

Lessons from the Life of Abraham (Genesis chapter 12)

(Based on the writings of C.H.M.)

Note: Abraham is called *Abram* until his name is changed in Genesis chapter seventeen. For convenience, we'll refer to him as Abraham throughout

FAITH AND OBEDIENCE

Welcome to this series of messages on the life of Abraham. By studying the life of this man of faith, we can learn so much that is relevant to us. In the story of his life, we gain fresh perspectives on *our* Christian experiences! We come to appreciate just why this wonderful patriarch of old is described to us as our father in the faith and we – his children (*Galatians 3:7*).

We first come across Abraham in the eleventh chapter of Genesis. Here we find the beginning of Israel's line of descent after the flood, - from Shem through to Terah and his sons: Abraham, Nahor and Haran.

The family lived in the city of Ur in southern Mesopotamia. Ur, known as *Ur of the Chaldeans*, was an important cultural centre and its ruins are situated in modern-day Iraq.

We know that Abraham's family were idol-worshippers. When the covenant was renewed at Shechem, Joshua began his address to the people with these words:

“Long ago your forefathers, including Terah, the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the river and worshipped other Gods.” (Joshua 24:2) (italics mine)

But in the book of Genesis, we're told that the family packed up and migrated:

“Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan....” (Genesis 11:31)

But what had caused the family to move? Why did they suddenly set out for the unknown land of Canaan?

The answer is given to us in the twelfth chapter of Genesis.

There we find that Abraham had left his homeland as a direct result of God's specific calling in his life!

“The Lord had said to Abram “Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.” (Genesis 12:1)

Shortly before he was stoned to death for his faith, Stephen recounts this incident in his apologia to the Jews:

“The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. ‘Leave your country and your people.’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’” (*Acts 7:2-3*)

And through Joshua, God described the overall journey and its results:

“But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the river and led him throughout Canaan” (*Joshua 24:3*)

So, Abraham was called by God! While living in the land of death, a land of idolatry, he heard the word of God and responded.

In the same way, each of us has heard the voice of God and lived.

As recounted in John’s gospel, Jesus said this to the Jewish leaders:

“I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live.” (*John 5:25*)

The apostle Paul puts it this way; “..and those he predestined, *he also called*; those he called he also justified.” (*Romans 8:29*) (*italics mine*)

But Abraham wasn’t just called to leave his native city, Ur of the Chaldeans. He was called to travel to the land of Canaan – the land that God would show him.

In the same way, you and I weren’t saved just to escape this world of death and judgment. We’ve been delivered from this present, evil world for a purpose – in our case - to inhabit a spiritual land.

Our Canaan is described in the book of *Ephesians* as ‘*The heavenly places*’ and it’s a place of fellowship and communion with God in our lives.

Yet Abraham’s journey to this promised land was interrupted! Instead of travelling directly to Canaan, he was held up in the city of Haran in North-western Mesopotamia.

“.....they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there.” (*Genesis 11:31*)

We’re not told how long Abraham spent in Haran, but the next verse goes on to say that he was there until his father died:

“Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran.” (*Genesis 11:32*)

This verse makes it quite clear that natural ties prevented Abram from fully responding to God’s call. God had said to him: “Leave your country, and your people and your father’s household” – and what does Abraham do? He takes them all with him: his father, his brother Nahor and wife Milcah, and his nephew Lot!

Abraham hadn’t let go of all those things that belonged to his old life and what happened?

He stopped short of the land! He was called to Canaan, but he finished up living in Haran, in north-western Mesopotamia – and he was stuck there until his father died!

Perhaps his father, Terah, liked it in Haran. Perhaps Terah was just tired of travelling. Perhaps he was afraid to venture into the unknown.

All we know is that Abraham couldn't move on until Terah had passed away.

There's a spiritual land – a *Canaan* that awaits you. It's a place of blessing, a place of service, a place of full fellowship with God!

But Abraham couldn't fellowship with God in Ur of the Chaldeans. He had disobeyed when the God of glory told to leave behind his home and family and step out in faith – and now those natural ties were preventing him from reaching the promised land.

And neither can we have fellowship with God if we remain attached to this world!

When we're called by God, the first thing He asks *us* to do, is to leave our country, our people and our father's household. In other words, he requires us to turn away from our old way of life! All those worldly activities: those relationships with this world - with the people of this world - that would hinder us entering into full fellowship and communion with Him.

How many of us have been called by God to fully fellowship with Him, to enjoy an intimate walk of love and fruitful service in our lives – and we've been held up in Haran? We've stopped short of the land of promise! We're missing out on the spiritual blessings in heavenly places promised in His Word. All because we've only partially obeyed. We haven't made a clean break with the world!

Abraham stayed in Haran until his father died – until the ties of nature were broken by death. Only then was he able, unimpeded, to go on the place to where the 'God of glory' had called him.

We need to realise that human ties, and worldly influences, are all hostile to the realisation of God's call in our lives. We're so prone to take the lower ground. Time and time again we settle for less than what God calls us to. We stop short of Canaan!

Let's not trivialise the call of God in our lives. It takes a great deal of faith to enable us to rise to the level of God's thoughts and plans for us.

Paul realized this. He says to the saints at Ephesus:

"I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints...." (*Ephesians 1:17-19*)

And he later goes on to say "I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received." (*Ephesians.4:1*)

But we need to *understand* what God has called us to! We need to glimpse the love, joy, blessing, peace and victory he has in store for the obedient soul. You see, if we don't *understand* the calling, we can't walk *worthy* of it!

If Abraham had *fully understood* the truth that God had called him to Canaan – then he couldn't have stayed in Haran!

Are you still in the Haran of your spiritual experience? Are *you* settling for second-best?

If we really understand that we're called with a heavenly calling – that our home, our hope and our inheritance are all above – in heaven where, according to *Colossians 3: 1*: "Christ is seated at the right hand of God", we'll *never* be satisfied with seeking a reputation on this earth, being successful, making our mark- laying up our treasure in this world!

The two things are incompatible: we can't serve two masters The heavenly calling isn't a theory; it isn't a philosophy. It's either a divine reality or it's absolutely nothing! Abraham hadn't been called to *Haran* – he had been called to *Canaan* and God couldn't be happy with him stopping *short* of that.

So where are *you* now? You've come to know the Lord as your Saviour and you've been called to walk with him in the light of His Word – but where *are* you now?

If we desire God's *approval*, God's *presence* in our lives; if we want joy, peace and love to be a daily reality – then we *must* be seeking *by faith* to act on *His calling*. We must seek to *reach* - in experience, in practice, in moral character - the point to which God has *called* us. It's the point described by *John* when he says:

"We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And that fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3)

Fellowship with the Father in his thoughts about his Beloved Son.

Fellowship with the Son in his absolute devotion and obedience to His father.

But such fellowship demands identification with Christ. And this fellowship, if it exists at all, must exist in two directions:

Fellowship with him in his acceptance above.

Fellowship with him in his rejection here below.

And how can this sort of fellowship become a reality in our lives? In Abraham's case – it was death that broke link by which nature bound him to Haran. And in our case also, only death can break the link connecting us to this present world!

We *must* realise the truth that we have died in Christ, our Head and Representative.

Paul says in his epistle to the church in Rome:

"Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Romans 6:8)

Writing to the Galatian believers, he says:

“I have been crucified with Christ...” (Galatians 2:20)

Our place in nature (as children of Adam) and our place in the world around us, are among the things that used to be – the past! They now belong to a previous life.

For what does Paul go on to say?

“...and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20)

And that’s *exactly* what Jesus meant when he said

“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23)

We must realize the truth that we’ve been crucified with Christ, and we must put the old life, the old ways, the old attachments where they belong – in the place of death!

This is because, as Paul tells us that, having been crucified with Christ,

“We were buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of God the Father, we too may live a new life.” (Romans 6:4)

So, we’re living in a place of death to self and to sin - forever separated, not only from the power and penalty of sin, but from this world! And in that place of death, we’re living a new life - the risen life of Christ.

The Cross of Christ is to us - like the Red Sea was to Israel. It separates us forever from the land of death and judgment. But only if we live as those who have been crucified with Christ, can we walk worthy of the **“calling of God in Christ Jesus.”**

The same cross that *connects* me with *God* – is the cross that *separates* me from the *world*! In his letter to the church in Galatia, Paul looks at the world as something which should be nailed to the cross. And He goes on to say that the world, in crucifying Christ, crucified all who belong to him. He says:

“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.” (Galatians 6:14)

Acceptance with God - rejection by the world. The two things must go together! Acceptance with God makes us a worshipper and a citizen in heaven. Rejection by this world makes us a witness and a stranger on the earth. The cross has come between me and my *sins* – but it’s also come between me and the *world*. Because peace with God means hostility with the world. We can’t profess to enjoy the one and refuse to enter into the other!

We're not told how long Abraham stayed in Haran. We know that God graciously waited for him until he was free from nature's hindrance and able to fully obey God's call.

But notice one thing here – there was no fresh revelation to Abraham's soul during this time in Haran. God was silent! There was no communication!

We must *act* on the light that has been *communicated* – only *then* does God give us more. As we take *one* step, he then leads us on to the *next*.

“Whoever has, will be given more.” (Luke 8:18); that's always God's principle. If we choose to stay in *Haran*, there will be *no* fresh communication – no wonderful glimpses of God's *beauty* and *sufficiency*! And God *will* – *reluctantly* – leave us there! He'll never *force* us to obey. He'll never *drag* us along the path of true discipleship.

God always *draws us* along the path of true blessedness; joy; peace; and victory. But we *must understand* what he's offered us in Christ Jesus.

If we don't see a real advantage in breaking through all nature's barriers to respond to God's call, we lose out on the divine blessings He has for us. We begin to calculate whether its worth all the bother; We weigh up sacrifices involved – hindrances; difficulties!

We need to understand that there is true *blessing* in *every act of obedience*! Why? Because obedience is the fruit of faith and faith puts us in connection with the living God Himself.

The writer to the Hebrews says this:

“And without faith it is impossible to please God, for anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (Hebrews 11:6)

Without this faith, Abraham would never have *set out* to a country he hadn't seen. And without faith – without *believing God*, when He tells us of the glories, the blessings and the joy that are stored up for the obedient soul - we could never *step out* in faith, leaving the world and our old way of life behind us!

But true obedience isn't legalism. It isn't imposing harsh and strict rules. In fact, Paul says this, to the saints in Colossae:

“Since you died with Christ to the basic principles of this world, why, as though you still belonged to it, do you submit to its rules: do not handle! Do not taste! Do not touch!. These are all destined to perish with use, because they are based on human commands and teachings. Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body...” (Colossians 2:20-23)

There's an eternity of difference between true obedience and simply performing what we feel that God wants us to do!

In 'Discipleship journal', editor Susan Maycinik writes these words:

The line between obedience and performance can be a blurry one. Yet it is an important distinction to grasp, because obedience leads to life and performance to death.

Obedience is seeking God with your whole heart.

Performance is having a quiet time because you'll feel guilty if you don't.

Obedience is finding ways to let the word of God dwell in you richly.

Performance is quickly scanning a passage so you can check it off your Bible reading plan.

Obedience is inviting guests to your home for dinner.

Performance is feeling anxious about whether every detail of the meal will be perfect.

Obedience is following God's prompting to start a small group.

Performance is reluctance to let anyone else lead the group because they might not do it as well as you would.

Obedience is doing your best.

Performance is wanting to be the best.

Obedience is saying yes to whatever God asks of you.

Performance is saying yes to whatever people ask of you.

Obedience is following the promptings of God's spirit.

Performance is following a list of man-made requirements.

Obedience springs from fear of God.

Performance springs from fear of failure.

Jesus promised that His yoke is easy and his burden light.

True obedience to God is the natural response of the new nature. Certainly, to this new nature, God gives precepts for its guidance. But he also gives it suitable hopes and expectations for this new nature. If we're to respond to God's call, we must have an attractive object before us.

So, God says to Abraham:

"the land that I will show you." (Genesis 12:1)

This isn't *compulsion*; this isn't *legalism* - this is *attraction*!

God's land, in the judgement of *new nature* – in the judgement of *faith* – is far better than *Ur* or *Haran*! Abraham hadn't seen the land, but it was *God's land*, therefore faith considered that it was worth having!

"By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going." (Hebrews 11:8)

Abraham was walking by *faith* – not by *sight*. And *that's* how God calls us to walk. Abraham hadn't seen the land with his eyes – but he *believed*, and that *faith* became the *motivating principle* in his life.

The African impala can jump to a height of over three metres and with this jump, can also cover a distance of greater than nine metres. Yet these magnificent creatures can be kept in an enclosure in any zoo with a three-foot wall. The animals will not jump if they can't see where their feet will fall. Faith is the ability to trust what we cannot see and, with faith, we're freed from the flimsy enclosures of life that only fear allows to entrap us.

But we have an advantage over the captive impala. We have the Word of God and although we may not see with our eyes, our faith rests on more solid ground than our senses. As Paul says in his letter to the Corinthian church:

**“No eye has seen
No ear has heard'
No mind has conceived
What God has prepared for those who love him.” (1 Corinthians 2:9)**

And though our *senses* can deceive us, God's word *never* can! He has a promised land for us to enjoy right here on this earth: a Canaan to which he has called each one of us to inhabit.

But even when walking in Canaan, Abraham could not have gone on, unless God had revealed to him something infinitely more precious - infinitely more to be desired - than anything that he could possibly hope for in his present existence in the land.

**“By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”
(Hebrews 11:9)**

Fellowship with God means separation from the world. Living here in Canaan means living as a stranger and pilgrim on this earth. And how can we do so unless we clearly see, as did Abraham, that God has an eternal city awaiting us in heaven?

God promises us an eternal inheritance and what He's done is to give us a nature capable of enjoying that inheritance. God not only gives us a *heaven* to enjoy, but He also gives us a nature fitted to *enjoy* heaven – to *long for* Heaven. And this is necessary – for the *natural* man has no taste for *heaven*, its *occupations*, or its *occupants*. In fact, if the unsaved *were* to get to heaven – they'd be miserable!

The natural man has no ability to surrender earth - and no desire to get to heaven. Certainly, people have a natural desire to escape hell with its gloom and its misery. but the desire to escape hell and the desire to get heaven spring from two different sources; the former is in the old nature – the latter is only in the new!

So, God doesn't only forgive sin – he imparts a new nature which longs for heaven:

“Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.” *(Philippians 3:20-21)*

God revealed to Abraham a city which had foundations. And so God reveals to us - in the distance:

The Hope of glory.

A City which has foundations.

Many rooms in the Father’s Heavenly house.

Golden harps / Green palms / white robes.

Everlasting association and fellowship with Him in regions of bliss and light where sorrow and darkness can ever enter.

The unspeakable privilege of being led, throughout the countless ages of eternity, beside the still waters and through the green pastures of redeeming love.

A nature which can enjoy heaven and a heaven for that nature to enjoy!!

God dealt with Abraham that way; He revealed a better country!

God dealt with Saul of Tarsus that way. On the road to Damascus, He revealed to him a glory so bright that it closed Paul’s eyes to the brightest glories this earth has to offer. He saw a heavenly Christ in glory and for the remainder of his life, that heavenly glory occupied his whole being!

So, in writing to the church at Corinth, Paul gives his perspective in this way:

“For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” *(2 Corinthians 4:17)*

When tempted to put our roots here below, when distracted by the empty pleasures of Haran, may we put aside the things that so easily beset us. May we reckon ourselves dead to sin and to the world, and set out with a confident step to live in the promised land, with Paul’s words to the saints in Philippi, ringing in our ears:

“What is more, I consider everything a loss compared with the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ....” *(Philippians 3:8)*

May God bless his precious Word to each one of us

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