

ABRAHAM: THE FRIEND OF GOD

I want to address a particular subject today that carries on from the Feast of Tabernacles. As we come back from the Feast, and settle into life and the world that surrounds, how can we keep our lives focused on what it is that God has called us to?

We are going to return to an old favourite, Abraham. Abraham is described in Scripture as being “the friend of God.” He appears in chapter 12 of the book of Genesis. The majority of the book of Genesis is devoted to Abraham and his family, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph in particular. Of the 50 chapters of the book of Genesis, some 36 are devoted to this particular family, stretching over some four generations.

Commentators, looking at the book of Genesis, come to chapter 12, and say, “There’s a break in the story here. Genesis 11 ends what we call ‘primeval history,’ and now we get down to what the Bible is about: Abraham and his family.”

It’s interesting to consider the way in which even we, as a Church, have considered the book of Genesis from time to time. When I went through Ambassador College, most of the emphasis of the book of Genesis was on the first eleven chapters. Even then, that was focused to the first two chapters, and the account of the flood.

In fact, in one particular class, we spent a good portion of the semester just in those two areas. In a required class, we never touched on the aspect of Abraham and his descendants; this man who is known as the friend of God.

Subsequently, as other classes became required at Ambassador College, Abraham became part of it, but in a very cursory manner.

Today I would like to look at this aspect of Abraham.

The aspect of Genesis 11 being a break in the story is addressed in a comment from the Anchor Bible Dictionary. Talking about the account of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9, it says:

“Thus the story poses a haunting question. Is humankind doomed to the punishment of being scattered and confused?”

“If the primeval history concluded with the Babel episode, the answer to that question would have to be in the affirmative” (David Noel Freedman, The Anchor Bible Dictionary).

“The lot of man is to be scattered and confused. That’s what it’s all about. There is no purpose whatsoever. It is one of scattering and confusion.”

People like to make a nice distinct break at chapter 11 of the book of Genesis, and say, “That’s primeval history. Now we get onto real things in chapter 12.”

At the end of Genesis 11 and on into Genesis 12, we are introduced to Abram through Terah and his family.

Before we go to Genesis 12, I’d like to spend a little time in Genesis 11, showing that what happens in Genesis 11 is inherently tied into the Abraham story. You can’t read the story of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob and Joseph – in fact, you can’t read the rest of the Bible

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– unless you learn the lessons that are given in the first 11 chapters!

Genesis 11 is post-flood. God has already had to deal with the iniquity on the earth once, through Noah. Society, having increased in numbers, comes to the point ...

Genesis 11:1 Now the whole earth had one language and one speech.

2 And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar, and they dwelt there.

3 Then they said to one another, "Come, let us make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They had brick for stone, and they had asphalt for mortar.

4 And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."

This is an interesting situation. Man proposes a solution to his life. "How can I take care of myself? How can I ensure that I accomplish what I want to accomplish in life?" They decided to build themselves a city with a tower whose top will be in the heaven. "We will make a name for ourselves."

As one reads through this, it is interesting to find that they keep on using a cohortative statement saying: "Come, let us do this."

In other words, this wasn't just somebody's wild idea. This was a combined idea of people joining together. All of these people had a collective idea that this was what they were going to do together. There was a certain degree of agreement in terms of the purposes that these people were expressing:

4 And they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens (whose top will reach into heaven); let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth."

Their very first objective was to build a city and a tower. The top of that tower was to reach into heaven. Commentators have used a lot of ink trying to work out what they meant by that phrase. Was this to be a means whereby they could avoid another flood? Was this a means whereby they could rise up to heaven, and literally confront God? Mankind has that mindset!

At the beginning of the "space race" in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Soviets made the claim that they were going to send a spacecraft up into the heavens "to prove that there was no God: to show the religious Western world that their whole civilisation was based upon a false premise."

This idea of reaching up into heaven and being able to interact with God, whether He is there or not, is not necessarily a strange idea. Even we, in our sophisticated Western world have ideas of going up and knocking God off His pedestal – or whatever it may be that the Soviets had in mind at that time.

They said, "Let us build ourselves a city and a tower, that we make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth." There is an

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interesting collection of points here.

The City and the Tower

Herodotus, a Greek historian, probably considered to be the first historian, writing in the 5th century B.C. said of the Tower of Babel:

“It has a solid central tower, one furlong square, with a second erected on top of it and then a third and so on, up to eight. All eight towers can be climbed by a spiral way running around the outside, and about half way up there are seats for those who make the journey to rest on.”



Herodotus wrote this in terms of what he considered was the ruins of the Tower of Babel which was part of the city that these people were trying to build at that period of time. Various people have given us representations of it. To the left is one of the representations of one of the Dutch masters, of the ruins of the Tower of Babel, with a spiral way going up. I don't think he had read Herodotus carefully enough, because I think he got more than eight spirals going up. Perhaps artists are entitled to make such leaps of fancy.

More specifically, archaeologically the picture to the right is considered to be what remains today of the Tower of Babel. It is described as being a Ziggurat – one of the stepped pyramids that were not unknown in Mesopotamia. It is wasting away in the desert sands in Mesopotamia, in Iraq, at present.

Returning to Genesis 11, we have society “proposing” at that time. They were going to build a city and a tower. They used the terms “come build,” and “come make.” “Come, let's make a name for ourselves.” The purpose was to avoid being scattered.



We could look at it in a different way. They had a very clear purpose to build a city. They had a motive, and that was to make a name for themselves as a result of that city. And they had a reason for doing it. They wanted to avoid being scattered upon the face of the earth.

They started on their exercise – and God disposed of it. We have the expression, “man

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proposes, but God disposes.” This is one of the classic examples of God intervening in the affairs of man, and pulling the plug so that humanity’s plans could not be accomplished.

Genesis 11:6 And the LORD said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do (this is their plan); now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them.

So, mimicking the very approach of the people of Mesopotamia at that time, the Eternal said:

7 "Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."

The Eternal uses exactly the same language that they had used. “If you are going to act that way, We will act in the same way.” Once again, God uses the first person plural as in Genesis 1:26. “Let US go down, and their confuse their language.”

The Eternal’s reason for doing so is given very clearly in verse 6. He said, “They are one people. They have the same language, and this is what they begin to do, and now nothing which they purpose to do will be impossible for them.”

So in terms of reading six verses, we end up with two unknowns; one of which was in relation to humanity. How high was the tower to be? What really was the purpose of this high tower? What was it they were trying to accomplish?

God never tells us. Archaeology certainly can’t tell us. They think they have found the base of the Tower of Babel, but is that really it? We don’t know. Is what Herodotus saw in the 5th century B.C. really the Tower of Babel? It may have been the local lore of the land being passed down over generations. It may be that that was the case, and that they thought eight or ten stories would reach up to heaven. They will have to wait until the resurrection to find out how far off they were!

But God leaves us with an unanswered question. How high was the tower to be? And what was the purpose of the tower? From the Eternal’s point of view, we have a question as well. We might ask ourselves, what would humanity have been able to accomplish if God had not intervened? What was it that God was acting to prevent in terms of humanity when He makes that comment that “nothing that they purpose to do will be impossible for them.”

We look at that from the point of view of our electronic silicon age. We look back at these people with bricks and asphalt for mortar and we forget that we are their descendants! God may have been taking a very much longer view of the way in which humanity was conducting itself at that point in time, and what its motivations were, than we can ever really appreciate.

Humanity was at a place where they were wanting to build a centre for themselves whose top would be in the heavens. They wanted to make a name for themselves and they wanted to avoid scattering. They wanted to build a city state. They wanted to be together. They were proposing a power centre upon the earth which would enable them to have control of their own destiny. They were seeking to coalesce power around themselves so that

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they could control their own destiny.

In that environment, and a few verses later, God then introduces Abraham. The genealogy of Shem begins in verse 10, and we come down to Abraham in verse 26 as a descendant of Terah.

26 Now Terah lived seventy years, and begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

27 This is the genealogy of Terah: Terah begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Haran begot Lot.

Abraham very clearly enters the scene in Genesis 12. I want you to consider God's first instruction to Abraham in light of what we have just read. Because they are not unrelated. They are very distinctly related. Notice God's first recorded instruction to Abraham:

Genesis 12:1 Now the LORD had said to Abram:

"Get out of your country,

From your family

And from your father's house,

To a land that I will show you.

His first instruction was to scatter, to leave family and all that made him what he was! These people had been seeking to avoid being scattered. God calls a man and says, "Get out. I am going to scatter you. I am taking you from your family. I am taking you from your kinship. I am taking you from everything that creates your identity and I want you to go where I want you to be!"

The Eternal leaves Abraham with absolutely no room for doubt. We read it in the English translations, and it all sounds very nice. Abraham gets this lovely long letter from God saying, "Go forth from your father's house to the land that I will show you."

Unfortunately, in the Hebrew it is not that way! The Hebrew uses an emphatic imperative. An imperative is a command. An emphatic imperative is a command that leaves you absolutely no doubt as to what it is. If a boss tells a person, "You are fired. Out of here!" that is an emphatic imperative. The employee is left with no doubt as to where they stand *vis-à-vis* the boss, especially if he gives them whatever it is to go with it and tells them "Pick up your belongings and get out of here!" It is very emphatic, very direct.

You might say it is literally, "Go! Go! Get out of here!" so Abraham leaves. He takes his nephew, Lot. But what's the first thing that happens with Lot? He loses Lot as well. In Genesis 13 we see that the land is not suitable to handle all of their livestock, so they have got to split up. So even the last vestige that Abraham and Sarah had, that could identify them with their family, heads off down the hill into the valley.

Abraham is left with Sarah his wife, and no other family whatsoever. In terms of today's distances, the family were galaxies away. There is no way in which they could communicate with them as you and I can communicate with one another today.

We may sit in our hotel rooms at the Feast of Tabernacles and plug into the Internet. We get email messages from Zimbabwe, South Africa or the other ends of the earth which may

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have been sent less than 30 seconds beforehand – and it is before our eyes. Or we can pick up a telephone and we can direct dial anyone night or day and communicate with them.

They had nothing. In terms of distances, they were galaxies apart. They were removed altogether. Abraham was scattered. The book of Hebrews describes it in this way:

Hebrews 11:8 (New Revised Standard Version) By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going.

That is an amazing statement about Abraham. He obeyed. He accepted the instruction from God, and he set out, not knowing where he was going.

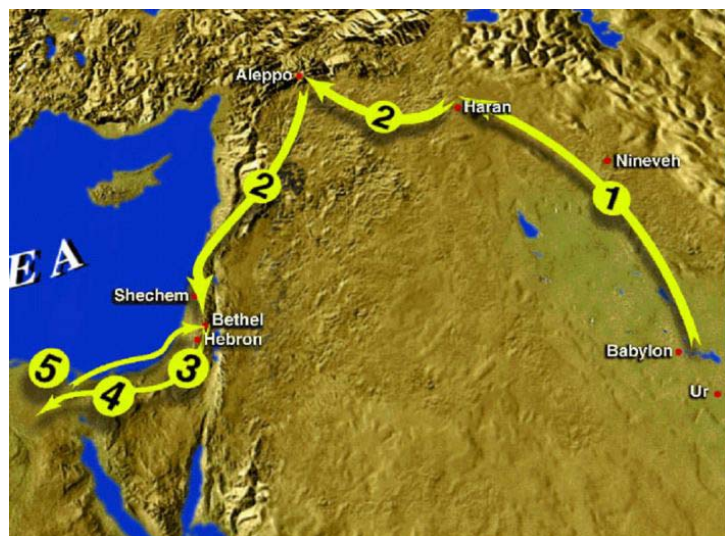
9 By faith he stayed for a time in the land he had been promised, as in a foreign land, living in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

He lived as a foreigner. He wasn't accepted. He had no real sense of identity. Most of us don't understand what it is like to be a foreigner. I have a little bit of an idea. That's not because I live in the United States instead of where I was born. But I have had the experience of spending a Sabbath in a city, and a nation, in which I knew there were other of God's people – and I couldn't speak the local language. If you want to feel like a foreigner, just be in a situation like that, where there is no one who you can really talk to, no one you can converse with, no one you can find. "Where is the Church's representative? Where do I find this person?" It can be a very, very lonely experience, to be in a situation like that.

But the book of Hebrews describes Abraham living like a foreigner, living in tents as did Isaac and Jacob.

We live in the English speaking world. Even within the English speaking world, there are many cultural differences between places. So even someone who can speak English, can feel culturally isolated living in another English speaking part of the world. It's just one of those facts of life.

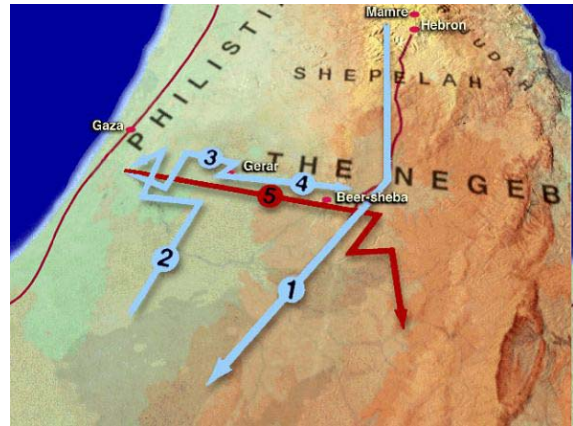
Abraham was scattered. He went from Ur of the Chaldees (at the bottom right-hand side of the map), up through the Mesopotamian area to Haran (a very important trading post), then probably to modern day Aleppo, before coming down into the land of promise, firstly to Bethel and then to Hebron as the book of Genesis tells us. Genesis 12 also talks about a side journey that he took into Egypt, from which he had to retreat back to the land that the Eternal had given him.



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The map on the right shows the area where Abraham, Isaac and Jacob spent their lives: the Negev, the Shepelah. Looking at this map doesn't give you a very hospitable feeling. Greys and browns in maps spell deserts and dryness. Abraham lived his life as a stranger in a dry, arid, inhospitable environment.

Some might say, "But what was his expectation? He was a nomadic farmer." What were Abraham's expectations? What environment did Abraham come from?



Below are some remains of Ur – not at the time of Abraham, but some 500 years BEFORE Abraham. In between times there had been a flood. The mindset of the people had come through the flood. What we see in the artefacts that we find today from pre-flood Ur were very much the values of the people who lived after the flood. There is a gold and lapis-lazuli necklace that was found in a grave, together with a golden dish for drinking from, and another golden dish which was involved in certain rituals.



To the left is a beautiful golden lapis-lazuli head-piece. The person who had been buried in this grave was a princess. She had been provided with all this finery and all of this wealth for her after-life, together with some 90 attendants to take care of her!

Not only did she have her own personal jewellery, she had the ram in the thicket (pictured on the right) – also made of gold and lapis-lazuli! This is a very beautiful piece of ornamentation which stands almost 12 inches tall. This was buried with the princess. We might wonder what the values of people in their life prior to death was like! What was the environment in which they lived?



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To the left is a lyre, a musical instrument that has been recovered and rebuilt. It is highly decorated and inlaid with mother-of-pearl and gold. The bull has a head of gold, and below it are wonderful motifs in mother-of-pearl.

Clearly, Ur of the Chaldees was a place of great wealth prior to the flood. It was clearly a place of wealth after the flood as well, at the time of Abraham. These were the standards that people expected. This is what power brought with it – wealth, beauty and things of great value.

If these goods were taken to the grave by a princess, what would her environment have been like in real life? It would have been one of great wealth, great power and great emphasis.

This was the environment from which Abraham had been brought. He was a man who understood the value of money. When all is said and done, if we look at Abraham himself, he was a man who had gold. He had more than 300 servants to take care of his flocks. His flocks of goats and sheep were so great that he and Lot caused problems with other inhabitants of the land wherever they went. Eventually they had to separate and Lot went to the city in the plain, by the green pastures to take care of his flocks. Abraham lived out his life in the harsh environment.

Isaac and Rebekah came on the scene. Isaac had to accept the state of being scattered. Rebekah had to leave her own family to journey to marry Isaac. She had to enter into this relationship that God had imposed upon the family of being scattered. She travelled with Abraham's servant from the north, from the city of Nahor (in the top left corner of the map), all the way down to Negev, to Beersheba to marry this very wealthy man. Abraham's servant did not arrive without gold and precious items to provide as a dowry.



It was not as though God had separated Abraham from the wealth of the east, and sent him out on a mendicant lifestyle like some monastic priest in the Egyptian desert. He hadn't called him to go and live like that! But He had separated him from the cities, and had brought him out into a land in which he was a foreigner. He was able to have, and appreciate, the benefit of wealth. He was able to appreciate an affluent lifestyle in terms of that day, but he lived in tents. He, and Isaac also, had to realise his identity was not in the things of humanity.

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What about Jacob? Jacob had to learn about being scattered. He had to learn that his own behaviour could lead to him being scattered. He had to flee from his brother. Then, having fled from his brother, about twenty years later, he had to flee from his uncle, right back into his brother's arms. This guy had a real identity problem as to where he should be on the face of the earth! He was always on the run. He was scattered.

He had a family. What happened with them? Joseph was scattered by his own brothers. He was sent to Egypt as a slave, and just in case the brothers felt secure and safe, now the third or fourth generation in the land, they eventually had to accept being scattered because they had to leave their land and head down into Egypt. They had to leave what they had established and they had to go to Egypt to be taken care of by their younger brother, who they had sought to destroy. What was the consequence of their scattering?



James 2:23 And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." And he was called the friend of God.

Abraham believed God. He did exactly what God said, and he was called the friend of God. The Scripture that James uses to locate Abraham as being the friend of God does not relate to the sacrifice of Isaac or anything of that nature. It's very early on in Abraham's life. The Scripture that James quotes from is from Genesis 15:6, where Moses, under God's inspiration provides the example that Abraham believed God:

Genesis 15:6 And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

In adding that Abraham was considered to be the friend of God, James is obviously bringing us this from somewhere other than the biblical account.

Where do we go from here? Is this example of scattering unique to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph? Is it unique to the book of Genesis? I don't think so. Because in Exodus we find that Moses has to be scattered! Moses has to accept leaving his family, even as a child. Then, having spent 40 years being molycoddled in the Pharaoh's palace, he has to leave that as well. He has to go into the wilderness to the Midianites and become a shepherd for 40 years.

We could look at another example, that of Ruth. Ruth makes a pledge to Naomi. After the death of her husband and sons, Naomi decides to go back to the land of Bethlehem. She

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asks her daughters in law to go back to their families, to marry again and live life as it was intended to be lived. Orpah departs ...

***Ruth 1:16 But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you,
Or to turn back from following after you;
For wherever you go, I will go;
And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God, my God.
17 Where you die, I will die,
And there will I be buried.
The LORD do so to me, and more also,
If anything but death parts you and me."***

This is a wonderfully poetic statement, but a very, very powerful statement at the same time because it talks to the commitment that she had: her willingness to give up everything that gave her identity and to attach herself to a totally new identity. Ruth was prepared to be scattered from her own identity and to receive a new identity that would be provided by God. It is a wonderful example for each and every one of us.

We ourselves have a statement from Jesus Christ, where He says:

***Luke 14:26 "If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother,
wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be
My disciple.
27 "And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My
disciple.***

“So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has, cannot be My disciple.” If we can’t give up everything in which we consider we have an identity, we cannot be God’s disciple. The Scripture uses the term “hating his father,” but we understand that this means, “loves less by comparison.” He is not talking about us going out and destroying our relationships. When Abraham left Haran and left his family, he did not walk out in such a row that the family never wanted to see him again.

Why? Because when the servant went back, he was well received. So he didn’t create a sense of odium with his family, saying, “You people are going to hell, and I am going to be saved. You are going to burn forever in the Lake of Fire.” This is how some people like to present the issues in life! Abraham didn’t create animosity with his family when he went out. I am sure they were sad to see him go, but his relationship with God was very much greater than his relationship with his family. He was able to send his servant back to find a wife for Isaac. Rebekah seemed to have no great difficulty going out to Uncle Abraham and his son.

When Jacob turned up on the scene a generation later, he didn’t seem to have any great problem being accepted by the family. But Abraham accepted God’s requirements in his life more than the family requirements. He didn’t create some great schism that is going to take the Kingdom of God to heal as so often people like to do. Oftentimes it is not the person who is called that has the problem. It may be the antipathy of the family. But we have to bear in mind that when God calls us to be separate, He doesn’t mean that we have to destroy the

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relationships that we had in any shape whatsoever.

So God calls us, and God expects us to place Him above everything else in life – to scatter from the things that would normally create our sense of identity. We find our sense of identity in God.

Having called Abraham into the land that He, God, was going to give him as a possession, what was God's purpose for him? Did God have a purpose? Did He just want to move people around to fill the earth? That wasn't the case at all. God had a purpose, and that was to make a name for Abraham. In Genesis 11, what was the purpose of mankind? They wanted to make a name for themselves – through creating a power centre – with a tower that reached up to heaven.

***Genesis 12:2 I will make you a great nation;
I will bless you
And make your name great ...***

Immediately we have a second connection between Babel and Abraham. God calls Abraham and says, "Out of here! Scatter! As a result of scattering, I am going to provide a name for you ..."

2 ... And you shall be a blessing.

The Bible has a lot to say about names.

***Proverbs 22:1 A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,
Loving favor rather than silver and gold.***

There are choices in life. What comes first? A good name? It is to be chosen above great riches. Looking at Abraham and his wealth when he came into the Promised Land, one could only assume that he would have been a highly successful person if he had stayed in Mesopotamia. The wealth that he brought into the Promised Land could have multiplied numerous times over. But for him, God making a name for him was more important than riches.

We have to ask ourselves that question as well. We have been through the Feast. We are now back into the grind. We have a challenge all the time – the challenge to compromise what we believe, because it may enable us to get ahead. It may enable us to improve our situation. Is that the choice we should make?

The book of Proverbs makes it abundantly clear that a good name is to be chosen rather than great riches; loving favour rather than silver and gold. We've seen a little bit of the wealth of that time.

We have this contrast of name versus riches. Once again, if one looks at the book of Genesis, we have God telling Abraham that he is going to create a great name for him. He has a son whom God names – Isaac (a laugh of a name!). God gives him the name. It means "laughter." Isaac has two sons, Esau and Jacob. Jacob means "supplanter." He ends with a new name – Israel. Most commentators translate that as "one who has power with God." In

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reality, it is probably better translated the other way around: “the one with whom God has wrestled with.” It takes God a little bit of time to get our attention. Each and every one of us can probably look back on circumstances in our life where God has had to take time to get us to focus our attention in the right place.

So God gave Jacob a new name: Israel. We find that Israel said of Joseph’s two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, “Let my name be named upon them.” He didn’t give them the name, Jacob. He wasn’t interested in that name any more. He was interested in the name that the Eternal had given him – Israel. So the name of Israel was named upon the two sons of Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh.

This idea of a name keeps recurring throughout the book of Genesis – and not just the book of Genesis. It keeps on reoccurring and reappearing right throughout God’s Word.

In Matthew 23 John the Baptist is talking to the religious leaders of his day. He says, “Don’t think to yourself, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. Don’t think you’ve got it made in life because you are a descendant of a particular person who God liked! That’s not the relationship that God is looking for. Don’t think that because you can make a connection to a name that has some weight in God’s Word, a man who is called ‘The Friend of God,’ that you are a descendant of him, and you can trace your genealogy back to him, that you’ve got it made. That’s not what God is looking for.”

John the Baptist goes on and tells the people, “If you are going to be Abraham’s children, if you are going to please God, you must bring forth the fruits that Abraham brought forth. You have got to be an example just like Abraham was an example. The Eternal speaking to Abraham, said:

Genesis 17:4 "As for Me, behold, My covenant is with you, and you shall be a father of many nations.

5 "No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you a father of many nations.

6 "I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you.

7 "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you.

This aspect of a covenant was going to be made between the Eternal and Abraham and his descendants after him in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, “to be God to you.”

Rather interestingly God said, “I am prepared to be your God!” But of course that requires a response. Are we prepared to be God’s people? John the Baptist was addressing a group of people who really weren’t prepared to be God’s people. That was the summation of the matter. He said, “If you want to be Abraham’s children, and you want to be the recipients of God’s oversight in your life, you’ve got to be the type of person that Abraham was. There are no ‘ifs and buts’ about it.”

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8 "Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God."

This aspect of a name comes up again in Genesis 17. The aspect of being a descendant of Abraham is very, very important to one particular people on the earth today – the Jews. They can trace themselves back to it.

Rather interestingly, so can the Muslims – through Ishmael! Various other people would like to consider themselves to be the descendants as well. But are they really the children of Abraham? Are they really the people that God is wishing to be the God to, and God IS the God to?

“Abram” simply means “exalted father.” To change the name to Abraham, it simply meant, “father of a multitude.” To a certain extent, you have to ask yourself, “What really happened in the naming of Abraham? What really changed: a person who is an exalted father, as opposed to a father of a multitude? I guess you could argue as to which is the better name! Not that we want to get into mysteries or things of that nature.

In the Hebrew, we have the equivalent of one letter being added to Abraham’s name – the equivalent of the letter “h.” It’s the fifth letter in the Hebrew alphabet. It could have a very important meaning on why God gave Abraham a new name. Most of us are aware that in Hebrew, numbers have some significance. Most commentators try to locate the number “five” in terms of grace. But what do we have in the Bible of which there are five? The first section of the Bible had five books: Genesis through Deuteronomy (the Torah).

The book of Psalms is broken into five different books. The book of Proverbs has five different books. Matthew has five different teaching sections relating to Jesus Christ. We have the number five appearing frequently in Scripture.

There is one place in which the number five, and multiples of the number five come up with even greater detail. That is in the Tabernacle. The number five was the ordinal number of the Tabernacle. What was the purpose of the Tabernacle? It was a dwelling place for the Eternal. It was where the Eternal dwelt amongst His people. The number five can, in many cases, be used to represent God’s dwelling place.

The change of Abram’s name to Abraham, rather than what we would like to translate it, probably has more to do with the fact that God was prepared to dwell with Abraham, and the fact that He was able to dwell in Abraham, and that Abraham was prepared to respond to Him and to obey Him, so He was able to give him a name. Revelation 2:17 is an interesting Scripture to consider as a caveat in terms of Abraham. Talking to one of the churches, he said:

Revelation 2:17 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it."

We can postulate about what Abraham means. We can try to come to some definition of

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it. But maybe we will have to wait until the resurrection and ask Abraham as to what his name REALLY means – just like these people are going to have to explain what their name really means. “What does this name that God has given to us mean?”

We can come up with all sorts of great ideas and scenarios as to what “Abraham” means. Maybe we will just have to wait and ask him in due course: “Abraham – what does it really mean? What did God intend by calling you Abraham?” Then we can tell him what our name means! “I used to have a name that meant nothing – or whatever it is, like “Abel,” and now I’ve got a name that means something, because God intended it to mean something!”

As you can realise, Jesus Christ is here talking to the Church. He is not just talking to one era of the Church because He said, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches” – to all of us. We are part of the Church. We are going to be given a new name, written in a white stone! And you will know the significance of that name! That is quite something to consider!

What will that name mean? I have a hunch that Abraham’s name means something to do with his relationship with God. That’s my hunch. And it’s not just “father of many nations,” as commentators or lexicographers would like to translate it. It has to do with his relationship with God more than anything else. So much for names.

What about cities? The Tower of Babel started off as a city with a tower to reach up to heaven. If we go through Genesis 12, there’s no immediate promise of a city for Abraham. He dwelt in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs according to the same promise. In fact, we find him avoiding cities! The first reference to a city in terms of Abraham in the Promised Land is with Lot who chooses to live near the cities. We know the rest of the story and the way in which the Eternal has to rescue Lot from the cities. Cities, in terms of that environment were inherently evil.

The first positive reference to a city in relation to Abraham comes in Genesis 14:18 where King Melchisedec of Salem brought out bread and wine.

Genesis 14:18 Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High.

19 And he blessed him and said: "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth;

20 And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand." And he (Abraham) gave him a tithe of all.

Melchisedec was the king of Salem. “Salem” means “peace.” We have the word, “Salam” in Arabic today which comes from this same word. The Hebrew word, “shalom” comes from the same tri-letter root. “Salem” means “peace.”

Jerusalem (Jer-u-salem) simply means “city” (Jer) “of” (u) “peace” (salem). Jerusalem is the city of peace.

So the first positive reference to a city is in relation to Melchisedec. I think we have to realise that God is not necessarily against cities, *per sé*. When all is said and done, the New Testament shows that the reward for those who produce with the talents that God gives them

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is a certain number of cities. Cities are to be ruled over in a godly manner.

God is not against cities per sé but He is against what they represent. It is not just cities. The cities of Abraham's day are now nations. The nations of yesteryear are now global alliances.

In the same way that the city of Babel represented an opposition towards God, so cities and nations today represent an opposition towards God. You can see the polarisation of this nation in terms of the presidential election. Much of it is religious. Interestingly, our incumbent president is not the favoured presidential choice by the majority of the Western world. The simple reason is that he is "too religious." "We don't like religion entering into our affairs. We want to determine our own future ourselves."

That is part of the delusion that Satan has blinded people with. They think that they can control their own future.

But there is more about Abraham and a city. Genesis does not necessarily tell us, but Paul, in Hebrews 11:10 tells us very clearly that:

Hebrews 11:10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

Speaking of Abraham, Paul says he waited for a city which has foundations. It is obviously a city of some substance. The Builder and Maker of that is God.

13 These (Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Israel, Joseph) all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.

This was the life that they chose as a stranger and a pilgrim on the earth; mighty wealthy ones at that. I want you to realise that they weren't mendicant monks wandering across the face of the earth, renouncing all physical pleasure and all wealth. God blessed their lives in many ways.

But they realised that they were strangers and pilgrims on this earth. Their identity was not in the systems of this world. It was not in the value systems of this world. It was not in anything that this world chose that their identity existed.

***14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland.
15 And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return.***

The door was open. They could go back and live in Mesopotamia any time they wanted. It would take a bit of time, a little bit of hardship, but there was always a door to go back there and to involve themselves in the affairs of this world.

16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

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What is the city for which we wait?

Revelation 21:10 *And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the great city, the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God,*

11 *having the glory of God. Her light was like a most precious stone, like a jasper stone, clear as crystal.*

15 *And he who talked with me had a gold reed to measure the city, its gates, and its wall.*

16 *The city is laid out as a square; its length is as great as its breadth. And he measured the city with the reed: twelve thousand furlongs. Its length, breadth, and height are equal.*

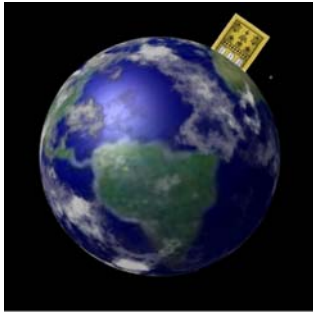
We don't measure things in furlongs today, so we wonder what it is like. Firstly, it appears to be a cube. It appears to be like the Holy of Holies which was a cube. The Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle was 10 cubits by 10 cubits by 10 cubits. I think the Holy of Holies in the Temple was 20 cubits by 20 cubits by 20 cubits. It was a cube.

But the Holy of Holies was in cubits, not furlongs. This is 12,000 furlongs. A furlong is approximately 200 yards, so 12,000 furlongs would give you 2,400,000 yards or 7,200,000 feet – which, if you translate it into miles is approximately 1,369 miles! It is a rather large city! If we were to locate one wall in Los Angeles, some of you would be at home at the other wall – in Arkansas. It would literally reach two thirds of the way across the American continent!

If you were to draw an arc, you'd have an idea of just how much land that city is going to encompass:



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Someone tried to represent it on a globe. They put it on the earth as it presently is, because *terra nova* (the new earth) has not yet come! The Americas are in the foreground. Africa is in the distance, and over the horizon, is the New Jerusalem – a 1400 miles cube. Anyone who understands physics will wonder how the earth can spin with a 1400 mile cube appended to it! My answer is that I don't know. In reality, that is not my problem – fortunately – or it would be a very BIG problem!

The picture below shows how someone has depicted the New Jerusalem: floating above the earth! But how does a 1400 mile cube float above the earth without affecting the earth's gravitational rotation and various things of that nature? Obviously, these things are kids' stuff to the Eternal! He doesn't need any of us to advise Him on the matter. He is more than able to take care of it.



But the New Jerusalem comes down from heaven after the earth has been purged, cleansed and purified by fire.

We have moved into the book of Revelation. One thing should be abundantly clear for each and every one of us – that there is an incredible connection between the book of Genesis and the book of Revelation. You can't read the book of Revelation without having read and understood the book of Genesis. You can't read the last chapters of the book of Revelation, and you can't read the messages to the churches without having been very much aware of what is in the first three chapters of the book of Genesis. The number of items that are taken by John and are represented and reintroduced in the book of Revelation are considerable.

The same is true of Genesis 11 and the book of Revelation. It doesn't stop. We find in the book of Revelation that there are cities. We have Babylon versus the New Jerusalem. The contrast and the choice is as great as that. Babylon is the Greek name for "Babel." It is the same system that has been passed on down from humanity, from post flood to the present day. You might say that we live in Babylon. We always like to see Babylon as being somewhere else – but we are very much a part of the Babylonish system today, whether we

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like to accept it or not.

Since the captivity at the time of Jeremiah, God's people have lived principally under a Babylonish system. Jesus Christ was born into a world that was controlled by the Babylonish system. The Church was started in Babylon so to speak. The Roman Empire was Babylon.

So the book of Revelation provides us with this very clear contrast that the book of Genesis does not introduce – the cities. But consider Genesis 11 and the rest of the Bible. On the one hand we have human endeavour and intention – and we have God on the other. Humanity wants to build a city. God is wanting to scatter us from this world. “Come out and be separate, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will be a God to you, and you will be My people.”

This aspect of being separate, of finding our identity not in the physical things of this life, but in the things of God; being God-centred and making sure that God is the centre of our lives.

Humanity wanted to make a name for themselves. God, on the other hand, said, “I will make a name for you.” When God makes a name for you, how long does it last? As long as the white stone exists? No, I guess that stones can get worn away. It's as long as you exist.

How long are those people going to exist? For eternity! They are going to have that name for eternity. We are going to know Abraham by the name that God has given him for eternity! We are going to appreciate that name, and we are going to know one another by the names that God has given you and me. We may remember the person's other name. We may remember their nicknames. Each and every one of us probably have people who we will remember by certain of their characteristics. But they will be overshadowed of course, by the name that God has given them, and the way in which God sees them. We will want to see that person from the perspective that God sees that person, rather than from what mankind sees.

Mankind moved to avoid being scattered. God's purpose and God's reason is that He wants to provide a city. When we look at what Genesis chapter 11 provides us with in terms of what human motivation was, they had things upside down. They wanted to start at the end to avoid the beginning. God said, “You silly human beings. You've got it all back to front. When will you ever learn? It is only as you learn to detach yourself from the physical and seek to find yourself in Me, that you can really have a future. And you will have a place in a City that we just can't comprehend.”

Does anyone of us comprehend the New Jerusalem? I'd like to see the size of the oysters that produce the pearls for the gates!!! How big is the rock that they are attached to? I guess God can create pearls without oysters. That's God's business, but my mind is boggled by the idea of how big this oyster is – because each gate is one pearl. So if that's the size of the pearl, how big was the oyster that produced that pearl? We can get ourselves caught up in these things, but none of us understand it.

We look forward to it. We look forward to a place in it – and we hope for it in a very profound way.

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As I said at the beginning, there are two unknowns. From humanity: how high was that tower to be? What was it that humanity was seeking to replicate or do with the Tower of Babel and the city that they were building?

From God's perspective: what would humanity have been able to accomplish if God did not intervene? What was it that God was short-circuiting? What was it that He was preventing?

Let's consider some possible scenarios. Did they understand about the New Jerusalem? Were they trying to short-circuit the plan of God? Were they trying to create their own New Jerusalem? Is that why it was described in that way – of reaching up into the heavens. Interestingly, the Bible sets off one against the other. You have to ask yourself, was this part of their motivation? And if that were the case, what is the answer to the second question: was God intervening and restraining them from subverting His plan for humanity? We could debate these things for many an hour. They aren't the really important things though.

What is the most important? I think for each and every one of us, the focus of our life has to be on Abraham's relationship with God. This man obeyed when God said, "Scatter!" He believed when God said, "I'll make a name for you." When he didn't have a child, and his wife was past childbearing age, he believed when God said, "I'm going to make great nations out of you." He was described as being the friend of God.

Can we also have a similar relationship with God? Can we enter into that same relationship? Can we also be considered a friend of God? I think the answer to that is yes. Jesus Christ said to His disciples, and to WHOEVER comes to accept God at His Word, when God calls and opens their minds:

John 15:14 "You are My friends if you do whatever I command you.

Abraham was a friend of God because he obeyed. If you and I obey God, we can be called the friends of God too! What an accolade! What a relationship we can have with God!

15 "No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.

We have left the Feast, and we are spending another year waiting for the Kingdom of God – but we do so with the opportunity of being considered the friend of God! This is not just something that was reserved for Abraham. Here's an opportunity that is available to you and me as well!

But the requirement of it is exactly the same as it was of Abraham – of seeking our identity in God, not in the things of this world; seeking a name from God, not out of accomplishments of this world, of not taking care of ourselves, seeking not to be scattered as the people of Genesis 11 did, but of looking forward to the event that is going to unify all of God's creation – bringing them together and providing them with a purpose and a focus such as nothing else has ever done – and that is God's throne, His New Jerusalem!

That is to be the focus of our life. That is the purpose for which OUR life is to be lived – LOOKING FORWARD to that, not the here and now, not the things of this life! ❖