

THE RESPONSE OF ABRAHAM

Genesis 12:4-20

What stupendous results hung upon Abraham's response to the call of God! Although he was an obscure and childless man living in an idolatrous land, through grace God selected him as the one through whom the blessing of heaven should flow to earth's remotest bounds and to the end of time.

When the name of any great Biblical or historical character is mentioned, we instinctively associate with it the trait or characteristic for which that person was famous. With Moses we associate the grace of meekness; with Samuel, integrity; with Elijah, courage; with Job, patience; with Daniel, faithfulness; with John, love; with Paul, whole-hearted enthusiasm.

Two words are required to describe the outstanding traits of the life of Abraham: faith and obedience. He believed and he obeyed.

When God called Abraham, He asked him to leave his country, his kindred and his father's house. Abraham took God at His word without hesitation or question, left his country and started for the promised land of Canaan, but, when he had gone about one half of the distance, he stopped in Haran. There he dwelt for about six years, all of which were wasted. There is no record of any revelation or encouragement from God, no appearances of the Lord, no victories, no progress, no growth. In leaving Ur and staying at Haran, his obedience was only partial.

While Abraham was tarrying in Haran, God stepped in and took his father from the scene. Terah died and was buried in Haran, the place of fruitlessness. It must have been hard for Abraham to sever the tender ties of the flesh, but it had to take place before he would go farther. How much easier it would have been for Abraham to have left his father behind in Ur of the Chaldees than to bury him in the strange land. How much better it would have been to have obeyed God willingly and immediately by separation from the world and the flesh rather than to have disobeyed God and brought His judgment upon him.

As soon as every tie had been cut by his father's death, Abraham left the halfway place of compromise and set out on the pilgrimage to which he had been called. The writer to the Hebrews commented on verse four and says that it was by faith that Abraham obeyed God. In faith Abraham departed. Departure is the first act of faith of every child of God. Conversion means a departure, a break with the former life, the beginning of a journey along the narrow way from earth to heaven.

The implicit obedience of Abraham to the call of God is very fascinating and impressive. According to Hebrews 11:8, "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went." He went out with sealed orders and promises. He did not know the way which he was to travel, but He did know the Guide who had commanded him to go. He displayed marvelous faith, for the invisible God had called Abraham to go to a land which was invisible to him. In his obedience Abraham "took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan." In other words, Abraham left nothing behind. He completely left his country, his kindred and his father's house. His was not a venture of trial and error. Neither substance nor souls were left in the place of compromise. If either had been, Abraham likely would have been tempted to return. In starting on this pilgrimage he dedicated to God all that he possessed--his family, his household and his property. He took all with him to use in the service of his God. Abraham did not expect to return nor did he anticipate the return of his people.

"They went forth to go into the land of Canaan." Here we see the importance of having a definite goal in view. It is such definiteness which makes the difference between a traveler and a tramp, between a pilgrim and a wanderer. The wanderer does not have any clear objective. It is always sheer accident if at any given time he is here or there. But, it is otherwise with the traveler. He knows the destination toward which he is going.

The two things of which Abraham was sure were the starting point and the goal; Chaldea was at the one end and Canaan at the other; but the way between was hidden from his view. When God called him to leave Ur, He said nothing to him about the path between the starting point and the goal. What matters it if we see not the way, so long as we are sure that we are in the right path and know with whom we are going?

God is still saying, "Get out and go in . . ." If this is to be done, we shall have to exercise strong determination, for much of the journey to the goal will be hard and hazardous, and only the will to continue steadfast will bring us victoriously to the end.

Those who are contemplating this journey should be warned about certain things. One of them is the natural tendency to delay. One of the chief menaces to the Christian life is this disposition to postpone, to procrastinate and to dawdle along the way. Another danger of which we should be aware is the constant temptation to shirk difficulties. There come times in the life of the Christian when he is confronted with problems which are new and startling; there are times when momentous choices have to be made; and there are times when he is conscious of conflicting influences and ideals.

Abraham and his company set out to go into the land of Canaan, and "into the land of Canaan they came." For us, as for Abraham, the secret of entering the land is glad submission to the divine will. This means separation from much to which we naturally cling. For Abraham it was from his country, his kindred and his father's house; and, though it may not mean this for us, yet it will mean submission and separation. Another condition of this joyful realization of entrance into the land of victory and rest is prompt obedience to the Word of God. The reward of entering will be intimate fellowship with God, increasing fruitfulness in one's own soul and inexhaustible fullness for others. Let us say to Him, "Lord, I will follow Thee whithersoever Thou goest."

Since Abraham had been promised by God to be given a country for himself and his seed, one would have expected it to be vacant and ready for his possession. However, this was not the case. Again, faith must rally to the rescue. This land into which this man of faith had come was inhabited by a thriving people, the Canaanites. This fact was enough to have squelched the hope of anybody except someone who had a sincere faith in the true God. If any doubts entered Abraham's mind when he saw the occupants of the land, they were dispelled by the appearance of the Lord and the reaffirmation of His promise. "The Lord appeared unto Abram and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land."

Abraham pitched his tent and built an altar. By the tent he confessed himself a stranger and a pilgrim. By the altar he confessed himself a worshiper. After he had erected the altar, he held sweet converse and communion with God. Thus his life was wholly surrendered to God.

Meanwhile, there came a sore famine in the land. God did not tell Abraham to leave, but on his own initiative he went out of the land where he was dwelling and down into Egypt, where there was plenty as far as his natural eye could see. This is the first time that Egypt is mentioned in the Bible, and, like all of the subsequent references to it, it stands for that which is a constant menace to the people of God. It symbolizes alliance with the world and reliance upon the arm of flesh. "Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses, and trust in chariots, because they are many; and in horsemen, because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord!" (Isaiah 31:1)

It is not surprising that all of the time that Abraham was down in Egypt he did not have any sweet communion or joyful fellowship with God and, consequently, that he was without power. While in Egypt, Abraham practiced deception and denied that Sarai was his wife, thus endangering the honor of the one who was nearest and should have been dearest to him. His sojourn in Egypt was a waste and a loss of time.

From our study of the call of Abraham and his response thereto, we learn some very valuable lessons. God's call comes to us, as it did to Abraham of old, to have an absolute trust in God, to take Him at His word and step out on simple and unquestioning faith, to separate ourselves from the world and to depend entirely on God, Who never fails His own.