

"He looked for a city."

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In the Book of Genesis the history of Abraham occupies just a little more space than the whole history of things from the creation up to the time of his birth. In the New Testament also there are many references to him, and in Hebrews 11, after brief notices of Abel, Enoch and Noah, quite a number of verses are occupied with him. All this testifies to the great importance of certain features marking his story. We specify three of them: there was given to him the first of the special revelations of God's Name, he was the first to receive a Divine call; and in him first was faith declared to be the way of righteousness.

No one had ever been accounted righteous before God except on the principle of faith; hence in Hebrews 11, the Spirit of God directs our thoughts to righteousness by faith in connection with Abel. Still in the actual history, as unfolded in Genesis, this foundation truth did not come clearly to light until Abraham "believed in the Lord; and He counted it to him for righteousness" (Gen. 15: 6). In Hebrews 11 however, since this truth is stated as to Abel we do not find it repeated as to Abraham; we start rather with *the call of God*.

That call was to get out of all his old associations, whether national, social or domestic, and go to the place of God's choice, and we read that, in response to that call "HE WENT OUT." though he did not know "whither he went." All his old associations were of an idolatrous nature, and hence the separation was to be complete, and all links of whatever nature were to be cut.

We must not imagine that because Ur of the Chaldees was a city of idolatries it was therefore uncivilised and barbarous; nor must we suppose that he was called to a life of greater elegance and superior amenities. The exact reverse would be the case. Ur was a city of elaborate civilisation, as recent excavations have proved, and in the land of Canaan Abraham had to adopt the nomadic life with a tent and an altar. From the viewpoint of his earthly circumstances he was a great loser by obeying the call of God. He exchanged a place of comfort and luxury for a life of wandering with its attendant discomforts.

Moreover the land of Canaan was at that time inhabited by tribes which were sunken in idolatry as much as the people of Ur, if not more so, therefore it was that God did not break Abraham's links with Ur to allow him to settle down and form fresh links in Canaan. Afterward he was to receive that land as an inheritance, but that would be under different conditions. All through his long life *Abraham was a stranger*.

Abraham's response to the call of God and his going forth from Ur was *an act of faith*, and this act was the introduction to *a life of faith*. We read that, "By faith

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as in a strange country." Not once did he settle down as an inhabitant of the land that had been given to him, although his sojourn there lasted for exactly a century. For all that time he maintained his strangership in faith.

In all this Abraham's history sets forth typically the position of the believer today, and is full of instruction for us. We are not called to leave any particular city or country, nor to come out of our domestic circles. The heavenly calling that has reached us is really more sweeping than this, for it involves our being "delivered from this present evil world" (Gal. 1: 4.) The word here for "world" is really "age," a word of wide significance, covering the whole course of the world-system. Our links with the present evil age are to be cut, though we still dwell in the same place and under the same circumstances as before our conversion.

Sometimes this has not been understood. In earlier times, for instance, it was thought that if men really wanted to live separate and holy lives they must retire behind high walls; and hence arose the monastic system. By this means they shut themselves in from a good many evil people, but not from this evil age for they carried within their own persons all its evil principles. The same idea still persists, though in different forms, in unexpected quarters. If we are really delivered from this evil age we shall not come under an unequal yoke with unbelievers; which yoke involves fellowship, communion, concord, part with and agreement with unbelievers, as is shown in 2 Corinthians 6: 14-16; but even so we shall need to know the power of the cross of Christ in our own hearts and lives, so that the world indeed is crucified to us and we to the world.

Of how many of us can it be said 'Having heard the call of God, *he went out* in response'? And again, **of how many** of those who do make some response can it be said, "He was content *to sojourn* as in a strange country"? These are searching questions for us, especially today, when the attractions of the age are so multiplied. It is quite certain that no satisfactory answer to these questions is likely, unless it can be said of us, as of Abraham:

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which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

Here, then, is the secret of Abraham's remarkable career: his faith bestowed upon him telescopic vision. The astronomer sweeps the heavens with his telescope, and into his field of vision there swim ten thousand stars, never yet seen by the naked eye; so faith enabled Abraham to see the city that was altogether unperceived by those in whom faith was not. He discovered that God had something better and more stable for him, and the bright anticipation of this delivered him from the attractions of both Ur and Canaan.

There is no record either here or in Genesis as to how the knowledge of that heavenly city reached him. He could not have discovered it of himself: some word from God must have come to him, and that word he received in faith. What is made quite plain in Genesis is that he lived in an age when men were very busy building cities. The flood had occurred only a few centuries before, and the building of Babel and its tower was still closer to his time. The opening paragraph of Genesis 11 covers verses 1-9, and the opening paragraph of chapter 12 verses 1-8, and there seems to be a designed contrast between them.

In building the city and the tower men aimed at creating for themselves a centre of influence and

strength, and thus making to themselves a name. It was self-exaltation, only of a collective sort rather than individual, for they had conceived the idea of co-operation, whereby things quite impossible to the mere individual could be achieved. Their cry was, "Come on, . . . let us make . . . Come on, let us build . . ." (New Trans.). The antediluvian age had been one of intense individualism, and ended with violence as the hand of each was against his fellow. The post-diluvians had a bright idea: they would stop senseless competition and combine!

Now just when men were aiming at solidarity, God introduced scattering; and soon after He called Abraham. Men were saying "*Come on!*" when to Abraham God said, "*Get thee out!*" When they were urging combination, God commanded separation, and Abraham obeyed. When men had their city and their tower, Abraham had a tent and an altar. In their cities men seek that which is settled and permanent, whereas a tent is connected with a transitory state of things. A tower is built to provide security and defence, as far as it is humanly possible, but an altar speaks of God, and of maintaining contact with Him.

Abraham spent his life outside the cities of men because he had in view the city of God that is yet to be — "a city which hath foundations." There seems to be a plain inference here that the cities of men lack foundations. Their material foundations may be sound enough, but right moral foundations are sadly lacking. Unless righteousness and love lie at their base neither endurance nor permanency can mark them, and sooner or later they decay, or are swept away by convulsions from within or without. Abraham saw by faith that God would ultimately introduce a city and a polity which would be based upon righteousness and love, and he was content to wait for that.

That abiding order will never be brought about by human endeavour: no one but God can be its "Builder and Maker." As the Fountainhead of love and righteousness He will lay its foundations and construct it, and with that in view we may well be content to be sojourners in the present order of things. If we turn aside to interfere with the arrangements of men's cities in the hope of improving things, we shall commit a double folly. We shall court failure by attempting to accomplish something that God has *not* told us to do: we shall fail to do that to which God *has* called us. Our business is to live as those who are delivered from this present evil age, while proclaiming the message of grace by which others may be called out, even as we have been ourselves. Thus it will be clearly seen that we belong to the noble band of those that "declare plainly that they seek a country."

The record in Hebrews 11 does not hide from us that the old land of Mesopotamia had attractions which might well have exerted a powerful pull upon Abraham. If he had allowed his mind to continually dwell upon the old spot from whence he had come, its fascination might have grown upon him. Then his heart would have turned in that direction, and soon his feet might have followed his heart, for easily he "might have had opportunity to have returned." The record in Genesis shows us that he steadfastly set his face against any such return, either for himself or for his son. His word as to Isaac was, "Beware thou that thou bring not my son thither again" (Gen. 24: 6).

The same thing exactly is true for us. Nothing is easier than to be like Demas, who forsook Paul, "having loved the present age" (2 Tim. 4: 10 New Trans.). The word "evil" is omitted here, you notice. As a Christian, Demas would not love *evil* but he loved the *age* and desired to get more fully into touch with it. But, whether for Demas or ourselves this means that we go back to that out of which we have been called by the gospel, and if we have any inclination in that direction, we may be sure that the devil will see to it that we get plenty of opportunities to return. There was no lack of occasions when Abraham might conveniently have slipped back, and so it is with us. These occasions often come with special force in middle life. Worldly associations, that one turned from in the early days after

conversion, may be returned to under pressure from one's children. It is noteworthy that the warning against the world, in 1 John 2, is given to the "young men," and not to the "little children" or the "fathers" — given, that is, to those who represent the middle stage of Christian growth and experience. Let us all take home the warning.

Abraham and others were preserved in the way of faith and pilgrimage, because they had set their hearts on something better than all that they had left: they desired "a better country, that is, an heavenly." This is indeed a remarkable statement for, as far as Genesis is concerned, the record is that God called him to a place on earth: it was "unto a land that I will show thee" (Gen. 12: 1). And again when in the land He said, "I am the Lord that brought thee out of Ur of the Chaldees, to give thee this land to inherit it" (Gen. 15: 7). As far as God's public dealings were concerned the call that reached Abraham was earthly, yet he became aware that God had heavenly things in reserve, and on those things he set his heart.

If these things were so with Abraham how much more should they be with us, seeing that the heavenly things have now been revealed, and we are amongst those "holy brethren" who are "partakers of the heavenly calling" (Heb. 3: 1). That which was once only a private revelation has become public, and the very gospel that we have believed has set a heavenly country before us, and has bidden us to wait for God's Son from heaven. We know that we are called to heaven, but *do we desire it*, as did these patriarchs of old? Here, alas! is the weak spot with so many of us. The present age, in spite of its evils, is marvellously attractive, and we are seduced by it, instead of setting our affection upon things above. Setting our mind on the things on the earth, we come to desire them instead of desiring the heavenly country.

Abraham will not be disappointed when the coming age arrives, for God has prepared for him a city. He and the other Old Testament worthies, who died in faith, will enjoy a heavenly portion. Their seat and citizenship will be in the heavens, though they will not participate in certain things which are special to the church. The last verse of Hebrews 11 makes it plain that they will reach perfection in glory when the church does so, and not before. The same verse shows that there is a distinction to be observed between "they" — the Old Testament believers — and "us," who are the church, and that God has in store for the church some "better thing" than is provided for them — most wonderful as their portion is to be.

When Abraham reaches his full portion in the bright millennial age, he will be raised in a body of glory to enjoy his heavenly citizenship. He will have reached the city that he looked for and the heavenly country that he desired. We sometimes sing the verse of a hymn, which says,

"Yes! in that light unstained

Our stainless souls shall live;"

but perhaps he, more truly than ourselves, could take up the language of the third and fourth lines, and say

"Our heart's deep longings more than gained

When God His rest shall give,"

Our heart's longings for the heavenly country are often painfully shallow, if the trend of our lives is any true index to the desires of our hearts. Let us be concerned about this matter.

The prepared city lies in the *future*, but there is also a remarkable statement made as to the *present* — "Wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God." He is spoken of very frequently as

the God of Abraham, and He was content to be designated in this way. In Hebrews 2 we read of Christ as the Captain of our salvation, and He is not ashamed to call us brethren; but that is because we are sanctified as being "all of one" with Himself, the Sanctifier. All that we are, as the fruit of *God's own workmanship*, and He cannot be ashamed of that which is His own work. In Abraham's case however, the statement is made in connection with *his responsibility*.

"*Wherefore*," we read; "Wherefore God is not ashamed." And when we turn to the context to discover what is referred to, we find the reference is to the faith which led Abraham and others to the pilgrim life, with their desires set on the heavenly city that was yet to come. They yielded present and earthly things in view of the coming things of heaven. God is not ashamed to be known as the God of such men as these.

In the New Testament we find Paul claiming God in somewhat similar fashion. He says to the Philippians, "My God shall supply all your need." Yes, He was the God of Paul, and we are sure He is not ashamed of that designation. But, the God of Demas? Never! Of that He would be ashamed, we are sure.

How do matters stand with us? Of how many of us would God be ashamed, if He were spoken of as our God? These are searching questions. God has indeed provided some better thing for us; that is the fruit of His sovereign choice and action. Then comes the question of our responsibility to answer to the grace conferred. How well Abraham responded in faith to the lesser grace bestowed upon him. How poorly do we respond to the greater grace bestowed upon us. Let us bestir ourselves lest in days to come we have to discover that God was ashamed of us, though He was not ashamed of Abraham.