin this last study of Abraham as I sometimes do funerals. Since this is Abraham's funeral, I would say,

"We are gathered together to pay our respects to one who has lived among us and has now departed this life."

Here now is the account of the departure of Abraham. If you have been actively participating in this study of Abraham's life, you must now have a great sense of respect and awe for this pattern man of faith as we come to his closing days.

Abraham was called "the friend of God" (James 2:23b), one of the very few men who has ever earned that title in the pages of the Bible. He is one of the great universal names of mankind. You can mention the name of Abraham almost any place in the world and they know who he is. There are places where people have never heard of George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, or Napoleon, but almost every nation and people have heard of Abraham. He is a man of great integrity of heart and purpose, a man of unusual honor and vision, and one of the most faithful men of all time. Yet as we have followed this account through, I hope you have noticed that Abraham is a man of like passions with us. Though we may honor his character and his moral greatness, nevertheless, Scripture very clearly shows that he is the same make-up as we. As someone has well said, "We are all made of the same mold, but some of us are moldier than others."

Abraham is poured into the same human mold as we are. He is capable of lying, deceiving, rebelling, blaming others, loving himself, giving in to weakness, and shutting his eyes to truth. Obviously, here is a man no different from us. Without the grace of God he never would have been any different, just as without the grace of God we could not be any different than we were in Adam.

What Abraham became by the Spirit is beautifully summarized here in these few verses at the opening of Chapter 25.

First of all, his life was one of abundant fruitfulness.

Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. Jokshan was the father of Sheba and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim, and Leummim. The sons of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah. (Gen 25:1-4 {RSV})

Why are we told this about Abraham in these closing remarks of his life? Remember that at the very beginning of his life, in the journey out of Ur of the Chaldeans, he was promised that he would become the father of many nations. Through Isaac and Ishmael, the two sons with which we are most acquainted, several nations arose. Isaac, of course, became the father of another group of nations. Through Keturah, Abraham's second wife, he has six more sons, who each became the founder of other nations, so God's promise was literally fulfilled that Abraham should be the father of many nations and through him all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

It is interesting that when Sarah died, Abraham was about one hundred and twenty-five years old. After that he took another wife and, remarkably, had six more sons. We are told specifically in the Scriptures that when Isaac was born, Abraham had long since ceased to possess the ability to have children. Both he and Sarah's bodies were dead, their reproductive powers had ended and it was by a miracle of grace that Isaac was born. He was a child of promise and is called the child of faith.

The writer of Hebrews tells us: "For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, 'Surely I will bless you and multiply you,'" (Heb 6:13-14 {RSV}). Evidently, when his youthful powers were restored to him in order that he might have Isaac, these continued afterward and these six other lads were born to grace his home after Sarah's death.

If we add these six men to Ishmael and Isaac, we learn that Abraham had a total of eight sons. These eight sons picture the fruitfulness of this man's life. We have noticed how remarkably the Old Testament takes the physical qualities of Abraham's life and makes them a picture of the spiritual realities in our lives. I have said before, and I repeat it, this is one of the most remarkable proofs to me of the inspiration of the Scripture. It is simply impossible these events could have happened in this way and be such a precise picture of spiritual truths without the hand of inspiration involved. You might as well take some book of ancient history and expect to find everything there an exact picture of spiritual life as to have this occur without this hand of inspiration. This accounting of the eight children is a beautiful picture to us of the fruitfulness of the life in the Spirit, life lived by faith as Abraham lived his life. You and I too can have eight sons in this metaphorical sense.

Now, to see what I mean, look at Second Peter 1:3-8 where eight marks of the fruitful life are listed. I wonder if it is mere coincidence that these marks are equal to the number of Abraham's children. I think the following passage could well have been the epitaph of Abraham. His whole life is summarized here for us, beginning with the call of God out of Ur of the Chaldeans unto his own glory and excellence:

**His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, that through these you may escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion, and become partakers of the divine nature. For this very reason make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.
(2 Pet 1:3-8 {RSV})**

Peter begins with faith, of course, a supreme ingredient of spiritual life. This was the great thing about Abraham; he had confidence in God despite the circumstances. That is a very simple, realistic definition of faith -- having confidence in God despite the circumstances -- while unbelief is believing the circumstances in spite of God.

Which do you have?

Faith is not taking the circumstances into account when determining some action to be taken. Faith disregards the nature of the test, even though it may be quite disconcerting. Faith believes God despite those circumstances.

This is the basis of all contact with God. You and I cannot be Christians, we cannot live as Christians in any sense without faith, without believing that God knows what he is talking about. I am so eager for our young people to begin to appreciate that the Scriptures are the Word of God. In them, God himself is telling us the truth about life.

We are then told to add to faith the quality of virtue. In several translations this is rendered "manly courage," or "moral character." I like that. How marvelously we see that in Abraham! With what courage he armed his servants and set out after that great army which came from the east. With what wisdom he surrounded their camp and routed the forces of the enemy, thinking nothing of his own safety in order that he might deliver Lot and the others who had been taken captive! This is one of the key ingredients of a fruitful Christian life. I rejoiced that when Jesus Christ came into my life, he came in to make me a man. A Christian is one who begins to demonstrate manliness or womanliness.

Then Peter says to add knowledge to your virtue, or manly courage. I'm so glad he said that. There are some people who get the idea that Christians are so heavenly-minded they have no concern with anything on earth. We have it all right here, and we don't need to be aware of anything else around us. But it is not like that at all. Further, there are some who think Christianity is against knowledge. But the Christian attitude toward knowledge is that all is from God and we are to learn and to comprehend whatever we can. However, the secrets of knowledge lie not in any human textbook, but only in the book of God. We can find help from some human textbooks, but if we want to get at the streams of life, the very deep things, the basic functions of human life, we will find them only in this book. Without the Bible, we cannot know God, nor can we know ourselves, we who are the greatest enigma of the universe. The Spirit of God at work is always the spirit of knowledge.

Now we come to self-control. We see demonstrated in Abraham's life that he was able to keep his temper amid the irritations of those around him. He exhibited a wonderful degree of self-control. Now there is a type of self-control that says, "Just wait, my time is coming; I won't say anything now, but just you wait; we'll straighten things out later!" But this is not what the Spirit produces. Spirit given self-control says: "Before you speak in irritation, remember that you belong to God; he is the Lord of your life, and what you say must reflect him." Therefore, God-control results in self-control.

I remember reading an account of an incident in Hudson Taylor's life. He was speaking of his years in China and how on one occasion, since he could get no other transportation, he chartered a small boat to take him down the river to an appointment. While he was waiting at the wharf to board, a very richly dressed mandarin, a Chinese teacher, came down to the wharf with a couple of men following him. Seeing this little boat there, he asked the driver, "Where are you going?" The man told him, and the mandarin said, "I want the boat." The Chinese owner tried to explain to him that the boat had already been chartered. The mandarin asked, "To whom did you charter it?" The man said, "To this foreigner," pointing to Hudson Taylor. The mandarin looked at him arrogantly and with a wave of disdain swept him aside and said, "I'll take the boat!" Hudson Taylor said that he could feel the ire rise within him. The mandarin was standing between him and the river and all he would have to do was push and he would land in the river. He had almost started to do it when he felt the restraint of the Spirit. Turning to the man, he said, "Look, I know that you regard me as nothing but a white foreign devil, but I have chartered this boat and it is mine by rights. The Jesus that is in me kept me from pushing you into the river just now. You richly deserve that, but the Lord kept me from it because he has not sent me here to push Chinese people into the river, but to win them for Christ. The boat is mine and I must take it; however, I invite you to come along with me and be my guest." Rather confused and amazed, the mandarin accepted his invitation and went aboard, and they had a wonderful conversation all the way.

Now to self-control, we are to add steadfastness, which is an old fashioned word for patience. And what a word that is! Have you ever noticed that God cannot give patience? He can only teach it. There is no use praying for patience. If you do, the Lord will send you tribulation, because "tribulation worketh patience," (Romans 5:3 KJV). So watch out. You need patience but it can't be given, it can only be taught.

What a marvelous manifestation of the Spirit this is! Look back at old Abraham waiting twenty-five years for a son. The promise had been given, but he waited for twenty-five long, weary years before that promise was fulfilled. You can see something of what the Spirit of God taught this man in the way of patience. Most of us are like the little girl who banged her cup on her high chair and demanded milk. Her mother told her to be patient. She said, "I've got patience, but I don't have any milk."

Then to patience, or steadfastness, add godliness. What is this? It is simply the sense of the presence of God in your daily life. Abraham was the man with the tent and the altar. He always built an altar everywhere he went. He was an intimate friend of God. He knew God; this is what godliness is. In the New Testament it is expressed in the phrase, "Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God," (1 Cor 10:31b {RSV}). Godliness is a consciousness of his presence.

To godliness add brotherly affection. This is the sharing of self in hospitality and by encouraging one another, inviting someone over for dinner just to give him a word of encouragement to strengthen him. This is a practical manifestation of the Spirit at work.

Last, we are to add love to brotherly affection. Love is the most unmistakable fruit of the Spirit. First Corinthians 13 is the commentary on what love really is, and this kind of love is produced only by the Spirit!

This is the fruitful life, pictured by Abraham's eight sons. These eight beautiful virtues are part of the Spirit-filled life. Peter continues,

For if these things are yours and abound, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For whoever lacks these things is blind and shortsighted and has forgotten that he was cleansed from his old sins. Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fall; so there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. {2 Pet 1:8-11 RSV}

Abraham has now come, at the close of his life, to this abundant entrance into the kingdom of the Father.

In Genesis 25, we find that not only is this a life of abundant fruitfulness, but the next few verses make it clear that it is also a life of practical foresight:

Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, and while he was still living he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastward to the east country. (Gen 25:5-6 {RSV})

In other words, he never forgot that Isaac was the son of promise and the divinely chosen heir. He was constantly alert to protect the inheritance of God. He anticipated danger and made some provision for his other sons so that they would not destroy what God was doing in his life. Isaac is throughout a picture of Christ. We read that Abraham gave all that he had to Isaac, just as the Father gives all that he has to the Son. This is a portrait of a life that is so Christ-centered that it exercise care to protect the inheritance and to keep away the things that might harm it.

This expression, "He sent them ... eastward to the east country" is significant. When Abraham first came into the land, he pitched his tent between Ai and Bethel, with Ai on the east and Bethel on the west. *Ai* means "ruin"; *Bethel* means "the house, or place, of God." Isaac was given the inheritance in the west, in the place of God, while the other boys were sent out into the east countries to the place of ruin. This is a picture for us of the natural life, the life that we had from Adam.

As with Abraham, we are expected to show a little practical foresight in our daily lives. Just as Abraham sent these boys away so they would not injure the inheritance given to Isaac, so we are to be careful not to get into situations that threaten our spiritual lives.

When I was a young man in Montana, I heard of a cowboy who used to come in from the country every weekend. He would tie his horse up in front of the saloon in the town, and go in and get drunk. Then one day he was converted in the little church there and stopped drinking completely, becoming a godly man. For a long time after that, though, he kept tying his horse up to the hitching rack in front of the saloon. One day an older Christian took him aside and said to him, "Now, son, I know you never go into the saloon any more, and I notice you are always at prayer meeting, and your life is a blessing to many, but I would like to give you one suggestion. Change your hitching post! Sooner or later you are going to be tempted to go back into that place. Why don't you just hitch your horse down the street a few doors so you won't have to walk past the saloon?" That is good advice. Change your hitching post. Take a little practical foresight in the protection of your spiritual life.

Abraham's life was also a full one:

These are the days of the years of Abraham's life, a hundred and seventy-five years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. (Gen 25:7-8 {RSV})

If you and I had been with Abraham at the moments of decision in his life, we might often have pitied him:

- When he left Ur, we might have said, "Abraham, you poor fool, do you mean you are going to wander out there in the desert and perhaps live in a tent the rest of your life, when you could have the enjoyment of the city and all of its blessings?"
- When he allowed Lot to choose the best of the land, perhaps some of us might have thought, "Abraham, don't throw away your rights like that! You are the oldest one. You have the right to choose. Why let Lot take that choice piece while you are left with this dry old pasture? You are throwing away your rights." Abraham let Lot choose, and God chose for him.
- And do you remember when the king of Sodom offered all the riches of Sodom to Abraham, Abraham said, "I'll not take even one of your shoelaces, I don't want any of it." Some of us would have been tempted to say, "Now wait, Abraham, you are carrying this a little too far. You could have deducted this from your income tax, and just think what you are missing, all the riches of Sodom you could have, think how you could use it in the Lord's work."

But Abraham chose God every time, and his was a life of fullness.

He lived one hundred and seventy-five years, and every one was packed full, spiced with excitement and adventure, filled with challenge and interest, rich in faith and blessing. He died an old man, full of days. This reminds one of our Lord's words in Mark 10: "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life," (Mark 10:29-30 {RSV}). There is the promise of a full life to those who live in the Spirit.

In Verse 8 there is an indication that our pattern man of faith had divine fellowship, he "was gathered to his people." That does not refer to his body, because Abraham was not buried back in Ur with the rest of his family. Nor does it refer to the fact that he was gathered into the realm of death where all the rest of his family had gone -- for many of his ancestors who were not godly men were there. We are told that Abraham was an idolater in his early years, and his family worshipped idols. They were not, therefore, men of godliness, and Abraham was not gathered to them.

The account says that he "was gathered to his people." What does that mean?

It means that he was gathered to those before him who had exercised faith in God. He was with those righteous ones who all through that intervening time of history had been walking with God. Enoch and Noah were examples of such men who learned to know the living God. Those are Abraham's people. Just as the people who are ours are not the fleshly people, but the ones to whom we are spiritually bound. Isn't this what our Lord Jesus meant when the word came in to him that his mother and his brethren were waiting outside and Jesus refused to go, saying to those with him, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother," (Mark 3:34b-35 {RSV}).

So Abraham was gathered to his people.

This phrase indicates that by no means did his life end 4,000 years ago:

- In Matthew, when the Sadducees -- who did not believe in the resurrection of the dead -- asked Jesus a question, he answered them: "Have you not read what was said to you by God, 'I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?' He is not God of the dead, but of the living." (Matt 22:31b-32 {RSV}). By this he was answering those who did not believe in life after death. He was saying that Abraham is living. God is the God of the living, not of the dead!
- On another occasion, he said, looking forward into the future, "I tell you, many will come from east and west and sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven," (Matt 8:11 {RSV}).

- Then we have that amazing story in Luke 16 in which our Lord tells of the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus died and was carried to Abraham's bosom, the place of fellowship where Abraham was with God the Father. The rich man in Hades, seeing him there, begged him to send someone to relieve his torment and the anguish of his heart and soul. "But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them,'" {Luke 16:29 RSV}. "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead," (Luke 16:31 {RSV}).

What a picture Abraham's life is of a life like yours and mine! There was nothing unusual about him; nevertheless, God made him an extraordinary person, whose life reaches far beyond the realms of earth, out into eternity. His life is one of blessing, fellowship, and fullness. Abraham stands as a living testimony to anyone who takes the path of faith and walks this way. In so doing, we will find the same blessing. The author of Hebrews, in the great "heroes of faith" chapter has this to say about Abraham and others before him:

These all died in faith, not having received what was promised, but having seen it and greeted it from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. (Heb 11:13-16 {RSV})

Abraham's life is the life of every Christian, for all who walk in faith with Jesus Christ, called to be his, to be possessed of him, to live as pilgrims and strangers on earth. Thus, all the fruitfulness we desire, and the abundant life in the everlasting kingdom of the Father will be fulfilled in us as they were in the life of Abraham.

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[PBC Homepage](#) | [Discovery Publishing](#) | [Ray Stedman Library](#) | [Series Index Page](#)

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