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## **Bible Study**

### **The Call of Abraham: “Get out of your country” Turning Our Backs on the World**

*Now the LORD had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” So Abram departed as the LORD had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:1-5).*

#### ***Terah and His Family***

Before this incident, we read that Terah took his sons out of the land of the Chaldeans to Haran. It says, “And Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram’s wife, and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan; and they came to Haran and dwelt there” (Genesis 11:31).

However, Saint Stephen in the Acts of the Apostles says, “Brethren and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran, and said to him, ‘Get out of your country and from your relatives, and come to a land that I will show you.’ Then he came out of the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. And from there, when his father was dead, He moved him to this land in which you now dwell” (Acts 7:2-4).

Saint John Chrysostom explains the seeming contradiction. Terah was a heathen dwelling in the land of the Chaldeans. Nevertheless, out of affection for his God-fearing son, Abram, he left the land of the Chaldeans and dwelt in Haran. Then after Terah died in Haran, Abram was commanded to continue to Canaan. We will see the significance of this later.

#### ***Leaving Behind the Obvious***

When God commands Abram to leave his country, he essentially tells him, “Leave behind what is obvious and accepted, and choose that which is not very clear or apparent.” So Abraham from beginning chose the less obvious over the more obvious, and future realities over those at hand. Abraham went to a place that he did not fully understand. God did not explain to him anything about this new place

He would show him. This required a detached attitude that was not held down by any habit. For us, sometimes we cling to our habits and are even willing to endure hardship for the sake of not changing.

It is very easy for us to become obsessed with the visible realities of this world. Even though we claim to be seeking after the Kingdom of God, we are living for this world. We often choose to live for the body first, while ignoring the soul. That is, we are trading the visible for the invisible. Likewise, we trade the invisible world of the age to come for the visible world of today.

We are not created for this purpose. Only after the fall of mankind did the soul become subject to the body, rather than the body to the soul. Sometimes, we think that real life is found here on earth. Actually, in turning our backs on the world and ascending toward God will we find true life and understand what our life on earth is all about.

### ***The Excuses We Make***

*Question: How could Abraham have avoided the Lord's commandment? What excuses could he have made?*

The Lord gives Abraham a rather vague commandment, for He neither reveals the place nor the country to which Abraham is headed. At the very least Abraham could have asked, "All right, you bid me leave the country I'm now living in, my kindred, my ancestral home. Why don't you make clear to me the country you order me to travel to, so that I may be in a position to know how great the distance? How, after all, tell me, is it going to become clear that the place will be shown to be better and more prosperous than the one I am leaving?"

Abraham could have also used the excuse of his father's death to stay. After all, many people prefer to die in the same place as their parents and other family members. He could have also said that his father had endured much to leave the land of the Chaldeans for my sake. He left his home and all his customs. Therefore, I at least owe it to him to stay here in Haran. However, in all of these things, Abraham's love for God helped ease the burden and made the commandment light.

Abraham could have also used age as an excuse. He could have said, "How can I travel now at my age, as I near the end of my days?" He could have asked, "How can I leave unaccompanied by my relatives and become separated from all those

who by family ties are my support?” Here some other questions he could have asked:

“How can I in this desolate and lonely condition take possession of a foreign place without even knowing where my wandering will stop?”

“If it should be my misfortune to lose my life halfway through the journey, what will be the good of this terrible upheaval? Who will lay out for burial this old man, this refugee, friendless and homeless?”

Far from entertaining these questions, Abraham hastened to obey the command.

The Lord promised a reward to Abraham, namely blessing. So Abraham may have asked, “Why do you guide me to a foreign land and bid me take possession of someone else’s country? If you really intend to make me great, why on earth not do it to me here? Why would you not grant me blessing while living in my ancestral home?”

Also, we might say to ourselves, “Of course Abraham obeyed when God gave him such a great promise.” Our vision is always 20/20 in hindsight, because we know the end of Abraham. Aren’t we in Abraham’s position in the same way? Haven’t we received many promises of paradise and eternal life in the age to come? Yet, we often ignore these promises to cling to our habits.

### ***Reminders of God’s Promises***

As we continue to read, we see that Abraham only took those things that he had acquired in Haran. He left behind all the Chaldean possessions. Someone might ask, “Was Abraham so attached to his possessions? Why didn’t he leave everything behind?” Saint John Chrysostom explains that by taking the possessions he acquired in Haran it would be a constant reminder of God’s providence. After all, Abraham left his home in the land of the Chaldeans, and, since coming to Haran, God increased his goods and possessions until he was prosperous. Therefore, these possessions would be a reminder of God’s goodness and kindness toward him.

So let us summarize the measure of Abraham’s faith and obedience: God told him to leave everything, kindred and house together, and he left them; He told him to go to a land he did not know, and he agreed; He promised to make him into a mighty nation and to bless him, and he believed that this too would happen. As the Lord God had told him, so he set out – that is to say, he believed the words coming

from God, with no hesitation or uncertainty, but rather with mind and purpose firmly decided he set out; hence he enjoyed great favor from the Lord.

### ***Three Renunciations***

We cannot simply read these stories from Bible without asking ourselves, “Why does this mean to me? How can I imitate the greatness of our father Abraham?”

The road to the obedience, faith, and virtues of the saints begins with detachment. Saint John Climacus teaches us in the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* that the first rung on our climb in the spiritual life begins with this concept.

In Saint John Cassian’s conferences, we read in the third conference a contemplation from Abba Paphnutius about three renunciations: 1) in bodily fashion, we despise all the wealth and resources of the world, 2) we reject the former behavior, vices, and affections of soul and body, and 3) we call our mind away from everything that is present and visible and contemplate only what is to come and desire those things that are invisible.

These three renunciations, according to Abba Paphnutius, correspond to the three-fold command of God to Abraham: 1) Get out of your country, 2) from your family, and 3) from your father’s house.

‘Country’ refers to the resources of this world and to earthly wealth.

‘Your family’ corresponds to the former way of life and behavior and vices that have been related to us from our earth by a connection, as it were, of a certain affinity or consanguinity. Even when we put away our previous sins and vices, we can remember them as a way to avoid falling into them again, but not in a way that will cause us to repeat our offenses. In remembering our past sins, we can contemplate on the great grace that our Lord has shown us, and His loving-kindness and forgiveness. For example, Saint Paul writes, “For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but with the grace of God which was with me” (1 Corinthians 15:9-10). Saint John Chrysostom reminds us that Saint Paul does not lose sight of his own failings, but ponders them insistently, the sins for which he was quite sure he had received forgiveness in baptism he does not even allow himself to forget. It was through God’s grace that Saint Paul could say, “I am what I am.”

‘Your father’s house’ refers to every remnant of this world, which the eyes gaze upon. There is the father, which must be forsaken, and the one that must be longed for. We ought to contemplate on the things that are unseen. The things that are seen are temporal, but the unseen are eternal. We direct our eyes from the temporal and visible house to the one in which we shall abide forever. We accomplish this by not walking according to the flesh, but remembering that our citizenship is in the heavens (Philippians 3:20). We leave the former parent of our old man, and cling to the new.

We may turn away from certain behaviors physically and outwardly, but what about the heart? For example, the children of Israel left Egypt physically, but they turned back to their former way life in their hearts. Even though they saw signs and wonders as God led them out of Egypt, they turned to the idols they once disdained. After eating the heavenly manna, they said, “We remember the fish which we ate freely in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic” (Numbers 11:5). So even if a person appears to renounce this world and its desires, in his or her heart, he or she may say, “It was well with me in Egypt.” Of the six hundred three thousand armed men who left Egypt, only two entered into the Promised Land. Many are called, but few are chosen. Therefore, bodily renunciation and removal from Egypt, as it were, will be of no value to us. The renunciation of the heart is far more valuable and beneficial.

Saint Paul also reminds us, “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing” (1 Corinthians 13:3). So imagine, even if we fulfill the gospel commandment to go, sell, all that we have and give to the poor, in order to be perfect and have treasure in heaven. Or imagine if we go to martyrdom and hand over our bodies for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. Yet, if we are impatient, angry, envious, proud, or inflamed by the insults of others, or if I seek what is my own or think what is evil or do not bear patiently and willingly all the things that could be inflicted upon me, the renunciation of the outer man will mean nothing.

Consider the Apostles. What did they leave behind? These poor fishermen left nothing more than some torn nets. Yet, they achieved greatness. So their abandonment came in the heart and not necessarily their possessions.

We must renounce the three things in order to attain the Promised Land, ‘Come to the land which I shall show you.’

We begin with the little measures of obedience and renunciations each day. Provide examples of following the instructions of others or by delaying.

What is our motivation? We must attach to something. Just as his love for God drove Abraham to leave everything and to trust him, we also must do the same in this life. If we renounce earthly things without anything to hold onto, we will feel very empty. But if we cling to our Lord Jesus Christ, then we will possess everything.

**Glory is due to our God forever. Amen.**