

The Echo of Easter

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning, everybody. My warm thanks for having me again this morning, and thank you to Nick for inviting me. It's always, as I've said before, a great pleasure to be here with you, because so many of you I remember from years gone by, and it's great to make acquaintance again today.

Now, I want to speak to you this morning about the beginnings of the gospel and how God works with us. And I want to go right back in the book of Genesis to the reading that Nick read for us from Genesis chapter 12 concerning Abraham, because the beginnings go right back to Abraham. So, now, when we come to the story of Abraham right at the beginning of the Bible, you need to remember that this is the beginning of the gospel story which culminates in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus Christ said, Abraham saw my day, and he rejoiced. In other words, Jesus was saying that Abraham knew, because of some sort of prophetic word that he received from God, that someone was coming who was going to be greater than him, and he rejoiced in that. But the gospel story begins with the story of Abraham in Genesis chapter 12. And when you read Genesis, you must always remember that, because Abraham, who dominates the early chapters of Genesis, is a figure who dominates the whole Bible.

[1 : 27] You read about him throughout the Bible and references to him even in the New Testament. And the Lord Jesus made reference to Abraham on more than one occasion. So, he's a giant figure in the Bible story.

And he, in fact, is the one that God uses to start the sequence of events that finally culminates in the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, who dies on the cross for us.

So, when you read the story of Abraham, you're actually getting an echo of the gospel. Although Abraham didn't know it, and he didn't understand it all, and although you wouldn't know it and wouldn't understand it all if you didn't have the New Testament, or if somebody didn't tell it to you, it's the truth, that Abraham is the beginning of the gospel, and is an early echo of what was to come in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, what I want to do this morning is mention four or five things about Abraham to show you how God works with people like you and me, how God operates with us, how he sovereignly works in our lives and helps us to come to the Lord Jesus Christ.

What he does with us and how he works in our lives, and it's all reflected in the early days of Abraham. Now, I'm not going to go today into all the profound relevance that Abraham has to the entire gospel story, but just take four or five simple things from the story of Abraham and set it before you before we come to communion.

[2 : 57] And the first thing I want to remind you of is this, is that Abraham was a man who was born with a destiny. I want to remind you of that. And the reason why I want to tell you that is because you also were born with a destiny.

Abraham didn't know what his destiny was when he was born. And when we are introduced to Abraham, he's already 75 years old. We read of him in this little portion that we read as coming from the town of Haran.

But in actual fact, he comes from Mesopotamia, from Ur of the Chaldees. Now, that's a very, very early reference to towns and cities that no longer exist, but were mighty civilizations in their day. So Abraham is introduced to us as an old man. He's not introduced to us as a young boy filled with the vigor and strength of youth like young David was before he became king, but he's introduced to us as an old man of 75 and he's introduced to us as an urban dweller.

He's a city dweller. He comes from Ur of the Chaldees. He comes from a great civilization. So he would have been a very sophisticated man. And he was a wealthy man.

[4 : 13] There was one problem in Abraham's life, however, he had no offspring. And it was very important for people in those days to have children so they could pass on their inheritance and their family name and the family traditions and so on.

And so Abraham is introduced to us in that way. And yet we know from the ensuing story that Abraham was a man with a destiny. He was a man who was chosen by God to be the forerunner of the nation that we come to know as the nation of Israel.

And from Israel would come the Lord Jesus Christ. But at this time when he was 75 without any children at all and no heirs, how was it ever going to happen?

So God chooses a man like Abraham. Abraham and in effect he says, I have a destiny for you. Of course the destiny would be, humanly speaking, impossible.

Because finally when Abraham's first child is born, we know he was 100 years old. How in the wide world was the nation going to come from that one child? But as you read the ensuing Bible story, you discover how it happens.

[5 : 26] But that isn't my point this morning. My point is to remind you that this was a man with an enormous destiny that he knew nothing about. And the reason why I make that point is because there are many people today who feel that they are just random people.

Their lives are random and have no real meaning and no real significance at all. And they just kind of falter their way through life and bumble their way through life and the years go by and they don't leave any real mark behind them at all.

You may feel and I may feel from time to time as if I'm a nothing and a nobody and nobody of any special significance at all. What you need to remember is that you were created with God's image upon you.

You are not a random person. When you were conceived in your mother's womb, you were not randomly conceived. There is a divine providence behind all things and a hidden hand that brings everything to pass.

And you are in this world for a specific purpose. You may not see that at the moment as you sit in the pew. You may look at your life and say, I haven't achieved anything. I have failed more than I have succeeded.

[6 : 38] I haven't been much of a person at all. I'm a great sinner and I'm very guilty for the things that I've done. And I don't feel like I'm achieving anything for God. God, you may feel like that, but you are no different to Abraham.

You were born with a destiny. Now, Abraham was born with a special destiny because he had a special function to perform in the salvation purposes of God.

You are born with a destiny in that you are called upon to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was Abraham's great, great, great descendant.

You've got to believe in that and believe in him. And your destiny is fulfilled when you become a Christian and begin to shine as a light in a world that is filled with darkness.

So Abraham had a destiny and you have a destiny as well. And if you look in the mirror at the mornings, at the mirror in the mornings and say to yourself, I'm a nobody, you are making a massive mistake.

[7 : 36] And you need to actually repent of that. You need to say, Lord, thank you that I'm alive today. Thank you that I know about you. Thank you that today is a day when I may have an opportunity to speak a word for you to somebody who doesn't know you.

Thank you that I can shine today. Thank you I can do something for you today. I'm a person with a destiny. My destiny may not be as great as Abraham's and not be as spectacular as some people's destiny, but I'm here for you and you can use me as you please today because you are the one who oversaw my birth.

You are the one who brought me to this place in my life and I exist and live for you. You're a person with a destiny. You're not a random person. You need to remember that and you need to take yourself in hand and remind yourself of that every day.

The second thing I want to tell you about Abraham is this, that he was a man who heard from God. You must remember in Abraham's day, which we estimate was round about 2,000 years before Christ, there was no Bible.

There were no preachers. There were no prophets of old that we know about. There was no one to tell him about the God of heaven. And from all accounts in the Bible, he was a worshiper of the

moon god and other idols that were prevalent in his part of the world.

[8 : 58] He was just an ordinary guy. He was nothing special. He was just one of the crowd, although he was probably a businessman who'd had some success. But he wasn't anybody special.

How was he going to hear from God? And we read in the Bible that God had spoken to Abraham and said, leave your country and your people and your father's household and go to the land that I will share with you.

Now, God gave Abraham a special message. And how did God give him that message? Well, he must have just spoken to him, perhaps with a loud voice.

We do not know how. Maybe in a dream or vision or maybe through the appearance of an angel.

We don't know how he spoke to Abraham. But he spoke to him. Abraham had the great privilege of the God of heaven speaking to him.

There had to be a starting point for the plan of salvation to work out. And so this was the starting point. God spoke to Abraham and said, I want you to leave your father's household and to leave your people.

[10 : 02] And I want you to go to the land that I will show you, the land of promise, the promised land. And there I will settle you and make you into a very great nation. And your nation will bless the whole world.

Abraham couldn't see or understand how that was going to happen. But we know that God spoke to him. And that was an important factor in his life. And God gave him a huge demand.

God said to him, I want you to leave your father's house. And I want you to leave your people behind. That's a hard thing to do. That is not an easy ask of anybody.

And I want you to go to the land that I will show you. And he gives Abraham a divine promise of a greatness that is to come. Now, my friends, we are also people with a destiny and a people who hear from God.

Now, we don't hear from God through visions and dreams usually. And we don't hear from God through angels. If any angel appears to you to give you the word of God, don't listen to him.

[11 : 05] Because God has given you his word here. And if you don't get the word from his book, then anybody else who gives you his word is false. You must hear it from the book.

And so, we hear from God every Sunday. And we hear from God when we read the book for ourselves. God speaks to our hearts. And we hear the God when it is proclaimed to us or shared with us or it is preached to us in some way.

Our hearts are touched. Our minds are touched. And so, we are guided along life's pathway because we hear from God's word. Now, God's word always drives us in one direction.

And what is that direction? It is toward the cross. It is always toward the Lord Jesus Christ. And God's word always has connections with the cross. So, when you hear people giving you prophecies about this or that or prophecies about the last days or prophecies about ancient Israel or prophecies about what's going to happen in the last days, you know them on the wrong track. Because if they are real prophecies, they'll point you to Jesus and they'll point you to the cross. And so, that is the way you hear from God today. And that is why Abraham is always an echo of the cross, always an echo of the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross.

[12 : 23] He heard from God. And that hearing from God was the beginning of the establishment of the movement that resulted in the Lord Jesus dying on the cross thousands of years later, 2,000 years later.

When you hear from God, you hear that message. You hear, when you read it, you hear God saying to Abraham, leave your father and leave your city, leave all your people and go to the land that I will give you.

When you hear the gospel message, you hear God saying to you through his word, leave your sins, leave your own ideas, leave all the opinions of your family behind you.

And you turn to Jesus on your own and you embrace him and you make him your savior. And do not bother about what your family thinks or friends think or anyone else thinks.

Do not say to yourself, I can't do that because it will have an impact on me. Do the hard thing. Do what seems to you impossible. And I will give you the power and the strength to put your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as your only hope for heaven.

[13 : 32] You know, friends, all of us have a very great need in this world. And that need is to have our sins forgiven. It doesn't get forgiven unless we come to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ is the one who takes away our sins and makes it possible for us to go to heaven. And this is what the story of Abraham is pointing toward all the time.

So while Abraham heard God's voice in his own way, telling him to leave his family and to leave his father and then heard the good news.

I'm going to make you into a great nation and give you a land of your own and make you a blessing to the world. That was the gospel for Abraham. The gospel for us is that when we come to the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the one who that Abraham looks forward to when we come to him, then we receive our good news.

And that is our sins are forgiven and we have the hope of heaven. And so it's very important for us to understand that and to remind ourselves that Abraham's story is an echo of the cross.

[14:37] He had a destiny and he heard from God. Now let me ask you if you have heard from God in recent weeks. You know, it's possible to hear from God and not to do anything about it because our hearts are so hard.

But if you've heard from God and you embrace his word, you walk in the way of light and in the way of blessing. But if you push his word away or if you put it off to another day, then you walk away from him and your heart becomes harder and harder as the days go by.

Then the third thing I want to remind you of concerning Abraham is that Abraham made a very big mistake. Now you make mistakes and I make mistakes too.

And Abraham's mistake was this. God said to him, leave your father and leave your people and go to the land that I will give you.

So Abraham takes his father with him and his family and he makes his way to the promised land.

So instead of leaving his family behind, who are all idol worshippers, he takes them with him and he goes to the promised land.

[15:48] And he gets to a town. You read about this in the previous chapter, in chapter 11. There's no time to turn to it now. But he gets to a town called Haran. And there, because he's got an elderly father with him and he's got servants with him and people with him and he's got a nephew with him.

He's got a family group, probably a large group with him. He settles down, it says. He's not in the promised land. He did something wrong. He made a mistake.

He made an error of judgment. He committed a sin against God's word. He only half obeyed God's word. That's what many of us do, isn't it? We half obey.

We say, yes, we believe, but. And that's the mistake that Abraham made. So he made a terrible mistake. And he got halfway to the promised land and he settled down right there.

And he became settled in his life there. Now, there are many people today who hear the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. And while they don't disagree with it and they take a step toward it, they become stuck halfway.

[16:57] They become diverted. There's a digression. There's something that takes away their attention. It's a family fight. Or it's some disappointment with the children or a family member.

Or it's something that happens with the job. Or there's some other drama or sickness that takes place. And the call that we heard to come to the promised land gets put on the shelf.

And there we get stuck halfway to the promised land. So if anyone knocked on your door and said, do you believe in Jesus? You'd say, yes, I do. Are you following him? Well, I'm trying.

I'm doing my best that I can. You're only halfway there. Do you see what's happened? You've got digressed. You have been diverted. You've got stuck.

Just like Abraham was stuck in the town of Haran. Because he didn't quite obey the full word of God. And so there he is stuck halfway between the promise and the fulfillment of the promise.

[18:00] Which was to go into the land of Canaan. And there to stake his claim. And God would eventually give him that entire land as his own. And there a nation would be born called the nation of Israel.

And they would take that nation. God would take that nation. And from that nation, finally, the great savior of the world would come. Abraham was stuck. Are you stuck?

Are you stuck? Have you heard the gospel and said, yes, but you haven't followed through? You don't disagree with it, but you haven't walked through the full length?

You haven't touched the cross yet? You haven't come to that point where you've bowed before the savior and said, I am embracing the entire promise. I refuse to go halfway.

I'm saying to you, friends, move from halfway. And go the whole distance. And don't get stuck. Don't get stuck in your little town of Haran like Abraham was. Get up out of it and move toward the Lord Jesus Christ.

[19 : 00] And the next thing I want to point to you about Abraham is this. He faced a massive crisis. And the crisis was simply this. He had settled down in the town of Haran.

He hadn't followed through with the message that God had given him to leave his father behind and to leave his family behind. So his father died. There was a tremendous crisis for him.

In those days, when the patriarch of the family died, it was a big deal. And there in Haran, in the place where he got stuck, his father died.

And he faced this particular tragedy and bereavement in the place we had settled down where he shouldn't have been. And I mention that to you, dear friends, not to wield a club over your head, but simply to point out to you that sometimes God has to deal with us through a crisis before we move on to the promised land.

Do you understand? But like Abraham, sometimes we can make mistakes. And like the great Abraham of the Bible, we can sometimes get halfway there and don't follow through.

[20 : 09] And like Abraham of the Bible, we sometimes need to face up to a crisis in our lives before we fully embrace the Lord Jesus Christ. And so Abraham faced a crisis. And his crisis was a bereavement in his family.

His father died. But you know what that did for him? It loosened his bonds to the town of Haran. It made him realize again that he wasn't where he should be.

And sometimes grief and sorrow and sadness or some shock can do that for us. It makes us realize that this isn't all there is in the world. And so the call of God to Abraham became foremost in his mind again.

And in some way he was given strength to move on to the promised land. And so when we come to chapter 12, Abraham is moving on to the promised land.

And listen to this great promise that God gave to Abraham. I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you. I will make your name great. You will be a blessing.

[21 : 14] I will bless those who bless you. And whoever curses you, I will curse. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. You had proof of that this morning, do you know?

When your pastor here pointed to the missionaries that you support. The nations of the earth are being blessed. Because Abraham went to the promised land. And through him the nation of Israel came.

And through the nation of Israel Jesus came. And the message of salvation is now being carried out to all the nations of the world. Isn't that amazing? And so Abraham, because he faced a crisis, found all the bonds loosened.

And so he went on to the promised land and obeyed God. He got back on track. Now my friends, it's very important to get back on track again. And I do not know whether you are on track or not. And maybe today is the day when you've got to face up to your own life and say, Hey, I have been stepping off track. And I've got to get back on track again with God and his gospel.

[22 : 23] Do you know who went badly off track in the New Testament? It's that boy in the parable that Jesus told of the prodigal son. He wandered away from his father and got badly off track.

Do you remember? And then there came that moment when he was feeding the pigs. When the Bible says he came to himself. There was a sudden realization.

A sudden awareness that he was off track. That he was wasting something. That he was lost. That he wasn't where he ought to be.

He'd given up his privileges. He turned his back on all that was for him. And was embracing things that were against him. And so Jesus tells the story.

The boy went back to his father and begged for forgiveness and was taken back home again. There's always that act of grace and mercy with Almighty God for anybody who's off track.

[23 : 24] So here's the great Abraham. He's just an ordinary person like you and me. But he's got a destiny just like you've got a destiny. And Abraham's destiny is to become a great blessing to the world.

And your destiny is to become a blessing to those who are around you. Abraham is a man who heard from God. And you hear from God when you hear the word of the gospel saying, Come to me and I will give you life.

The Lord Jesus Christ says that to you. Abraham got stuck halfway. He got halfway there and then got distracted. And in his distraction, he stopped where he was and didn't go any further until something happened to him to make him go further.

And that may be true of somebody here today. And then Abraham got back on track again. By the grace of God, he moved forward, went to the promised land. And as a result of that today, we have our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

See in the story of Abraham, you get an echo of the cross. Do you see? But my friends, the point of the story is that you yourself must look at your own heart and say, Have I picked up the storyline? [24 : 36] And am I back on track again? Have I heard the echo of the cross? Have I moved from where I've been stuck? And have I put my true faith in the Lord Jesus Christ?

Now, what do you do if you haven't done that? Or what do you do if you feel that you are stuck?

How do you get unstuck? What must you do? Must you go back home and do something?

No, you do it right here. Right here in the pulpit where you are. This is where you do it. And what do you do? You lift your heart to God and you beg him for his mercy and forgiveness and for his grace and strength, for you to move away from where you are and to get back on track and walk toward him.

You do it where you are. Now the great question is, will you do it? If you are stuck, today is a day when you can say to God in this church at St. Mark's on this Sunday morning, leading up to Easter, I've heard the echo of the cross.

And I want you, Lord, in the name of the Lord Jesus, to unstuck me, help me to get on with the job, to get back on track, and to walk toward you and make me your child.

[25 : 54] Will you do that today? It's with that in mind that I'm going to ask you to close in prayer with me now. Let's pray. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you for all these great stories we have in the Bible.

And they're all there to teach us. And as we think of the story of Abraham, we think of ourselves, always thinking of ourselves as people of no worth. But today we remind ourselves that we are people of great worth because you sent your Son into the world to die for us.

And now here's a prayer that you can pray. Oh God, because Jesus died for me, I know that I am of worth to you. Please help me to embrace that.

Forgive me for all the distractions.

Today, with your help, I'm getting back on track. And I pray for your blessing. In Jesus' name.

[27 : 09] Amen.