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Our Pulpit.

Abraham the Friend of God.

The Birth of the Heir.

SERMON PREACHED BY

REV. A. J. MOWATT.

In St. Paul's Church Fredericton, April 8th.

'And the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken. And Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him.' GEN. XXI. 1, 2.

For fifteen years Abraham's tent had stood under the oak at Mamre in the vale of Hebron, and it looked as if he would live out the rest of his days there. During those fifteen years he had enjoyed unbroken prosperity, and experienced some of his happiest experiences. It was during those years he had conquered the mighty Chedorlaomer, and crowned himself with renown for his valorous exploit. No famine had come to him there. There Ishmael had been born to him. There the Lord had appeared to him very specially on at least two occasions. There the angels had been his guests. Can we wonder, then, that Hebron was dear to the heart of the patriarch, and more his home than anywhere else of all the places he had pitched his tent? And yet we find him pulling up his stakes and moving away, and at a time when we would have expected him to remain.

His removal took place almost immediately after the overthrow of Sodom, whether or not that calamitous event had anything to do with it we cannot be sure. It looks as if it had, but other things may have led to the step. He removed to the southwest, to the land of the Philistines, and he settled at a place of some considerable importance at that time, the capital, called Gerar. The city has long since ceased to be, and not even the site of it has been identified.

The Philistines inhabited the extensive plains of the sea-coast, the land of roses, and in later history they were rivals of Israel in the possession of the country, and many a hard-fought battle they had over the territorial rights. Samson got his wife among the Philistines, and had trouble with them. Goliath the giant of Gath was a Philistine. They gave their name to the whole land, Philistia or Palestine. They were descendants of Ham, although some have tried to make out that they were Semites. They tilled the soil, and in Abraham's day they were well advanced in civilization. They had their royal cities and their kings. The ordinary title of their chief ruler was Abimelech, the English of which is, My-Father-the-king. They had also a prime minister whose title was Phichol, Mouth-of-All, a very expressive title for such an officer, the people's representative before the king. This was the interesting people Abraham removed from Hebron to Gerar, and afterwards to Beersheba, to reside among for a time.

First, The Patriarch at Gerar. It was by easy stages the patriarch moved to the southwest, but he made no considerable halt till he had come to Gerar. This was his first acquaintance with the Philistines, and Abraham acted over again here the mean cowardly part he had acted twenty years before in Egypt. He proposed to his wife to let herself be called his sister, for he feared that for her sake, the sake of her striking beauty although so old, he would lose his life among this people. We cannot understand him; we can hardly have patience with him, his conduct is so utterly unworthy of him. But so often are the most trifling and culpable littleness to be met with in the greatest and best of men. So high Abraham towers above others in spiritual grandeur, and then stoops to what is so despicable, to what men who cannot begin to stand up alongside of him would not demean themselves to be guilty of! But, then, let us not forget that we are not in a position to judge him. If we were where he was, living in his times, trained up where lying and duplicity were universal, we would perhaps not be so surprised to find him taking advantage of the fact that his wife was his half-sister, when it served his purpose.

As in Egypt, so at Gerar, the king had a harem where he kept a multitude of wives. It was looked upon as adding to his dignity. And that is still the idea in savage countries where polygamy is practised. The more wives the greater the man, the more of consequence he is in the land. Accordingly the

polygamous king took Sarah from Abraham's side, where she had been so many happy years his other and better self, to be one more in his ever growing family of wives. And, strange to say, the patriarch let her go without one word of protest on his part. He made himself believe that the Lord would interfere again as He had done before. And the Lord did interfere. Sarah was as much under the special divine protection as the patriarch himself. In a dream of the night the Lord made known to Abimelech the true state of the case, and warned him as to the consequences of any harm to Sarah.

This king of the Philistines seems to have been a true man, one who feared God, a man we have the highest regard for, and we wonder to find a man occupying his position to whom the Lord would reveal His will directly. That itself gives us the highest idea of the man, for he is no ordinary man to whom the Lord speaks. And then he makes haste to do what he is told, and is so sorry that anything of the kind should have happened. He honors Abraham because he is a prophet of the Lord, even though, in a manner, he had betrayed him into the doing of a great wrong. He at once restores Sarah to her husband, and rewards him generously, fully, for the unconscious insult he had offered him in taking his wife. 'And Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and men-servants and women-servants, and gave them unto Abraham, and restored him Sarah his wife. And Abimelech said, Behold my land is before thee; dwell where it pleaseth thee. And unto Sarah he said, Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver; behold, it is for thee a covering of the eyes to all that are with thee, and in respect of all thou art righted.'

This is quoted from the Revised version, and it means, the king gives her husband satisfaction for the great wrong he had unwittingly done him. He puts it right between them as far as it can be put right by a pecuniary satisfaction.

Secondly, Beersheba. The king gave Abraham a royal license to pitch his tent, and feed his flocks and herds, anywhere in the land, and with such a license he looked about, and finally settled at a place afterwards called Beersheba. But it was very soon felt by the king and his counsellors, that it would not do at all to have so powerful a sheik dwelling in the country, and moving about freely, without some definite understanding being come to between them. And trouble was already arising, for Abraham had dug a well, and the people wanted to deprive him of its use. The king and his prime minister, then, came to Abraham, and proposed to him a formal alliance. This was agreeable to Abraham, and a league was struck in due form. After the league was entered into, the king noticed seven ewe lambs by themselves, and wanted to know what they meant. And Abraham explained that the seven ewe lambs were to settle the dispute with regard to the well. 'These seven ewe lambs shalt thou take of my hand, that it may be a witness unto me, that I have digged this well.' So the well was afterwards called Beersheba, or the well-of-the-oath.

As the league was to be for generations, Abraham signalized the event by two things, calling the well Beersheba, and planting a monumental tamarisk-tree. The tamarisk is a species of hardy ever-green. It has small, bright green leaves, and the wood is said to be compact and durable. It outlived many a generation, and tamarisk trees are still growing where Abraham planted his, out no doubt his is long since gone. The other memorial, the name of the well, still clings to the spot after four thousand years. Dr. Robinson rediscovered the site in 1838, fifty years ago, and he found the place called Bir-es-seba. Two grand wells of ancient masonry, the larger of which is twelve and a half feet across, are still there, and no doubt Abraham dug one of them. Worn deep into their stone margins are the marks of ropes. A little distance away are the ruins of an ancient village or town. Here in the long long ago, in the grey morning of the world's eventful history, Abraham watered his flocks and herds, and on the hillsides and in the valleys of the neighborhood they browsed. How full of hallowed memories is the old place! But how different the swarthy Bedouins around the well to-day from Abraham and his people! And yet those wild children of the desert claim to have the patriarch's blood flowing in their veins, and they probably have—a little of it.

Thirdly, Isaac's Birth. At Beersheba occurred the long-looked-for event, the

birth of the heir, the promised seed. How God keeps His people waiting sometimes, but His word of promise never fails of fulfilment; it is yea and amen. You may count on it with infallible certainty. When He says He will do a thing, bring to pass an event, nothing can defeat it. Abraham is an hundred years old, and Sarah an aged matronly lady of ninety, and you and I would say, if the hope of the world depends on those old people having a son and heir, the hope is a slender one indeed; yea, an impossibility. But the Lord has said it, and He does it. The aged Sarah is a mother, and a happy mother.

It is not hard to imagine what a stir the birth of Sarah's child would create in the encampment. It had been whispered around that it would be before long, but few would pay any heed to the rumor. But now it is, and the news passes from lip to lip so soon, and everybody talks and wonders. Some are sorry, for they had hoped there would be no heir; but the most are glad. Abraham's faith is crowned; yea, it blossoms out and bears fruit.

When the child is eight days old, the rite of circumcision is performed upon him, initiating him in his infancy into all the rights and privileges of the household of faith, and sealing to him the promise. About the same time also aname is given him; he is called Isaac, laughter. This name is given him, not altogether because of the incredulous laughter of both father and mother when his birth was announced by the angels; still less because of the scornful laugh of this slave-born brother when there had come another into the home with rights he never could have; far rather for this reason, that he was the pledge and promise of one yet to be born in the fulness of time, who would fill the world with holy mirth, the blessed gladness of salvation, the laughter of the gospel. And so the happy mother, waking up to the joy of motherhood, sings and smiles:

Laughter hath God prepared for me:
All who hear of it will laugh with me:
Who would have said to Abraham—
Sarah giveth to children suck?
For a son have I borne to him in his old age!

'The words,' says a living writer, 'are simple as nursery words, but they are a prelude of Hannah's song over the babe whom she had asked of God; a prelude of the nobler song which one more blessed than Hannah sang over the Babe she had never dared to ask. They strike the first note in that splendid welcome to the Child of Promise and Heir of Blessing, of which the full music echoes forever through the church in Mary's *Magnificat*;

My soul doth magnify the Lord,
And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.

For He hath looked upon the low estate of His handmaidens;
For behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed,
For He that is mighty hath done to me great things.

And holy is His name,
And His mercy is unto generations and generations.

Of them that fear Him,
He hath shewed strength with His arm;
He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their heart,
He hath put down princes from their thrones,

And hath exalted them of low degree,
The hungry He hath filled with good thing;
And the rich He hath sent empty away.
He hath holpen Israel His servant,
That He might remember mercy,
As He spake unto our fathers,
Toward Abraham and his seed forever.

Some to-day would sneer and say, 'what a fuss to make over a new baby! Indeed they are not so uncommon at our house that we should laugh and sing over every new comer! Rather burst into tears, for it means increased expenses, new cares and responsibilities, another mouth to feed, another burden to carry and crush, another life to labor and save for!

And so to day the birth of children in many a home is a sorrow, not a song. They are not wanted. They are not prayed for. They are looked upon as in the way of the gay society life so many lead. And they are dreaded as little pests. Away with them! And indeed the little buds of promise are sometimes nipped in the bud; and so are not, but the Rachels are not comfortless. Another sort of Herod has risen up to slay the innocents in these days, and Heaven frowns.

In the home of faith, however, children are still welcomed, and the more the merrier, the louder the laughter, the greater the song. They are not in the way; they are a help, a blessing from Heaven, a crown of joy.

Fourthly, Hagar and Ishmael's Expulsion. Two or three years have elapsed, uneventful years. Isaac has learned to walk, and his little feet patter everywhere, and all day long his child-talk makes music in Sarah's tent. But the time of his weaning has come, and Abraham gives his people a great feast in honor of the event. It is a general holiday, and the brow of care relaxes into sunshine, the sad face into a broad grin, and laughter holds his sides and ha ha. The people give themselves up to the joy of the hour, and for once sorrow is forgotten. The child-heir, dressed up in his best, is brought out of the nursery to be presented to the assembled encampment, and they welcome him with great joy, and many a pleasant remark is made about him. He is not better-looking, nor better-mannered, nor cleverer in any respect, than many a slave-child; but then he is the heir, Sarah's one child, and so he is honored. Oh how proud of their boy are the over-weaning parents, and especially the mother! Never such a child, so clever and wise and good! His mother calls him her angel, and expects him to do so much for her and his time. And is it not natural, mother-like? We may indeed expect too much of our children, and spoil and pet them with our over-weaning fondness; but we may also not expect enough of them, and so stand in their way of being useful and great and good in the coming years.

But as the feast goes on, Sarah observes Ishmael, the wild colt of a boy, doing what he can, in his rude frolicsome way, to turn the celebration into ridicule, and all the old jealousy of seventeen years before returns with a hundredfold force and fury. She will not have it. Hagar and her slave-born son must go. So that very evening she lays the matter before her husband in a definite shape; 'Cast out this bondwoman and her son, for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac.'

And she says it with a hotness in her words that blister and burn. She means what she says. Nothing else and nothing less will satisfy her than utter expulsion. Abraham feels bad over it. The rude boy has gained a hold upon his heart, and then he is his own child, and has claims upon his fatherly care and love. It seems to him inhuman to thrust out the child and his mother. That night, however, in his perplexity, a Divine message comes to him, directing him to do as Sarah urges, and making it clear to him that Isaac was to be the sole heir. It was to be seed, not seeds; one, not many; Isaac alone, not Ishmael and Isaac dividing the heirship of the promise between them: 'In Isaac shall thy seed be called.'

And then the vision had a good word for Ishmael as well. He was to grow to be a nation; but it was to be far away from the Patriarch's tent. As soon therefore as it was day-break, Abraham took bread, and a skin of water, and put them upon Hagar, and he gave her the lad, a boy of seventeen, and sent them away forever. It was hard, but there was nothing else he could do. Ishmael must be trained for a life of endurance, and it was a kindness to him in reality to be thus early thrown upon his own resources. It is the making of some to stay at home, and of others to leave home. When we keep our children home with us, our grown sons and daughters, we may be in the way of their true destiny-making, their rise in the world; and, on the other hand, we may do that with some of them, if we part with them. The Isaacs do best at home; the Ishmaels best away. And so the Lord directs Abraham to keep Isaac at home, and to thrust Ishmael out to the rude hard knocks of the world.

You see Hagar and her son directing their steps Egyptwards, for that was her country, and she had still a longing for it. Their feet sink in the sand as they trudge along, and they are weary. After a while they lose themselves in the desert of Et-Tih, and they wander about they know not whither. And to make matters desperate with them, the water in the skin-bottle is exhausted, and the lad drops faint and sun-struck at his mother's feet. She takes him up in her arms, and, as best she can, carries him to the friendly shade of some desert broom. Here she lays him down, and retires perhaps two hundred yards away, so that she might not see her child die. She is in unutterable distress. But an angel of the Lord comes to her comfort and help. He tells her what to do, and gives her to see water, and so her boy is revived. They find their way to Paran on the borders of Egypt where they reside. Here Ishmael grows up, following the wild Bedouin life of the country. He seems to have been true to his mother, and she chose for him a wife out of Egypt. He came to be a great man in his way, and his name went down through a numerous progeny to

later days. And his mother can never be forgotten, bondwoman though she was and, while cast out, she and her son, from Abraham's tent, and God's Israel, we still expect to find her among the Israel redeemed, the blessed ones around the throne on high. But here we must pause. And as we close, let us learn a lesson or two. Learn how faithful God is to His promise. He is not always in a hurry to fulfil it, but He does fulfil it, and fully. Here are promises for us, so many of them, promises with regard to this life, and promises with regard to the life to come. Let us, then, make them ours, and He will fulfil them to us with a fullness that we cannot now understand. Put God's word to the test, and you will find how true it is, for God will be as true and as good to you as to Abraham, if you will; believe as Abraham believed. Then we learn here how sad it is to do wrong. See Abraham coldly, almost cruelly, thrusting out to the wilderness his own flesh and blood and the worse than widowed Hagar, and know, that there is a future to sin that is woe. You cannot do wrong without its coming back to you in some form, and wringing your heart for you. You may say, 'I have repented; I have washed out the wrong I have done with my tears; I have atoned for it with my money, I have been forgiven.' But there is in wrong what is not forgiven, and as the years go by, your wrong comes up, and you are made suffer over again for it. Oh how true:—
Though the mills of God grind slowly,
Yet they grind exceeding small;
Though with patience he stands waiting,
With exactness grinds he all.

[The above sermon is one of a Series on the Life of Abraham. The series as delivered will be published in this paper.]

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