

# From Hopelessness to Hope

*The Life of Abraham*

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We shall read the word of God from the book of the prophet Isaiah, Isaiah chapter 51. We read verses 1 to 16. Isaiah chapter 51, reading verses 1 to 16.

1 "Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness and who seek the LORD: Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; 2 look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many. 3 The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing. 4 Listen to me, my people; hear me, my nation: the law will go out from me; my justice will become a light to the nations. 5 My righteousness draws near speedily, my salvation is on the way, and my arm will bring justice to the nations. The islands will look to me and wait in hope for my arm. 6 Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail. 7 Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have my law in your hearts: Do not fear the reproach of men or be terrified by their insults. 8 For the moth will eat them up like a garment; the worm will devour them like wool. But my righteousness will last forever, my salvation through all generations." 9 Awake, awake, clothe yourself with strength, O arm of the LORD! Awake, as in days gone by, as in generations of old. Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces, who pierced that monster through? 10 Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made a road in the depths of the sea so that the redeemed might cross over? 11 The ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away. 12 I, even I, am he who comforts you. Who are you that you fear mortal men, the sons of men who are but grass, 13 that you forget the LORD your Maker, who stretches out

the heavens and who lays the foundations of the earth, that you live in constant terror every day because of the wrath of the oppressor, who is bent on destruction? For where is the wrath of the oppressor? 14 The cowering prisoners will soon be set free; they will not die in their dungeon, nor will they lack bread. 15 For I am the LORD your God, who churns up the sea so that its waves roar--the LORD Almighty is his name. 16 I have put my words in your mouth and covered you with the shadow of my hand--I who set the heavens in place, who laid the foundations of the earth, and who say to Zion, 'You are my people.'"

We end our reading at the close of the sixteenth verse.

Last Lord's Day in our evening service, we began a series of studies on the life of Abraham and we continue that series this evening still introducing the subject. But I'd like to read just a few verses from Genesis chapter 11, reading from verse 26 to the end of the chapter. Genesis chapter 11, verse 26.

26 After Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. 27 This is the account of Terah's family line. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. 28 While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth. 29 Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milkah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milkah and Iskah. 30 Now Sarai was barren, she had no children. 31 Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there. 32 Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Harran.

The theme of our meditation this evening, still introducing the life and witness of Abraham is "From Hopelessness to Hope." From hopelessness to hope. In Isaiah chapter 51, which we read earlier, we have words spoken by God to a discouraged, despairing, exiled people, a people whose hearts were filled with fear and despair, a people who had ceased to hope, a people for whom the future was dark. What does God say to these people? I quote, "Look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn; look to Abraham, your father, and to Sarah, who gave you birth. When I called him he was only one man, and I blessed him and made him many. The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD." So says God through the prophet, "Look to Abraham your father." In other words, there is something particularly encouraging about God's calling of Abraham. There is something in that set of circumstances which is designed to give hope to discouraged, hopeless people. The calling of Abraham tells us that there is no situation for God where God cannot change it for the better. There is no situation beyond God's power. There are no set of circumstances too hopeless for God to change for the better.

Let's begin by considering Abraham's world. Abraham's world. What sort of a world was it in which God called this man? Well, it certainly wasn't a primitive world. It was a very sophisticated, cultural, technically advanced civilized world, a world in which human beings still relatively undamaged by sin, were capable of constructing glorious civilizations. Earlier this year, as we saw in Genesis 4, human beings developed the arts of agriculture and industry and music. There was a flowering of human genius. We saw in Genesis chapter 11 the mighty building projects and the vast Mesopotamian civilization that arose between the Tigris and the Euphrates.

Abraham was from the great city of Ur. It's quite staggering when we realize that when Abraham was born, the city in which he was born was nearly 2,000 years old. It had been a massive center of civilization for 2,000 years. It has been excavated by archaeologists. It was situated halfway between Baghdad and the Persian Gulf, an enormous metropolitan area with great buildings, irrigation, gardens, thousands of inscribed tablets have been discovered showing a flourishing bureaucracy and civil service. We saw in our study of the Tower of Babel how it was dominated by this massive construction, 90 meters high, seven platforms of black, red and blue. On each platform were terraces planted with trees and hanging gardens. At the top was a temple covered in silver. Abraham was born in a technologically sophisticated civilized world. Human beings were spreading over the planet to colonize it and to subdue it. The descendants of Japheth were pouring north into Europe and Asia, establishing new nations, setting up new cultures. The descendants of Ham were moving south into the vast continent of Africa. The golden age of Egyptian literature was about to begin. The pyramids, the great technological and artistic developments of the dynasties of Egypt were flourishing at this time. It was an age of rebellion against God. The terrible lesson of the flood had been forgotten. People had forgotten that human beings were created to serve God. They had forgotten about God. They had pushed God to the circumference. They were ignoring God. It was an age of humanism. Men were seeking their own glory, their independence, their self-sufficiency. You remember how we studied those arrogant statements in Genesis 11, verse 4, "Come, let us build ourselves a city with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves."

So he was born in a sophisticated, technological, civilized culture which was utterly godless and rebellious, a self-confident culture, an aggressive culture, a successful culture, a dominating culture, which was managing without God. Yet in this culture, we can see the results of sin. They are seen even in this family of Abraham. Joshua chapter 24, verse 2, Joshua says to the Israelites, "Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshiped other gods." Abraham's father was a pagan idolater. Abraham's father had forgotten the true God. Abraham was raised in an unbelieving home where God was not honored and God was not worshiped. His father worshiped other gods.

Life is becoming shorter. The age of human beings when they die is progressively decreasing; you no longer have the great lifespans of the time before the flood. We meet an awful tragedy in chapter 11 verse 28 of Genesis, the first case of the natural death of a

son before his father, and it strikes us like a hammer blow as something profoundly tragic and unnatural and wrong. I quote, "While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died." That shouldn't be. That wasn't meant to happen. That was a mark of the disruption caused by sin in human existence. A child should not die before his or her parents, but it happened. We see the results of sin even in the barrenness of Sarah. Here's another startling statement in its context and in its period. "Now, Sarah was barren. She had no children." Here was a young woman, married. She was unable to produce children. The very future of the race seems to be threatened.

So there is a great deal of hopelessness here. There is a godless, flourishing civilization going further and further away from God, ignoring God, pushing him to one side and doing very well, subduing the earth and creating new cultures and civilizations, but this passage of scripture tells us that God is there and God is working. And how is God working? He's not working in a spectacular way or in a very visible way. God chooses one man. That's what God does. He doesn't send a flood. He doesn't come down in thunder and lightning. He chooses one ordinary man and he speaks to that individual and he enables that man to hear him and to believe him and to obey him. And he changes that man and he uses that man in his plan, in his purpose. And he says to that man, "I will bless you. You will be a blessing. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you." So in that dark, magnificent, sinful culture, God speaks to one individual, chooses him and works in it. As one commentator says, the future belongs not to Cain, nor to Lamech, nor to the generation that rejected Noah, but to this lonely, elect man to whom God spoke and to the Creator himself who has not gone back in the purpose of his grace. Very significant. As God said through Isaiah, "When I called him, he was but one. Look to your father, Abraham. When I called him, he was but one." God called one man and in doing that, God changed forever the history of the world.

Let's in the second place consider the world of Jesus, and when we come to the first century AD, we see a world very similar to that of Abraham's time. A world still enjoying probably the most magnificent culture that there has ever been on this earth, the culture of classical Greece, with its literature and its drama and its art, which reach the pitch of perfection that I don't think human beings have ever equaled, let alone surpassed. And a world dominated by the uniquely efficient and powerful empire of Rome, with all its military force, with all its legal genius and governmental ability. This too was a world in rebellion against God, a world where God was not known, a world where human beings were exalted, where the very Roman emperor was going to be worshiped. In spite of all its magnificence and civilization, it was a dark, evil world. The people in the world were given to idolatry, old gods and new gods, vile gods. It was a world of moral degradation, Read Romans 1. A world where homosexuality was rampant, was in fact the dominant force in the culture. A world where abortion and euthanasia were practiced on a wide scale. A world where most of the population of Italy were slaves. A blood-stained, cruel world. It was a discouraged world. A world where people were despairing and giving up. A world where many people, intelligent people, committed suicide because they couldn't face the world and didn't want to live in the world. What did God do in that world? He brought a baby into this world in a stable in Bethlehem. That's what God did. He was also working in the homes of Galilean fishermen and in a Jewish home in Tarsus and in

Gentile homes in Corinth and Rome and Asia Minor, preparing people, shaping them, bringing them to that point where they would hear his gospel. The gospel was going to be sent out and to all the world and in that situation, God was working.

And when we come to consider our own world, the parallels are clear. We pride ourselves, rightly or wrongly, in living in a civilized world. Certainly materially, we have more than any other generation who has ever lived on the face of the earth, everything we could imagine technologically. We live in comfort. We enjoy abundance. We travel the earth. We communicate to the ends of the earth in seconds. It's a world that prides itself on its advancement, on its cleverness, its wisdom and its sophistication. It's a world of rebellion against God, a world where God is ignored, where God doesn't matter, where God is an irrelevance. It's a world of idolatry, as we thought this morning, where people today were crowding into the temples of mammon to worship their false God, when there were more people in Tesco supermarkets than in places of worship throughout Great Britain. It's a world where life is threatened, where millions are cut to pieces in their mother's wombs. It's a world of barrenness, personal barrenness, where people are feeling that their lives are empty pointless and they're drowning in a sea of things and they have no meaning and no purpose and nothing worth living for. It's a world of cultural barrenness. No great music, no great literature, no great art. The 20th century will go down as a desert in man's cultural history. Our culture, if it's anything, is ugly and confused. It's a world where even the environment is being poisoned and polluted by human sin. There's much that can discourage us at the end of the year 2000, and many people do feel discouraged.

Friends, the life of Abraham, consider Abraham, "Look to Abraham, your father," for God is working, and God is working as he has always worked. God is working quietly, and God is working with people and in people, unlikely people in unlikely places, and it is through people that God's purposes are carried out, people changed by the power of God. F. B. Meyer comments, "Do not despair for the future of the world. Souls are still being trained in the bosom of the Sanhedrin, Luther's in the cloisters of papal row, Abraham's under the shadows of great heathen temples." You would have looked at the world of Abraham's day, and you would have said there is no hope of God and Abraham in mind, and God spoke to Abraham, changed him, and used Abraham to carry out his purposes. Perhaps some of us now this evening feel discouraged, downhearted, hopeless. We're coming to the end of one year, the beginning of another, perhaps you haven't much to encourage you. We see around us idolatry, rebellion, and barrenness, and sorrow, and disappointment. We're tempted to despair. The life of Abraham says don't despair. Look to Abraham, your father.

As I pray for this congregation from day to day, I love to speculate on what God is doing in your lives and I love to dream about what God may do through us, through you, through some of you young people. God is speaking to you. God is calling you to himself. God is stirring you up. He is changing you. He has work for you to do. He has great purposes, great purposes for you to fulfill. He says to you and to me as he said to Abraham, "I will bless you." You will be a blessing. How can we be discouraged? This is

how God works. It's not dramatic, it's not showy, but it's powerful and it's long lasting. Look to Abraham, your father.

Friends, let us look at what God is doing in us and in our brothers and sisters. Think of the potential there is under God in this room tonight. Just think of it. You see, the devil would have us sink into a mire of hopelessness and discouragement and look at the world and it's all so pointless and hopeless, this clever, aggressive, sophisticated world going its way and doesn't care, and God went into that heathen city and he selected that heathen man and he converted him and changed him and throughout the years he guided him, he used him. There are those sitting here tonight, 40, 50 years from now, and many of us are no longer on this earth, you may still be a blessing used by God. "Look to your father, Abraham. When I called him, he was but one." You're one, aren't you? You're one. It's the same God that called Abraham is calling you, calling you to hear his word. Listen to his call in your life to all of us to believe him and to obey him and to follow where he leads and to take this word to ourselves, "I will bless you. I will bless you," God says, and you will be a blessing. God calls us to take him at his word. Amen.

Let us pray.

*O Lord, our God, we could fret ourselves into distraction by the godless world. We could break our hearts about those in high places and influence who care nothing for you. We could allow ourselves to become profoundly disheartened and discouraged. But, Lord, you spoke to your discouraged people, and you said, "Consider your father Abraham. When I called him, he was but one." So, Father, we pray that we will each one know ourselves to be called by you and a great flood of happiness may sweep over us tonight if in your mercy you have called us to obey you, to belong to you, to hear your word. And Lord, you do not call us to waste our lives, you do not call us to mock us, you do not call us that we will be frustrated and lead a pointless existence on this earth, but you call us to bless us and to make us a blessing, and you are able, as we have heard already this evening, you are able to take what seems very little and to multiply it in a miraculous and wonderful way. Lord, we bring before you ourselves this night, help us in our hearts to offer ourselves to you that you will use us as you please for your purposes and for your glory. Help us to be confident that you will bless us and so we shall be a blessing, not because of our gifts, but because of your choosing and calling, your power and grace. Help us to know that with you nothing is impossible. Help us to be filled with gladness and grant, Lord, that we may enter this new year confident in your purpose for our lives. We ask it in the name of our Savior and for his sake. Amen.*