

First Sabbath

Abraham as a Witness

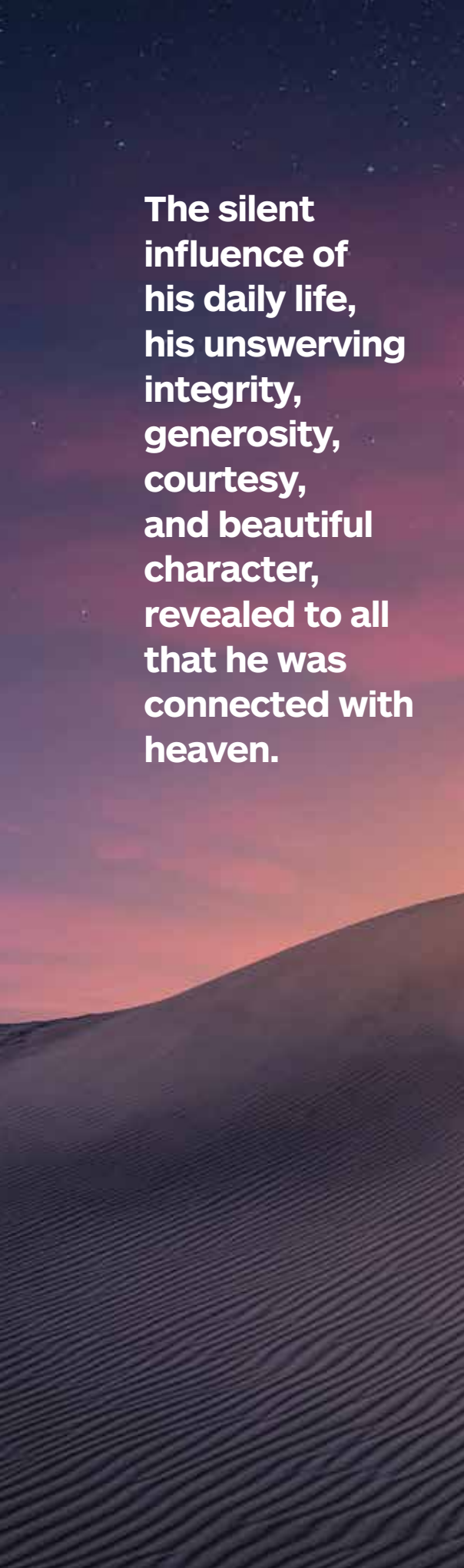
Leading by example

BY TED N. C. WILSON

The fabulous city of Ur, located in the heart of ancient Mesopotamia along the banks of the mighty Euphrates River, was the center of a wealthy empire that drew traders from around the then-known world. With its busy port close to the Persian Gulf, “Ur was a bustling metropolis with shops, narrow streets full of cattle carts and donkey caravans and craftsmen who made everything from leather goods to precious ornaments.”¹ Goats and sheep dotted the landscape surrounding the city where rich farmland boasted groves of date palms, and irrigated fields produced barley, lentils, onions, and garlic.

Dominating the city skyline was a massive ziggurat, a pyramid-like temple honoring the moon god, Sin. Rising 65 feet (19.8 meters) from a base measuring 135 by 200 feet (41.1 by 60.96 meters), the ziggurat had three platforms, each with a different color, and a silver shrine at the top.² Human sacrifices were known to have taken place there.³

The city and temple, built not long after the Tower of Babel rebellion, was a center of idolatry and heathenism. Nevertheless, out of the corrupting influences of this ancient city came one of God’s most faithful witnesses—Abraham.



The silent influence of his daily life, his unswerving integrity, generosity, courtesy, and beautiful character, revealed to all that he was connected with heaven.

“Idolatry invited him on every side, but in vain,” wrote Ellen White. “Faithful among the faithless, uncorrupted by the prevailing apostasy, he steadfastly adhered to the worship of the one true God.”⁴

How could this be, given that his own father, Terah, was serving “other gods”?⁵ One possibility is that Abraham, born approximately 350 years after the Flood,⁶ learned about the true God of heaven from his great-great-great-grandfather Eber, who was the great-grandson of Shem, Noah’s son. While most of Abram’s generations of grandfathers had already passed away, Eber lived to be 464, including at least 100 years after Abram’s birth.⁷ It is quite possible Eber shared God’s truth with his young descendant.

Regardless of exactly how he learned of God, we know that “by faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going” (Heb. 11:8).

Leaving what was then the wealthiest, most civilized place on earth, Abraham was willing to be a witness for God wherever he was called to go. Let’s briefly consider some of the ways this great patriarch was a witness.

A WITNESS TO HIS FAMILY

After a brief stay in Haran, where his father died, “Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan” (Gen. 12:5). Pitching his tent near Shechem, Abram first built “an altar to the Lord” (verse 7). When he moved again, he “built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord” (verse 8). Encouraging family worship, Abram invited everyone within his encampment to

the morning and evening sacrifices. When he moved to a new place, the altar remained as a silent witness to all who passed by.

While Abraham exercised “the greatest care” to “shut out every form of false religion”⁸ he was known in the communities where he lived to be a kind, courteous, and just man and was respected by all.

A WITNESS TO THE LARGER COMMUNITY

Abraham was peace-loving. When fighting broke out between his and Lot’s herdsmen, he pleaded, “Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren” (Gen. 13:8). Allowing Lot first choice in where to settle, Abraham allowed him to choose the lush, rich valley of Siddim while he remained in the more mountainous regions.

Later, when all the inhabitants of the valley were captured by King Chedorlaomer and his allies, Abraham showed he did not hold any grudge against Lot’s earlier ingratitude. “All his affection for him was awakened, and he determined that he should be rescued. Seeking, first of all, divine counsel, Abraham prepared for war.”⁹ Victory was swift and complete, with all prisoners and goods recovered, and Abraham ascribed triumph to God.

“The worshiper of Jehovah had not only rendered a great service to the country, but had proved himself a man of valor,” wrote Ellen White. “It was seen that righteousness is not cowardice, and that Abraham’s religion made him courageous in maintaining the right and defending the oppressed. His heroic act gave him a widespread influence among the surrounding tribes.”¹⁰

Abraham was an educator, and as he shared his faith his household continued growing, eventually

comprising more than 1,000 people. “Those who were led by his teachings to worship the one God found a home in his encampment; and here, as in a school, they received such instruction as would prepare them to be representatives of the true faith. Thus a great responsibility rested upon him. He was training heads of families, and his methods of government would be carried out in the households over which they should preside.”¹¹

Respected by all the surrounding nations, Abraham’s “allegiance to God was unswerving, while his affability and benevolence inspired confidence and friendship and his unaffected greatness commanded respect and honor.”¹²

A WITNESS BEFORE GOD AND UNFALLEN BEINGS

Abraham honored God, and God honored him by speaking directly with him and revealing His purposes. Nevertheless, Abraham was human, and Scripture records at least three times his faith faltered: (1) when he lied about his wife to Pharaoh (Gen. 12:10-20); (2) when he took Hagar as his wife to produce an heir (Gen. 16:1-4); (3) when he lied to King Abimelech about Sarah being his wife (Gen. 20). These instances reveal the danger of (1) going where God has *not* called us to go; and (2) listening to those who may be trying to help but are not if they aren’t in line with what God has indicated.

Ellen White points out that “God had called Abraham to be the father of the faithful, and his life was to stand as an example of faith to succeeding generations. But his faith had not been perfect. . . . That he might reach the highest standard, God subjected him to another test, the closest which man was ever called to endure.”¹³

God commanded him, “Take now your son, your only son Isaac,

whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you” (Gen. 22:2).

Abraham knew human sacrifices were worship rituals that the heathen practiced, but not the God of heaven! The command made no sense. Why would God ask him to slay the son of promise? Nevertheless, after wrestling in prayer, the aged patriarch moved forward in faith.

“Abraham was human; his passions and attachments were like ours; but he did not stop to question how the promise could be fulfilled if Isaac should be slain. He did not stay to reason with his aching heart. He knew that God is just and righteous in all His requirements, and he obeyed the command to the very letter.”¹⁴

Little did he realize that all heaven was eagerly waiting to see what he would do. Little did Abraham or Isaac realize that what they were doing would be a lesson in the plan of salvation for the entire universe. Little did they know that it would be in the very place they were called to go that God would sacrifice His own dear Son for our salvation.

“Heavenly beings were witnesses of the scene as the faith of Abraham and the submission of Isaac were tested. . . . All heaven beheld with wonder and admiration Abraham’s unflinching obedience. All heaven applauded his fidelity. Satan’s accusations were shown to be false. . . . God’s covenant, confirmed to Abraham by an oath before the intelligences of other worlds, testified that obedience will be rewarded.

“It had been difficult even for the angels to grasp the mystery of redemption. . . . When the command was given to Abraham to offer up his son, the interest of

all heavenly beings was enlisted. With intense earnestness they watched each step in the fulfillment of this command. When to Isaac’s question, ‘Where is the lamb for a burnt offering?’ Abraham made answer, ‘God will provide himself a lamb’; and when the father’s hand was stayed as he was about to slay his son, and the ram which God had provided was offered in the place of Isaac—then light was shed upon the mystery of redemption, and even the angels understood more clearly the wonderful provision that God had made for man’s salvation.”¹⁵

OUR WITNESS TODAY

Abraham’s life of faith, obedience, and service provides an important example of witness for us today. The silent influence of his daily life, his unswerving integrity, generosity, courtesy, and beautiful character, revealed to all that he was connected with heaven. He was able to look beyond what is seen, and grasped eternal realities. “Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness” (Rom. 4:3). ☉

¹ Andrew Lawler, “City of Biblical Abraham Brimmed With Trade and Riches,” *National Geographic*, Mar. 11, 2016, <https://on.natgeo.com/3isuYmQ>.

² *Ibid.*

³ John Noble Wilford, “At Ur, Ritual Deaths That Were Anything but Serene,” *New York Times*, Oct. 26, 2009, <https://nyti.ms/3k1nKqm>.

⁴ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1890, 1908), p. 125.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Time line based on Genesis 5, 11. See chart, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1953), vol. 1, p. 185.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ E. G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 141.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 134.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

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