ONE

The Test of Discipleship

GEN. 11:27—12:3

As far as Scripture is concerned, our knowledge of Abram before his initial encounter with the Lord is restricted to a family tree spelled out in some detail at the conclusion of Gen. 11. We learn that compared to twenty-first-century standards, his immediate ancestors lived long lives, so he evidently had sturdy genes. Abram's immediate family first lived in Ur of the Chaldeans, making him a native of the ancient area known as Mesopotamia. He was one of three brothers, each of which had a wife. Abram's wife was named Sarai, and evidently the biblical writer was laying a foundation for subsequent marvelous divine actions in the life of this couple by mentioning that Sarai was barren, which was perceived in the ancient world as a curse for women.

This early record in Scripture gives us no clue as to the religious life of Abram's family. However, we can make a reasonable inference from ancient records of religious practices in the

Mesopotamian area. References to Babylonian life in texts such as Isa. 8:19 suggest that occult practices were widespread and no doubt included worship of astral deities. Joshua 24:15 implies that Abram's family members were idolaters as well.

Donald J. Wiseman describes the religious situation in Ur based on ancient documents:

> Religion in Babylonia at this time was polytheism of the grossest type. . . . more than three hundred distinct gods were worshipped. . . . Small idols, images and figurines (possibly the *teraphim* mentioned in Genesis xxxi. 19) were manufactured from clay by potters near the temple area. According to Jewish tradition Abraham's father traded in these idols and this polytheism was a feature of Abraham's early home life from which he revolted. His father is said to have worshipped twelve different gods. . . . "Your fathers dwelt of old beyond the river (Euphrates), Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nahor; and they served other gods" (Joshua xxiv. 2).[1]

Thus is it reasonably clear that Abram, along with his ancestors, was an idolater before God graciously revealed himself to him. This does not mean that Abram rejected all his former practices when he began to follow the "voice." As Abram followed the Lord, we will see both a growing faith and a developing ethical maturity. This transition from idolatry to ethical maturity did not occur quickly, simply, or easily. Contemporary Christians nurtured from childhood in the church may find it

difficult to be patient with new converts to Christ who do not immediately reflect model Christian behavior. Judged by the ideals embodied in God's creative intention for the human race, many, like Abram, fall miserably short. One of the most notable examples is John Newton, celebrated author of the popular hymn "Amazing Grace." For some time following his dramatic conversion from the depths of sin and corruption he remained the captain of a slave-trading ship, having, as he said, "sweet communion with the Lord." But as he matured, he realized the inconsistency of this occupation with being a Christian.

The idolatry of the heavenly bodies is probably reflected in a Jewish legend that when Abram started on his journeys, he saw the stars in the heavens and said, "I will worship the stars." But when the stars set, Abram saw the constellations, such as the Pleiades, and said, "I will worship the constellations." But the constellations also set. Then Abram saw the moon sailing high in the heavens and said, "I will worship the moon." But the moon also vanished when her season was over. Then Abram saw the sun in all his majesty, coming out of his chamber like a bridegroom and rejoicing as a strong runner in a race. But when the day was spent, he saw the sun sink on the western horizon. Stars, constellations, moon, sun—all were unworthy of his worship, for all had set and disappeared. Then Abram said, "I will worship God, for He abides forever."

Knowing all this we are left with the impression that there was little in Abram's background that would have prepared him

for an encounter with the true and living God, except what Wesleyans would call prevenient grace. But God's grace is always a mystery. It does not conform to human standards or plans. It may appear without cause—except for the mercy of God—and without normal human preparation. But whether or not we can explain it, what is most important is that this pagan man heard and responded to the "voice."

Although these studies mainly focus on one aspect of the Abraham saga, we will give some attention here to another that is also important. This other aspect is suggested by the preceding observation about Abram's awareness of a "voice" that transcended his culture and by the words of E. A. Speiser: "Abraham's journey to the Promised Land was thus no routine expedition of several hundred miles. Instead, it was the start of an epic voyage in search of spiritual truths, a quest that was to constitute the central theme of all biblical history."[2]

Because he followed the "voice," Abram was always on the move. By living this way in the Promised Land Abram developed an understanding of God that distinguished God from contemporary objects of worship. In that period—and later as well—the prevailing polytheistic religion was characterized by numerous local gods. Thus each local area had its own god who was limited to that place. The idea that Abram's God was mobile—not restricted to one city or place, but equally present wherever Abram camped—was a significant theological development. As A. Carter Shelley says, "A mobile God was one of

the primary contributions made by the Hebrews."[3] In the light of the numerous worship shrines dedicated to Baal in Canaan, and soon taken over by the Israelites, this concept of God was probably the basis for the Shema, found in Deut. 6:4-5: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone."

Contemporary readers of the Bible may have a difficult time grasping the radical nature of the call of Abram. With centuries of theological development and biblical knowledge about the Lord available to them, people today often fail to realize that Abram of Ur was not privy to any of this information. All Abram had to go on was a "voice." As he followed that "voice," we find Abram not only maturing ethically in his own character but also increasingly understanding the character of the One whose "voice" he had heard.[4] Thus an important part of his journey, which possibly takes on new elements at each stage, is a growing knowledge of the One whom he named El, the name of the Semitic high god that was often associated with other descriptive terms (e.g., El Shaddai [God Almighty]). It was only at the revelation of the divine name at the burning bush that the children of Abraham came to know the One they called El as Yahweh (Exod. 6:2-4).[5]

This way of thinking about Abraham's theological development is suggested by the observations of Pfeiffer:

> There are few if any practices in Abraham's worship that are unique, except the object of that worship. Far more important are the elements that are missing, specifically the preoc-

> cupation with fertility and ceremonies connected with the yearly agricultural cycle. . . . The truly unique element of Abraham's faith was the special place that he had in the purposes of God and his obedience in fulfilling those purposes.[6]

However we may explain the call, when it came, it was a call for Abram to turn his back on his past and step out into an unknown future. In a sense, that is always the nature of the divine call. The future is unknown to us, and only God knows the implications of our present decisions. Because of the environment in which Abram was immersed, we can say that responding to God's voice meant dropping a curtain on the past. This was a decision that meant more than physical separation from his family, his home environment, and the familiar setting that had up till now shaped his life. It meant a separation involving his values, priorities, and worldview. The latter would be the most difficult separation and would take time and maturation. Oswald Chambers describes the difficulty of this separation in these words: "One of the hardest lessons to learn is the one brought out by Abraham's obedience to the call of God. He went 'out' of all his own ways of looking at things and became a fool in the eyes of the world."[7]

Based on the call of Abram in Gen. 12:1 that is marked by an increasingly personal identification ("from your country and your kindred and your father's house"), Jewish scholar N. Liebowitz points out that this sequence is contrary to what would be expected, for the logical sequence is that one first leaves his

home, then his birthplace, and after that his country. She concurs with early Jewish commentators that what is being suggested by the passage is "a spiritual rather than physical withdrawal, beginning with the periphery and ending with the inner core."[8]

We have a reasonable sense of what Abram's call was *from* and, from our contemporary perspective, what it was *to*, but from Abram's point of view, it was a total mystery. It was a call into a relationship with God "for his own purposes, and the test of faith is to believe that God knows what he is after. The call of God only becomes clear as we obey, never as we weigh the *pros* and *cons* and try to reason it out."[9]

The narrative tells us that Abram was seventy-five years old at the time of his departure from Haran. It is true that he was not an old man by contemporary standards, but he was no "spring chicken." He could easily have reasoned that at this age, it made no sense to leave the comforts and securities he enjoyed, abandon an urban area of advanced civilization and wealth, and head out into the barren land to the west.

The difficulty of Abram's response may be seen by his not pulling up stakes until his father, Terah, had died. His initial call came while his family was living in Ur of the Chaldeans. For whatever reason, the family's relocation at Haran to the north began with the intention to go to Canaan, but Terah decided to remain there.[10] It was here that God apparently spoke the second time to Abram, calling him to go farther, and it was

from this point that his pilgrimage began. All calls to discipleship are calls to go farther.

What do we make of this? It is reasonably easy to explain from a human point of view. Abram lived within a patriarchal culture that had strict mores about family life. The oldest male in the extended family was considered the patriarch and his was the role of absolute ruler of the family, making decisions that were binding for every member of the clan. The patriarch served as the priest, judge, and arbiter of all relations including marriage. Thus if a young member of the family declared his independence and left the oversight of the patriarch, that young person was viewed in a strongly negative way.[11] We see this acted out later in the case of Esau. This strong cultural influence was possibly the reason for Abram's delay in responding to the voice he heard. When Terah—his father and patriarch—died, the door was open for him to make the decision to leave home and country and head into the unknown.

Nevertheless, this was a traumatic decision that meant making a clean break with the past. The author remembers the response his own family made in becoming Christians. There was a trip to a prayer altar, followed by actions that symbolized leaving the old life behind. A bonfire was kindled—in the heating stove—and family members burned everything in the house they associated with the past. No doubt some of the items burned represented innocent practices, but the action signified a commitment to live out the grace they had experienced.

This kind of initial response has ongoing consequences, and decisions must be made along the way. Rare is the person who does not stumble at some point in pursuing that course. Abram, too, had some failures along the way, but there is no indication that he ever looked back. Dr. A. K. Bracken would often say to his students, "No matter how often I stumble and fall, I will always get up with my face toward the city of God."

The children of Abraham are called to the same response. Jesus' call to discipleship demanded the same radical reply:

> Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry the cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, saying, "This fellow began to build, and was not able to finish." . . . So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions. (Luke 14:25-30, 33)

Like Abram, this response has both a negative and a positive side. It means leaving behind the old way of life. Like Matthew, who left behind the "tax booth" (Matt. 9:9), and Peter and John, who left behind their fishing nets (4:18-22), the Lord calls us to "burn the bridges behind us." On the positive side, we are called to a new relationship, to become part of a new

family to which we are to give our primary loyalty, the family of Abraham, the friend of God.