

THE FERVENT PRAYER OF ABRAHAM.

– GEN. 18:23-32. – AUG. 18. –

Golden Text: – "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." – Jas. 5:16.

ABRAHAM at the time of this lesson was ninety-nine years old. He was camping at Mamre with his family and household, servants, herdsmen, etc., over 1,000 persons. His faith still rested in the Lord's promise, which he evidently believed would be fulfilled through his son Ishmael, at this time thirteen years old. As he rested in the door of his tent three men approached him, and, after the manner of the sheiks of that country today, he arose to meet them most hospitably, and provided for their entertainment tho they were strangers to him. By and by he ascertained that his visitors were heavenly beings, who for the occasion had assumed human form – one of them being a special representative of Jehovah himself, either one of the chief angels, or, we think still more likely, the Lord Jesus in his pre-human condition. How glad Abraham must have felt when he learned who his visitors were, that he had entertained them so kindly and hospitably. The Apostle calls this matter to the attention of the Church and urges that the Lord's people always be on the alert to show hospitality, and citing this case he says, "Thus some have entertained angels unawares." – Heb. 13:2.

True, circumstances are in many respects different today from what they were in olden times, in that now we have hotels and boarding houses for the accommodation of travelers; hence our responsibilities are lessened; this very fact, we fear, inclines us to be more selfish, less hospitable, than would be to our profit. The Lord's consecrated people will do well to cultivate hospitality, and that of the kind which Abraham showed, – without waiting for it to be requested. A Scripture statement is,

"There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, [R2857 : page 253] but it tendeth to poverty." (Prov. 11:24.) Another declaration is, "The liberal soul shall be made fat." (Prov. 11:25.) In practicing liberality we are developing God-likeness, for is not God benevolent; is he not continually giving to his creatures? The greatest of all his gifts was the gift of his own dear Son to die for us – to ransom us. True, all cannot exercise liberality alike – those who are in debt or in poverty are properly to consider themselves hindered, limited in this direction by justice to their creditors, their families, etc. Nevertheless, the spirit of benevolence and hospitality should always abound in our hearts, whether we have much or little opportunity to manifest it; and rarely do those who exercise themselves in this respect fail to profit by this course, even in temporal matters. Where we cannot give all the succor needed, we can at least dispense words of consolation and cheer, which may prove of much greater value than money. Many need the spiritual counsel and advice and encouragement, which every true Christian should be able to give, far more than they need temporal assistance. To have Christ-likeness implies not only a *desire* to be helpful to the groaning creation and "especially to the household of faith," but it means more, – it means the *effort* to assist them, even at the cost of our earthly comforts and pleasures. [R2857 : page 254]

It was while partaking of the hospitality of Abraham and Sarah that the Lord and his two companions were made known to Abraham – that they were not ordinary men, and at this time a further promise was made respecting the long-expected son Isaac. "Let patience have her perfect work," says the Apostle, and surely it would seem that this was the case with Abraham, who had waited twenty-five years indefinitely, and now for the first time received a definite assurance of a prompt fulfilment of this part of the promise. Isaac was born within a year, when Abraham was one hundred years old. Abraham's faith and

patient waiting on the Lord are instructive to us. The Gospel Church likewise was called to inherit a promise and to perform a pilgrimage while waiting for its fulfilment. The promise to us is our deliverance as sharers in the Kingdom, and ultimately in the work of blessing all the families of the earth, to be accomplished at the second coming of Jesus, who was typified in Isaac, even as Jehovah, his Father, was typified in Abraham. The Gospel Church has had great need of patience and endurance, of trust in God, during the nearly nineteen centuries since Jesus suffered in the flesh and was quickened in spirit, and going away, promised to come again to receive us unto himself, and to fulfil all the exceeding great and precious promises foretold respecting him and us. The faith of many has cooled so that they are hoping for the long promised Millennial blessings through other channels, – hoping that earthly churches, human organizations, begotten not of the Lord's instruction, but unauthorizedly, like Ishmael, may convert and bless the world without the second coming of Jesus and the establishment of his Kingdom. But all those who have the faith of Abraham will also have the Lord's testimony that the blessing can come only through Isaac. – Rom. 9:7; Gal. 4:28.

At the same time that faithful Abraham and Sarah were consoled and refreshed, at the same time Isaac was begotten, the iniquity of the Sodomites had become great, – the cry of its wickedness calling upon Justice for repression. The Lord and the two angels took their departure from Abraham's tent, going in the direction of Sodom, Abraham accompanying them through courtesy and through a desire to continue in heavenly company. And because he was a faithful servant of the Lord it was revealed to him that the destruction of Sodom and her sister villages was imminent. Thus we see the principles upon which the Lord deals with his creatures – to those who are in heart-harmony with him, full of faith and trust and loving obedience, and yet willing to wait patiently for the various features of his plan, – he reveals

his plans not only as respects the coming blessing of all the families of the earth, but also as respects the punishment of the ungodly.

We do not find Abraham rejoicing in the calamities about to come upon his neighbors; on the contrary, we find him generous; and so we should expect to find all who are the Lord's true people, full of generosity, kindness and good wishes toward their neighbors – even toward such as they could in no degree recognize or fellowship. Instead of glorying in the adversities coming upon the Sodomites, Abraham instinctively prayed for them divine compassion. And we are to remember in this connection that he had no thought of their calamity extending beyond the loss of the present life. He knew nothing about an "orthodox hell" with its corps of devils to receive and everlastingly torture them. He merely understood the Lord that the *destruction* of the people and of their cities impended. If he thought at all of their future, it would doubtless be in connection with God's promise, that by and by all the families of the earth should be blessed through his promised heir.

We notice with pleasure the modesty of Abraham as he petitioned the Lord to have mercy upon his neighbors: "Wilt thou consume the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city, wilt thou consume and spare not the place for the fifty righteous that are therein?" He was not attempting to charge or condemn the Lord by applying his standards; rather he was wishing to ascertain what would be the divine standard in the matter – how much compassion the Lord could justly exercise in behalf of such as sought at all to walk in his ways. Abraham must have known well the unsavory reputation of the Sodomites; – no doubt being in communication with Lot frequently. It is to his credit, therefore, that he was unwilling to think of those people as badly as they deserved. Actually there were only three worthy of being delivered; yet

Abraham, with generosity of heart, assumed that there might be fifty. Benevolent people generally are pretty sure to err in their judgment on the favorable side, when they think of the weaknesses and villainies of their neighbors.

The Lord assented to Abraham's proposition, and the latter's faith thus encouraged, he ventured to lessen the number in his inquiry to forty-five, forty, thirty, twenty, ten, and with all his earnest desire he could not think of petitioning the Lord to save those cities from destruction if wickedness had gotten such a hold that only ten could be found loving righteousness. We rejoice in Abraham's mercifulness, as well as in his faith. Had mercy not been a part of his character we may doubt if the Lord would have called him to be the starting point of his plan of salvation. "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." Such the Lord is seeking, to be his agents and the channels of the mercies he has provided for mankind, to be dispensed during the Millennial age. Only the merciful will be acceptable to the Lord as joint-heirs with Jesus in the Kingdom, and only the merciful of the ancient worthies will share with Abraham in dispensing divine favors to mankind as "princes in all the earth;" representatives of the spiritual Kingdom. – Psa. 45:16.

We contrast Abraham's modest and reverent petition with some which we have heard uttered by those who suppose themselves to be members of the Gospel Church, the body of Christ, – and the contrast is immensely in Abraham's favor. "O let not the Lord be angry, and I will speak but this once [more]; peradventure ten be found there [will you have mercy upon the cities for their sake]?" How some can go to the Lord in prayer in rude and dictatorial manner, telling him what they want to have done – how many they wish to have converted, how he shall manage the various features of his work, whom he shall bless and how, etc., – we cannot tell. Let not such persons think that they shall receive anything of the Lord; let them not think that

such praying is either fervent or effectual in any good sense. Let us, on the contrary, [R2857 : page 255] as the Lord's people, reason how great he is, and how insignificant we are; how just and true are his ways, and how imperfect are our best conceptions; and let us approach him with reverence to ascertain what are his purposes, rather than to amend or alter them to alignment with our imperfect judgments.

SAVED SO AS BY FIRE.

Evidently Lot's decision to reside in Sodom was for business reasons: he evidently had some children twenty-five years before, when he started out with Abraham, his uncle, and probably his interests in business and his desire for prosperity leading him to reside among the Sodomites was chiefly for the prosperity of his children. Alas, how great was his mistake! Yet he did not seem to fully realize it until, urged by the angel, he fled from Sodom accompanied by his two unmarried daughters, losing all else he had in the world – his wife and married children and grand-children, his flocks and herds and servants and all his personal belongings. He was indeed saved, preserved, from the destruction which there came upon the ungodly; but it was a bare rescue, not an abundant deliverance; he was, so to speak, pulled out of the fire.

We may consider ourselves justified in considering Lot and his daughters who escaped to be illustrations, samples, whose antitypical lessons would apply in this present day. For as Abraham and his patient waiting represented the faithful, the overcomers, so Lot seems to represent a class in the end of the present age, who do not walk sufficiently by faith and who seek not chiefly the Kingdom and its righteousness; but who for the sake of earthly advantage are quite willing to risk their spiritual interests and the highest interests of their children, by choosing fellowship with the world; [R2858 : page 255] – by

commingling to some extent with the world, the flesh and the devil, even tho, like Lot, disapproving their surroundings which vex their righteous souls. Such, the Apostle tells us, shall be "saved so as by fire." (1 Cor. 3:15.) Such the Lord illustrates as coming up out of great tribulation, washing their robes and making them white, and eventually obtaining a blessing, but not the chief one which they might have obtained had they followed faithfully with the pilgrims and strangers, the "little flock." – Rev. 7:9,14.

The story of Lot's haste out of Sodom, and of his wife's transgression of the angel's command in looking back and hankering after the things left behind, are brought to our attention in that part of our Lord's great prophecy relating to the end of this age; – "Remember Lot's wife!" (Luke 17:32.) This reference seems to corroborate the thought that Lot's experiences were somewhat typical. The Lord's people will be tested along the line of their separation from the spirit of the world. Those who, like Abraham, are the friends of God will be far off from the danger; others not so faithful will be in the full midst of the trouble, yet if loyal at heart to the Lord they will be delivered with great loss, and the sufferings which such disappointments and losses will imply; yet in the end such will gain the heavenly, spiritual, life for which they started out. None, however, will be delivered if they remain in the city of destruction, Babylon. If they do not avoid it at first, they must at least be willing to leave it, and that with great energy, ere its destruction comes; and if they love the things behind, more than they appreciate deliverance – so that they in any degree look back or long for the evil things doomed to destruction in the coming trouble, it will mean that they will not be worthy of having any part or lot in the deliverance.

The record is that Lot's wife became a pillar of salt, and altho infidelity has been inclined to dispute such a miracle, we

have every reason to believe the truthfulness of the record; and like all miracles, if explained, it would no doubt seem reasonable enough. An explanation of the miracle has been suggested by a traveler, as follows: "Just as some of the victims of Pompeii stumbled in their flight, and were buried under the ashes, which still keep the outline of their figure, so Lot's wife was covered with the *half-liquid*, slimy mud." "An atmosphere heavily charged with the fumes of sulphur and bitumen might easily produce suffocation, as was the case with the elder Pliny in the destruction of Pompeii. And as no dead body would ever decompose on the shores of this salt sea, if left in such an atmosphere, it would become encrusted with salt crystals. Pillars of salt are found in the vicinity which have formed from the spray, mist and saline exhalations of the dead sea, and are constantly growing larger."

SUFFERING THE VENGEANCE OF ETERNAL FIRE.

Jude tells us that the destruction of Sodom was intended by the Lord to be an illustration of the fate of the wicked. But it certainly does not illustrate what that fate is generally supposed to be: it does not illustrate perpetual fire, with the Sodomites continually burning and never destroyed, and with demons poking the fires and torturing the victims. Nothing of the kind. The "eternal fires" which God intends for the wicked, and which he illustrated in the case of the Sodomites, signify fires, whose work of destruction is complete and everlasting. It is divine vengeance or retribution against sinners – "they shall be punished with an everlasting destruction" (2 Thess. 1:9), beyond all hope of recovery. The "lake of fire" of Revelation, and the Dead Sea of Sodom represent in *symbol* the Second Death – extinction, from which there is no hope by a resurrection or otherwise. None will go into the Second Death on account of

ignorance. All who enter it will do so because of wilful, deliberate participation in sin, or because of sympathy with it.

Supposing Sodom to represent Sin, the lesson would be that all finding themselves in an evil condition of life, even tho, like Lot, their hearts be out of sympathy with it, should and must flee from it if they would avert the consequences. They must flee in haste and tarry not in all the plain. Yet it is a comforting thought that as the angel laid hold of the hands of Lot and his daughters and helped, urged and encouraged them to flee, so the Lord's providences will take hold of every one who shall seek to escape from sin, and will so cooperate with their good wills in the matter that they shall eventually be fully rescued from it.
