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GOODBYE TO NORMAL LIFE

“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” [Gen. 12: 1]

“And another also said, Lord, I will follow Thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, which are at home at my house. And Jesus said unto him, no man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God” [Lk 9:61-62]

People are generally on the move: from rural to urban areas, from one region to another within the same country, or from one country to another. Some people are forced to move because of natural disasters, such as famine, floods, fire, or earthquake. Others move because of man-made crises, such as inter-ethnic/inter-racial/inter-territorial disputes and wars, or industrial accidents. Some others move of their own volition to greener pastures abroad. According to recent statistics from the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), there are nearly 22 million refugees [people forced to move] in the world today.¹ Figures from the International Labour Organization (ILO) indicate that there are 100 million migrants [people in search of better economic fortunes who may not return to their places of birth], among whom are over 35 million working overseas.²

There is yet another group of migrants who have no reason to move. They are comfortable. They are fully settled in their homelands. Everything looks good into the foreseeable future. Then, one day, God asks them to give up such settled normal lives and move into uncertainty in a new country. They did not ask for it because, in the words of Jesus, “you have not chosen Me, but I have chosen you” [Jn 15:16]. They can refuse since God does not force us to serve Him, but it is not wise to turn God down. Some of us pray each day, asking God to make us labourers in His vineyard. He can knock on your door tomorrow, but you can be sure that He won’t post you to the playground near your home!

In today’s lesson, we shall study the call of Abraham at the age of 75 years and see what we can learn from it. It is the story of “goodbye to normal life!”

¹ The Refugee Story in Statistics, <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home?page=statistics>

² Peter Stalker, *The Work of Strangers* (International Labour Organization 1994); see also ILO Website, <http://www.ilo.org/> for updates.

1. Have you ever been there?

John was the choirmaster in our church in Lagos, Nigeria, in the mid-1980s, and he was a gifted singer. He was a senior information officer with the Federal Government of Nigeria. His employers gave him a fully furnished apartment in Ikoyi, the most prestigious part of Lagos. I remember how he used to react, jokingly, to one song on Christian commitment to Christ. One line of the song goes like this, “Can you forego your job for Jesus’ sake?” Each time we got there, John would say, “Ah, no!” and we would all laugh.

Speaking seriously, I am asking you that same question right now. Can you forego your present comfortable life for Jesus’ sake? It is quite easy to bubble with enthusiasm in a comfortable and stable setting, thinking that we are doing quite well in the Lord’s vineyard. We may be doing well in our chosen field of human endeavour and we thank God for that. We may be married with children who are doing quite well. We are in good health, with wise investments, and looking forward to retirement. Or, we may be completing our studies and looking forward to good jobs or professional practice. Most importantly, we may be quite active in the local church.

Then, out of the blues comes God’s command to do the unexpected. He may require you to give up everything you are doing right now and to follow an entirely different course. It may require your having to relocate to a new place, or to give up a lucrative business or profession. How would you react? Here is a sample of people like us that God had called out of normal life to do something for Him:

- ❑ Abraham was 75 years old when God called him to leave Syria, his homeland, and settle permanently in Canaan [this is the case we shall study today];
- ❑ Isaiah was required to walk “naked and barefoot three years for a sign and wonder upon Egypt and Ethiopia” [Is. 20:3];
- ❑ Jeremiah was required not to marry at all [Jer. 16:2];
- ❑ God told Ezekiel, “Son of man, behold, I take away from thee the desire of thine eyes with a stroke; yet neither shalt thou mourn nor weep, neither shall thy tears run down.” In the evening the next day, his dear wife died! [Ezek. 24:15-18];
- ❑ Hosea, a prophet, was asked by God to marry Gomer, a well-known prostitute, and she continued her trade even in marriage! [Hos. 1:2];
- ❑ Amos was a successful farmer, a “herdman and a gatherer of sycamore fruit” when he was called to become a full-time prophet [Amos 7:14];
- ❑ Peter was a businessman, a fisherman with a flourishing family business, when Jesus chose him to become a “fisher of men” [Mk 1:16-20];

- Paul trained under Gamaliel, “a doctor of the law,” [Acts 5:34], with the hope of becoming a high-ranking Pharisee in the Jewish council. However, Jesus called him out to become an itinerant Apostle of the Gentiles [Acts 9:15].

In all those cases, they never returned to the lives from which they had been plucked. When Peter asked Jesus what they would receive in return for giving up everything to follow Him, here was His response:

There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for My sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life [Mk 10:28-30]

Yes, temporal and eternal blessings will follow, but with a heavy price tag, persecutions! Therefore, it is goodbye to normal life! Let us look at Abraham's case.

2. Abraham's case

a) *Normal life before the call*

Abraham [originally called Abram] came from the lineage of Shem, one of Noah's sons that had survived the flood [Gen. 11: 10-26]. He was the son of Terah and the brother of Nahor and Haran [the father of Lot] [vv. 26-27]. Abraham's wife was Sarah [originally called Sarai], a very beautiful woman who was barren [v. 29]. Their native land was Ur of the Chaldees, which makes Abraham a Syrian [Gen. 11:31; Deut. 26:5].

After the death of Haran, Lot's father, Terah, took his son, Abram, daughter-in-law, Sarai, and grandson, Lot, and moved into the land of Canaan, to a place called Haran (apparently named after his late son). It was there that Terah died at the age of 205 years [Gen. 11:32]. In Haran, Abram acquired some “substance” [wealth] and servants [Gen. 12: 5].

b) *The call to emigrate*

At the age of 75 (his wife was 10 years younger- Gen. 17:17), God asked Abram to move “out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee” [Gen. 12:1]. In addition, God promised to make a great nation out of him, and make his name great [v. 2]. He left “as the Lord had spoken unto him,” taking with him his wife and nephew [vv. 4-5]. He did not hesitate, and God is pleased with those who trust Him [Heb. 11:6]. Soon after, God appeared to him to let him know that “unto thy seed will I give this land.” The first thing that Abram

did on that land was to build “an altar unto the Lord, who appeared unto him” [Gen. 12:7]. He knew whom he had believed [2 Tim. 1:12].

c) *Now, the hard part!*

Was God going to give Abraham the promises on a platter of gold? No way! He had to be emptied of his worldliness and prepared as God’s vessel. Here is a sample of what he and his wife passed through:

- ❑ Famine drove them into Egypt where the Pharaoh almost took Sarai from him. But, out of the encounter, God made him richer [Gen. 12:10-20];
- ❑ Abram met Melchizedek, king of Salem, a figure of the Preincarnate Christ, to whom he paid the first recorded tithe in Scripture [Gen. 14:17-20];
- ❑ After 10 years, the promised child had still not come. So, Abram and his wife tried a carnal approach to bring God’s word to pass by making Abram marry Sarai’s maid, Hagar, who bore him Ishmael, the father of the modern Arabs [Gen. 16:1-16]. However, God reiterated that it would be a child from Sarai’s womb.
- ❑ They waited for another 14 years before the promise was fulfilled. At the time, Abram was 99 years old and his wife, 89! Abram had to be circumcised as part of the covenant. Remember, at that time, they had no sophisticated hospital equipment and supplies to minimize the old man’s pain or bleeding! And have you ever seen a pregnant 89-year old woman? In fact, she was so pretty and young-looking that Abimelech, the king of Gerar, almost took her from Abraham! [Gen. 20:1-18]. That’s faith at work.
- ❑ With Isaac now born, the ordeal should be over. Who told you that? God asked Abraham to go and offer his son as a sacrifice! If it were any of us, we would call it Satan’s message because God is not a God of confusion! He cannot call Isaac the child of promise and now require him to be killed. Well, the issue here is obedience! And Abraham chose that course. For doing that, God pronounced everlasting blessings on Abraham: “in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed: because thou hast obeyed My voice” [Gen. 22:1-18].
- ❑ Sarah died at 136 [Gen. 23:1] and her husband at 175 [Gen. 25:7]. With long life does the Lord satisfy those that He has shown His salvation [Ps. 91:16].

d) *The reward of obedience*

Let's go again to Faith's Hall of Fame to read the citation on Abraham and Sarah:

By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.... Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised [Heb. 11:8,11]

So, because Abraham believed, it was imputed to him for righteousness [Gen. 15:6]. Therefore, faith-based obedience is what God will also count for us as righteousness. That is very good news!

3. Lessons: Why we should accept the call

Ordinarily, human beings choose pleasure but avoid pain. As we have seen from Abraham's case, divine calling requires us to give up pleasure [a stable life] and choose hardship! Are you then scared because of that? Here are some reasons why you should actually pray to be called:

a) *We are made for God's pleasure*

Why did we come into this world? To become successful parents, professionals, or what? That cannot be because we came naked and at death, we shall return naked [Job 1:21]. Only God knows why He brought us here. The saints in heaven worship Him with the following song:

Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power; for Thou hast created all things, and for Thy pleasure they are and were created [Rev. 4:11]

That is why Isaiah has said, "O Lord, Thou art our Father; we are the clay, and Thou art our potter; and we all are the work of Thy hand" [Is. 64:8]. Therefore, we are not in a position to question what God chooses to do with us.

b) *Therefore, He chooses us*

When Jesus saw the multitude of people that came to His "crusades," He told His disciples, "The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest that He will send forth labourers into his harvest" [Matt. 9: 36-38]. Therefore, it is a rare privilege for God to choose us among the billions of human beings on

earth to do Him a little favour to serve in the capacity that He chooses to assign us. Can you turn down such a unique offer?

c) *The alternative is worse!*

If the cares of this world prevent us from accepting God's call, we are in a worse situation "for what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul" [Mk 8:36]. To turn down God's offer is to accept the devil's because "ye cannot serve God and mammon" at the same time [Matt. 6:24]. That is why Joshua challenged the people of Israel of his time:

And if it seem evil unto you to serve the Lord, choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord [Josh. 24:15].

d) *The reward is tremendous*

We cannot know our way forward better than God who knows the end from the beginning. Therefore, when He tells us to move now, it is because later will be too late. He wants to lead us to a better place, and it is only on His terms that we can get there *perfectly*. He has promised blessings for the obedient in this world and in the world to come [Mk 10:28-30], and hell fire for the unbelieving and the disobedient [Rev. 21:8].

4. Conclusion

Can you forego your job, career, country, and comfort for Jesus' sake? Think deeply before you answer because you may be taking a decision that will change your life forever. Next time you pray, "Lord, let your will be done in my life," you are actually offering to be called out for service as a labourer in His vineyard. However, always remember that should you be called, it will be goodbye to normal life!