

## Renunciation and Communion

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(Extracted from Scripture Truth Vol. 15, 1923, page 127.)

It is a well-established fact in the Scriptures that the initiative always belongs to God. Illustrations of it abound. Turn where we will in the histories of men of faith and action in the service of God we find that the source of all lay in God Himself. The impulse in the strength of which they acted came from Him. The start of everything in each case was when some revelation from God, or as to God, reached them. The most striking New Testament illustration of this is the case of the Apostle Paul. The fountainhead of all his Spirit-energized activities was "when it pleased God . . . to reveal His Son in me" (Gal. 1: 15, 16). The most striking Old Testament illustration is the case of Abraham. All his remarkable life took its rise from, and was characterized by, the fact that "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham" (Acts 7: 2).

REVELATION, then, is the mainspring of spiritual life in the believer. The life flowing from the revelation may be considered in a two-fold relation: one negative and one positive. Here again we may take Abraham as a striking example.

From one point of view, then, the whole life of that man of faith may be summed up in the one word RENUNCIATION. That was its negative character — renunciation as regards the world.

His story in Genesis begins with the statement, "Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee" (Gen. 12: 1). These, according to Acts 7, were the words with which "the God of glory" appeared unto him. The revelation and the renunciation were as cause and effect. The latter was possible in the strength and joy of the former. The glory of Ur of the Chaldees paled before the God of glory. In eagerly stretching out his hands towards the one, Abraham turned his back upon the other.

This was, as we may term it, Abraham's conversion. It is an essential feature in every true conversion, though alas! the majority of conversions are shallow compared with his. Abraham most decisively "turned to God from idols," as did the Thessalonians in a later day, and there is no true conversion without this.

Abraham's course was not, however, only marked by renunciation at the outset; the same feature marked him all through. Having started forth "not knowing whither he went," and having finally reached the land "which he should after receive for an inheritance," he sojourned in it "as in a strange country dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise" (Heb. 11: 8-10). In these words the Spirit points out that having abandoned the glories of Ur for the land of promise, he never enjoyed what he set out to possess. He renounced any immediate or personal hold upon it, and as Genesis shows he contented himself with a tent and altar, thus declaring himself still to be seeking a country — desiring "a better country, that is, an heavenly" (Heb. 11: 14-16). This second renunciation was perhaps more remarkable than the first.

But there was yet more. Abraham, with Lot his nephew, though not formally taking possession of the land of promise, yet had a day-by-day use of it as they traversed its length and breadth with their flocks and herds. Then there came a time when "the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together," and consequently "there was a strife between the herdmen of Abram's cattle and the herdmen of Lot's cattle" (Gen. 13: 5-7). As the outcome of this there was another act of renunciation on Abraham's part. Though the senior, he gave place to Lot and yielded to him first choice in the use of

the land, saying, "If thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left" (verse 9). In result, Lot chose the well-watered plain and left Abraham on the less fertile hill-tops.

In Genesis 14 we find Lot carried captive by the confederate kings, and read of Abraham's remarkable victory and the recovery not only of his nephew but of other persons and goods captured from Sodom. The grateful king of Sodom said, "Give me the persons and take the goods to thyself." Now note Abraham's answer: "I have lift up mine hand unto the Lord, the most high God, the possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take from a thread even to a shoe-latchet, and that I will not take any thing that is thine" (verses 21-23). The patriarch is in the happy conscious knowledge of the "Possessor of heaven and earth," hence the goods of Sodom had no peculiar attraction for him. He could firmly yet happily twice utter the decisive words, "I WILL NOT."

In turning his back upon Ur of the Chaldees, with its idolatry and worship of the powers of darkness, we see Abraham renouncing the devil and all allegiance to him. In these subsequent acts we see him renouncing the world in its various forms; whether as an abiding place of settlement and ease, or a place of fertility and prosperity, or as a provider of every object of utility or ornament, but all debased by the service of sin.

Another great act of renunciation lay ahead, apparently as severe in its testing as any which had preceded. It sets forth in type the renunciation of the flesh. The promise of the seed had been given and Abraham's faith had embraced it, but impatient for its accomplishment, he sought for its fulfilment "after the flesh," and Ishmael was born. Fourteen years afterwards the promised seed appeared in the person of Isaac.

Abraham's heart yearned over Ishmael. His cry was, "Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee!" And not only so, but Ishmael was circumcised, and thus outwardly was the mark of the Covenant put upon him (Gen. 17: 18, 25). All was, however, unavailing. It had been said of Ishmael, "He will be a wild man; his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him." A wild, intractable and quarrelsome fellow he remained — fit type of the flesh, for as James says, "From whence come wars and lightings among you? Come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?" (James 4: 1). Ishmael's term of probation ended, however, when he proved himself to be not only wild, but a despiser and a mocker in regard to the promised seed, Isaac, who was a type of Christ. Then came that word which is so illuminatingly commented on in the New Testament, "Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac" (Gen. 21: 10; Gal. 4: 21-31).

Thus in type we see the final testing of flesh by the presence of Christ. The flesh simply mocks HIM: hence there is no good thing in the flesh, and the flesh must go!

Here was a severe test for Abraham. "The thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son." Yet he responded to it. The renunciation was made. "Abraham rose up early in the morning" — here we see the energy of his faith — "and took bread and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away" (Gen. 21: 11, 14).

In type, then, we have seen Abraham renouncing the devil, the world, and the flesh, and we might well suppose that there would be no further renunciation beyond. Yet one further act of a supreme sort remained.

Genesis 22 is the record of it. Isaac, the seed, with whom were bound up all the promises, was left with his father. The divine word now was, "Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest,

and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering." The story of this chapter is well known. Isaac is in type yielded up to death, only to be received again as though risen from the dead. So Christ, once known after the flesh, is henceforth known no more after that order. The believer's links with Him are of a spiritual order and in resurrection, and because of it, "henceforth know we no man after the flesh" (2 Cor. 5: 16). When Abraham thus yielded up the promised seed, we may say that the crowning point of his path of renunciation was reached.

If, however, revelation was the spring and starting point of his career, and renunciation its prominent feature in a negative way, on the positive side it was a life of most blessed COMMUNION with God in the light of the revelation He had made of Himself.

In the chapters, Genesis 12 to 22, we have the record of no less than nine occasions when God appeared to Abraham and put Himself into communication with him, and other occasions are also recorded when Abraham put himself into communication with God, either in worship or prayer. This was a wonderful record, only the history of Moses is comparable with it. God not only blessed Abraham but let him into the secrets of His dealings with men as His "friend."

The blessing that rested upon Abraham was very great. It more than recompensed him for all the renunciations he made. If he gave up earthly prospects in Or, he became an inheritor of blessing that should ultimately spread out to "all families of the earth" (Gen. 12: 3). If he yielded the fairest parts of the land to Lot, directly afterwards came the word, "Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee" (Gen. 13: 17). If he totally refused the smallest recompense from the goods of Sodom, there came immediately the word, "Fear not, Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward" (Gen. 15: 1). If he had grief as to Ishmael, he presently heard the words, "I am the Almighty God: walk before Me, and be thou perfect" (Gen. 17: 1). If he ultimately yielded up not only Ishmael but Isaac, he got that great promise as to THE SEED, in whom all the nations of the earth are to be blessed (Gen. 22: 18).

A most elevated and striking example showing the intimacy of Abraham's communion with God is recorded in chapters 18 and 19, where he is let into the secrets of God's governmental dealings with the cities of the plain, and the Lord Himself says, "Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do?" adding "For I know him, that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord." What in the Old Testament bespeaks greater intimacy than the further record, "But Abraham stood yet before the Lord, and Abraham drew near and said . . .," and again, "The Lord went His way, as soon as He had left communing with Abraham"?

Read carefully the whole passage beginning with Genesis 18: 23 and continuing to the end of the chapter. Note the blending of deep reverence and simple familiarity in Abraham's remarkable pleadings; and then remember that all that he says is concerned not with himself nor any purely personal interest, but with the reputation and glory of the great "Judge of all the earth," in the first place, and with the deliverance of Lot and his family and the plight of the sinners of Sodom, in the second.

Thus did Abraham have communion with God about His things, rising out of his own littleness into the holy elevation that marks them, and thus as a privileged intercessor he gained the title, afterwards conferred, of "the friend of God."

And God treated Abraham as a friend; for we read, "It came to pass, when God destroyed the cities of the plain, that God remembered Abraham, and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow" (Gen. 19: 29). Abraham had not definitely asked for this. Still, in pursuing his intercession until he had obtained the promise that the cities would be spared if only ten righteous were found within, he

doubtless had Lot and his family in mind. There were not found ten righteous, but all the same God answered Abraham's prayer in the spirit of it by rescuing the one man who could be spoken of as righteous.

Genesis 22, which shows us the climax of Abraham's renunciation, equally gives us the climax of his communion, for there pre-eminently we see him as the man of faith moving amidst agonising circumstances with the serenity which comes from a clear intelligence of the mind and ways of God. What but spiritual understanding, the fruit of communion, could have prompted such a word to the young men who attended Abraham and Isaac as, "I and the lad will go yonder and worship, and come again to you"? This was no remark made at random under the stress of the moment, as Hebrews 11: 17-19 shows. He "offered up Isaac . . . accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead."

In those days life and incorruptibility had not "come to light " as they now have through the Gospel (see 2 Tim. 1: 10), yet as the fruit of communion and intercourse with God Abraham knew Him as the God of resurrection.

A little later comes Isaac's question as to the lamb. Abraham calmly answered, "My son, God will provide Himself a lamb for a burnt offering"; uttering thus, possibly without knowing it, a prophecy the scope of which went far beyond the immediate matter in hand. It became one of the great Old Testament predictions of the coming of the suffering Messiah, so greatly amplified when Isaiah 53 came to be written. Again we may say, how full and elevated must have been the communion which expressed itself in this calm certitude of faith! In very deed, God did not hide from Abraham the thing that He was about to do.

A third exhibition of faith and communion was seen in Abraham naming the place Jehovah-jireh — the Lord will provide. The spot became "the mount of the Lord," the site of the future temple.

It was all this that called forth the special approbation of heaven. "Thou hast obeyed My voice" was the Lord's commendation, for true communion always has its fruit in obedience. In connection with this there was that giving of the Divine oath as well as of the word — those "two immutable things" of which such important things are said in Hebrews 6: 13-20.

Clearly, then, Abraham held communion with God, even about things which were not in his day the subject of public revelation. He rejoiced in the coming Lamb of sacrifice, and in resurrection, in the city which hath foundations, and in the heavenly country — but all as a matter of anticipation, and held as a secret between his own soul and God.

We today are come to these things (see Hebrews 12: 22-24). They are fully revealed. The Lamb of sacrifice has appeared. Resurrection has come to pass in Him, being established beyond all dispute and now announced as an integral part of the Gospel. What glorious light, what heavenly privileges, are the portion of the Christian!

But what about our communion?

Do we let God talk to us about these things in His Word and by His Spirit given to us? Do we responsively talk to Him about them? Or are all our communications Godward occupied with our own trials and troubles and needs and wants?

Depend upon it, communion and renunciation go hand in hand. We cannot have one without the other. As we are in touch with God, so are we out of touch with the world, and vice versa. To happily embrace both is the way of joy and power and blessing.