

## Lessons from the Life of Abraham (Genesis chapter 12)

(Based on the writings of C.H.M.)

Note: Abraham is called *Abram* until his name is changed in Genesis chapter seventeen

### BACKSLIDING AND RESTORATION

One of the most perplexing problems in the Christian life, is the question of why God allows good people to suffer. Why is it that *some* Christians – godly people – seem to encounter constant trials and difficulties in their walk with God?

Have *you* ever been at that point in your life when you've cried out for answers? How should we *respond* at these times?

Once again we can turn to the life of Abraham to throw light upon this dilemma and to give us hope and encouragement in the bad times. We'll take up his story when, after leaving Haran, he arrived in the promised land.

**“Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.” (Genesis 12:6).**

Now I want you to notice that last statement.

**“the Canaanites were in the land.”**

What a shock that must have been! Abraham had finally fully obeyed God. He had left Ur of the Chaldeans, left Haran when his father died, travelled down to the land to which the God of glory had called him – and what does he find there? The Canaanites! He suddenly found himself surrounded by enemies. What a test this must have been of his faith, hope and patience!

And these Canaanite tribes were not to be taken lightly. They were descendants of Ham, the son of Noah. You may remember the record in Genesis chapter nine of Ham's perversion. Because of it, God had put a curse on his son Canaan – and Ham's perverted tendencies seemed to be passed down to his descendants. The Canaanites weren't just ferocious and war-like, they were thoroughly depraved. Homosexuality and sodomy were rife in Sodom and Gomorrah and many of the tribes worshipped Moloch (or Molech), the god who demanded abominations such as child sacrifice by fire.

So, Abraham found that he wasn't alone! God had called him to the land he had promised to give to him, and Abraham found that it was *already populated* with these barbaric tribes.

And from this we learn a very important lesson. The Lord has called each one of us to live in the promised land - in the heavenly places – that we find referred to four times in the book of Ephesians. And if we do walk with him - if we do occupy the heavenly places in our spiritual experience - if we, *like* Abraham, *obey* God's call in our lives - then we're going to meet the Canaanites! The spiritual forces of evil are going to oppose us!

We *have* the peace of God within us, but we aren't called to peace in the Christian *walk*! In fact, if we *respond* to God's call - and if we're in the very place He *wants* us to be – then we'll find ourselves in the middle of a spiritual *conflict* with the forces of evil.

Ephesians 6 verse 12 describes this war:

“For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realm”. (*Ephesians 6:12*)

So, if we’re *in* the land, if we’re in the place God wants us to be - the Canaanite *will* show himself and we *will* experience opposition. And this can take many forms: opposition from the world; from circumstances; from friends; sometimes even from family.

Writing to Timothy, Paul advises his young brother in the Lord that:

“...everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.” (*2 Timothy 3:12*)

But notice that not *every* Christian is going to be persecuted! Persecution is only guaranteed for those who want to live a godly life!

Abraham didn’t meet the Canaanites in Ur of the Chaldeans. He didn’t even meet them in Haran – because there he had stopped short of the land. Only when he’d *fully* obeyed God and gone down *into* the land - did he find the Canaanites.

Living a holy, sanctified walk with the Lord brings us into direct conflict with the powers of darkness. But if we remain cocooned in the world – feathering our nest here below- content with being spiritually mediocre - we’ll never *meet* the opposition! We’ll never *encounter* the enemy. Only if we fully obey his call in our lives will we have the privilege of suffering with Christ – and fully sharing in his glory!

You may have set out from Ur of the Chaldeans– in the first flush of faithful obedience, with love for Christ warming your heart and his call ringing in your ears – but where are you now? Have you stopped short of the promised land? The place of blessing, joy, peace and victory in the Christian walk?

Do you remember that Abraham stopped short of Canaan and settled in Haran until his father died? Are you still living in Haran? Have the years slipped by and you still haven’t met the Canaanites? Are the ties of nature – too much attachment to worldly comfort, ambition, pleasure and self-interest, preventing you from yielding fully to the Lord and enjoying full fellowship with Him?

If you are, then you’re never going to meet the Canaanite – and you’ll never know the joy and blessing of defeating the enemy. You’ll never hear the ‘*Well done, good and faithful servant*’. When the Lord comes, you’ll experience the shame and loss that will be experienced by the faithless servant. How terrible to have him refuse to publicly acknowledge you because you refused to acknowledge his Lordship here below:

“If we disown him, He will also disown us.” (*2 Timothy 2:12*)

If you’re still in Haran, then life for you will go on, undisturbed – *You’ll* never meet the Canaanite – and Satan will be happy to leave you there – quite undisturbed!

If a woman has a cyst which appears to be harmless, the surgeon is very reluctant to do a biopsy. Why? Because invading the lump may stir things up, and if there are suspicious cells present, they may escape from the enclosing sac and be released into the bloodstream.

So, if you’re a worldly Christian, Satan’s not going to trouble you! Why should he? You’re no *threat* to him! If your testimony is non-existent, why would he interfere?

And so, we have here one of the ironies in Scripture. The battle against the forces of evil is in the very place to which God has called us to live – the *heavenly* places.

Now we might find all this a little daunting, except for one important thing: –

*The Canaanites weren't the only thing that Abram found in the land.*

It was there that he also found the Lord! We're told in this chapter that:

**"The Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land'" (Genesis 12:7)**

What a beautiful connection there is between these two things:

So that Abraham wouldn't be preoccupied with the Canaanites - the ones who *currently* possessed the land - Jehovah appeared to him as the one who wanted to give the land to him and his descendants for ever.

Satan might - right now - be the ruler in heavenly places and the prince of the power of the air, but we are heirs of the heavenly places and joint-heirs with Christ. They belong to us in Christ!

**"All things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are of Christ and Christ is of God." (1 Corinthians 3:21-23)**

And when God had appeared to Abraham – *because* he had appeared to Abraham - what was the result?

Abraham's eyes were fixed on the Lord – not on the Canaanite!

**"So we fix our eyes, not on what is seen - but on what is unseen." (2 Corinthians 4:18)**

When I keep my eyes fixed on God – not on the power of the enemy - I come to realize that the battle belongs to the Lord! I come to understand that, as Paul says, when writing to the church at Philippi:

**"I can do all things through Him who gives me strength." (Philippians 4:13)**

What peace – what confidence - what security!

The Canaanites were powerless to resist Abraham and his descendants, and they'll be unable to stand before us, but only if we keep our eyes fixed on the Lord. Only if we fully understand that He has *already* defeated the enemy.

Most of you will be familiar with the little chorus that goes like this.

**'Turn your eyes upon Jesus;  
Look full in His wonderful face,  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim  
In the light of his glory and grace'**

Who do you have your eyes fixed on? On the Canaanites or on the Lord? On the God who promises to give you everything in Christ Jesus – or on the difficulties, problems and opposition around you.

Instead of being occupied with Satan's power to keep us out of our inheritance, we're called to understand Christ's power to bring us in.

**"In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us." (Romans 8:37)**

So then, instead of fearing the Canaanite, Abraham began to worship!

Our chapter goes on to tell us:

**"So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he went on towards the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord." (Genesis 12: 7-8)**

Notice that Abraham had two things – an altar and a tent.

The altar meant that he was a worshipper of God!  
The tent showed that he was a stranger in the world!

A worshipper and a stranger!

The same cross that has made me a citizen of Heaven and a worshipper of God - has also made me a stranger and a pilgrim in this world.

But Abraham had still other things to face!

As well as *spiritual* opposition represented by the Canaanites, Abraham found that all natural *circumstances* seemed to be against him.

We now find that, in addition to the Canaanites,

**"...there was a famine in the land." (Genesis 12:10)**

The *very land* that God had called him to – and there was a *famine*!

Should Abraham have concluded that he was in the wrong place? How many more things could go wrong?

There's no doubt that the famine would have puzzled him! I can imagine the thoughts going through his mind. 'Jehovah has called me to this place. I've obeyed - and now I'm going to *starve*'.

We sometimes wonder why there often appears to be famine in our lives! Why does God allow us to suffer when He could so easily deliver us? Why do we meet so many difficulties, frustrations and disappointments – particularly in those times when we are genuinely trying to live for the Lord?

Like Abraham, we need to understand that life for the believer will *not* be easy sailing. For two important reasons:

Firstly – if nothing goes wrong, we tend to mistake the peace of *circumstances* for the peace of *God*.

If things are going smoothly and pleasantly;  
If our property is safe, our business doing well;  
If our children and spouses are in good health.

Why then – it's so easy to *trust* under those circumstances. It's so easy to mistake the peace that we *then* experience - for the peace that flows from enjoying the presence of *Christ* and walking in true dependence on *him alone*.

The Lord knows this, and He stirs up the nest! Not because He wants us to be uncomfortable but so that we don't rest in *circumstances* - and instead - find our rest in Him!

On one occasion, Christ said to his anxious disciples:

*“Peace I leave with you. My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. (That's the peace of circumstances). Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.” (John 14:27) (brackets mine)*

Secondly, we fail to realize that opposition and adversity are completely necessary for our spiritual development

Paul said this to the believers in Rome:

*“We rejoice in our sufferings because we know that suffering produces perseverance, perseverance, character; and character, hope.” (Romans 5:3)*

And the apostle Peter encouraged his listeners with these words:

*“In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith, of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire – may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.” (1 Peter 1:6-7)*

*A young boy carried the cocoon of a moth into his house to watch the fascinating events that would take place when the moth emerged.*

*When the moth finally started to break out of his cocoon, the boy noticed how very hard it had to struggle. The process was very slow. In an effort to help, he reached down and widened the opening of the cocoon. Soon the moth was out of its prison. But as the boy watched, the wings remained shrivelled. Something was wrong!*

*What the boy hadn't realized was that the struggle to get out of the cocoon was essential for the moth's muscle system to first develop and then to pump blood into the wings. In a misguided effort to relieve its struggles, the boy had crippled the future of this creature.*

Trials are necessary for growth.

Somebody has said that the trials of our faith are like God's ironing. When the heat of trials is applied to our lives, the wrinkles of spiritual immaturity begin to be ironed out.

If we fail to appreciate all this, there's a big mistake we sometimes make.

We tend to believe that if everything works out, and our spiritual lives are going without a hitch, this is an indication that we're in the Lord's will.

But in the words of the song: "It ain't necessarily so!"

In fact, the path of true obedience may be the most difficult - the most trying - and the most trouble-filled.

Paul and Silas, like Abraham, responded to God's call. But when they arrived in Macedonia, one of the first things they encountered was a jail cell in the Philippian prison.

Now for a heart out of communion with God - this would have spelt the deathblow to the whole mission.

But how did Paul and Silas react? They sang praises - everything was as it should be!

And because they *were* there, the Jailor heard the gospel and believed.

Their imprisonment was God's way of getting the gospel to one of his elect – something which would have otherwise been difficult – if not impossible!

Joseph was thrown into a pit and sold to Midianite traders but later, as his fearful brothers trembled before him in Egypt, he said this:

**"You intended to harm me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done – the saving of many lives." (Genesis 50:20)**

*A story is told of a group of farmers in Southern Alabama who grew cotton crops. Year after year they would plough their fields and plant the cotton which gave them a modest income – although they did have to struggle.*

*One particular year the boll weevil appeared on the scene and destroyed their cotton crops - wiping out most of the farms*

*The next year – the farmers who survived, mortgaged their homes and tried again.*

*But the boll weevil returned and destroyed their crops a second time.*

*In the third year, the farmers gave up on the cotton and experimented with growing peanuts. This new crop proved to be hardy and well-suited to the soil. Furthermore, the market at the time was ravenous for peanuts.*

*The enormous profit the farmers made enabled them to pay off their mortgages.*

*A couple of years later, the farmers celebrated their new-found prosperity by erecting a monument in the town square.*

*A monument to the peanut? No – a monument to the boll weevil!*

You see - Without the boll weevil, they would never have discovered peanuts

Only God knows the reason why disaster and reversals come into our lives

He can turn these apparent setbacks to spiritual joy, victory, and prosperity.

And Abraham should have reasoned the same way with the famine

All appearances to the contrary, he was in the *very place* where God had called him – and he'd been given no direction to go anywhere else.

But still – there *was* the famine! And Egypt looked so inviting – offering relief from the pressure.

Egypt has always represented the world, and Abraham should have reasoned that it would have been better to starve in Canaan than to live in luxury in Egypt

*We're* faced with the same temptation – the temptation to avoid the difficulties and struggles connected with faithful service to Christ.

But *we also* need to realise that it's better to *suffer* in *God's path* than enjoy *ease and luxury* in *Satan's path*. It's far preferable to be poor with Christ than to be rich without him

But Abraham gave way to the pressure and found relief in Egypt

And when he was in Egypt, he appeared to enjoy a great deal of material success:

**“Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels.” (Genesis 12:16)**

Now natural man would say this was substantial proof that Abraham had made the right choice in going into Egypt.

But he had no altar in Egypt! – he had no communion with God!

What happens when we allow sin into our lives? When we let the desire for worldly things slip into our hearts?

We lose our altar! Our communion with God stops abruptly! Certainly, we can continue to study the Scriptures – we can earnestly discuss the things of God and enjoy doing so.

But one thing that will go by the board is our prayer life!

We are assured in the Scriptures that God cannot fellowship with anything (or anyone) sinful:

**“Your eyes are too pure to look on evil.” (Habakkuk 1:13)**

The Result? We can't – and don't want - to come into God's presence with sin and compromise on our consciences. The first thing Adam did after sinning, was to hide from God! When we allow sin into our lives – our first instinct is to hide!

Do you recognise the symptoms? A reluctance to pray. Dislike of joining others in sincere worship? Instead, criticism of other believers (they're all 'lazy'; 'uncommitted' or just 'plain hypocrites'). A Sunday that gets filled with more and more worldly things until going to church becomes at best a habit and at worst - a tedious exercise.

All because we've slipped aside into Egypt! All because the demands of a righteous, sanctified walk with the Lord become too much for us when we take our eyes off the Lord.

Abraham lost far more by going into Egypt than if he had stayed in Canaan

*Nothing can ever make up for the loss of our communion with God*

To avoid trials and exercise connected with God's path – we slip aside into the world and bring emptiness, leanness and gloom into our hearts.

Relief of pressure; increasing wealth; gaining a reputation; becoming popular with other people – these things are all poor equivalents for:

joy in God.; communion; freedom;  
a pure uncondemning conscience;  
a thankful, worshipping spirit;  
a vigorous testimony and effective service.

So, when the trials come, instead of turning into Egypt – we should wait on God!

And if we have backslidden – if we have succumbed to the temptations of this world, there is always forgiveness and restoration. Not a half-hearted restoration but full restoration to the place we occupied before our downfall.

Abraham was not only brought out of Egypt but also brought back- as our chapter tells us:

**“...to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the Lord.” (Genesis 13:3-4)**

When we backslide – and our conscience starts to work – we tend to think that we've blown in! But if we do think like that, then we're in great danger of failing to appreciate the character of divine grace. We put limits on God's restoring grace and we consequently stop short of being totally restored.

What the experience of Abraham teaches us, is that nothing can satisfy God in reference to the wanderer or backslider - but his being entirely restored. Right back to the very place where he had first left the Lord.

Abraham went back to **“where he had first built an altar”** and it was there that he **‘called on the name of the Lord.’**

We readily acknowledge that God can save the guiltiest of sinners but when a saint has backslidden, we often tend to become self-righteous. We may suggest that some-one who has strayed, should take a lower place than before. Fellowship certainly – but no public ministry – no position of importance or influence!

And if it were a question of a person's worth or merit - this would certainly be the case! But it's not! It's altogether a matter of grace! Just as much a matter of grace as our salvation. And *as* such - it's God's prerogative to fix the measure of restoration – not ours!

And this is a complete restoration - to full fellowship with Him.

**“If you will return, O Israel, return to me’ declares the Lord.” (Jeremiah .4:1)**

Nothing short of this would be worthy of God!

He will either not restore at all or restore in such a way as to magnify and glorify the riches of his Grace.

When the prodigal returned, he wasn't asked to 'sit outside'. He wasn't instructed to prove himself before he could come in and sit down at the family table. *He* may have said "I'm no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me as one of your hired servants" (Luke 15:19), but *his father* wasn't having any of that. Calling out the fatted calf, he threw his arms around his son, ordered that he be clothed in suitable garments, and then threw him a home-coming party.

One of the most remarkable insights into the character of God's restoration is found in the account of Peter's address to the crowd at Pentecost.

Speaking to the Israelites in Solomon's colonnade, Peter rebukes them severely with the accusation:

"You disowned the Holy and Righteous One." (Acts 3:14)

But wait a minute – this was *Peter* speaking! The very person who just a short time before had *himself* denied the Lord *three times*!!

I can imagine the things people would have been saying if they'd heard this. Some would have reacted in shocked indignation. 'What a hide!'. What cheek!. He's the last person who should be saying something like that."

Others would have been more kindly disposed; saying something like:

'Well, that certainly needed to be said, but it's seems inappropriate that Peter was the one who said it. Perhaps one of the other disciples?'

But restoration, like salvation, is God's work and he restores completely. So, Peter could stand up unflinchingly, with no sense of hypocrisy – being fully forgiven and restored.

But remember this: we're not restored so that we can go and sin lightly but so that we can, in the words of Jesus to the woman caught in adultery: ".go and sin no more." (John 8:11)

The greater my awareness of the grace of divine restoration, the deeper will be my appreciation of the holiness of it all.

Genuine restoration is always linked to a subsequent life of righteousness.

David, in one well-known psalm, links them in this way

"He restores my soul; he guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." (Psalm 23:3)

The proper path of a divinely restored soul is the path of righteousness

"grace reigns through righteousness" (Romans 5:21) and so restoring grace will show itself in the righteousness of a restored life.

The grace that forgives us our sin also cleanses us from all unrighteousness. As John said in his first epistle:

*“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” (1 John 1:9)*

Forgiveness, restoration and righteousness must *never* be separated.

*In the United States, millions of wooden palettes are used to haul products back and forth across the country. These palettes are subjected to crushing weights, abuse, rough handling by forklifts, bumpy roads etc. They become cracked, smashed, loose and floppy – no longer fit for use!*

*Disposal companies buy up these useless palettes for \$5.00 each. They are then burnt, or chewed into woodchips or used as landfill*

*There was, however, a company in New York – Big City Forest in South Bronx. This company recognised the potential of these palettes because they were made of rosewood; cherry; mahogany; oak; maple*

*So Big City Forest began to buy up the palettes and to recycle them as flooring or furniture.*

*Bought up for \$5.00 a palette, they were sold as woodchips for \$30.00 a ton.*

*Recycled as flooring, they were sold for \$1200 ton*

*Turned into material for furniture, they brought \$6,000 ton!*

If lifeless wood can be restored like this – how much more can we be restored to lives of value?

Like Big City Forest God is in the business of restoration.

Do you, even as a believer, sometimes feel worthless?

Broken by the sheer weight of sin you've allowed into your life?

Backslidden to the point of desperation?

Remember this: God can transform your life into one of to life of beauty and usefulness.

If you *have* backslidden, if sin has taken over your life so that your joy has gone, the things of the Lord have become tedious, and your conscience tears you apart - then be comforted. The Father is standing outside, eyes scanning the horizon, eagerly expecting your return.

And this return will be to the very place you left your first love!

He's waiting for you to come home!

May God bless His Word to each one of us.