**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**GENESIS-011. AN EXAMPLE OF FAITH by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"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 shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. So Abram departed, as the Lord had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran. And Abram 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; and into the land of Canaan they came. And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. And the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the Lord, who appeared unto him. And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Beth-el, and pitched his tent, having Beth-el on the west, and Hai on the east: and there he builded an altar unto the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south."*

*Genesis 12:1-9*

We stand here at the well-head of a great river--a narrow channel, across which a child can step, but which is to open out a broad bosom that will reflect the sky and refresh continents. The call of Abram is the most important event in the Old Testament, but it is also an eminent example of individual faith. For both reasons he is called the Father of the Faithful. We look at the incident here mainly from the latter point of view. It falls into three parts.

**I.** The divine voice of command and promise.--God's servants have to be separated from home and kindred, and all surroundings. The command to Abram was no mere arbitrary test of obedience. God could not have done what He meant with him, unless He had got him by himself. So Isaiah (li. 2) put his finger on the essential when he says, I called him alone. God's communications are made to solitary souls, and His voice to us always summons us to forsake friends and companions, and to go apart with God. No man gets speech of God in a crowd. If you desired to fill a person with electricity, you used to put him on a stool with glass legs, to keep him from earthly contact. If the quickening impulse from the great magnet is to charge the soul, that soul must be isolated. He that loveth father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me.

The vagueness of the command is significant. Abram did not know whither he went. He is not told that Canaan is the land, till he has reached Canaan. A true obedience is content to have orders enough for present duty. Ships are sometimes sent out with sealed instructions, to be opened when they reach latitude and longitude so-and-so. That is how we are all sent out. Our knowledge goes no farther ahead than is needful to guide our next step. If we go out as He bids us, He will show us what to do next.

I do not ask to see

The distant scene; one step enough for me.

Observe the promise. We may notice that it needed a soul raised above the merely temporal to care much for such promises. They would have been but thin diet for earthly appetites. A great nation; a divine blessing; to be a source of blessing to the whole world, and a touchstone by their conduct to which men would be blessed or cursed;--what was there in these to fascinate a man, unless he had faith to teach him the relative importance of the earthly and the heavenly, the present and the future? Notice that the whole promise appeals to unselfish desires. It is always, in some measure, elevating to live for a future, rather than a present, good; but if it be only the same kind of good as the present would yield, it is a poor affair. The only really ennobling faith is one which sets before itself a future full of divine blessing, and of diffusion of that blessing through us, and which therefore scorns delights, and for such gifts is content to be solitary and a wanderer.

**II.** The obedience of faith.--We have here a wonderful example of prompt, unquestioning obedience to a bare word. We do not know how the divine command was conveyed to Abram. We simply read, The Lord said; and if we contrast this with verse 7, The Lord appeared ...and said, it will seem probable that there was no outward sign of the divine will. The patriarch knew that he was following a divine command, and not his own purpose; but there seems to have been no appeal to sense to authenticate the inward voice. He stands, then, on a high level, setting the example of faith as unconditional acceptance of, and obedience to, God's bare word.

Observe that faith, which is the reliance on a person, and therefore trust in his word, passes into both forms of confidence in that word as promise, and obedience to that word as command. We cannot cut faith in halves, and exercise the one aspect without the other. Some people's faith says that it delights in God's promises, but it does not delight in His commandments. That is no faith at all. Whoever takes God at His word, will take all His words. There is no faith without obedience; there is no obedience without faith.

We have already said enough about the separation which was effected by Abram's journey; but we may just notice that the departure from his father's house was but the necessary result of the gulf between them and him, which had been opened by his faith. They were idolaters; he worshipped one God. That drove them farther apart than the distance between Sichem and Haran. When sympathy in religion was at an end, the breach of all other ties was best. So to-day, whether there be outward separation or no, depends on circumstances; but every true Christian is parted from the dearest who is not a Christian, by an abyss wider than any outward distance can make. The law for us is Abram's law, Get thee out. Either our faith will separate us from the world, or the world will separate us from our faith and our God.

The companionship of Lot, who attaches himself to Abram, teaches that religion, in its true possessors, exercises an attractive influence over even common natures, and may win them to a loftier life. Some weak eyes may discern more glory in the sunshine tinting a poor bit of mist into ruddy light than in the beam which is too bright to look at. A faithful Abram will draw Lot after him.

They went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came. Compare this singular expression with chapter xi. 31, where we have Terah's emigration from Ur described in the same terms, with the all-important difference in the end, They came not into Canaan, but unto Haran, and dwelt there. Many begin the course; one finishes it. Terah's journeying was only in search of pasture and an abode. So he dropped his wider scheme when the narrower served his purpose. It was an easy matter to go from Ur to Haran. Both were on the same bank of the Euphrates. But to cross the broad, deep, rapid river was a different thing, and meant an irrevocable cutting loose from the past life. Only the man of faith did that. There are plenty of half-and-half Christians, who go along merrily from Ur to Haran; but when they see the wide stream in front, and realise how completely the other side is separated from all that is familiar, they take another thought, and conclude they have come far enough, and Haran will serve their turn.

Again, the phrase teaches us the certain issue of patient pilgrimage and persistent purpose. There is no mystery in getting to the journey's end. One foot up, and the other foot down, continued long enough, will bring to the goal of the longest march. It looks a weary journey, and we wonder if we shall ever get thither. But the magic of one step at a time does it. The guide is also the upholder of our way. Every one of them appeareth before God in Zion.

**III.** The life in the land.--The first characteristic of it is its continual wandering. This is the feature which the Epistle to the Hebrews marks as significant. There was no reason but his own choice why Abram should continue to journey, and prefer to pitch his tent now under the terebinth tree of Moreh, now by Hebron, rather than to enter some of the cities of the land. He dwelt in tents because he looked for the city. The clear vision of the future detached him, as it will always detach men, from close participation in the present. It is not because we are mortal, and death is near at the furthest, that the Christian is to sit loose to this world, but because he lives by the hope of the inheritance. He must choose to be a pilgrim, and keep himself apart in feeling and aims from this present. The great lesson from the wandering life of Abram is, Set your affection on things above. Cultivate the sense of belonging to another polity than that in the midst of which you dwell. The Canaanites christened Abram The Hebrew (Genesis xiv. 13), which may be translated The man from the other side. That is the name which all true Christians should deserve. They should bear their foreign extraction in their faces, and never be naturalised subjects here. Life is wholesomer in the tent under the spreading tree, with the fresh air blowing about us and clear sky above, than in the Canaanite city.

Observe, too, that Abram's life was permeated with worship. Wherever he pitches his tent, he builds an altar. So he fed his faith, and kept up his communion with God. The only condition on which the pilgrim life is possible, and the temptations of the world cease to draw our hearts, is that all life shall be filled with the consciousness of the divine presence, our homes altars, and ourselves joyful thankofferings. Then every abode is blessed. The undefended tent is a safe fortress, in which dwelling we need not envy those who dwell in palaces. Common tasks will then be fresh, full of interest, because we see God in them, and offer them up to Him. The wandering life will be a life of walking with God, and progressive knowledge of Him; and over all the roughnesses and the sorrows and the trivialities of it will be spread the light that never was on sea or land, the consecration of God's presence, and the peacefulness of communion with Him.

Again, we may notice that the life of obedience was followed by fuller manifestations of God, and of His will. God appeared when Abram was in the land. Is it not always true that obedience is blessed by closer vision and more knowledge? To him that hath shall be given; and he who has followed the unseen Guide through dimly discerned paths to an invisible goal, will be gladdened when he reaches the true Canaan, by the sight of Him whom, having not seen, he loved. Even here on earth obedience is the path to fuller knowledge; and when the pilgrims who have left all and followed the Captain of salvation through a deeper, darker stream than Abram crossed, have touched the other side, God will appear to them, and say, as the enraptured eye gazes amazed on the goodly land, Arise, walk through the land in the length of it and in the breadth of it; for I will give it unto thee.