

Catford Lectures 2008-2009

Part 8

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Place	Catford
Date	01.11.2008
Duration	01:06:26
Online version	https://www.audioteaching.org/en/sermons/ccl001/catford-lectures-2008-2009

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[00:00:00] Good evening everyone. Let's begin by singing hymn 212.

Called from above and heavenly men by birth, who once were but the citizens of earth.

As pilgrims here we seek a heavenly home, our portion in the ages yet to come. 212 Called from above and heavenly men by birth, who once were but the citizens of earth.

[00:01:01] As pilgrims here we seek a heavenly home, our portion in the ages yet to come.

Where all the saints of every kind shall meet, and each with all shall all the ransomed greet.

But for the height of bliss our Lord shall be, to owe it all and share it all with thee.

[00:02:19] Thou who washed the image in man's gloomy guise, of the invisible to mortal eyes.

Son of His bosom, come from heaven above, we seek in Thee, incarnate God, His love.

[00:03:12] Thy lips, the Father's, name to us reveal, What burning heart in all Thy works we feel, as with enraptured hearts we hear Thee tell.

The heavenly glories which Thou know'st so well, [00:04:03] No curse of war in reward's sovereign grace, And now what glory in Thine unveiled face, Thou didst attract the wretched and the weak.

Thy joy the wand'ers and the lost to seek, That precious stream of water and of blood, [00:05:08] Which from Thy pierced side so freely flowed, Has put away our sins of scarlet dine, Washed us from every stain and brought us night.

We are but strangers, here we do not crave, A home on earth which gave me but a grave.

[00:06:12] Thy cross has severed ties which found us here, Thyself a treasure in a brighter sphere.

I would like to turn to Genesis 2, not Genesis 2, but Genesis chapter 15.

I think it would be good to read the whole chapter.

[00:07:13] Genesis chapter 15 verse 1, After these things the word of the Lord came unto Abraham in a vision, saying, Fear not, Abraham, I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward. And Abraham said, Lord God, what wilt thou give me, seeing I go childless, and the steward of my house is this Eliezer of Damascus? And Abraham said, Behold, to me thou hast given no seed, and lo, one born in my house is mine heir.

And behold, the word of the Lord came unto him, saying, This shall not be thine heir, but he that shall come forth out of thine own bowels shall be thine heir. And he brought him forth abroad and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars [00:08:05] if thou be able to number them. And he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the Lord, and he counted it to him for righteousness. And he said unto him, I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees to give thee this land to inherit it.

And he said, Lord God, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it? And he said unto him, Take me an heifer of three years old, and a she-goat of three years old, and a ram of three years old, and a turtle dove, and a young pigeon. And he took unto him all these, and divided them in the midst, and laid each piece one against another, but the birds divided he not. And when the fowls came down upon the carcasses, Abraham drove them away. And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Abraham, and lo, and horror of great [00:09:08] darkness fell upon him.

And he said unto Abraham, Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them, and they shall afflict them four hundred years. And also that nation whom they shall serve will I judge, and afterwards shall they come out with great substance, and thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace. Thou shalt be buried in a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.

And it came to pass that when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold, a smoking furnace and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces. [00:10:01] In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abraham, saying, Unto thy seed have I given this land from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates, the Kenites and the Kenazites and the Kadmonites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Rephaims and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Girgashites and the Jebusites. May God bless the reading of his word.

I suppose all of us when we've encountered this chapter in Genesis have found it a rather strange story, a rather enigmatic story.

Perhaps we could be forgiven for saying a little bit of a mysterious story. What does it mean?

Well, I was privileged to be with some brethren in eastern Nepal two and a half weeks ago, [00:11:07] and during a session of questions and answers, and I've learned it's dangerous sometimes to organize sessions for questions and answers, I and the two brothers with me got a question about this chapter. Fortunately, it was the last question of the day and it was getting rather dark and we had

to get back to where we were staying, so we were able to put off answering the question until the following morning. But my purpose this evening isn't to present to you what we said to the brethren there in Nepal for its own sake, but to challenge us all about the lives we're living for the Lord Jesus today.

Abram was a man of faith.

In fact, the scriptures call him the father of all them that believe. [00:12:05] We could say the father of the faithful. So he's a wonderful example to us of how we should be today. Now we've confessed in our hymn, the start of this meeting, that we're heavenly men by birth.

There's been a work of God in us which we call new birth, and we've come to believe on the Lord Jesus as our savior.

And that makes us different from all those around us.

It's not only that we're heavenly men by birth, but we have a heavenly destination. We're going to heaven.

Heaven should characterize us while we're on this earth.

[00:13:02] It was very good to be able to hear about the account of creation in the scriptures earlier today from our brother, Jeff.

And he brought before us the need to answer to the challenge of our day. Fifty years ago, most people in this country would have acknowledged there was a God. And so the question would be, where do you stand with regard to that God? You're a sinner, you need to be saved. But sadly today, very often, people won't acknowledge a God with whom they have to do.

They believe in some power, some influence, but it's not one that they really think they [00:14:02] have to think about in a personal way.

And as a result, they have no sense of their need to be made right with that God. Very often today, we have to start with the fact that there is a God, a creator God, before we come to the matter of redemption, the need to be saved, to be made right with that God. So the matter of creation, upholding it, is very important today. But what I hope to bring before us this evening, not just you, but myself especially, is the need for us not only to be able to explain from God's words the fact there is a God, but to be able to live it out in our lives that we know that God and he affects our life [00:15:01] and we're different from those around us in such a way that they are attracted to the person that we know, our God and our Father. And of course, our Lord Jesus Christ, the one who loved us and gave himself for us.

If we turn back to Genesis chapter 12, we find it says in the first verse, Now the Lord had said unto Abraham, Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house unto a land that I will show thee.

If we were to compare that with what Stephen says in Acts chapter 7, we would see that Abraham had a wonderful experience.

The God of glory had appeared to him when he was in Ur of the Chaldees, when he was [00:16:07] among the idolaters of that land, those who did not know God, who worshipped heathen gods.

But he didn't immediately respond to that call in all its fullness. He didn't actually depart from his father's house. In fact, it was his father, Terah, who went with him and they stopped short of the land that God was going to show them, or show Abraham, in this place called Haram.

And so we see that even though Abraham is a wonderful example of faith, he's also an example to us of the fact that very often, those of us who have put our faith in the [00:17:07] Lord Jesus as our saviour, don't always put that faith into practice fully in our lives. We don't always live by that faith as we should. If you look in Hebrews chapter 11, you'll find that there are many witnesses of the efficacy of faith, the value of faith in the life of a believer on God. But two stand out predominantly. Abraham, an example of the endurance of faith, and Moses, an example of the energy of faith.

They are the two main characters in that wonderful catalogue or gallery of faithful men and women.

[00:18:01] But we see that faith didn't come automatically to Abraham. He had to learn faith. We may say that as we trace his experiences from chapter 12 through to the end of his life as it's recorded in scripture, we see him learn in faith.

And one of the wonderful lessons that we can learn from his experience of learning is the patience of our God.

God is a patient teacher. He teaches us faith.

Eventually Abraham was to leave Haran as we see in verse 4 of chapter 12.

He came into the land that God had promised him. But unfortunately, where he had hesitated in Haran, now he went too far.

[00:19:07] Very often we can be like that. Sometimes we lag behind God's leading, other times we go too far in front of God's leading. And eventually Abraham went down to Egypt because of a famine.

But there are some wonderful things that we could just learn briefly from chapter 12. I don't want to spend too long in it because our chapter really is chapter 15. But there are a number of things in chapter 12 which can really help us.

If you read verse 6, you'll see that Abraham passed through the land unto the place of Sikkim, unto the plain of Moreh, and that Canaanite was then in the land. Then it says in verse 7, the Lord appeared unto Abraham and said, unto thy seed will [00:20:03] I give this land, and there he builded an altar. That's the first thing that I would like to bring before you from this chapter. He had an altar, which means he had a place of approach to God. He was marked by worship. He was a worshiper. Abraham was a worshiper of God.

Then it says in verse 8, he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Bethlehem and pitched his tent.

There we see he has a tent, and that shows us that Abraham was a sojourner.

He was, if you like, a pilgrim, someone who was on the move. We've already mentioned in connection with our hymn that we're heavenly men by birth, but we have a heavenly destination.

Our lives here in this world should show that we're not at home here. [00:21:06] This is not our home. We have a hymn in our hymn book. Heaven is our home.

We're going home.

Abraham is an example to us of how we should be in our lives. Paul says our conversation, our citizenship is from heaven. It's not of this earth.

Our interest should lie in the things of heaven, not in the things of this earth, certainly not in the things of this world.

Then as we read on down, it says that after he pitched his tent having Bethel on the west and High on the east, there he builded an altar unto the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord. That's the third thing. He called upon the name of the Lord.

[00:22:01] In 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul says that the words he writes are to the believers at Corinth but they're also to all those who call upon the name of the Lord in every place. Christians should be marked by calling upon the name of the Lord. And being English, I like to connect things up by putting the same capital letter in front of them.

You could say the first point here is he was a worshipper, the priestly character of Christianity. We bring praise and worship to God. We go into the presence of God and we come out speaking of the marvelous things of our Lord. We get that, don't we, in 1 Peter chapter 2. There's a priestly side to Christianity.

And then in the wonderful thought of the tent, we have the pilgrim side which we've mentioned already that we're on a journey, we're going home. This is not our home. [00:23:02] And then thirdly, the thought of prayer. Dependence upon God, seeking his help and guidance for every step of the way. Priest, pilgrim, and prayerful man.

These things marked Abraham, the man of faith.

But sadly as we've already mentioned, he went away from the place where he had put his altar and where he had pitched his tent and where he was calling on the name of the Lord and he ended up in Egypt.

And as you read the account of what happened in Egypt, you won't find any mention of him calling on the name of the Lord. He hadn't gone there through the direction of the Lord.

We haven't got enough time to go into exactly what happened in Egypt, but the important thing we learn as we turn the pages of scripture is that when he came out of Egypt, he had [00:24:05] to go back to where he had gone wrong.

That's in verse 4 of chapter 13. It says, unto the place of the altar which he had made there at the first, and there Abraham called on the name of the Lord.

We might have thought God would have said, you hesitated before you went into Canaan, Abram, and now you've got into Abram, you've gone far too far, you've gone all the way south and you're out of the land and you're in Egypt. And furthermore, you've denied the relationship you have with your wife. How can I use you for anything, for my glory or for anybody else's blessing? But does God say that to him? No, God doesn't say that to him. God brings him out. Yes, it involved plaguing Pharaoh's household to get Abraham out of that situation where [00:25:08] he was.

And often when we get into wrong situations because we don't follow the leading of the Lord, we will find there are consequences, not only for ourselves, but for others too. And we're going to touch on that in a moment as well.

But Abram came out of Egypt. God got his man out of Egypt. And we read then in chapter 13 of the strife between Abram's servants and Lot's servants.

This just brings before us again the fact that still Abram's obedience of faith, we read in Romans of obedience of faith, you can find it in the first chapter of Romans and you can find it in the 16th chapter of Romans. The obedience of faith.

[00:26:04] God wants to see obedience mark us in our faith towards him.

Yes, it's a wonderful thing to have faith in the Lord Jesus as our savior. That is obedience to God, to turn from our sin, to acknowledge our sinnership, to trust in the Lord Jesus as our savior. But it goes beyond simply the matter of eternal salvation. It goes into the way we live our lives. But Abram's obedience of faith had not been complete because there was still this person Lot with him, of his family, Lot was still there.

And as we're going to see briefly, Lot was of the same kind of conviction as Abram was.

But there was this conflict between Abram's servants and Lot's servants and eventually [00:27:04] they had to part company.

And sadly, Lot decided to go for the well-watered plains of the Jordan where Sodom was, that place of sin.

But God gave a wonderful promise to Abram once they had separated that he would inherit the land. He said, look at the land, it's verse 14 of chapter 13, lift up now thine eyes and look from the place where thou art northward and southward and eastward and westward. It seems that when Abram got fully free of his connection with Lot, which he should have got free from before, then God was able to encourage him with a look to all the blessing that God wanted to give him. [00:28:01] And it's wonderful to see this sort of lifting up the eyes. Again, it's the heavenly look. It's looking at things from God's point of view, looking at what God wants to give. It reminds me of this verse and some of the other verses which we're going to mention of the way in which Paul presents the mystery, the privileges and blessings of Christianity in his letter to the Ephesians.

Here it's the breadth and length and height and depth, isn't it? But here it's the dimensions of the land that God had in mind for Abram to enjoy. And he was to arise and walk through the land in the length of it and the breadth of it, for I will give it unto thee. This is what God had in mind for his servant Abram.

But you see, there probably had been consequences of another kind through Abram going down into [00:29:06] Egypt.

Lot had been with him.

And it seems that what attracted Lot to the particular part of the land that he chose was that it was like Egypt.

He had got a taste for Egypt into his heart and his life. And I think this is a challenge for us, particularly when we're younger as Christians. Have we got a taste for Egypt in our hearts? Egypt in scripture is a picture of the world. We can say we're heavenly men by birth, but has Egypt, has this world got a little bit, perhaps a large bit of our hearts, of our desires, of our lives, of our occupations?

It had for Lot, probably as a result of him going down to Egypt with Abram. [00:30:05] And incidentally, it may well be that it was in Egypt that Sarah got her handmaid Hagar, for she was an Egyptian. We've only got to think of chapter 16 to think of the consequences of that.

So we need to be encouraged to see that on the one hand, God is patient with us. But on the other hand, if only we were more devoted to God, if only we really were marked by that full obedience of faith, how much more God would be able to accomplish in us for his glory and for the blessing of others.

But in chapter 14, a remarkable thing happens. Lot now effectively in Sodom is involved in a conflict between five kings and four kings.

[00:31:08] And he's on the wrong side. The king of Sodom is defeated and Lot is taken into captivity. But you know, the wonderful thing about Abram is he's marked by the wonderful attributes of God.

His relationship with God has affected him and he goes after Lot to bring him back. And we all know the story of how he brings him back and how he brings back much more than simply Lot.

He's the one through whom much is recovered to those kings that were defeated, including the king of Sodom. And the king of Sodom wants to give something to Lot, to Abram as a result. And Abram refuses the entreaties of the king of Sodom.

[00:32:02] In verse 21 of chapter 14, the king of Sodom said unto Abram, give me the persons and take the goods to thyself.

And Abram said to the king of Sodom, I have lift up mine hand unto the Lord, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take from a thread even to a shoelatchet, and that I will not take anything that is thine, lest thou shouldst say, I have made Abram rich.

Abram, in his heart, desired to be for God.

And he was exercised in every respect to be holy for God.

He made mistakes, but the desire of his heart was to be faithful to God. Of course, we know from the verses just before the verses I've read that this mysterious person, Melchizedek, has already come

forth bringing bread and wine. [00:33:04] He was the priest of the most high God. And it seems that his ministry to Abram at this time was what provided Abram with the moral strength to resist the charms of the king of Sodom. And the Lord Jesus, our high priest, of course, Melchizedek is a picture of the Lord Jesus, is in heaven, praying for us, providing us with the help we need to be able to resist the attractions of this world, because Satan will use this world to try and divert us from real dedication and faithfulness to the Lord. This is a real challenge, particularly to younger believers. Those who have their lives, humanly speaking, before them, if the Lord Jesus doesn't come. The world is a very attractive place for the young person. [00:34:04] More and more, the world is geared up to attract the young.

Even the technology of the world is designed particularly with the young in mind. And the world is constantly placing its wares, its attractions, before our eyes. And the young have the greatest opportunity to take advantage of them. But God, God is laying out before us the wonderful opportunity to be for him in this life. To live in this world for the one with whom we're going to spend eternity. And the question is, which are we going to go in for? The offerings of a world that can only please us for 70 or 80 years?

[00:35:01] Or the things which go on into eternity?

And perhaps this is the biggest challenge for us today. Are we going to go in for the things of God?

Abraham, because he went in for the things of God, he could be such a blessing and helped a lot in this particular instance. He was really able to be Lot's shield, wasn't he, in his danger when he was taken captive.

And he was one who was offered much in return for his prompt and brave action in sending his servants to recover Lot.

But he was faithful to God in resisting every temptation to go down the wrong road. And that's where we come to chapter 15. [00:36:02] Because often it's when we've done something for the Lord that we're in the most danger. We feel we've triumphed in some way for the Lord. And it's really quite small and insignificant. But there is a tendency in all our hearts to take credit for what we've done. But God comes in to protect Abraham from any such tendency.

He brings himself before Abraham and he says, fear not, Abraham. Perhaps Abraham had a sense of fear. Perhaps he thought that his stand in regard to the King of Sodom marked him out even more as someone who was a bit different. And that's a fear we have, particularly when we're young as believers. We're afraid. I know when I was at school as a Christian, I was afraid to be clear that I was a Christian [00:37:02] because it marked me out as being different from all the rest. And I'm sure others have had that feeling too.

But God says to Abraham, fear not.

We need to look at things from God's point of view. And he says furthermore to Abraham, I, not an angel, but I myself, I am thy shield.

You've been a shield a lot. I am thy shield and thy exceeding great reward.

You've turned down the rewards that the King of Sodom would give you. But I am your reward.

And I suppose one of the biggest challenges of this particular story is, do we really believe what we say we believe? Do we really believe that our God and Father, that our Lord Jesus Christ, do we really believe [00:38:03] what the scripture presents about our Father and about our Savior? Do we really have it in our hearts that they are for us and the Holy Spirit indwells us and enables us to live for the glory of God? Do we really believe that? Is it a practical thing in my life that I'm a Christian, that I believe in the Lord Jesus, that I know I belong to God, that I have God as my Father, that I'm going to heaven? Is that something that really affects the practical aspects of my life day by day? This chapter would bring before us the fact that it should.

But when we're younger, we've just been thinking of the kinds of questions people ask us. We often have questions. We've been thinking about questions in regard to creation and evolution. [00:39:02] But here was Abram. He said, Lord God, what wilt thou give me seeing that I go childless? The word go here really is the word depart. Abram here was someone who was middle-aged.

He was getting to a point where he was thinking, I'm never going to have a child. I'm not going to have an heir. I'm going to go out of this life childless. What will you give me, God? Because the only person really who's going to carry on my business, if you like, my household, is this Eliezer of Damascus. Behold, to me thou has given no seed, and lo, one born in my house. In other words, a servant is mine heir.

Sometimes we do have to ask questions of God because we have to realize that when we [00:40:06] want to know something, we have to turn to God's word.

And he's the one who will show us his mind and his will. It's good to ask our parents. It's good to ask brothers in the meeting. It's good to turn to books of doctrine and exposition of God's word. But how often do we pray? How often do we come to the Lord and say, Lord, show me the answer to this particular situation, this particular problem? Remember, one of the things we said about Abraham was that he was marked by being a prayerful man.

And this is an example of him asking the question. And the Lord gives him a categorical answer. This shall not be thine heir, but he that shall come forth out of thine own bounds shall be thine heir.

[00:41:01] And if we were to look at Romans chapter 4, we would see Paul's commentary on this. Because there the apostle Paul uses this experience of Abraham as an example to us of a man who takes God at his word. And as a result, gets into the blessing that God has for him. God brings him out of his tent.

Now, we were hearing earlier on about the lack of light, the lack of, no, not the lack of light, the fact there's too much light today in our cities and towns. When we look in the sky, we can't see the stars for all their grandeur. But that wasn't a problem in Abraham's day. But isn't it beautiful to see God bringing Abraham out under the canopy of the stars and turning his face upward.

[00:42:01] We need to keep turning our face upward. Lift up your eyes.

And here he says to him, look now toward heaven.

Look toward heaven.

And tell the stars if they'll be able to number them. And he said unto him, so shall thy seed be. God had promised Abraham a seed, was to be as the stars of heaven. It's the heavenly aspect of the seed which comes out particularly in this chapter. And we are the heavenly seed.

Of course, we have believed on the Lord Jesus as our savior.

We aren't part of God's earthly people. We are his heavenly people.

And it says Abraham believed in the Lord and he counted it to him for righteousness. It doesn't mean that his faith was righteousness. [00:43:02] It means that believing God got him the righteousness that God gives to those who simply take him at his word.

This is the principle that Paul uses in Romans chapter 4 to bring before us the fact that Abraham got his righteousness not by way of circumcision because this happened before God gave the mark of circumcision to Abraham.

He got it by simply taking God at his word. The crucial thing is, have we just done this, as it were, for our eternal salvation? Are we working it out in our lives day by day? Something to mark us continually. But it is an encouragement to anyone here who hasn't trusted the Lord Jesus. This is another verse to show you all you have to do is to take God at his word. That's all you have to do. [00:44:01] Take God at his word.

God promised this to Abraham and Abraham at that moment, as he looked at that night sky, he heard God speaking to him. As we can hear God speak to us in the Bible and he took God at his word and God records here for our spiritual blessing that he counted it to him for righteousness.

And then he presents himself to Abraham. I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees to give thee this land to inherit it.

You see, sometimes we think faith is a matter of simply believing God and we have no more questions to ask.

But this is the education of faith. God leads us on step by step. Abraham's faith was real, but he still had questions. And he says, whereby shall I know that I shall inherit it? [00:45:03] And God in his grace leads him to do this thing, which sometimes we've found difficult to understand. He tells him to take these five creatures. They're all creatures that later on in the scriptures we find are sacrificial creatures. They're used in the approach particularly of God's earthly people to him. We can think in the case of the heifer, of the red heifer that was used for the purification of sins as the people went through the wilderness. You'll remember that red heifer had to be taken and it was burned after its blood had been sprinkled in front of the tabernacle.

Its ashes were then mixed with water and it was used as a medium of purification whenever somebody was defiled as they went through the wilderness. [00:46:01] The she-goat, the goat, we can think of the two goats that were used on the Day of Atonement. Here it's a she-goat.

Goats were often used as sin offerings, but they were also used as burnt offerings. We can think of

the ram of consecration for the priests.

We can think of the turtle dove and the young pigeons that were provided for those who were poor when they couldn't bring the other animals as their offering, whatever it might be. We can think of the way in which it says of Mary and Joseph that when the Lord Jesus was presented in the temple, they brought, didn't they, the two young pigeons or doves.

And so these animals, they do speak to us of the sacrifices that would be used by the people of Israel in their approach to God. And if we think of that, then we can think of the fact that these sacrificial creatures [00:47:04] were pictures of the Lord Jesus himself who would give his life for us upon the cross of Calvary to bring us to God. Abraham did as God asked him to. He divided them in the midst, laid each piece one against the other, but the birds divided he not.

And there they were on the ground. Now if we were to look at Jeremiah 34, we would see that the people there did something similar to this. They took a calf, they split it in two, they walked through the two parts of the calf to make a covenant with God. In that case, that they would give their servants freedom.

It's there in Jeremiah 34, we haven't got enough time to look at it now in detail, but the sad thing was having walked between the two parts of the calf to prove that they meant [00:48:03] what they said, that they were going to give freedom to their servants. They then went back on their promise and God held them particularly guilty for doing that. So it seems that this was a way in which people made an agreement between themselves. They would take animals, they would cut them in two parts, they would walk between the two parts in proof of the agreement that they had come to. Because God had asked Abram to do this, Abram divided these animals in two parts each except for the birds and then, I don't know what he was expecting to happen, but the birds came down to devour the carcasses.

And Abram, he drove them away.

[00:49:01] He didn't want this symbol of his agreement with God to be spoiled and he tried to stop the birds coming down to spoil it.

There's something lovely about this, it shows Abram's dedication, it shows his energy, it shows his desire to experience the blessing that God was promising him. But God had another lesson to teach him. The birds were coming down, the day was getting late, the sun came down and a deep sleep fell upon Abram.

He hadn't got the energy or the light to keep on doing what he was doing and lo and horror of great darkness fell upon him.

Often deep sleeping scripture speaks of death, darkness speaks of being out of God's blessing.

[00:50:12] Abram felt no doubt because it speaks of horror here that what God had promised wasn't going to be realized, that he wasn't able to find what God was going to give him.

But then we hear the words of God, God said unto Abram, know of a surety. God gives Abram his word, your seed that which shall proceed from your own bowels, from your own body, they will be a stranger in a land that is not theirs and they shall serve them and they shall afflict them for 400 years.

We know that this 400 year period really lasts from the time that Abram departed his life [00:51:04] to the point at which the people of Israel came out of Egypt where they were afflicted and the nation, God says in verse 14, will I judge and afterward they shall come out with great substance, how true this was for the people of Israel. True God says you'll be buried in a good old age but in the fourth generation your seed shall come hither again for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.

This verse brings before us the fact that Abram was really only thinking of his own particular situation. He wanted to know if he was going to have a seed to carry his name forward, to enjoy the blessings which God had promised.

[00:52:04] But sometimes we have to be brought back to this fact that we are part of God's designs that go beyond just our own lives and our own interests. And here in this particular case, God was also working with the Amorites, the people who dwelt in the land. God was not going to judge them immediately but eventually despite whatever witness the Amorites had of God, their cup of iniquity was going to become full and it was through the people of Israel that God would judge them when they came back to the land. And it came to pass that when the sun went down and it was dark, when there was no light at all, behold a smoking furnace and a burning lamp that passed between those pieces. In the end, Abram wasn't going to walk through those pieces with God. [00:53:03] He wasn't going to get this blessing that God promised him by his own efforts in warding off the birds which often speak, as we know, of the evil one who wants to take away the blessing from us.

God was going to do it for Abram all by himself, if we can put it that way. The smoking furnace speaks of the refining work of God that would take place among the seed of Abraham.

And the burning lamp speaks of the light that God would give them to find their way, that he would, to find his way for his glory in their history.

And we have to learn these two things as well. When we want to know God's will for our lives, we have to learn that we need the refining work of God in our lives.

[00:54:03] Presented here by this smoking furnace, I think the word smoking here would bring before us the intensity of the heat.

But it would also bring before us the fact that God has got his hand upon the situation. We read about the chastening that God exercises as father of us as his children. We get that in Hebrews chapter 12, don't we, just after that passage which speaks about the need for faith.

And as well as the smoking furnace, we read here of the burning lamp. God is always leading us, always directing us, always showing us the way in which we should go if we're going to please him in our lives. We know that the people of Israel did have to have this chastening in their lives, but God was ever faithful as he led them out of Egypt and into Canaan. [00:55:04] They always had that pillar of cloud which was light by night to guide them through the pathway.

Indeed, the very flame of fire in the burning bush when God spoke to Moses and directed him to lead his people out is an indication of the way in which God is ever faithful to direct and guide us, but he's also refining us in our lives. God was really showing to Abraham that he was going to be true to his word and bring his people through for his glory.

And in the same day, in the good of that vision which Abraham had, God made a covenant with him and he again presents to him the immenseness of the blessing which he has in mind for him. I think for us we have to learn this lesson. [00:56:04] We too need to live our lives with God day by day. We need to be willing to be directed by the Holy Spirit, guided by God's word. We need to be helped by the fellowship of the saints. We need to show the same endurance of faith and energy of faith which was seen in the life of Abraham.

And if that happens, we can be sure that God will guide and direct us through our lives. The scene may be dark, there may be all sorts of influences on us like these birds that seem to be bent on taking away from us what God wants to give us, but we have to rest in the fact that God loves us and wants the best for us. That's been demonstrated at the cross where the Lord Jesus went into a far greater furnace, [00:57:04] if we can put it this way, than ever we shall be called upon to go through in our lives. When he suffered and died for us on the cross of Calvary in order that we should be made right with God, that we should know God as our father and him as our Lord and saviour. We should know him as our shepherd and our guide. In this respect, the Lord Jesus as ever is the perfect example because the Lord Jesus could say to those two disciples on the way to Emmaus who were downcast, they reasoned amongst themselves, they couldn't understand or work out why things had happened the way they had happened.

The Lord Jesus himself drew near. He showed them from the scriptures the things concerning himself. But he said to them, ought not Christ to suffer and then enter into his glory? [00:58:01] Often there is a pathway of suffering to be experienced by us if we would truly know the blessing that God wants to give us. It says in the Psalms, by pressure thou hast enlarged me, but God is always faithful.

God will achieve his purpose in our lives even though sometimes we cannot explain why certain things happen.

But God is in control and God will carry us through and bring us where he wants us to be. Paul had a sense of this in his heart. In Romans 6, we can read the truth of the fact that we died with Christ. That's a doctrinal thing. Positionally that's true.

God has finished with the first man.

We've been baptised, we've been baptised unto the death of the Lord Jesus. [00:59:02] But you know Paul had gone past that simply being a doctrinal thing. He bore in his body the dying of Jesus.

He realised in a practical way that the only way to live was to be totally devoted to Christ.

He was truly morally in the place of death. He gave everything over to the Lord.

Often we hear about people today who live on the edge. Paul lived on the edge. He lived on the edge, you could say. He lived on that margin between life and death because for him to live was Christ, to die is death.

And I think the challenge for us is we feel weak and perhaps we feel unworthy to say these [01:00:01] words, but we really need to be dedicated to Christ in our lives.

These are the last and closing days, the dark days. The sun is going down, the night will soon be fully over this world. Of course we won't be here when it is like that because the Lord Jesus is going to come for us. We don't look for that day when darkness will fill the earth completely.

The sky, not the grave, is our goal. The Lord Jesus has said through the words of the Apostle Paul, he's coming again to take us to be with himself. Every Lord's Day morning when we break the bread and drink the cup, we announce his death till he comes.

And remember it was on that night when he instituted his supper, that by which we remember [01:01:03] him Lord's Day by Lord's Day, that he said to his disciples, I will come again for you myself, take you to be with me.

And the Lord Jesus is descended, he will take his saints out of this world. But the night is drawing in.

Are we going to be marked by the same faith that characterised this faithful man Abraham and that marked the Apostle Paul in his life and dedicate our lives to the Lord? If anything that I've said has not been right, I'm sure the Lord will take it away from our minds but I will pray that the urge, the challenge of these words will particularly speak to my younger brethren because we're so weak today in the gatherings of the Lord's people. [01:02:01] Those who seek to be true to the truth of the assembly, we need young brothers and sisters who will be dedicated, who will be marked by faith, who will follow the Lord and put into practice the things of the scriptures despite this dark day, the smallness of numbers so that there might still be an assembly testimony here in this world when the Lord Jesus comes to take his own to be with himself. May it be so for his name's sake. Hymn 364.

Have I an object, Lord, below which would divide my heart from thee, which would divert its even flow in answer to thy constancy? O teach me quickly to return and cause my heart afresh to burn. [01:03:10] 364. Have I an object, Lord, below which would divide my heart from thee, which would divert its even flow in answer to thy constancy?

O teach me quickly to return and cause my heart afresh to burn.

[01:04:14] Have I a hope, however dear, which would differ like the only Lord, which would detain my spirit here when all can last in joy and woe?

From it my Saviour set me free to look and love and pray for thee.

[01:05:19] Be thou the object bright and fair to fill and satisfy the heart.

My hope to meet thee in the air and never more from thee to part that I may undistracted [01:06:10] be to follow myself and wait for thee.