

BEYOND THE HALFWAY PLACE

"And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his son's son, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there. And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years: and Terah died in Haran" (Genesis 11:31-32).

After the flood, when men began to multiply and increase in the earth, it was not very long until they began to turn aside from the true and living God. They very rapidly traveled along the downgrade until they worshipped strange gods.

Our attention is arrested by two striking and deeply significant statements in the text. The first is, "Terah took Abram his son and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan." The second is, "And they came unto Haran and dwelt there." We have usually taken it for granted that the impulse to migrate from Ur to Canaan arose with Abram, that it was he who revolted against the gross paganism of Ur, and that it was he who resolved to seek a land where he would be free to practice a pure faith.

I wonder whether or not we have been giving to Abram the credit which really belonged to his father. The wording of our text suggests that the first impulse to the migration originated with Terah. The Bible says, "Terah took Abram." I don't suppose Abram was in the least unwilling to be taken. Probably he shared his father's feelings. But it looks as if Terah was the moving spirit. We are in no way detracting from the greatness of Abram by saying that the idea of moving to Canaan first occurred to his father.

I like to think that it was a religious motive which prompted Terah to take his family out of Ur, that great and wealthy city which possessed a civilization which was "surprisingly advanced and social order which was in some respects admirable." But with that advanced civilization, the people of Ur practiced a religion which would shock even those who are familiar with the immoralities frequently fostered by heathen religions. Terah's soul revolted against it all. To get out of Ur's corrupt atmosphere Terah took Abram and turned toward the land of Canaan.

That involved a tremendous sacrifice. It meant turning his back on ease, comfort, and safety, and going forth into the wilderness. I can compare it to nothing better than the risks our own Pilgrim Fathers took, and the sacrifices they made, when they left their pleasant homes in Lincolnshire and Nottinghamshire and the East Counties and settled on that bleak New England coast where, for years, hardship, poverty, starvation, and sickness were to be their lot. But when once religious convictions have laid hold of a man, sacrifice ceases to count.

I also like to think that Terah was not thinking of himself so much as of his children. If he had thought only of himself, he might have continued to live in Ur. But there were his children and his grandchildren! He might have been able to stand up against the immoralities of Ur, but what about his family? It was for their sake that Terah determined to change his habitation. The movements of parents have been decided many times by consideration for the interests of their children, and it is right that they should be. So often I wish that parents were just as anxious about the spiritual interests of their children as they are about their physical and mental interests. Wise parents follow the example of Terah in choosing a home which will give their children a chance of growing up in the fear and love of God.

Terah was not the first man whose title to fame rests on a famous son, nor is he the last. Terah is best known as the father of Abram. There is an old saying to the effect that "Sons hit the mark their fathers aimed at." It is entirely possible to think that Abram hit the mark at which Terah aimed.

God's Word does not tell us very much about Terah. It does imply several things about him. Alexander Whyte referred to him as "the humble-hearted, the useful-hearted, the brave-hearted, and the believing-hearted" old father.

When Terah and Abram heard the call, felt the pull, got up, and turned their back on the idolatry of a pagan civilization, they struck out in adventurous faith to follow a voice and pursue a dream. Other people went along with them, but they didn't get to the Promised Land. Some of them got only as far as Haran, five hundred miles from the starting place. There civilization was a little more advanced, and the circumstances a little more comfortable, but Haran was still on the same side of the river and only halfway to where God was calling them.

Terah died in Haran. He had some faith; enough to start on the journey; enough to make him discontented with paganism; and enough to induce him to break with it. But the prospect of crossing over a broad and deep river, moving into a land he had never seen, and making such an irrevocable break with the past, was too big a leap, so Terah settled in Haran and died there.

This sudden stop on the journey is usually ascribed to one of three things:

1. The irresolution of Terah.

Some think that he, having become weary, of the perils of the way, and having found a comfortable location for himself and his flocks, preferred to bring his wandering to a close, just as many a Christian pilgrimage has been shortened by faint-hearted indecision.

2. The unbelief of Terah.

Some believe that Terah had started on the journey with strong faith and great zeal, but, as faith weakened and enthusiasm subsided, was easily persuaded to halt at Haran -- an emblem of other pilgrims who began their heavenly journey well, but paused in mid career through the cooling of their ardor and the declining of their piety.

3. The infirmity of Terah.

Some ascribe his halting to the fact that he was an old man and unable to further continue his journey to the Promised Land.

Whatever the cause it is a fact that Terah stopped in Haran and never went any farther.

Let us look at the supposition that Terah was a man whose courage gave out, after traveling five hundred miles, and whose enthusiasm failed. He set out to go into the land of Canaan, but he died in Haran. On this supposition Terah is the man who began to build and was not able to finish. He was a man who made a grand start, but who could not finish the course. If you take that view of him, he is only an example of what happens in multitudes of cases. We get tragically disappointed in

some men. They start so well and they finish so badly. They start off with great enthusiasm and lofty ideals, but in course of time they settle on their lees and sink back into the crowd and live only for comfort and ease. They do not fulfill their early promise. They leave their first love. They set out for Canaan, but they stop at Haran. Terah might just as well have never left Ur as stop and die in Haran.

Let us consider the other and kindlier possibility that Terah dwelt in Haran and died there, not because his courage failed, not because he turned his back upon his early ambition, not because he succumbed to the lure of Haran, but because age and infirmity overtook him so that he had to halt in Haran. Even though he died in Haran, it was Canaan that was in his heart. He died with his life's dream unfulfilled.

If we take Terah as an example of the man who dies with a cherished purpose unrealized and with life's aim unfulfilled, all of us are like him, for we never reach the Canaan of our dreams. There was only one person in all history Who accomplished all that He set out to do, Whose life was complete, and Who with His dying breath could cry, "It is finished," and that was the Lord Jesus. For the rest of us, life is an unfinished something.

David cherished one great ambition. It was that of building a worthy house for God. He collected a vast store of material, and made lavish preparations. The Temple was in David's heart, but that dream never got built on solid ground. His vision never became a fact. He never saw a stone of the Temple laid. He went to his grave with his great purpose unrealized and the hope he had cherished unfulfilled. And that is typical of most of us. We do not reach our Canaan, but we die in Haran.

Abram went out to receive an inheritance and he died possessing nothing in the Promised Land but a grave. Joseph cherished the idea of a home for his people in Canaan, and the end of his story was a "coffin in Egypt." Moses brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, and his aim was to establish them in Palestine, but he died in Moab. That is typical of us all. We never finish our task. We never realize our ambitions. We never reach our goals. We die in Haran.

The great aim of life for all of us should be the attainment of a Christian character. It remains an ambition, not an attainment, to life's end. Such has been the case even with life's noblest and best. Take Paul, for example. That was his ambition -- to be conformed to the image of God's Son, but his dream was not entirely realized. He said, "Not that I have already attained or am already perfect." And such has been the confession of every saintly soul. In a sense these disappointments and seeming failures of life constitute the bitterness of life. But it is infinitely better to cherish great dreams, even though we never fulfill them, than not to cherish any dreams at all.

It doesn't take much imagination to bring this Bible story up to date. It is a true picture of man everywhere and at any time. When we divide people spiritually we usually think of two levels only, the good and the bad. The movies do it too -- "good guys and bad guys," but alongside that simple picture of life is the true one: there is an Ur with its paganism; and there is a Promised Land with its open road to victory; and there is also an Haran, a halfway place between them. Lots of people die in Haran.

Haran is the place of arrested development, the cemetery of buried hopes, faded visions, and compromised ideals. How many Terahs there are in this pilgrimage of

life! Many people start out in response to a dream; they have high hopes of reaching some promised land of achievement. Then gradually their fine upward sweep levels out, their legs get tired, their visions fade, and they settle down in some halfway place where the finest in them dies.

Terah is the type of all men who just miss success. Many in all professions or callings just miss success because they lack something, such an initiative, willingness to concentrate, dependability, and a willingness to keep up with the progress in his profession. Terah is the type of all who leave a job half done. There are plenty of people like that today. A man starts to do something worthwhile, and is enthusiastic about it. Then he turns to something else and leaves the job half finished.

Terah is the type of all who put off until tomorrow what should be done today. His name means delay. He has always been known as the man who delayed. There is no more fatal flaw in character than procrastination. The habit of putting off until tomorrow what should be done today is a guarantee of certain failure.
