

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Learning difficult lessons with Abraham: Learning to leave

Learning is a vital part of living. I can't claim to have ever loved school, but I've always enjoyed learning: it's one of the reasons I love reading so much. One of the positive aspects of the internet is the way that so much information is available so quickly. There are many different ways to learn. I am still slowly learning to sail by exhilarating, if damp, experience! I love to listen to people telling me about their experiences and interests in life. I can travel across space and time, as somebody tells me their personal experience of countries and ages I have never seen.

Today we start a series looking at what we can learn from the life of Abram as recorded in the Bible. I've never seen any of the places Abram visited, except on the TV, and there is nobody alive today to recall the age he lived in, but God caused Abram's history to be recorded for us to learn from it. We'll begin by reading Genesis 12:1-5: *"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 I will 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. So they came to the land of Canaan."*

Leaving places

The first thing that God says Abram will have to leave is his country (Genesis 12:5). In an age of cheap and fast international travel this probably sounds less dramatic to us than it did to Abram. We might try and imagine ourselves back into the early Victorian era, when few people travelled further than the nearest town, and many people never got farther than the next village in their entire life. Such people might hardly have been able to understand what travelling to another country might involve, and their outlook would have been much closer to Abram's than ours is. In case you are thinking that counties were quite small in those days, and leaving the country didn't necessarily mean a huge journey, Canaan is over four hundred miles from Ur as the crow flies, and travelling via Haran made it perhaps 800 miles or more. That was a vast distance when the speed of travel was limited by the speed that animals and humans could walk.

Leaving the country meant travelling to somewhere that people spoke another language, ate different food, had different customs and worshipped different gods. This call would totally transform Abram's life. We normally think of Abram as some kind of Bedouin, a nomad moving from place to place, but Abram was not born into a travelling family. He left a civilised major city, and he didn't leave as a boy or a young man; he had lived in that city for decades. It was a significant step of faith to move out into the unknown.

Leaving people

Leaving a place can be hard enough, but leaving people is much harder. Historically, immigrants have tended to live together in one city, or one area of a city. That way they can still surround themselves with reminders of home. Many migrants arrive by themselves and then bring family over later. Family ties are strong.

Abram was instructed to *"Get out ... from your family"* (Genesis 12:1) We are not told why Abram was to leave his family, but one thing is always true of God's call to faith - we are all called individually. Those of us who have Christian parents can thank God for their loving influence and instruction, but we each had to trust Christ for ourselves. Thank God, that He often saves whole families of people but, again, each of them is saved individually. Our parents will always be due our respect, and their counsel may be very valuable to us, especially if they have loved us well and long, but we are finally answerable to God, not them, and sometimes, for a variety of reasons, God may ask us to leave our families behind.

Leaving certainties and support structures

The third thing that God says Abram will have to leave is his father's house (Genesis 12:1). In the culture that Abram lived in, your ancestry was vitally important. What your father did and was, defined your prospects much more closely than it does today. Politicians today talk about 'social mobility'; meaning the ability to rise above your parents in terms of wealth and social position. They mean that the son of an unemployed bricklayer should be free to become a lawyer

or a wealthy businessman, if he is prepared to study and work hard. In Abram's time the son of a farmer became a farmer, the son of merchantman became a merchant and the son of a poor man almost certainly remained poor. Your father's house represented your position in life and your safety net. In an age with no social security system of any description, your father's household was your chief form of security, long after you had left home. In calling Abram to leave his father's house, God was asking Abram to abandon all the certainties in his life, and all the support structures that he could ever hope for. If leaving his family would cut the social and relationship ties, leaving the house would cut the economic ones.

Applications for us

We want to study Abram's experience to learn lessons for ourselves, so let's consider a couple of ways that these things might apply to us.

Life stage leaving

Most of us who are adults know what it is to leave home and family. We have set out to make our own home and, perhaps, our own family. This is part of the biblical pattern for growing up and marriage. Occasionally, you still hear somebody who has grown up with the King James Bible refer to marriage as 'leaving' family and 'cleaving' to a spouse (Genesis 2:24, Matthew 19:5). We still have many responsibilities to the parents we have left, but we have taken on new responsibilities and new priorities of our own. If we come from Christian families, then we can take the example and teaching of our parents as some kind of pattern for the new life we are entering into, but we need to learn for ourselves what God is calling **us** to do for Him with our lives.

Missionary leaving

When God calls people today to leave country, family and father's house, it might well be a missionary calling. We can't really describe Abram as a missionary; he wasn't sent to tell other people about God, but we can see some parallels. There is the same call to go to a different climate, culture and language. The same challenge of leaving family far behind is encountered. The same loss of social security and the real dependence on God are certainly there. Of course, not every Christian is called to be a missionary, but every Christian should seriously ask them self whether this is something God is calling them to. It is too easy to start with the assumption that missionaries are some special breed of human being, and therefore I can't possibly be one. All the missionaries I know, even those who have done special things for God, are very much ordinary people that God called to do something out of the ordinary.

Escapist leaving - running away

Not all leaving is good. If you're anything like me, you will have known lots of times when you would have happily run away from a situation. Not just in fear, but to escape from responsibilities, challenges or problems that just seemed too much to face. A job that is too challenging, a relationship that is too demanding, a problem, perhaps one of our own creation, which seems to have no clear solution: all of these can make us want to run away. Abram's leaving was not running away, and we shouldn't imagine that God is calling us to escape our difficulties by flight. Even if God does want to take us out of a difficult situation, maybe find a new job that is a little less demanding, He wants us to face the current situation first, with His help; not to run away.

Going towards

It's possible to look at every action from two different perspectives. What looks from one point of view like leaving place A, might, from another, be seen as moving towards place B. Abram was leaving Ur and Haran, but he was moving towards Canaan. "*Get out...*" (Genesis 12:1), was the first part of God's command, but it was quickly followed with "*... to a land that I will show you*" (Genesis 12:1). When God calls us to leave something, He is always calling us to move towards another. He may not always make clear from the start what that new destination is, Abram was not given a clear description of where he was going - certainly no map of the route. Sometimes the main purpose is to learn to trust God. Indeed, that seems to have been the principal purpose in God's first calling to Abram. God knows that human beings need some destination to move towards, some hope to sustain them, and He always provides these.

Finding new things...

To do

God never calls us to total inaction. There might be times when He sends circumstances, such as illness, that prevent us from doing external activities, but He then wants us to focus on internal actions. God's command in Psalm 46:10 was not just "*Be Still*", but "*Be still, and know that I am God.*" Even in stillness there are things for us to do! Abram would have journeys to make, decisions to face, a son to raise and a great deal to learn about faith, God and himself. God wasn't calling him to leave Ur and Haran and do nothing. So it is with us. Whenever God calls us to leave a place or an activity, He has something new, something better in view for us.

To learn

Sometimes that 'something new' might be something difficult. We might not regard it as better at all! God had a lot of

things that He wanted Abram to learn, and He regularly led Abram into very difficult circumstances to teach him those lessons. Abram didn't always make all the right decisions. We will consider more of these lessons in later talks in this series, but it wasn't long after Abram and Sarai entered Canaan before a famine resulted in them going to Egypt, and they both told lies to avoid potential problems. Abram went right on learning lessons for the rest of his life. He learned through success as well as failure, and we can expect God to keep leading us into new learning experiences as long as He leaves us in this world.

To hope for

I don't know what kind of things Abram hoped for when he was in Ur. Maybe he wished for a new, bigger house and more respect in his community. I'm sure he longed for children.

People still hope for those things today, and there is nothing at all wrong with them, but they are not things that can finally satisfy the longings in human hearts. Human relationships are much more satisfying than houses and status, but they are not **ultimately** fulfilling. One of the tragedies of living without God at the centre of our lives is that we are constantly trying to fill that space with other things; and always failing. It's interesting that God gave Abram lots of material blessings, he was an incredibly wealthy and powerful man, but God worked hard to fix Abram's contentment and his hope elsewhere. Since we live in a world where most of us have levels of luxury and convenience that Abram never even dreamed of, we would do well to learn from him how to be well off, but hoping for non-material things.

One of the things that appear to have helped Abram fix his hopes elsewhere was his lack of a son. Without an heir, all Abram's wealth was of little value to him. To be able to pass on that wealth, for God to fulfil His promises of making Abram into a great nation, Abram needed a son, and he had no power himself to make that happen. That realisation that there are things that we cannot gain for ourselves, and that our lives are temporary and incomplete in themselves, will help us to hope for other things. May God teach us to hope for eternal things that only He can provide.

Empty hands/heart - for God to fill

We said earlier that one of the chief things that God was teaching Abram was to trust Him. Abram, or Abraham as he later became, is the most famous example of faith in the Bible, and is referred to as the "*father of all those who believe*" in Romans 4:11. God wanted to fill Abram's heart, and He wanted to fill it with God Himself. One of the first steps in doing that, was to empty it of other things. I think this is the chief reason that Abram was called to leave, country, family and father's house. There was nothing wrong with any of those things, and they are things that fill people's lives in quite natural and permissible ways, but God had something better planned for Abram.

So God set about emptying Abram's hands, and Abram's heart, of the things that were currently occupying them, in order to fill them with Himself.

Leaving bad influences

Ur of the Chaldeans was the place that Abram was initially called to leave. It was a comparatively large place; a prosperous and a civilised place. The Chaldeans were an advanced nation and they were to become proverbial for their knowledge. Why would God call Abram from such an advanced city and send him to the underdeveloped land of Canaan? One of the reasons was that Ur was a place of idolatry. All of us are influenced by the society and the people around us, and those influences are often bad ones. The people in Canaan were idolaters as well, but Abram didn't live among them in the same way that he did in Ur. In Canaan he lived with his wife and nephew in tents, pitched out in the countryside. In Ur he lived in a house in the city. God isn't calling us to abandon cities, and live in the countryside or in monasteries and convents! Nor is He calling us to give up all non-Christian friends and only associate with other believers. Nevertheless, there are often people who are particularly bad influences on us. Perhaps they were our friends, or acquaintances, before we became Christians, and they still encourage to do things that we wanted to stop when we trusted Christ. Maybe you have bad influences that God is calling you to leave behind.

What you always take with you - you!

Have you ever watched one of those TV programmes where a family moves from Nottingham to Australia in search of a new life? In addition to looking for more sunshine and a new career, these families often turn out to be trying to escape some problem. Maybe the parents are always quarrelling, or one of the children is struggling in school. They hope that moving to the other side of the world will let them leave their problems behind. This seldom works.

What they all seem to forget, is that where ever in the world you go, the one thing you always take with you is yourself! If you were quarrelsome in Nottingham, you will be quarrelsome in Brisbane! Abram didn't get a one step character transformation when he arrived in Canaan. We must not expect God to remove all our failures and character flaws after our first steps of obedience. "*He who has begun a good work in you will complete it*" (Philippians 1:6), but not today!

God's promises

God would later make some very explicit promises to Abram, but there are several promises contained in this first call to follow that are worth noting.

Direction

God sends Abram "... to a land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1) We have already noticed that God does not say what this land is, or what the route there might be, but He does promise that He will show the way. This is characteristic of the way that God directs us today. He does not tell us from the beginning exactly where He will lead us through the world, and He certainly does not map out every turn for us. What He does do, is promise that He will always be ready to direct, and never abandon us to find our own way.

Presence

The promise of God's presence with Abram is more implied than stated, but when God repeatedly says "*I will*" (5 times in Genesis 12:1-3), He effectively promises that His presence will go with Abram throughout his journeys. It seems to me, that this is one of God's greatest promises. "*I will never leave you nor forsake you*" (Hebrews 13:5) is a wonderful strength and comfort in good times and bad. There would be occasions in Abram's life when, for a time, he left God, but God never left him.

Perhaps Abram had moments when it **felt** like God had left him, we certainly feel that way at times, but God never took His eye off His servant, and His presence remained with Abram right through his long life of faith.

Blessing

"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." The promise of God's blessing is loud and clear, but I wonder if Abram realised, at that point, how God would fulfil those promises. We will consider in a later talk how Abram had to wait for a son to begin that "great nation". Hebrews 11 makes it clear that Abram never possessed the promised land in the way we might have thought. *"By faith [Abraham] dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents"*, Hebrews 11:9. Indeed, the writer of Hebrews makes clear that Abram was looking for blessings beyond his time and beyond this world when he says, in Hebrews 11:10, *"He waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."* So Abram left a city with foundations, but built by men, to live in tents all his life, while waiting for a different kind of city with permanent foundations and structure, built by God. It is not hard for us to see parallels with our calling as believers in the Lord Jesus. We are called by Christ to follow Him and given wonderful promises of blessing, but most of those blessings are not to be fully realised in this world. We are called to be ready to leave many things in this world, and to live as if this world is not our permanent place of residence (which of course it isn't!) as we move on towards a permanent residence, built and made for us by God Himself.

Onward Blessing

Abram wasn't just promised blessings for himself; he was called to **be** a blessing to others. *"You shall be a blessing ... In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed"* (Genesis 12:2-3). God intends our role in his great 'plumbing system' of blessing, to be that of pipes rather than tanks! In other words, we are not meant to be 'dead end' stores of God's blessings; we are meant to transmit them to others. This is true at many levels. With the gospel itself: we should receive it with thanks and then look to pass it on to others. If God has blessed us with material things, we should be ready to pass them on, and to share. If God has given us some understanding of His word, we should be ready to teach others. Even the youngest and least gifted can be thankful for what Christ has done for them and pass on a smile and a kind word to others in response. There are very few blessings that cannot be passed on and shared.

Conclusion

May God teach us to leave the things that will not help us, press on towards His best for us, and never forget to share His blessings with all those with whom He brings us into contact.

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