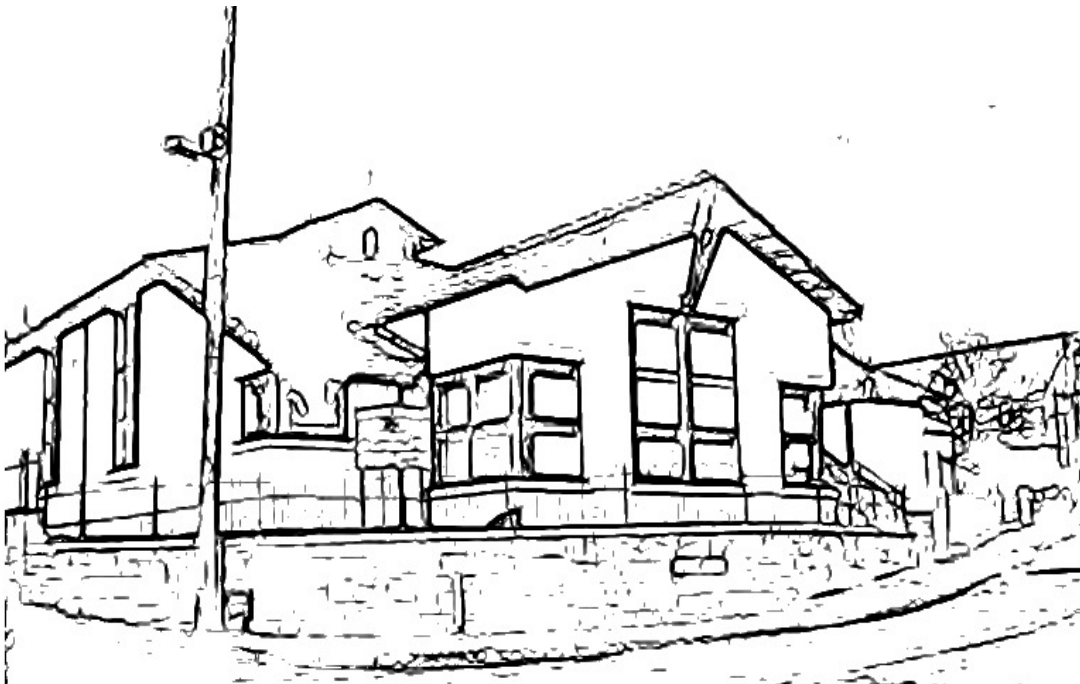


Torrance Parish Church
Church of Scotland



George Philip

Daily Bible Readings in Genesis
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Friday 1st January 12:9-20

Abram did “the reasonable thing” to guarantee food for his family. But very soon he became apprehensive, not about his spiritual condition because, after all, he would tell himself he was a man of God, but about his personal safety. His apprehension became fear and this led him to invent a scheme to guarantee that things would work out. We are not told what his poor wife thought of the plan, but we shall see that the memory of it lingered with her a long time. The plan involved a deliberate lie, and a lie persisted in, to the extent that Abram benefited socially and financially (14-16). Like many a wife, Sara could well have felt, “He does not care what happens to me so long as his business (or his congregation) prospers.” But God was not prepared to let this go on, for the work's sake as well as for Sara's sake. The Lord afflicted Pharaoh and it seems the pagan king realised there was some explanation that was spiritual rather than just human and he summoned Abram. How Pharaoh was able to grasp the significance of the situation we cannot tell, except, once again, to recognise the work of the Holy Spirit. God is never without the means of carrying out His will! Abram, man of God, called to spiritual service, was left in no doubt that he had lost the respect of Pharaoh and his court. Abram's witness was lost, and his actions had cast a shadow on the name and the honour of his God. It was a humbling experience for Abram to be sent back to the will of God by a powerful, worldly man who did not believe in God. Pharaoh could well have confiscated all Abram's cattle and servants, but he acted with dignity, the dignity of person that Abram had forfeited by his own lapse into worldly calculation. He had forgotten God. He had abandoned the faith that had started him on his journey and had brought him so far along the road of God's will.

Saturday 2nd January 13:1-4

Humbled by his failure and as a result wiser because of his failure, Abram made his way back to the place where he had made his vows and built his altar between Bethel and Ai. He had begun to see that in order to be a useful servant for God he had to stay right in his walk with God and close to God, waiting on God rather than just reacting to the pressures of circumstances and the promptings of inclination. He was now a richer man than before and perhaps the community around Bethel would have been impressed. But Abram, his wife, his family and perhaps many of his servants knew of his failure and shame in Egypt. The memory of that would stay with Abram for a long time. Many Christians know well what that kind of memory is and what it does in terms of an abiding sense of guilt. It is the kind of memory that can not only steal our joy in Christ but can inhibit all future service, because we are so aware that we are not worthy. But keep in mind that, by the merciful providence and discipline of God, Abram had been brought back to the place of the altar. He was back at the place of forgiveness and that means the slate was clean, the guilt was put away, the relationship with God restored, and the sin of the past

was forgiven and forgotten. We *must* learn the glory and wonder of God's forgiveness. Read Isa. 1:18; Ps. 32:1,5; and Jer. 31:33-34. God is not the One who drags up past sins to accuse and torment. That is the activity of the Devil, the arch-accuser, whose tactic is always to torment and distress us because of past sins. We must refuse his accusations and stand firm in the forgiveness and acceptance that is ours in Christ. We must believe in a radical way the words of 1 John 1:9 and Rom. 8:1. The best picture of the God who forgives so totally and restores so wonderfully is that of the Father of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:18-24). Never forget that even when he was a Prodigal, the foolish young man was still a son as far as the Father was concerned.

Sunday 3rd January 13:5-13

Note in v.1 and again in v.5 the phrase, "Lot went with him." That had been Lot's story from the start (12:4). There is no mention of Lot having faith. Of course, there is a human attraction when real faith is manifest in an individual or a congregation and people are drawn because they find friendship, warmth and enthusiasm about the things of God. This should always be the case and if we repel people instead of attracting them there is something wrong. This does not mean in a church that we will like everything about everybody on every level. We do find some people unpleasant, abrasive, hard to get on with, but we need to remember that they may feel exactly the same about us. Even more importantly we need to remember just how wonderfully God has borne with us and all our complications and wrongs. If God loves us like that, we are under obligation to love others in the same way (1 John 4:9-11), making allowances and trying to understand what in their experience and personalities has made them what they are. So far we have not been told much about Lot nor about what Abram really thought about him. But now tension began to arise between the two lots of herdsmen and it seemed to be a purely practical matter regarding the management of pasture. But the comment on the Canaanites and Perizzites in v.7 indicates that there was an issue of witness involved and, because of his experience in Egypt, Abram was sensitive to such an issue. He did not want godless people to see men who claimed to belong to God arguing over material benefits. Abram was also aware that this situation, if allowed to remain, would create a great division among the people called to serve God and, sensing that reconciliation did not seem possible, he faced Lot with a choice. Note that Abram did not send Lot away, nor did he force him to go. Lot simply had to make a decision that was to influence the whole of his future life. That choice we consider tomorrow.

Monday 4th January 13:4-13

The choices we make and the factors we take into account can reveal a great deal about our spiritual condition. There is no mention of Lot seeking the mind of God. He considered the view, the material factors for business, and the

possibilities for housing and he made his choice on that basis. He separated himself from Abram with whom he had gone along since they lived together in Ur. Lot knew of Abram's altars, his faith in God, his obedience to God, and all he had experienced of the forgiveness and blessing of God. But Lot's heart had remained that of a worldly man. We cannot tell how much, if anything, Lot knew of the society in Sodom, of the atmosphere and moral attitudes, nor whether he considered how such matters would affect him and his family. We are not told if he tried to find out *before* he made his decision. But what we are told in v.13 has an ominous sound with regard to Lot's spiritual safety in days to come. There are practical lessons here. In our day, very often people young and old have little choice as to *where* they have to work. That being decided for them, too many then make decisions about housing without any consideration of where they will worship and what kind of spiritual ministry will be available for themselves and their children. To live in a wealthy but worldly community can make it very difficult to maintain a truly Christian way of life, and that militates against the spiritual good of growing children. The rest of Lot's story, as we shall see in due course, was a sad one. In spiritual terms he lost out completely.

Tuesday 5th January 13:14-18

The fact that God spoke again to Abram after his separation from Lot seems to indicate that the relationship between the two men and the two families had been a drag on Abram's spiritual life and a hindrance to his full availability for God's service. A good way to test a relationship is the effect it has on spiritual life, growth and service. Abram may not have been fully aware of the real reasons for breaking with Lot but he felt within his own soul that the time had come for this to happen. We must not assume that the decision was easy. Indeed, in human terms it may have been very costly and, the break having been made, Abram may have had reactions and questions in his mind about it. Perhaps that is why God, who so well understands our human nature, spoke to His servant so clearly, indicating the sheer dimension of the purposes he had for Abram's life and service. Abram was reminded that God's purposes are long-term and that the full significance of our service may not become visible until after we are dead and gone. Of course, in Christ we will not be dead, but alive in the glory of Heaven, knowing far more about what is going on on earth than we are aware of at present. Think of the story of the Transfiguration (Lk. 9:28-30), with Moses and Elijah discussing with Jesus the death He was to die on the Cross! We must see also in this passage that God's glorious purposes of blessing to Abram and through Abram were not just to be admired and meditated on. Abram was told to rise and to walk through the length and breadth of the land to see it, to experience it and to claim it for the Lord. There would be enemies to displace and work to establish and that would be done in the obedience of faith. It would not be done all at once, because the

dimensions involved the four points of the compass. But Abram had to make a start to enter in and take possession of what God had given to him (v.17). In the same way we have to lay hold by faith on all that God has done for us and given to us in Christ (Eph. 1:3-8; 2 Pet. 1:3-4). Little wonder that Abram again built an altar, not an altar of sacrifice or atonement, but one of remembrance, so that he would not forget what God had said to him. Listening to God and believing what He says are the basis and inspiration of spiritual service.

Wednesday 6th January 14:1-12

This passage that is complicated to read tells of the kind of eruption of wars among various small states that we still read about today. Conflicts erupt, kings and rulers take sides, usually in self-interest, sometimes in the hope of gain and sometimes in an attempt to keep the balance of power so that no kingdom gets to be too strong. It is the story of happenings in the real world, dangers that come in a totally unexpected way, and the conflict is recorded here to remind us of Lot, who made his choice of life in the way he thought would bring him most human benefit. Without any warning, the worldly Lot, who had really decided to live his life without God, found himself a prisoner-of-war with all his possessions taken from him. We cannot tell how long Lot had been in Sodom but we do know that the various satellite states had been in subjection for twelve years before they rebelled (4). Feelings were running high, and in that kind of situation there is little humanity shown, let alone mercy. Think of the present conflicts in the Russian states, in Eastern Europe and in parts of Africa with the carnage and streams of refugees. The first uprising was crushed (5) and another uprising came in v.8. In one sense Lot did not really belong to the conflict, but he was there and was caught up in it. We can imagine his wife and family saying bitterly, "Why did you bring us here?" They may have had no objection when all was going well, and so far there is no indication of Lot living a bad life. But he was there and he was involved. All of us need to be careful where we go and who and what we get involved with. Lot may have felt sorry for himself, protesting that he had done no wrong. But he should never have been there in the first place. He was having to live with the result of his own choices.

Thursday 7th January 14:13-16

Here is a wonderful example of how a man, living his life separated from complications and committed to God, can be a significant help to others in their time of need. Abram did not take the attitude that it was Lot's own fault and it was up to him to sort out his life. It was, of course, Lot's own fault that he had landed in trouble but Abram remembered that it was his own fault that he had landed in trouble in Egypt. On that occasion, though he did not deserve it, God worked to deliver him and to bring him back to safety and service. Because God had so dealt with him, Abram decided without hesitation to go to

Lot's help. How important it is in our dealings with others to remember just how kind, gracious and longsuffering God has been with us and how He has again and again rescued us from our own complications. We do well to ponder Rom. 15:1, where the strong are commanded to bear with the weak, and indeed to bear them up, carrying them if need be. The same message is found in Gal. 6:1-2, where we are commanded to restore the person who has obviously blundered and whose guilt is manifest. And we must do this in a spirit of gentleness, remembering that we are not without sin and may very well fall into the same temptation. It is always easier to knock down than to lift up. The sobering part of the story is that, having been rescued, Lot went back to Sodom. His heart and his wife's heart belonged there. Life with Abram and Abram's God did not appeal.

Friday 8th January 14:17-24

Two kings are spoken of in this difficult and mysterious passage, the first being the king of Sodom who came out from wherever he had been hiding and went to visit Abram. Keep in mind the demands both human and spiritual on Abram: his separation from Lot; his disappointment in and concern for Lot; and then the battle to deliver Lot. Keep in mind also that those called to spiritual service will always be the subject of the Devil's attentions, especially after significant events. Now look at the proposition made by the king of Sodom (21). He spoke as if he had been a partner in the victory just won, and his bold words were, to say the least, patronising. If Abram had agreed, the public assessment of him would have been that he was a man out to increase his wealth and in order to do so was willing to be regarded as a colleague, if not a servant, of the great king of Sodom. There is something in this "offer" by the king of Sodom that reminds one of the words of the Devil spoken to the Lord Jesus: "All this will I give you if you worship me," (Lk. 4:5-8). Abram's response was instant and radical. He declared himself to be God's man, His glad and willing servant, and said that all his work he did for God and not for man. Nothing would be allowed to cloud his testimony, and nothing would be allowed even to suggest that Abram acknowledged that the "powers of the world" had any rights or authority over him. There was spiritual dignity about the man of God, which stemmed from his being right with God, and his setting a guard on his life. Think of Jesus' words in John 8:46; 14:30; and Paul's words in Acts 20:17-19; 1 Thess. 2:3-6; 2 Cor. 4:1-2. How we need to guard our involvements! They may not harm us personally, but they may hinder God's work.

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Saturday 9th January 14:17-24

We have recognised the spiritual danger to Abram in the approach of the king of Sodom. The picture is then given of Melchizedek arriving and seemingly intervening, standing between Abram and the dangerous temptation coming to

him. We have no introduction to this Melchizedek, who just appears on the scene and then departs. We are told in Heb. 6:19-7:3 that Melchizedek, king of righteousness and king of peace, is on the scene as a type or foreshadowing of the ministry of Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, the One who ever lives to make intercession for us (Heb. 7:25). That means we have to see this mysterious king, as coming to Abram from God, at a time of particular need, to minister to him. This “Priest” of the Most High God brought out bread and wine, and we must surely see in these “elements” more than just symbols of eastern courtesy and hospitality. The picture is of God coming in His representative, with spiritual nourishment and blessing, to minister to His faithful servant for his present need and his preparation for the future. It was as if Melchizedek was saying to Abram, “Your God will supply all your need. He comes to you in blessing and power for life. He will always come to you.” Then Melchizedek used words in v.20 that focused the thoughts of Abram and everyone else on God who was the One who had won the victory. Abram recognised without hesitation that this mysterious king was in fact sent from God, with the authority of God, and he responded and gave a tenth of everything. In so doing Abram was testifying and saying, “All I have and all I am belongs to God by right.” How often have we discovered, in various circumstances of need, the truth of Jesus' words, “I will not leave you comfortless, I will come to you,” (John 14:18)?

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Sunday 10th January 15:1-6

We must focus on the first two words of this passage, because they do not necessarily refer only to the immediate events and experiences of the previous chapter. Some ten years (cf. 12:4 and 16:16) had passed since Abram had responded to the call of God and the story has recorded his failure in Egypt, his restoration, the costly separation from associates who would have hindered, the rescue of Lot and then Abram's dignity of faith and integrity of testimony described in chapter 14. Abram was no longer a spiritual novice but what he had been through must have taken its toll on him physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, whether or not he was fully aware of it. Now, of course, it is not wrong to be tired but we must recognise it if we are to cope and be able to go on in spiritual service. It is wonderfully reassuring and encouraging to be told that God is the first to recognise the condition and need of His servants and, taking the initiative, the Lord came to Abram. The nature of the vision we are not told and do not need to know. Some, if they knew, would want a similar experience, and it must be left to God to speak and guide as He chooses. What we are told is the two-fold message given. The first word was “Fear not!” and the second was that God Himself was His servant's shield for protection and reward. Both AV and NIV make plain that God, not something God would give, was the reward. The objective of God's words was

to encourage Abram to fix his thoughts on God rather than on circumstances and people. The Lord does not say, “Fear not!” unless He is aware that His people are beginning to feel afraid. Fear can stir as the result of tiredness or strain as we have indicated. It can stir because of uncertainty about the future (as in John 14:1-4). Fear can break in suddenly and irrationally, a specific work of Satan as in 1 Sam. 27:1. Read Ps. 56:3-4 where the Psalmist seems to say, “when I am afraid . . . I will not fear.” That is worth thinking about.

Monday 11th January 15:1-6

God was reassuring Abram that everything in his life was safe and secure in His hand. Something of the “reward” spoken of is expressed in Isa. 57:15. What a glorious companion to have in the ordinary business of life! Abram obviously felt “comfortable” with God, because he was prepared to tell God in detail about the things that bothered him and made him uncertain and apprehensive. The focus was on one particular issue that had become dominant in his thinking: the question of a son and heir. How could the promise of 12:2 be fulfilled if he remained childless? After all, ten years was a long time to wait! Note carefully the one-to-one, face-to-face nature of this conversation between Abram and God. We see here the beginning of the kind of relationship that led to the description of Abraham as the friend of God (Jas. 2:23). There was no rebuke from God, no suggestion that Abram was lacking in faith, but a plain word of reassurance that a son would be born. Not only did God affirm His promise, He gave His servant an astonishing illustration of the sheer dimension of the blessing and the service that God had planned for him (5). Abram believed God and he was “justified by faith”. Read the realistic expression of all of this in Rom. 4:17-25. Abram staked all on the integrity of the Word of God. It is amazing just how often the word we need from God is, “Fear not!” Fear is destructive; it distorts our thinking and torments our emotions. The great need is to be calmed, because only then can God speak to us and we can speak to God about what is really bothering us. Sometimes a whole lot of things worry us and we try to give the impression to ourselves and others that we are coping. We do not talk either to God or to a trusted friend, and the result is that the pressure builds up and focuses on some thing or person that becomes an obsession. The real problem is lost sight of and remedy is virtually impossible.

Tuesday 12th January 15:7-11

This passage introduces the rather mysterious events later in the chapter but it has clear instruction for us. The speech of both God and Abram is recorded. In v.7 Abram is made to focus on the person of God, and he is reminded not just that it was God who called him and God who gave promises to him, but that it was God who took full responsibility for him. The call out of Ur was a call with a specific objective. It was to lead Abram into a whole new way of life in a

new area and territory which God had pledged to him. All of us need to be quite clear that God has His specific plans for us, for our lives and service, as well as for our eternal destiny. As with Abram, so with us, the intentions of God are far beyond what we think, and we must guard against the danger of limiting God's working by unbelief. Read such passages as Jer. 29:11; 1 Cor. 2:9 (AV); Eph. 3:20; 1 Pet. 5:10 and think just how great God's thoughts are. God knows what he is doing with us and all His dealings with us are in order to lead us into what He has prepared. Abram reacted in a very human way, wanting to be assured about the future. Note that it was possession of the land that he questioned. He accepted that he would have a son and heir, simply because God had said it. But if he had accepted by faith one seemingly impossible thing, why did he doubt about the other? Who are we to criticise? We do the very same thing. Even though we can look back and trace the story of God's grace and faithfulness, we still tend to doubt when some new situation presents itself, especially if we feel God is being rather slow in answering our prayers.

Wednesday 13th January 15:12-21

The elements of the sacrifice were prescribed by God (9-10), but we do not know what significance to attach to the details and it is better not to speculate. Although the sacrifice was dedicated to God it was not free from the attack by the birds and they were resisted by Abram. We may be allowed to see in this the fact that every work of God will be attacked by its natural enemies. For example, unbelief will always be against faith. The objective in this "ritual" was that God should give assurance to His servant, and yet a dread and darkness encompassed Abram (12). If, in any sense, the significance of the birds had to do with the powers of evil (cf. Matt. 13:4,19), and Abram resisted them the whole long day, then it is not surprising that he fell asleep and that at the same time a feeling of dread encompassed him. But Abram was also deeply aware of being in the presence of God and that significant things were being said. Perhaps we can understand his experience best if we think of how in Gethsemane and at the Cross, times of great significance in the outworking of God's plan of salvation, there was in the experience of Jesus an ominous sense of awe, burden and perplexity, but yet a sense of assurance in God (Mk. 14:32-36; 15:33-34). Being drawn into the working of God is a profound experience, with consequences far exceeding what we can grasp, and it is not surprising that we should feel awe, solemnity, apprehension and even fear. Right after His baptism, at the start of His ministry, Jesus was led into the dark experience of the temptation in the wilderness, at the end of which He needed the ministry of angels (Matt. 4:11). When Moses was receiving God's Law he was drawn into the thick cloud of darkness where God was (Ex. 20:21). We begin to grasp the significance of being called to worship with reverence and godly fear (Heb. 12:28-29).

Thursday 14th January 15:12-21

In an atmosphere of solemnity God spoke to Abram and set his life and service into the context of the plan of redemption history. This is a concept that we tend to find difficult because we live in a generation preoccupied with the present and the immediate. God is not in a hurry, and already in the story of Genesis He had mapped out the route and the timetable for the coming of the Saviour. Then, when the fulness of the time had come, He would send His Son, born of the Virgin in Bethlehem, to die on the Cross as the promised Lamb of God in whom salvation and life would be found by sinners. Remember that Jesus said that Abraham, by faith, saw His day and was glad (John 8:56). But God made plain that the outworking of the plan of salvation would stretch far beyond Abram's own lifetime, and this is something we must grasp and believe as we seek to understand our own experiences. Many things will not be clear until we look back on them from the light of eternity, then we will indeed "bless the hand that guided and bless the heart that planned". The span of God's plan is from eternity to eternity. Other people have laboured, we enter into their labours, and in due time we pass the work on to those who come after us (John 4:37-38). There is responsibility and yet great privilege, not least because, as we are being taught in this experience of Abram, God commits Himself to His people. The pattern of the sacrifice (9-11) would have been familiar to all present as the ritual adopted when two people were making a covenant. Normally both parties would walk between the two "lines" of the sacrifice, but in v.17 the smoke and the torch (think of the pillar of cloud and of fire in Exodus) were symbols of God's presence. He alone walked through the sacrifice. He is the one who takes the initiative and makes the covenant. God pledges Himself unconditionally to the people He has chosen and called. We have His Word, His promise and His presence. If God be for us(Rom. 8:28-31).

Friday 15th January 15:12-21

There is one further important lesson to learn and it will help us to grasp why it often seems to us that God is being slow, both in working out His salvation and in bringing evil to judgment. In v.16 we are being taught that while evil and its working may be mysterious to us they are not so to God. He has full knowledge of evil in every aspect of its working and development. As the story of the Garden of Eden makes plain, God is immediately aware of the operation of evil and He addresses it and deals with it. Individuals and nations have to live with the consequences of their evil actions in their own lives and on through their descendants. There is an inheritance or entail of sin and the whole of Scripture and history testifies to the astonishing sovereign patience and forbearance of God in the face of evil. He is never quick to judge but He is sure in His judgments, as 2 Pet. 3:1-10 makes plain. God is never afraid of evil nor does He necessarily deal with evil when its activity first becomes evident, as

Matt. 13:24-30 makes plain. At times in history the tide of evil reaches such a height that in a certain generation there is manifest judgment. Read Gen. 6:5-7 but note even in the pronouncing of judgment we are told of the grief of God's heart. Read also Matt. 23:29-39 where Jesus spoke of how the accumulated perversity and evil of past generations were about to crash in on the present generation. It is a solemn concept, and the tragedy of it is found in the words, "I would have gathered you but you would not." In the providence of God evil is allowed to operate so that it will expose itself for what it is, as being totally and utterly evil, and fully deserving the righteous judgment of God. These are solemn matters but we must be clear. God is not mocked. God is righteous. God forgives. God is the judge, who always does what is right (Gen. 18:25). This God is the rock and refuge of His people.

Saturday 16th January 16:1-6

The previous chapter ended with the sovereign purposes of God being spelled out to Abram and this chapter begins with complaining and scheming in the human situation. Understandably Sarai was vexed that after years of marriage she had no child and she seems to have blamed God for that situation. Of course, we do not know to what extent Abram shared with his wife the promises God had given him regarding a son and heir (15:4). It is a fact of experience that lack of communication and failure to share particularly on a spiritual level are the causes of many breakdowns in marriage. Two people who keep the deepest things of life to themselves can never be true friends let alone real partners. This scheme of Sarai was set in motion at a very significant time in the life and development of Abram, the servant of God. He had just had a profound spiritual experience in which God spoke to him about the future and the importance of his service. He had believed God, and he knew God was with him and that he was committed to God, even though he could not yet see how God could do all He planned through someone such as himself. After all, although he had already been used by God, he had failed in some significant ways. Then, just as Abram was beginning to move forward in faith, his partner in life reacted to her unhappy feelings, spoke unwise words and made suggestions that seem to have demolished Abram's faith and patience, causing him to give rash agreement to a plan that should never have been made. Having listened to the scolding tones of his wife, Abram agreed to what was suggested and there was introduced into his family life and his service for God a whole long stream of complications. Human decisions are important. We need to watch and pray, because there is an enemy!

Sunday 17th January 16:1-6

It is easy to forget that in *all* areas of life we are involved with God, and that is why we need to learn to take our disappointments as well as our joys to God in prayer. It is instructive to compare the reaction of Hannah, the mother of

Samuel, with that of Sarai (1 Sam.1:1-11). It would be easy to say that Sarai had not kept pace with her husband's spiritual development, but we must remember that patience is not easy when long waiting is involved and it is usually easier for a man to come to terms with childlessness than for a woman. In the culture of Abram's day it appears that the practice of "surrogacy" was accepted and the child of a servant girl could be recognised as the wife's own child. But even if society recognises and validates some patterns of behaviour, especially those involving sexual behaviour, that certainly does not mean that God approves. It is dangerous, on various levels, to assume that human methods are the right ways to carry out the will of God. Note that Sarai had no real assurance that what she was proposing was in accord with God's will, but she went ahead (2). We do not know how long Sarai may have been suggesting that Abram should take this course of action. We do not know if Abram had been aware of the attractive Egyptian maid who had been introduced to his household when he had been adrift from God in Egypt years earlier (12:16). Note that it was after ten years of God's faithful dealing with him that Abram made this grave error. Whatever he thought of the rights and wrongs of the issue, he agreed with his wife, perhaps to keep the peace. The plan went ahead. The child was conceived. The maid mocked her mistress, who may well have had a snobbish or superior attitude to the girl. Sarai blamed her husband for it all but Abram refused to accept responsibility, and because of cruelty the pregnant maid ran away. What a story this would have made in today's newspapers!

Monday 18th January 16:7-15

Since we are tending to be easily critical of both Abram and Sarai in their lapse from faith and obedience, we had better read and ponder 1 Cor. 10:12 and Gal. 6:1. We should always remember that when tension and conflict between people introduce an element of confusion into the work of God, the fault seldom belongs to one party. As situations develop the original "flash-point" can often be forgotten and the "wrongs" can develop in all sorts of directions. Try to imagine the hurt feelings, the sense of guilt, and perhaps the sense of shame felt by Abram, Sarai and Hagar. It was God who took charge of things and none of the parties was allowed to run away. They had to live under God's providential grace and discipline with the situation they had created. That was the only real hope for them, humanly and spiritually. Down the years in a very real sense Hagar's son Ishmael was God's word of rebuke, a reminder to all who are called to serve God that they must learn to wait upon God and not to take situations into their own hands. Hagar, no doubt heading back to Egypt, was met by God and sent back to Sarai. This may indicate that her part in the scheme had not been without fault, and it may also have been to prevent scorn being poured on Abram's name when the Egyptians heard of what had happened. Hagar, being sent back, was no doubt a sore lesson to

Sarai, a rebuke to her harshness and a humbling of her pride. Abram had to live with two women who were bitter and who would, for different reasons, hold him responsible for all that had gone wrong. What a problem God has with His people, and yet He does not despair of them. Hagar was given the child's name: Ishmael, which means "God hears" or "God has heard". That is something we need to remember! Ishmael was to be great, but there was no word of his being a blessing to others. If we think of the Arabs of today being in some way the descendants of Ishmael, and if we consider the conflict between the two peoples down the ages, we begin to see just how long-lasting have been the consequences of Sarai's and Abram's lapse from faith and obedience. We had better guard our decisions, and guard even more carefully our reactions to people, which all lead to complications. There is no running away. God sees to that. But never forget, there is forgiveness with God (Ps. 130:3-4; Is. 1:18).

Tuesday 19th January 16:15-17:1

Yesterday's passage told us of the God who sees, hears and acts. Nothing is hidden from Him. There are no secrets as far as He is concerned (Heb. 4:11-13). But God's "seeing" can be a wonderful comfort when we feel we are struggling and making little progress against the winds of experience (Job. 23:8-10; Mk. 6:45-52). The AV translation of 16:13b is, "Thou, God, seest me." The NIV has Hagar saying, "I have now seen (or seen the back of) the One who sees me." She seems to have been amazed that God was taking such an interest in her and her situation, without her being struck dead. But there is no indication that Hagar came to faith. You can be closely involved in a congregation where God is working great salvation and blessing, and you can be thrilled by it, and even be aware of God (other people's God) without ever believing for yourself. In today's short verses we have to be aware of the long process of God's dealing with, discipline of, and encouragement of His servant Abram. A spell of thirteen years lies between the two chapters. There is nothing recorded in the divine narrative regarding these thirteen years. Perhaps we should not place too much emphasis on the silence, but we do well to consider how Abram must have pondered the apparent silence of God. After all, God had promised a son (15:3-4), and there was no sign of another child. Did Abram assume that this Ishmael was the son of promise, even though strictly speaking he was not his "own son", the son of his marriage? Think of Abram's feelings as the child grew to be a teenager. Would he gradually forget the sin of disobedience that led to the child being born? Had Abram forgotten God's words, "know for certain" (15:13) that had called for faith and trust? Had Abram forgotten God's words concerning the part he had to play in the development of God's planned purposes? Human feelings and human fulfilment can gradually dull the sensitiveness of our spirits and it can take a long time before we are "tuned in

to God” so that we can hear Him speaking to us about the real purpose of our lives. It seems it took thirteen years in Abram's case.

Wednesday 20th January 16:15-17:1

In spite of the seeming delay, Abram still had a significant spiritual future which had not been cancelled out by his failure. God is faithful (2 Tim. 2:13). Humanly speaking there was delay, but God's servant was being tested and strengthened in faith in preparation for the next stage of his service. The emphasis is on God, the God who was now speaking to Abram. God declared Himself to be “God Almighty”, the “El Shaddai” God, the all-sufficient God, the “enough” God. The fact that the God of Abram is our God stands over against all our thoughts and feelings of regret, failure, doubt and fear; feelings that make us wonder if we have forfeited our opportunities for service. In Abram's situation over the past thirteen years he may have had a deep and disquieting feeling that he had lost his fellowship with God, his sense of God being with him, and the experiences of God speaking with him. It must have stirred Abram's soul when he heard once again the voice of God. But what did God's call really mean? It may have been a challenge to walk in the light with God, out in the open, with nothing to hide (1 John 1:5-7). It may have been a word of encouragement, saying to Abram to walk before God, looking to God and trusting God, when full of doubts, fears and uncertainties, and especially when there was an underlying sense of failure. Remember too that these thirteen years had taken Abram and Sarai beyond the possibility of a “natural” son and heir, or so they would have thought. Abram may even have been training Ishmael to be his successor and to take over the leadership of the work of God. Then God broke His silence because He judged that Abram was now ready to go forward. God is always ready. And God's word to Abram made plain that where sin had abounded, grace much more abounded (Rom. 5:20 AV). What a God we have!

Thursday 21st January 17:1-5

A whole new phase of Abram's life was about to begin and it was to be set in the context of the on-going, sovereign plan and purpose of God. The word “blameless” (1) cannot mean sinless, or perfect, for that is impossible for all of us. If we ever claim to be sinless we deceive *only* ourselves (1 John 1:8). In Gen. 6:9 Noah is referred to as righteous (in relation to men) and blameless (in relation to God). It seems God was asking Abram to be whole-hearted as opposed to just maintaining a distant relationship. It is as if God was saying, “If you really want Me and want to be with Me, show it by trusting Me to fulfil in your life all My promises, and to fulfil them in My way and at My time.” Without waiting for an answer, God went on to confirm His covenant and promise with regard to future blessing. The initiative was with God and the commitment by God was not dependent on Abram's consent or otherwise.

What was required of Abram was that he should walk with God, not run, not hold back, but keep in step, letting God set both the pace and the direction. That is a great way to live and it is echoed in Jesus' words about His yoke being easy (Matt. 11:28-30). Abram's immediate reaction to God's voice was to bow in worship and to listen to God (3). Of course heads bowed or knees bent in worship do not necessarily mean we are listening to God, or even listening to the minister. How many can truly say "Amen", at the end of a pulpit prayer, affirming that the prayer was theirs as well as the minister's? God affirmed His covenant with Abram, outlined His purposed blessings for Abram and for his children after him, and committed Himself for time and for eternity (7-8). Go through the passage to see and to thrill to the repeated affirmation, "I will".

Friday 22nd January 17:9-14

God had declared Himself to Abram and presented to him the covenant already signed, "God Almighty". The sufficiency of God stood over against the frailty and limitation of His servant. Abram was given a new name, as if to signify that the past was in reality past, and the break was made by the God who makes all things new (Rev. 21:5; 2 Cor. 5:17). When God said in v.5 "I have made you a father of many nations", He was signifying that His purposes cannot be frustrated and, although Abraham did not know it, within a year the promised child would be born. The covenant was made and signed but, as in a marriage ceremony, there had to be a response and some sign or symbol used to demonstrate that the commitment had been made. Circumcision was ordained as the sign and seal of God's covenant. This was to be the sign or indication that Abraham had responded in faith for himself and for his children after him. He was not to wait for the children to "decide for themselves", as if everything in God's working depended on human decision. Abraham and his children were to be marked out as belonging to God, given the identity as covenant children, and be brought up in the knowledge and atmosphere of the covenant, which had at its heart the declaration of the undeserved grace of God. If in due time any of the children were to contract out of the "family covenant", as Esau did (Heb. 12:15-17), it would be manifest that they had made a deliberate decision against God. Without entering into controversy, it is right to point out that if, under the Old Covenant, children who were not of an age to understand were to receive the mark of the covenant, it would be surprising if, under the New Covenant, children should not receive the mark of that new covenant in baptism. Neither in the Old or New Covenants does the "sign" work salvation, but to be brought up in the knowledge, nurture and example of the covenant is benefit indeed (Rom. 9:1-5). Think of how many children and young people today grow up with absolutely no knowledge of God or Jesus. We have not begun to take seriously this problem of evangelism in our generation.

Saturday 23rd January 17:15-21

In giving Sarah her new name it seems that God was indicating that she took her rightful place in the plan in her own right and not just as the wife of Abraham. Then, as God began to spell out the details and the extent of the blessing He purposed, and the means whereby it was to be set in motion, Abraham reacted in two ways. He fell down before God in worship and he laughed inwardly at the seeming impossibility of what God was planning. It was almost too much to believe and Abraham began to suggest to God what seemed a more obvious way to proceed. After all, an officially adopted son already in position seemed a more likely channel of advance than the remote possibility that an aged couple would have a child. Abraham was having a struggle to believe, just as he had earlier in 15:8. In a very real sense Abraham was responding to God's announcement in a similar way to Mary in Luke 1:29-38. Humanly speaking it seemed impossible, but with God nothing is impossible (Lk.18:27). God was gently and graciously firm with Abraham, reassuring him in his faith, recognising his concern and prayers for Ishmael (20), and confirming that the plan would be worked out in exact detail in terms of both experience and timing (21). We have earlier referred to Paul's comment, by the Holy Spirit, on this situation, affirming the realism of Abraham's faith (Rom. 4:17-21). Abraham believed God, and what God said took precedence over his feelings, fears and preferences. He believed that the God who speaks, calls, promises and begins, is the God who brings His work to completeness (Phil. 1:6). Read the hymn, "The God of Abraham praise," and think of the words, "Hail Abraham's God and mine!"

Sunday 24th January 17:22-27

This seems an unattractive passage with unnecessary medical detail. But the emphasis is not on the physical. It has to do with the practical obedience of faith. God brought the conversation and discussion to a close because all that was necessary had in fact been said. It would be good and beneficial if we could all learn this principle and not allow discussions to go on past their useful time, and certainly to curb the time committee meetings can devour if people come to them without having done any preparatory thinking. Keep in mind that the whole of this chapter records a significant personal meeting between God and Abraham. It was what we could call a "spiritual high". But the "appearance" (1) or vision was now over and the test of the authenticity of all "experiences" is whether or not they lead to actual obedience to God. In Abraham's case it certainly did and, believing God's promise and holding to it in faith, Abraham caused all the males of his household to be circumcised. In that way they were marked with the sign of God's covenant and thus claimed for God and marked out for God's service. This "mark of the covenant" also marked out the people as belonging *together* as God's people, and this is an immense privilege. But it also brings responsibility to live in a way that is

worthy of those who bear God's name. The fact that all males were circumcised, all bearing the mark of the covenant, did not eliminate the need for faith nor did it automatically create faith. No “sacrament” can do this. And, in spite of all the privileges and benefits of belonging to God's covenant people, individuals can contract out in unbelief and deny the God whose grace has called them.

Monday 25th January 18:1

What time gap there was between the last passage and this introductory verse we cannot tell, but a comparison of 17:21 and 18:10 suggests it was not long. Something significant was about to happen and Abraham had been prepared by God for it. We pause in our studies to remind ourselves that, right from chapter 12, the story has concerned God's choice of and commitment to Abraham; God's purposes through Abraham, and the developing relationship of faith and fellowship between God and His servant. Abraham had been learning faith, learning to trust God even when things seemed impossible, learning to wait on God, to wait for God and to be ready for God. We too do not know what any one day might bring to us or require of us (Prov. 27:1; Jas. 4:13-15; cf. Matt. 6:25-34). There is something very ordinary about the picture in this verse, something quiet and peaceful. We are not told what Abraham was thinking nor if he had any feeling or premonition that this was to prove a significant day in terms of spiritual service. He may simply have been resting. He was certainly quiet, and this is perhaps one of the lessons we need to learn. We need to take time to stop, to be quiet; not reviewing the past, nor planning for the future, not necessarily reading our Bibles or praying; just resting and relaxing, and in that way being sensitive to the approach of God. Sometimes we try to be too spiritual and we mistake our own thinking for the voice of God. Sometimes we are too busy and assume we are doing God's will. Too often, when we are needed for God's service, He finds us weary, jaded and uninspired. There is so much we have to learn about resting in the Lord (Ps. 37:3-7 AV).

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Tuesday 26th January 18:1-8

The drama now unfolding is profoundly spiritual and yet gloriously human. It makes clear that life lived in the obedience of faith is full of surprises, because we are never quite sure who or what may come our way. But faith that waits on God makes us ready, whether our visitors are angels (Heb. 13:2), or the Lord Himself (Matt. 25:35). Abraham seems to have recognised at once that this visitation was important and indeed significant, although he did not yet realise just how significant. At the start of his story we were told that the God of Glory appeared to Abraham (Acts 7:2) and such a visitation can be quite overpowering, as Isa. 6:1-5; Dan. 10:2-9; and Rev. 1:12-18 make plain. But here

it was three men who came, one of whom was manifestly a person recognisable as deserving to be addressed as Lord. If we consider 18:22 and 19:1 it seems clear that the significant visitor was the Lord Himself, accompanied by two angels. The timing of the visit was the mid-day siesta and therefore the least convenient time for unknown people to arrive and yet Abraham responded with typical eastern hospitality on a very respectful and generous scale. In v.3 Abraham regarded the visit as an honour and in v.5b he recognised that these visitors had come, not to linger with him, but to go further on with a specific purpose. Note also in v.8 that Abraham, a significant man in his own society, stood in attendance on his visitors, almost accepting that they had royal status. Such was the warmth and spontaneity of Abraham's welcome that the heavenly visitors were glad to stay. There is a parallel here with the story of the Road to Emmaus where the disciples prevailed on the Risen Jesus to come in and stay. That kind of attitude prepares people for the revelation of wonderful things from God.

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Wednesday 27th January 18:9-15

The question as to Sarah's whereabouts may have been the normal polite introduction to an expression of thanks for the meal. Kindness should never be taken for granted! The Lord did not need to ask where Sarah was, and the intention may have been to alert Sarah (who was in fact eavesdropping) to what was about to be affirmed. It is possible that Abraham had not in any clear way passed on to his wife the promise given him by God in 17:16,21, and we need to emphasise again the vital importance of communication between husbands and wives if the relationship is to be maintained and grow both humanly and spiritually. On the other hand it may have been that, knowing the promise and aware that her husband believed it, Sarah had persisted in unbelief, simply because humanly speaking it seemed too good to be true. Even when she heard the promise and affirmation from the Lord Himself (Did she recognise who was speaking?) she still did not accept it. She laughed to herself, perhaps a little wistfully, but her attitude was cynical. It must have been a shock to Sarah to hear the next words which made clear that her laughter of unbelief was known. It seems Sarah was drawn out of her hiding place in the tent, because the words of the Lord were addressed to her personally (15). She was being reminded that she had not been diligent to prepare herself for God's future plans for her life, her service, and the significant part she had to play as her husband's God-given partner. Note in v.12 Sarah's concern is *her* pleasure. But that is not the vital thing, whether in friendships or marriage. It is as the gifts of God are given back to Him gladly in dedication for service that human joy and fulfilment are found. Perhaps Sarah thought that God would not do such a wonderful thing for her but she was to discover what a generous God

she had. Her unbelief and hesitation were rebuked but God's promise and purpose stood.

Thursday 28th January 18:16-21

These verses set the context for two great happenings from which there is much to learn: the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah and the intercessory prayer of Abraham. We see the man of faith playing a significant part in the outworking of both judgment and salvation. We see also the very personal way in which Abraham was drawn into this spiritual drama and we see the regard God had for His servant and the confidence and trust He placed in him (17-19). We do well to ask ourselves to what extent God can trust us with the stewardship of His Gospel and work, and with the shepherding of His people, especially at times of demand and crisis. We must not let this thought crush us because, as the RSV translation of 2 Tim. 1:11-12 emphasises, God is able to guard what He has committed to us, as well as guard what we have committed to Him. Ministers, elders and all believers are called to guard the Gospel (2 Tim. 1:13-14). All who have positions of responsibility are also called to guard the flock of God which is precious to Him and purchased at great cost (Acts 20:28). By the end of this month (Oct.1996) the Sandyford congregation will enter a spell without a settled minister. All who have been richly blessed by God (not by the minister) have a debt of gratitude to God and should have the sense of obligation that Paul expressed in Rom. 1:14. We have referred to the charge to the elders at Ephesus. Think of Jesus' words to Peter in John 21:15-17, words that made such an impact that later Peter emphasised them to others (1 Pet. 5:1-4). It is both our duty and our privilege to care for one another, to bear each other's burdens and so to fulfil the law of Christ (Gal. 6:1-3).

Friday 29th January 18:16-21

The last two verses of this passage are very solemn and searching and have a message that godless society needs to hear and to take notice of. The outcry against Sodom seems to speak of the whole of Heaven protesting against the evil in society. God is not blind, nor is He mocked. The eyes of the Lord see all there is to see throughout the whole earth (2 Chron. 16:9; Zech. 4:10; 1 Pet. 3:12) and that is comfort to the righteous, but a grave warning to all who do wrong. God is not indifferent to the evils of society, including the perversions of human behaviour that are indulged in and defended by so many. The time comes when God says, "Enough is enough." That was made clear at the time of the Flood when God's verdict was made plain (Gen. 6:5-8). But note in that story the grief and hurt of God's loving heart. Today's story may refer to the strident cry and clamour of evil in the world reaching the ears of Heaven and God coming down to see. When that happens a day of judgment is at hand. It is stated very clearly that God does not jump to conclusions nor does he listen to gossip about people and their actions. That is an example we do well to

follow, because it will keep us from making situations worse. God investigates thoroughly. The picture is stark and alarming. It portrays God walking the streets, visiting homes and hostelrys, examining the books of businesses, observing people, relations and behaviour. God sees. God knows. God takes the initiative. He is indeed the God with whom we have to do. In a world situation like ours and like that of Abraham, God looks for people in whom He can confide, whom He can make His trusted servants and partners. Abraham was ready and available. We have pointed out that Abraham was God's friend and, because a friend, he was glad to be a servant. Jesus spoke of this kind of thing in John 15:12-17.

Saturday 30th January 18:22-33

The two angel messengers went on their mission of enquiry and the Lord and Abraham were left together. Neither made any move to separate. We could read v.22 in terms of the Lord standing looking at Abraham waiting for him to speak and ready to listen. That is a marvellous picture of the situation when we come to God in prayer. Something of the spiritual development of Abraham's life is shown in the fact that he stood before God, aware that there was something he had to do. He drew near to God and began to speak. Again we see to what extent Abraham had become a friend of God. He did not stay at a distance. He was confident that God was someone he could speak to, because he had discovered that God was someone who spoke to him. It is when we begin to know God that we begin to learn about prayer. As we study this prayer we see that Abraham was not over-confident, nor was he exactly sure what he should ask. In a sense we could refer to Abraham's conversation with God rather than using the word "prayer", and that may tell us more about real prayer than when we use the word to concentrate on what *we* are saying to God. There are two wonderful passages of encouragement regarding prayer in Heb. 4:14-16 and 10:19-23. Abraham had confidence to speak to God. He had confidence in the perfect righteousness and justice of God (23). In the end the issue was left with God and it was God who brought the time of prayer to an end (32-33). It is interesting, and it may be significant, that Abraham was alone with God in prayer. There is no mention of Sarah or anyone else. Was there no-one to share the burden of prayer? An evangelical minister reported that one week at the church Prayer Meeting there were only three people: himself, his wife and his daughter. Prayer is not the priority it should be in the lives of many Christians.

Sunday 31st January 18:22-33

There was no triumphalism in Abraham's prayer, no "claiming" an answer from God, but rather a spiritual travail. But as he prayed his faith and confidence seemed to grow. Why he began with mentioning fifty we simply cannot tell. Abraham certainly believed that even in a degenerate place like Sodom there

could be righteous and believing people. That teaches us that we should not “write off” places that do not seem fruitful areas for evangelism. As he prayed and God answered, Abraham reduced the number to ten, perhaps thinking of Lot, his wife, his two daughters and their husbands and a few more close friends or servants. We have suggested that, as he prayed, Abraham's faith increased and became more persistent, but on the other hand as he progressively reduced the numbers it may have been that his expectations grew less. It may also have been that, sensing the evil of Sodom and the imminent danger of judgment, Abraham became more specific and urgent regarding the salvation of his nephew and his family. We could ask why God did not make His intentions clear to His friend Abraham right from the start. Was it to encourage and develop Abraham's faith? When God finally ended the session of prayer without spelling out the answer, it was as if God was saying, “Here is a man I can trust without having to explain every detail.” Abraham returned to his place. The issue was in God's good, sure and sovereign hand and he was at peace. He would wait in faith to see the issue. Go on to 19:29 and see that it was the man separated unto God who was the vital human element in the situation. Lot, the involved and compromised man, could not help himself, and was a serious danger to his whole family. This prayer deserves deep study.

Monday 1st February 18:22-33

Abraham's whole prayer was grounded in the character of God, along with a profound and realistic awareness and acceptance of his own unworthiness (23-25,27). There was also in Abraham a reverence and an awareness that he was indeed on holy ground, and that presumption was quite out of place (30). At the same time there was persistence in his praying until he reached v.32, when he knew he had to leave things with God. In this whole business of prayer we are taught in Rom. 8: 26-27 that the Holy Spirit helps and prompts us in our praying, because our knowledge, understanding and capacity are so limited. People sometimes urge us to ask great things from God and in a very real sense we must not limit God nor our expectations. But the Holy Spirit also checks us in our praying, as if to say, “Leave it there.” We must not fail to see the encouragement to pray in v.26. The whole godless city would be given another chance, another opportunity to repent, all because a man of faith prayed. There is a tremendous need for intercessors. Read Ezek. 22:29-30, where God looked for someone but found no-one to stand in the gap for the nation. It is easy to deplore, criticise and denounce the sins of society. It is much more costly to pray for salvation. That requires us to live our lives in the presence of God and separated to His service. But think of it this way. If we do not pray for the nation, who will? What if we leave our praying too late? That was the situation which faced Jeremiah (Jer. 7:16-20; 14:11-12). Is it not true that the fields are white unto harvest? But will it be a harvest of salvation or judgment? Right through this prayer there is emphasis on the activity of God. It was God

who involved Abraham (17) and who stood waiting for him to speak (22). The prayers of God's people and the active working of God go together.

Tuesday 2nd February 19:1-11

The picture is vivid and the story dramatic. This was the last evening Sodom was to know and no one seemed aware of it or concerned. The life of the city was going on in its usual, godless, indulgent way but its day of reckoning had come, and the people were not ready (Lk. 17:26-29). We are at once introduced to Lot who, sitting at the gate of the city, was obviously a man of some importance. We are told in 2 Pet. 2:6-8 that Lot was a righteous man who was vexed by the atmosphere of the city and the actions of the people. But he had chosen to live there and to stay there even after he knew the kind of place it was. But at least he was disturbed by the evil of society, whereas *we* now seem to have become accustomed to even the most horrific stories we hear. If the description of Lot as “righteous” is to be taken to mean he was “justified by faith”, then this story indicates just how far he had strayed from his spiritual moorings. The use Peter makes of the story tells us that God watches over and delivers His people even when they have backslidden as far as Lot had done. That is a wonderful thought but we must remember the alarming nature of his deliverance, and be warned by what we shall read later about Lot's reluctance to be delivered and restored to God. When the angel visitors came, although in human form, Lot seemed to recognise them as good men and was alarmed at the thought of their spending the night in the streets. But if Sodom was not a safe place for angels, who are not subject to carnal temptations, nor a safe place for men who were manifestly “good-living” men, it was certainly not a place for Lot to have settled down in. We need to be far more careful than we often are about the company we keep (1 Cor. 15:33). We are not nearly as strong as we think.

Wednesday 3rd February 19:1-11

When godly restraint goes, the degeneration of society is both deep and rapid (Rom. 1:21-32) and sin, far from being dormant, becomes active, predatory and ravenous. In Gen. 4:7 sin is spoken of as waiting to pounce, having already stalked its victim. Cf. 1 Pet. 5:8. We are not told Lot's reaction to the unwillingness of his visitors to stay the night, but we are told, in shocking terms, his reaction to the demands of the crowd that came to his door. He may have been expecting trouble, but not to the extent of the whole population. No matter how important he may have been in his official capacity in the city, he had neither the moral nor the spiritual authority, nor even influence, to restrain the wicked desires that were manifested. Lot's appeal in v.6-7 was ingratiating. He addressed the men as “brothers” and then he made the kind of “offer” or “deal” in v.8 that must shock everyone, especially fathers. The fact that Lot could even think of such a plan to “buy” peace makes it totally clear just how

far he had departed from any real commitment to godliness. It seems impossible to reconcile this aspect of Lot's character with what we read of him yesterday in 2 Peter. Can a righteous man, a man who has claimed to be justified by faith, a man who has companied with godly people as Lot had companied with Abraham, really fall as low as this (2 Pet. 2:20-22)? There is a Devil, and few of us really know the deep flaws in our personalities. How we need the grace of God to keep us from falling (Jer. 17:9)! How we need the new heart God has promised (Ezek. 36:26-27) and how we need to nurture and build up the new life that is ours in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17). There is one gleam of light in the darkness of this sordid story. Lot's daughters were pure. They had boy-friends (14) and were engaged to be married, but there had been no sexual impropriety. Sex was being kept for marriage. If God can keep relationships like that in a city like Sodom and with a father who had compromised all his spiritual principles, then God can keep us in our godless society.

Thursday 4th February 19:1-11

If sin was allowed unfettered operation, the chaos would be terrible and destructive. Lot seems to have regarded a breach of society's polite hospitality as more important than a breach of God's moral laws and a denial of parental responsibility. But that is the pattern for many today. The men of Sodom swept Lot aside, showing their basic contempt for him as a man and as one who professed to live by principles set by God, the God in whom they simply did not believe. In v.9b we have the picture of the power and the people of sin seemingly about to break the last defence and to carry all before them. But that cannot be. The "men from heaven" intervened. They first rescued Lot, and that is the emphasis in 2 Pet. 2:7. Then they made Lot's safety or salvation sure by closing the door. Then they struck the powers of evil with blindness so that they were totally unable to carry out their desires. It is not hard for God to reduce evil to blind confusion and to show it in its helplessness. When evil men think they call the tune, God laughs and acts (Ps. 2:1-4). Think of how, in the story of Daniel, God made the fiery furnace ineffective and later closed the mouths of the lions. Think too of the story of Job which makes so clear that the Devil can operate *only* within the strict limits ordained by God (Job 1:12; 2:6). Of course, at times, it seems that God allows evil to have the victory. It seemed so when the Son of God was crucified but the resurrection showed it was otherwise. But keep in mind that when all this was happening in Sodom, Abraham was praying in the presence of God.

Friday 5th February 19:12-14

Keep in mind that it was the arrival of messengers from Heaven in the persons of two men (angels) that aroused the hatred and opposition of the evil people of Sodom. Their being struck blind and therefore helpless, together with the clear statement and warning about impending judgment, seem to have stirred

Lot into response. Of course he may have been aware that after this incident his position, acceptance and even his safety in the city would be in danger. It seems that the future sons-in-law did not actually live in Lot's home so he went to warn and urge them to flee from the wrath that was about to come on the city. But they simply did not take him seriously. No doubt they had often been in Lot's home, seeing and sharing in the pattern of life and activity of the family, but they had not seen any sign that Lot took God seriously. To what extent are our homes like that? When people visit us and talk with us, do they get any sense that Christ is indeed the unseen but not unknown head of the house? This does not mean we should preach at people in our homes but rather that our lives should be so naturally set on Jesus Christ that everything about us and our homes should carry some "savour" of Him. When the young men who were going to marry his daughters heard Lot speaking earnestly about God, they thought it was a huge joke and simply refused to take him seriously. That is a devastating testimony as to how far this man had fallen away from God. We cannot help wondering just how many people Lot led astray and into deep spiritual danger when he made his business decision, on good statistical evidence, to take his family and servants to the lush area of Sodom. Our business life and practice, and indeed our social and leisure life, can have a counter-evangelistic effect. How many who know us well take seriously our claim to be Christian believers?

Saturday 6th February 19:15-23

Many people still laugh scornfully when we sing, "Rescue the perishing....snatch them in pity from sin and the grave," but that is exactly what had to be done for Lot, his wife and his two daughters. The "spirit" of Sodom and the way of life they had lived had gripped them so firmly that they were reluctant to leave even in the face of immediate and final judgment. There would not have been much sleep, but plenty of time to think. Then, in the morning, when urged to flee, Lot lingered and the small group had to be gripped and dragged by the angels. Note in v.16b the clear statement that the Lord was merciful to them. In spite of all they had been and done, and in spite of their careless reaction to the messengers of mercy, God was kind, acting to save them. In v.17 there is a throb of great urgency because, after all, salvation is the great and eternal issue for all sinners. But Lot was no different from the men of Sodom and his two future sons-in-law. He did not take the message seriously. Perhaps he thought the message of judgment was simply meant to frighten but was something that God would not really do. Lot's words in v.18-20 were spurious, and yet they tell a lot about him. He was willing to go far enough to escape danger but wanted to stay near enough to be able to go back if the opportunity came. Many want to be Christian enough to escape hell and be sure of Heaven but do not really fancy the idea of commitment to God, a life of discipleship, and a leaving behind of the world and its ways.

Sunday 7th February 19:15-23

The long-suffering patience of God is seen in v.21 and His guardian power over His own, even when they are spiritually adrift, obtuse and disobedient, is seen in v.22. Perhaps we are baffled by God's agreeing to Lot's compromise request and certainly we should be exercised by it. God sometimes gives us what we plead for and in the mystery of His providence causes us to live with the consequences for our own and others' ultimate good. Psalm 106:13-15 AV reads that God granted their request but sent leanness to their soul. Keep in mind that earlier in the story Lot had ended up in a sore mess and, when rescued by Abraham, he chose to go back to Sodom (Gen. 14:16). That was where his real interests lay. Yes, he was vexed by the gross evils of that society and perhaps thought that a good "dose" of judgment might deal with the worst manifestations of human sin so that the rest of Sodom could be enjoyed. Perhaps he thought that, as a politician and judge in Sodom, he could get evil legalised and restricted to certain areas, so that the rest of society could shut its eyes to the badness and hope it would not intrude too much on their own lives. We could be describing society in our own day and we must recognise that many professing Christians are in fact accommodating their convictions and practices to the pattern of the day. We have still to see the effect on Lot's wife and daughters. It is dangerous to want the best of both worlds. We must not hesitate between two opinions (1 Kings 18:21), because if we do we will end up neither cold nor hot (Rev. 3:15-16). We must learn to abhor evil (Rom. 12:9) and, in order to hold fast to what is good, we need to recognise that the spirit of the world is against God and godliness (1 John 2:15-17; 5:19). We emphasise again that godly Abraham was persisting in his prayers for his nephew, but it is doubtful if that crossed Lot's mind. Perhaps he would have resented it, and certainly he did not want to go back and join Abraham's company.

Monday 8th February 19:24-29

The judgment came, and it was total. Contrast the attractive picture of Sodom in 13:10 with that in today's verses. We say it is all very solemn, and so it is. But consider what effect there would have been in the world if this cancer of sin had not been dealt with. When we hear of Legionnaire's Disease we agree that premises should be closed down lest it spread its dreaded germs. When we hear of evil incurable disease, so often (but not always) spread by human wrongdoing, care is urged and precautions taken, but so many refuse to change their life-style. There is a blindness and a perversity in human nature as a result of the Fall, but God is not mocked and what is sown will be reaped individually, socially and nationally (Gal. 6:7). Jesus told us to remember Lot's wife (Lk. 17:26-32) and we need to be clear that it was not a brief glance over her shoulder that cost her her life. In the very process of judgment, with the dark cloud over the city, she stood and looked and longed and hoped for her old life. Her heart was there and she did not want to leave. God granted her

request and she perished in the judgment. Read the earnest words in Heb. 10:35-39. One last solemn lesson must be noted. Not even the earnest, persistent prayers of faith of the godly man Abraham could avert the judgment of the evil cities. Read Jer. 15:1; Ezek. 14:12-14. We can leave our praying too late to save the city and the nation. But we must pray on so that the next generation may have hope.

Tuesday 9th February 19:30-37

This is a grim ending to a grim story. Lot, who had started off with flocks and herds and became important, ends up in a cave. Lot who had been taken to a place of safety and guaranteed that there he would come to no harm, left that place. Nothing seemed to cause him to seek after God in a spirit of repentance. He was the Prodigal Son who never came home. What spell of time elapsed between verses 29 and 31 we cannot tell. We have no desire to go into the ugly details and we should not read into the story what we are not actually told. There seems to have been no attempt by Lot to introduce his daughters to any of the wide family of Abraham. He seems to have tried to keep his girls away from the kind of contacts that would have defiled them (19:8) but that kind of protection is not necessarily the best way to prepare young people for life in the real world. The two girls may have been bitter and resentful because of the way their father had been prepared to sell them to the rabble in Sodom, and besides, their father's action now had deprived them of the men they had been going to marry. Their attitude to having children may have been to preserve the family name for future generations, or it may have been, as it can be today, that they felt they had the right to have a baby. Certainly God and the will of God did not feature in their thinking, nor in their specific method of deliberately making their father drunk so that they could carry out their plan. We must accept sadly that Lot no longer had any influence over his daughters, perhaps no respect from them. But that had evolved over a long spell of time. What we note finally are the names of the children who were born, because right through the Old Testament the Moabites and Ammonites were a danger to God's people and work. It could all have been so different if only Lot had at the start been willing to go with God.

Wednesday 10th February 20:1-7

It is something of a relief to turn back to the story of Abraham, although it too has its solemn phases. We have seen in the story of Lot how far a man can drift from God even though in earlier years he was under good and gracious influence. We have seen how deeply Lot could sink into sin and what devastating influence he had on his family. We can be sure Lot never intended his life to work out like this, but successive choices he made on a totally worldly basis led him to a sad end. We do well to take seriously Jesus' words, "Watch and pray," lest we enter into temptation. And, in the light of what we

now read about Abraham, we need the earnest counsel of Paul in 1 Cor. 10:11-13 - "Let anyone who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall." Keep in mind that we are reading of Abraham who was not only a mature servant of God but a man who was the trusted friend of God (18:17), and a man who was a mighty and prevailing intercessor (19:29). More than twenty years had passed since Abraham had obeyed the call of God and had left the city of Ur. There had been fears and failures but God had led him on in faith. He was no longer a spiritual novice and that makes it all the more sad and solemn to read here of the re-emergence of old sins. The situation here is virtually identical to that in 12:10ff. We must see here a specific attack by the Devil along the line of Abraham's personality weakness. Almost irrationally, beyond what circumstances indicated, he was gripped by fear and tried to escape by telling lies. It was a ploy that put his wife in great peril at a time when soon she was to conceive and bear the son who would be the significant figure in the onward development of God's plan of redemption. We must study this well if we are to discern and resist the Devil when he tries to introduce an element of confusion into God's work.

Thursday 11th February 20:1-7

We say that we believe in the Devil but we forget about him and fail to be ready for him. Whenever we make a significant spiritual step forward, the Devil will be there to counter-attack. Review Abraham's story. In chap. 12, after the victory of faith and obedience, Abraham was drawn away into Egypt. In chapters 14-15, after a great victory in battle followed by a new experience of God and a new commitment in faith, Abraham was tempted and nagged into an involvement with Hagar. In chapters 18-19 we saw Abraham in the front line of spiritual warfare in prevailing prayer, and now we see him in a state of reaction in which unbelief has gripped him and he seeks to handle his situation on a totally worldly and deceitful basis. If we are to go on long-term in Christian service, we must learn that one of the most dangerous times is when we have engaged successfully in costly spiritual battles, rising to the heights of faith and obedience. Think of Peter being rebuked after his great confession in Matt. 16:13-28. Think of Elijah in his depression and escapism after the great confrontation on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 19:1-4). Did Abraham not recall his earlier failure in Egypt? What made him move to Gerar? His prayers for Lot had prevailed and, while the evil cities had been brought to judgment, there was no sign of Lot returning to spiritual pilgrimage. Had this made Abraham disappointed and restless? Had his expectations been unreal, his own thoughts and imaginings rather than assurances from God? Why had Abraham assumed that there would be neither faith nor moral integrity in Gerar? Had he no thought of or consideration for his wife in this scheme? Where was his faith? Where was his clear vision of God and the promises God had given and which he had believed? All was clouded. This is the work of the Devil.

Friday 12th February 20:1-7

When we seek to expose the Devil and his workings, we must see to it that we do not forget God. If we did, that would be a great victory for the enemy. Today we must grasp firmly, and indeed gloriously, the two words “But God” (3). Leave God out and the situation becomes disastrous. With God there is creative hope. We are dealing here with the good and sure providence of God operating on two levels: in preserving Abraham and Sarah for future service, and in dealing graciously with a heathen king who had been led into sin and danger by the duplicity of both Abraham and Sarah. Note carefully that it was to the unbeliever that God spoke, and Abimelech recognised that it was God who was speaking. This pagan king was an honourable man and God recognised his integrity. God also made plain that it was He who had kept the king from becoming embroiled in sin. Then God called on Abimelech to set the situation right, with a warning of dire consequences if he failed to do so. This story should make us look back over our own lives, especially but not exclusively to the years before we became Christians. Do we not see now, in a way that we did not see then, that the good hand of God was on our lives, and the good providence of God guarded and kept us from situations that could well have marred our lives and prevented our useful Christian service? How we need to view, ponder and give thanks for all the mercies of God that have kept us! How many of us can sing by way of testimony.

“When in the slippery paths of youth
With heedless steps I ran,
Thine arm, unseen, conveyed me safe,
And brought me up to man.” (Addison)

Keep clearly in mind that we are being taught about God being at work among unbelievers in the interest of a believer who had gone astray.

Saturday 13th February 20:8-18

We must see in this whole story that God did not in any way disown, devalue or discredit His servant Abraham, even though he had done such wrong. In v.7 God declared that Abraham was a prophet and an intercessor and that Abimelech would soon need that man's prayers. God's words to Abimelech caused him and his servants to be afraid (8). They took God seriously, always a wise thing to do. The king next called Abraham and, in the face of the assembled company, rebuked him. In our language, Abimelech, an unbeliever, said, “That is no way to behave if you are a Christian!” The question in v.10 was a searching one. It probed Abraham's motives. He was thinking only of himself, not of how his actions would affect other people. Abraham certainly was not thinking of how a friend and servant of God should behave nor how he should deal with people who were manifestly decent and honourable. It is

not clear in Abraham's answer (11-13) whether he was explaining or just trying to excuse or justify his actions. There is just a suggestion in v.13 that Abraham was blaming God for all his difficulties, describing his life of faith as a long, hard dangerous way. Abimelech cannot have been impressed when Abraham indicated that this had not been the first time that he had used this "scheme" to guarantee his personal safety by putting his wife in danger. Abraham must have felt shame when Abimelech treated Sarah with such respect, making sure that her personal reputation was not left with a stain or shadow. Do not forget that, but for the protecting providence of God, Sarah could have been with child by Abimelech and that would have introduced confusion and no doubt further delay in the outworking of God's purposes. Abraham, sent back by an unbeliever to the way of obedience, is seen at the end of the chapter in his true light: God's servant, being used for the blessing of others.

Sunday 14th February 21:1-7

The faithfulness of God stands in spite of the faithlessness and failures of His servants (2 Tim. 2:13). Of course, the years were passing. Abraham was one hundred years old. Twenty-five years had gone since he first set out in faith in obedience to God, and a further seventy-five years remained for his life and service (12:4; 25:7). But now, in spite of delays that made the birth of a child seem more and more impossible, and in spite of lapses of faith and all the works of the Devil, God did what He said He would do and the promised child was born in the old age of his parents. God is a God to be trusted. Read Heb. 6:13-20; 10:23-25; 11:8-16. All who live by faith must go on, even though they do not receive the full reward of their faith in this world. Faith holds fast even when everything seems to be breaking up in the storms of life. Read Acts 27:13-25, especially v.25, and note how one man's faith speaks out and becomes the channel of hope and assurance to a great many others. Faith stands firm even in the face of death, as Job 19:25a and 1 Cor. 15:54-57 make plain. Abraham, so recently a prodigal father (and husband), was mindful of God's goodness and God's covenant in the midst of his human fulfilment and the child was circumcised. The sign or mark of the covenant of grace was set on the child's body. Father and son alike were marked out for God. Sarah's laughter is related to and grounded in God and His promise. She could scarcely believe that God had given her such joyous fulfilment. She had discovered that God can and does do exceeding abundantly above all we ask or think (Eph. 3:20). We can imagine Sarah saying inwardly, just as we do, "Why did I doubt God?"

Monday 15th February 21:8-21

This story must be read with care in order to understand it. Abraham was one hundred years old when Isaac was born and at that time Ishmael was fourteen years old (16:16) and in that culture would have been thought of as being on the threshold of manhood. Isaac may have been between two and three years

old before he was weaned and that means Ishmael would have been about sixteen, certainly not a “child” as in v.16 (RSV), nor even a “boy” (NIV). The temperament, personality and disposition of Ishmael would have begun to be clear and it was Sarah who saw where this would lead. In v.9 Ishmael was not “playing” but “mocking” (NIV). It seems he was mocking the idea of Isaac being the son of promise and the significant heir to all the promises of God. This is the interpretation given in Gal. 4:22, 23, 29 where the word “persecuted” is used to describe Ishmael's attitude. One son had been born as the result of unbelief, when both Abraham and Sarah had acted on impulse. The other son was born as the result of faith, when Abraham believed God. The picture is of the emerging conflict between faith and unbelief; between what is of God and what is not of God. These two cannot live in harmony in anyone's life because unbelief and faith, flesh and spirit will always fight with each other (Gal. 5:17). Sarah may have acted partly in motherly resentment but when she demanded that Ishmael be cast out she was the instrument of God to guard the future. Abraham too reacted in a natural and human way in v.11. He had watched Ishmael growing up. He may even have thought it was good he had Ishmael in case anything happened to Isaac. But that was not an attitude of faith that trusted God and in the next chapter we find Abraham being put to the test, so that his faith would be in God and in God alone (22:1-2).

Tuesday 16th February 21:8-21

The presence of unbelief in our lives, in whatever form it takes, be it a person, relationship or activity, will always fight against faith, obedience and usefulness to God. What Abraham was being asked to do was not easy, and in his human hesitation, God spoke to him reassuringly (12), pointing him back to His promise and forward to its on-going fulfilment. But Abraham was not to go forward with half his trust in God and half in his own accomplishments. He had to begin to recognise that humanly Ishmael seemed to be a stronger personality than Isaac and that consequently the son of promise would be in danger as long as Ishmael was there. Already in Ishmael's mocking the basic conflict between the two sons indicated how the future would develop. One indication of that future is vividly expressed in Ps. 83:1-6. In v.12b God made plain that Ishmael had no positive part to play in the plan of salvation. He must not be allowed to hold on to what he thought of as his rightful place in Abraham's family. He had to go! If not, he would resist and hinder the development of the plan. In v.13 Abraham was told that this son he fathered in unbelief would become a great nation, but it was doubtful if Abraham realised just what a problem that nation would be down the ages of history opposing and persecuting the people of promise. In v.14 we are shown again Abraham's obedience of faith, doing what God commanded, no matter how costly in human terms. But there was no harshness in Abraham's spiritual obedience, and that is not always the case with the obedience of Christian believers. Bread and

water, the basic needs for life and continuance, were provided for Hagar and her son, and she departed. Keep in mind that Ishmael was a grown lad, not a little child.

Wednesday 17th February 21:8-21

Keep in mind that Ishmael was a teenager, not a child to be carried. The reference to wandering in v.14 does not necessarily mean aimlessness. The natural thing for Hagar to do would be to head in the general direction of Egypt. Keep in mind also that both mother and son may well have had the same proud ambition to be significant in God's plan for Abraham, without sharing Abraham's faith. For them both, all their ambitions had gone wrong and the tiredness and despair which led to exhaustion would have had an element of angry frustration in them. It may have been in v.15 that the son was blaming the mother, but both were at the end of their tether. The various translations of v.16b, 17 do not make it clear whether it was Hagar or her son who cried, nor whether the cry was weeping or praying. Wenham in the New Bible Commentary suggests Ishmael may have been regretting his earlier attitude of contempt towards Isaac and towards the spiritual issues of God's promises. Whatever the interpretation of the cry, God heard it and answered. To what extent the cry of mother and son expressed true repentance in relation to God or simply self-pitying remorse we cannot tell. Read 2 Cor. 7:8-11 and keep that truth in mind when we begin to live with the results of our own foolish actions. God called Hagar and her son to stand before him, making them aware that he was the one they had to deal with and relate to. Then God opened their eyes, which may have been closed by their resentment against Abraham and against God, and they saw what had been there all the time, a well of water to meet their need. The future of Ishmael is spoken of in v.20-21, emphasising that God would handle his life. At the same time we are shown the natural direction of his life in his marrying an Egyptian. In spite of their contact with God and the things of God, some people always belong to the "world". But do not forget the important lesson in v.19. Our attitude to and our resentment at situations and the people in these situations can make us blind to God's presence, provision and guidance.

Thursday 18th February 21:22-34

It seems Abraham was still in the area of Gerar and Abimelech is the king we read about in 20:1-3ff. It is difficult to say if this incident came after 20:18, 21:7 or 21:21. But it is clear that, in spite of Abraham's manifest fall from grace in chapter 20, Abimelech recognised quite clearly that God was with this man. He may have become aware of the basic godliness of Abraham when he saw Abraham's reaction to his spiritual failure. Our reaction to our sins and failures, how we respond to God's discipline and rebuke, and how we handle both ourselves and our situation tell a great deal about us. This, by the gracious

working of the Holy Spirit, can prove to be a powerful and effective witness to God and the Gospel. Abimelech knew Abraham was not perfect but he could see that God's good hand was on His servant and on his life. As a result, Abimelech wanted to have a right relationship with Abraham, not least so that he would not find himself at cross-purposes with God, as had been the case in chapter 20. Then, just at that time, another cause of friction arose (25). It was dealt with simply and effectively but only when Abraham spoke about it. This is the mistake we often make. We refuse to speak about things and, as a result, misunderstanding arises, issues become magnified, feelings get hurt, others get involved and a whole fellowship can be torn apart. Abraham and Abimelech brought everything out into the open so that all could see that right prevailed and friendship was real. But of course, Abraham was a man who was on friendly terms with God, a man who trusted God, and a man whose concern was to glorify God.

Friday 19th February 21:22-34

Think of all that Abraham had been through over many years, not least the costly events of the past two chapters. “Under the terms of the treaty Abraham secured a guaranteed supply of water for his flocks. He acquired a legal title to this well and this was his first foothold in the land.” (Wenham) The tree planted was something of a memorial to the occasion but the really important fact is that Abraham called on the name of the Lord. God is referred to as the Everlasting God and we must think about Abraham’s God and our God. Read Ps. 90:1-2 with the affirmation that from everlasting to everlasting He is God. Read Isa. 40:10-12, 21-23, 28-31. He is the everlasting God of power and tenderness, who never wearies of His people. What a God He is! The God of eternity, high and lofty, and of purer eyes than to look on iniquity (Habak. 1:13). He is the God most high (Gen. 14:19); the God who sees (Gen. 16:13); the all-sufficient God (Gen. 17:1). He is the everlasting, unchanging and unchangeable God (Jas. 1:17), great in His faithfulness (Lam. 3:23), God of love (1 John 4:8). He is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who spared not even His own Son but gave Him up for us all (Rom. 8:32). He is the God of our salvation. Little wonder we sing, “The God of Abram praise, who reigns enthroned above,” a God to be worshipped, trusted and adored. Yes, we sing rightly, “All my hope on God is founded, He doth still my trust renew.” Read Ps. 91:1 AV. “He who dwells in the secret place of the Most High shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.” For Sunday worship read or sing the hymn based on Psalm 90, “O God our help in ages past, our hope for years to come.”

“Under the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,

And our defence is sure.”
(Watts)

What a way to live! What peace! What assurance! What hope!

Saturday 20th February 22:1-14

We read this whole story and will study it for several days. Try to sense the drama of it and the intensity of thought and emotion that must have been involved. At the same time we must see that there is a tremendous spirit of peace and assurance right through the whole episode. In most Bibles the heading of the chapter refers to God testing Abraham, but God did not need this kind of proof regarding His servant's faith. Abraham was to be the beneficiary of this testing, his faith being confirmed in such a way that he learned he could trust his God even in the most baffling of experiences. Another great saint and servant of God said, "Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him," (Job 13:15 AV). But for a father to slay his own son points to an even deeper cost. We must also see in the story the testing of Isaac, because he was by now a young adult and unless he had given willing co-operation he could never have been bound to the altar. We have to see the absolute trust and agreement between father and son, and simply to use such words leads our thoughts to God the Father, who spared not even His own Son (Rom. 8:32). In many ways we should think of this action as the greatest thing Abraham ever did. Isaac, grown to manhood, was the symbol of and the assurance of all God's promises for the future. Isaac was the living proof that all the costly battles had been well worth while. And now God asked Abraham to give him up in a total sacrifice that could not be recalled. This is exactly what Abraham did, and the comment on his action is found in Heb. 11:17-19. He believed that God could and would raise the dead. What faith!

Sunday 21st February 22:1-14

Note how the story begins "After these things" (AV). "Some time later" (NIV). That could refer to all that had gone before, right from the call to leave Ur (12:1). It could also simply refer to the end of the previous chapter which records a considerable spell during which Abraham lived in quiet ordinariness, getting on with life, and enjoying his fellowship with God. If that is so, then God's call must have come with shattering unexpectedness. None of us know what any day will bring nor in what form the "testing" may come. But the testing of faith is an essential part of Christian life in order that our faith may be confirmed to *ourselves* and that we should grow in spiritual maturity. James 1:2-4 (especially in J B Phillips' translation), 1 Pet. 1:3-9 and 2 Pet. 1:3-11 are passages that we should ponder well. Without doubt it is through our handling both the spells of quietness and the spells of turmoil and testing that we learn faith and get our priorities right. The story begins in a very blunt way, with no

explanation to Abraham as to why this act was necessary, and with a reference to Abraham's love for Isaac that must have pierced the father's heart. Abraham responded in the obedience of faith, without hesitation, and seemingly without any explanation to Isaac. That the son responded without question is a great testimony to the relationship between father and son, one of love and trust. There is no mention of Sarah. If she knew what was planned she made no protest. Did all three of them recognise beyond any shadow of doubt that it was God who was speaking? Even if they did, they would not understand why God was asking this of them. But they could look back and see in their own lives proof of the sureness, integrity, faithfulness and love of their God.

“When darkness seems to veil His face,
I rest on His unchanging grace,
In every high and stormy gale,
My anchor holds within the veil.”
(Mote)

We have a God who can be trusted, especially in the dark when we do not understand what He is doing with us.

Monday 22nd February 22:1-14

Who can tell the thoughts of father and son during the days of journey? It was only on the third day that God told Abraham clearly the specific place for the sacrifice. Tradition believes that the place was Mount Moriah, the present Temple Mount in Jerusalem. There is something almost matter of fact in the narrative in v.5-6, but we must note clearly Abraham's reference to his return with Isaac. Did he think that God would never really ask him to sacrifice his son? Did he think God was simply wanting to see how far he would go in obedience and that there was really no drama in the situation? But if the servants were told this later, would they not think of God as rather fickle, and not to be taken seriously? Abraham made everything ready for a real sacrifice. The wood laid on Isaac to carry to the appointed place makes us think of Jesus carrying His Cross to that other hill. When Isaac spoke the word “Father,” what did Abraham feel? We cannot but think of the one great sacrifice on the Cross and how Jesus in Gethsemane also said “Father, if it be possible let this cup pass, nevertheless, not my will but thine be done” (Lk. 22:41-42). Abraham said with great simplicity, without knowing how it would be done, that God Himself would provide the lamb. God did on Mount Moriah, and He did on Mount Calvary. God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, and the Son gave Himself in sweet, unquestioning but costly love to the Father. In our story, father and son went forward together to the place of sacrifice.

Tuesday 23rd February 22:1-14

The scene described in v.9-14 almost defies exposition. We will never really understand the feelings of the father and of the son. The words of God in v.12 testify to the radical commitment of Abraham, whose heart must have cried in agony, “Why ... Why ... Why?” His faith in God's ability to raise his son from the dead (Heb. 11:17-19) may have had an element of desperation in it. He could not see how God could keep His promise regarding the future unless He did something as miraculous as raising Isaac from the dead. Abraham, like all of us, faced the mystery and seeming finality of death, and death is an enemy according to 1 Cor. 15:26. We know now that Jesus Christ has conquered death but that was not known to Abraham, even although Jesus did say that Abraham saw His day and was glad (John 8:56). We could compare the situation of Martha and Mary in the face of the seeming victory of death and Jesus' great affirmation in John 11:17-27. The culmination of the story, in the providing of the ram for sacrifice as Abraham had said God would do (8), makes plain that God Himself had watched over and had been involved in every development of this drama. Abraham called the name of the place “Jehovah-jireh” which means, “The Lord will provide”. The various translations of the last part of v.14 read, “On the mount of the Lord it will be provided” or “... it will be seen to” or “... it will come clear.” Faith believes that the explanation will come clear in due time, but we grasp the explanation only on the mount of obedience. We have spoken before of some of the names of God and they are all instructive. Jehovah-nissi (Ex. 17:15): the Lord our banner, and His banner over us is love. Jehovah-shalom (Judges 6:24): the Lord our peace. Jehovah -tsidkenu (Jer. 23:6): the Lord our righteousness. Jehovah-shammah (Ezek. 48:35): the Lord is there. He is always there. And, of course, that same Lord is our Shepherd, the Good Shepherd, who cares and is always to be trusted.

Wednesday 24th February 22:15-24

Immediately after this profound spiritual experience, in which Abraham expressed the obedience of faith, God spoke again, and spoke with great assurance regarding the future. Abraham could well have been emotionally exhausted by his experience and he could have been in great danger from the Devil with temptations to pride because of the “success” of his faith. But God was right there standing guard, and taking on Himself the ministry of encouragement. God repeated His promise to His servant and reaffirmed His commitment to His servant, and such facts should cause us to pause in wonder and worship. We speak often about *our* commitment to God, emphasising usually the cost rather than the privilege, but we do not think as often as we should about the commitment of the faithful God to us His servants. God was saying to Abraham here that his future life and service were guaranteed. God would do in him, for him and through him to future generations, exactly what

He had promised. This is the source of great peace as well as hope, and is something we can rest in. After all, do we really want anything that is not in God's good purpose to give to us? God's word to Abraham was that his future would be far greater, more expansive and more significant than anything he had expected when first he answered God's call in his homeland of Ur. Is it not also true that God has done for us, and enriched our lives, far more than we expected or prayed for (Eph. 3:20)? In the last verses (20-24) Abraham was told that already his family-circle was expanding, a token of all that was yet to be given him.

Thursday 25th February 23:1-4

At the end of the last chapter (22:19) Abraham returned from his “mountain-top” experience, with all its cost and promise, back to the ordinariness of family life and work. In some ways that was as much a test of his faith as the crisis of the sacrifice of Isaac, because it was on-going, day after day, week after week, with perhaps nothing much to excite or inspire. Of course it is faith and prayer cultivated in the ordinary spells that fit us for the crises of life. This is wonderfully shown in the story of Daniel (Dan. 6:6-10). Abraham had proved himself to be a man of faith and spiritual stature but he now faced a further testing experience, the death of his wife. Perhaps only those who have lost their life-partner, after a few or many years, will know just how deep a valley this is to travel. Those who have lost loved ones, whether babies, youngsters, teenagers or older people, will also know the grief that comes, grips and lasts a long time. Abraham and Sarah had been married over sixty years, and perhaps the last years had been the happiest, in the birth and growth of their son Isaac. If we compare 22:19 with 23:2 it seems the family were away from home when Sarah died. Hebron is near Mamre, where some of Abraham's great experiences took place (13:18; 18:1), but even though aware of his God Abraham, being a truly human person, wept and mourned in the loss of his wife. Now, we know that death has been conquered and that believers do not sorrow in the same way as others who have no hope (1 Cor. 15:51-57; 1 Thess. 4:13-18). But we do sorrow and it has to be expressed. It is a necessary part of the grieving process, which if not allowed to operate at the time can cause many psychological and spiritual problems later. There were times when Jesus wept, with real aching of heart (Jn. 11:35; Lk. 19:41) and we can be sure that He both understands and shares our sorrows.

Friday 26th February 23:1-4

Take time to consider Abraham's family life. If we compare 17:17 with 23:1, we realise that Isaac was now thirty-seven years old. Something like twenty years had elapsed since the events of chapter 22, during which time everything seems to have been “ordinary” years of consolidation, with the river of life slowing and broadening. Already, almost in passing, the name of Rebekah has been

mentioned and in due time she would be Isaac's wife. The story of that is in the next chapter and we may well think of marriages made in heaven. In the will of God is certainly the place for good, healthy and happy relationships. One translation of Prov. 31:10-12 affirms that “a good wife is a great find” and the heart of her husband can safely trust in her. Sarah had not always been a spiritual help and encouragement to her husband, nor had Abraham always been a good husband. In Heb. 11:11 Sarah is honoured for her faith and in 1 Pet. 3:1-6 she is spoken of as an example to wives. (Not the kind of passage that appeals to feminists!) For Sarah, her days on earth were over and it was as what she had become over the years that she passed over into the world of eternity. None of us will suddenly become saints simply by dying. We are told in Rev. 14:13 that those who die “in the Lord” are blessed and their works follow them. We must not waste the precious years granted to us, but we must always remember that God forgives, and that He can and does restore the years that have been stolen from Him and from us by “locusts” of various kinds (Joel 2:25).

Saturday 27th February 23:5-20

This passage, dealing with the arrangements for Sarah's burial, was introduced by Abraham's confession that he was a stranger and a sojourner. This world was not really his permanent home and he had no desire to go back to the way of life he once had in Ur. Read the statement of this in Heb. 11:8-10, 13-16. At the beginning of the story, God had promised to give the land to Abraham's descendants and Abraham believed the promise. But the land was occupied by others and in Acts 7:5 it is acknowledged that Abraham in fact took possession of no more than a plot for a grave. Today's story makes plain that Abraham could have had that plot free because of the apparently generous offer of the Hittites. But that would not only have left Abraham beholden to unbelieving men, it would have left him with no legal title to the plot, and therefore no permanent foothold in that land. Abraham stood his ground against all the clever pleading, and moved the discussion from the group in v.5-6 to one individual in v.10. Ephron spoke as if a mere four hundred shekels was not worth bargaining about between two great men but Abraham knew what he was doing. He paid the price in full and in v.17-18 a full, detailed legal contract was signed. The buying of that plot of land was a bit like explorers planting the flag and claiming the territory for the king. Whatever would happen in years to come that plot of land would be a reminder that the promise of God had been believed and claimed and would be held to even when Abraham died. This was Abraham's testimony that he had believed God and that he lived and would die standing on the promise of God. The plot of ground was a reminder that the future belonged to God. In the same way the Communion Table is a visible reminder that God is the God of our salvation. As we leave the passage, do not fail to note the quiet but firm graciousness of Abraham in all the

discussions. His whole manner commended his God to those who did not know God.

Sunday 28th February 24:1-9

There is a wealth of information in the first verse. Abraham was old and well advanced in years, but it depends what that means. He was 75 when he was called by God (12:4). He was 100 when Isaac was born and Sarah was 90 (17:17). That means Isaac was now 37 and Abraham 137 (23:1). According to 25:20 Isaac married when he was 40, three years after his mother's death. A further twenty years passed before Isaac had his two sons and if we keep in mind that Abraham lived until he was 175 then he lived to see grandchildren born and grow to be young teenagers. We must recognise that the reference to Abraham's death in 25:7 is not given in strict time sequence. We mention these facts because Abraham himself had to wait many years for a son and heir and so had Isaac, and we can imagine the old man telling his son to trust God saying, "Believe God's promise. I had to wait. God is faithful. Trust, trust, trust. God will do what He has said, but we have to be ready." We have grounds for saying these things because it is recorded that the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things, and Abraham knew it. It was God in His grace that had brought him thus far. It was God who had made him a man of faith and given him all that he had. The work of these many past years was not Abraham's but God's and, as we shall see, Abraham's main concern at this point was the future of that work. There was to be no casual easing off into retirement just because he was getting old. In actual fact he had another 37 years to go. Without arguing about these dates and figures, we must see that in God's on-going work our children and our children's children are involved and all we mean by family life is set in the context of the developing purposes of God. That is quite a thought and it means we must prepare, as far as we are able, our children and grandchildren for a spiritual future.

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