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Not Knowing Where...

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed to go out unto a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing whither he went" (Heb. 11:8).

"He went out, *not knowing whither...*" Those three words are a very apt description of the Christian life, in all its phases: its beginning, its progress and development, and in its consummation - *not knowing whither.*

We have, at the beginning of the Christian life, our own ideas as to what it is going to be, what it is going to mean; perhaps some ideas as to the way that we are going to take, and where it will lead us. We do not go on very far or very long before we begin to discover that we have been launched upon a mighty sea that we have never crossed before and for which there has not been put into our hands any answer to the questions: Whither? and What? and Why? It is as though the Captain of a ship had just called to us and asked us if we are coming. Will we come?

We answer, "Where are you going?"

He says, "That is my business, not yours."

"What shall we meet on the way?"

"Nothing to tell you about that."

"How long will it take?"

"Sorry, I can give you no information; you must put yourself confidently into my hands, and leave all those questions for me to answer and to be answered as we go along."

The Christian life is like that; it is like that at the beginning. It has to be like that. What we have read about faith, and Abraham's faith in particular, is just like that. Someone has spoken of Abraham's call and venture as being with 'sealed orders'. We know what that means. Either the Captain of a ship, or the leader of an expedition, is just handed an envelope; he is told not to open this or read it for so long, or until he reaches such and such a point. All he is told to do is to go, and to go in a certain direction. He does not know what for, he does not know what the destination is; he knows nothing but this, that he has to start out in a certain direction, under command, and leave the rest for the time being.

It is like that in the Christian life from the beginning. All the way along, again and again, we are tempted to ask, if we do not actually ask, "Where is this leading? What is the meaning of this? Why this?" And no answer comes back. All we have is this: there has been born in us a sense of call, a sense of urge, a compelling, a sense of destiny. Paul called it 'being apprehended', and that is a policeman's word; perhaps none of you know anything about that, but you may have seen it happen. And you know that when that hand of the law comes upon a shoulder or an arm, there is nothing to do but to yield to that urge. You are apprehended, and more than the power of a single human hand has got hold of you; all the authority and the power of the State is in that hand, and you have just got to yield; it is an apprehending.

Peter and John and the rest would have put it in another way, they would have said: "I heard the call, 'Come, follow!' And the call carried with it something irresistible; I just had to go." However it is, whatever we may call it, it is like that: an inborn sense that we no longer have our lives in our own hands. Someone has taken that prerogative out of our hands into His hands, but it is something inward. It is like the migratory instinct in birds: it wakens and there is no rest, there is no staying, it is urging, forcing on. And it is realised that to resist that urge is to frustrate destiny, and to curtail something that is more than human ambition, for this was not the way of our choice; this was not the will, the way that we would have taken, indeed, we would have stayed.

Naturalists tell us of certain birds, at the migratory season, who go so far; they go down to Cornwall where they feel there is some kind of an answer to that inward craving for warmth, the warmer climate. A fear has come into them of the long journey, crossing the sea, and all that is involved. They think that they have found the answer nearer at hand and so they just go so far and settle down, and perish in the winter. I think it is a parable. There is a lot in this letter to the Hebrews about that, is there not: its urge, "Let us go on..." let us go on; and the warning, "Accept nothing less than what the urge foreshadows". That was Abraham.

Abraham was mastered by this right through. He did come into the land it was quite true, what the Bible calls Canaan, the Land of Promise; but you notice he was a very old man when Isaac was born, and a much older man when Isaac's son Jacob was born, but he had never ceased to live in a tent up to that time; and he died living in a tent. "He looked for a city...". There were plenty of cities in Canaan, but it says, 'he looked for a city whose architect was God'; these were not God's cities. The

thing was still going on, this strange something that you and I ought to know something about, that we cannot ever force ourselves to settle short of that to which we have been called. It is like that, but what a lot it involves.

What a lot it involved for Abraham - the letting go - which is the great problem and difficulty of our lives, is it not? To let go. To let go the temporal for the spiritual. To let go the earthly for the heavenly. To let go the immediate for the eternal - that is to enter another world from the one with which we are familiar. That is to submit to new, unaccustomed principles of life, to obey new motives; it is another world. Oh, the conflicts that rage around this migration, round this going "knowing not whither". And the conflict begins and has its real basis in our own souls, what the New Testament calls, our 'flesh'. Is it not true that this natural life (which means the soul, the flesh) craves for security? And the suggestion of 'knowing not' just runs counter to all our instincts for security.

Look at Abraham. In Chaldea there were two thousand deities: that was his natural life, and every one of those deities was dedicated to the sentient life in some form. It was the life that you could see, that you could handle, that you could have immediately for your gratification. So many are the aspects of this natural life that it all is this: "No, do not ask us to venture into the unknown; we must have the known. We must have what we can handle, what we can see, and what is here and now". That is the natural soul, is it not? We are like that. And when we are called out into a life and a realm knowing not whither, the battle rises in our very being between heaven and earth, eternity and time, the temporal and the spiritual.

It was a marvellous thing that this urge was such in Abraham that his two thousand deities lost all their power, although they offered him immediate, earthly, temporal gratification. "He obeyed... and went, not knowing..." - what a tremendous thing for a man in such a setting and such an upbringing. No wonder his father Terah could not go through with it! There is that of Adam in every one of us that cannot go through with it, unless we know in our hearts this tremendous something that we cannot describe or define, but it is there. When the day of the great ordeal and trial comes, and everything seems to be testing, as it did Abraham, and apparently contradicting the call, and everything seems to cry that a mistake had been made, that it was all an illusion, and we allow these thoughts, ideas and suggestions to influence us, then we begin to decline, and we find ourselves in a cul-de-sac, in a back-water, off the main road. Then something touches us again of the old call. We touch something in the Word of God which was our very life before and that thing in us revives again, and comes up, and says, "We must go on! It is no use, we must get out of this and go on!" Do you know that? It is there. And it is not an 'it'; it is the Spirit of God, striving, urging like that!

I was saying that the conflict is in our very constitution: we crave security, we crave sight, we crave solidity, we crave the present; and all this says, "No, no, you are launched out" and still it is *not knowing whither*, in a very real sense.

Not only do we find the conflict in our own make-up, especially if we are of the more practical turn. The world also helps us a lot; the world will help us to stay with it. If we will go its way, it will befriend us; if we can be found to have in us any hankering for this world in position, in prosperity, in the satisfying of an ambition, in security, the world will help us, it will prosper us. We will get on if we go that way - the world will minister to us. Doors will be open: facilities will be granted; we shall be thought to be getting on, but, stay! Take a cross-section of life, and ask, over a given period: How much really of the Lord, and for the Lord, has filled that period and how much of this life, and how much of this world and its affairs? How much? What is the percentage of my spending and being

spent for that which will not appear again in glory? And what is the proportion of that which answers to my essential call? I know this may raise practical problems and questions. But fundamentally there is this: this world is no friend whatever to those going out *not knowing whither*; it will be very friendly to us if we will take its way, but it will keep us back.

Our sense of destiny, not only in life but in vocation, should be more powerful than any other motive and interest. So much so that all that this world can offer of its pretended securities is as nothing - "*that I may know Him...* that I may press on toward the mark, to the on-high calling of God".

There are other things to come in the way. There are, as we have said, those seeming contradictions that are so testing. He came into the land, whither the urge had led him. When he was there, what did he find? Not what he naturally would have expected; indeed it was not long before he found a famine. A contradiction in circumstances, apparently. Or, a Terah - the cautious element in life. I imagine that Terah was always cautioning his son: "Don't be an extremist! Don't be unusual, don't be different from the majority. Don't go too far! Be careful!" Do you know, while there is wisdom and discretion in the spiritual life, this way with the Lord is a tremendously bold venture that throws quite a lot of caution to the winds, which is justified. Think of all those servants of God who have launched out on this sea, not knowing whither, that have put home, wife, family, and worldly prospects on one side and simply the urge of destiny on the other, and have chosen this, and gone. And God has vindicated, taken responsibility there. It has been like that with very, very many. There is a kind of caution that can rob us of our eternal calling. Terah may impede our progress by that, and cause us to stay in Haran, until that is finally out of the way, and we can go on.

Or, it might be that feature represented by Lot, ever accompanying us. As John Bunyan would put it, that 'divided heart'. Yes, he will have the good, but not the other; he will have the advantages of this way, but not the disadvantages; he has got his eye upon how this will serve him. He has a sense of right and righteousness, but you know, it is possible, if the word about Lot means anything, to have a very intense sense of righteousness, and to be in the wrong place. "Vexed with the wicked..." - "his righteous soul vexed with the wickedness". Yes, every day. This was because he was out of the place of the will of God. He ought never to have been there. We can be very righteous, and not be where the Lord would have us, in the way. A divided heart is always very near at hand and can be accompanying a fellow of the way! Well, so it was with Abraham, but he went on.

He encountered many other difficulties: the deadness of his own body; the deadness of Sarah's womb - that is made much of in the letter to the Romans. There were great difficulties to the realisation of the purpose and the reaching of the end. And every one of them, you notice, was in this realm of the senses! "You see, I can't because of... and then this and that and that... it just cannot be." If you argue humanly, it never can be. You and I will never start on this road, we will never take the new step and stages of committal in this way, and we will never reach the end if we argue like that about human possibilities. We have started on a humanly impossible road! The sooner we settle that the better.

Well, you see, these things beset the beginning of the Christian life. Be made aware at once that it is like this, it is a committal in utter faith to One who calls you. And that committal includes and involves the confidence that He who has called you will do it and can do it.

The same arises along the way in the different stages of the Christian life. We come right up against a new crisis, a new demand, something that we have never met before, and all these things arise; it

is a battle. "Not knowing whither" is still the law and it is going to be; it is answering the Divine urge within.

And when we come to the end it will be like that: *Not knowing whither*. John says, 'We know not what we shall be'; "We know not what we shall be, except that when He is manifested we shall be like Him, and see Him as He is". And this holds good of our vocation, our calling. We have more than once met with men of years; men whose life has been well-nigh spent and they said to me: "I once felt that I ought to take the way you have taken; that I ought to give my life to the service of God, but I weighed up the whole thing, as to what it involved, and I said, 'No'. Today, my life has missed the way! I am a disappointed man." Oh, here is a warning: did you ever have that sense of call and destiny, that you knew came from God? It was not what you desired, it was not in line with some ambition of yours, but you knew the Lord called you. Are you following it through? Where are you today? The Lord may be speaking a real word of recall, of warning. We are going to find this true in our vocation. It is quite impossible to man; we don't know what it means, and where it is leading, and what is going to be the outcome of it all; but we do know one thing: that there is that in us which is still not dead, it is still alive - it is our original sense of vocation. Listen to it, and respond.

And yet, having said all that under those three words, "*not knowing whither...*" - don't we know? Oh yes, we do. On the way, all that I have said may be true, and we may be in that quandary many times, not knowing, and having to move in sheer faith - not in something unreal, but because of that which has happened to us and in us, and is still there. That may all be true, and yet, what is the end? Stephen said about Abraham, "The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham...". That could be paraphrased: 'The God out of glory and unto glory appeared unto Abraham' - the God who is in the beginning, with all His movements, the God of glory, and has at the end glory as His object. Glory compasses the beginning and the end: the God of Glory.

Does that sound remote or abstract? Well, listen again to words with which you are so familiar. Perhaps they have lost their charm. It is clearly stated that we were ordained to be unto the glory of His grace, and unto the praise of His glory; that is the end. 'The glory of His grace' - that, then, comes right into this present mysterious experience that we cannot explain, and we know not why, whither, or what. Grace - the glory of His grace! The praise of His glory!

What is your greatest fear? I tell you what it ought to be. It ought to be that in the end you should have come short of the glory of God, that glory bound up with your calling, that you should finish up having missed the way, having chosen some alternative. The Lord help us. Forgive this if it sounds too serious and too solemn a word, but I cannot help it. I just have to say what the Lord tells me to say. And we all need, do we not, from time to time, to be made to listen to the fundamental call: "Come, follow!"