

The Calling of God

by H. Foster

"... they ... that are with Him, called and chosen and faithful" (Rev. 17:14).

"By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed ... " (Heb. 11:8).

I want, as the Lord shall enable me, to say just a few simple words concerning that which is such a commonplace to us, and yet is surely a very wonderful and a most important thing — the experience of being called, called by the Lord.

Abraham, of course, is the outstanding example of a man of faith, who, through many experiences of God, came to a most blessed, wonderful and full inheritance in God. If we ask what was the secret of Abraham's life, our immediate response would be, 'Why, of course, faith. Abraham was a great man of faith.' But I would suggest to you that faith is not, as it were, an initial act. Faith is a response. Abraham, from his side, began when he believed God, but that was not the beginning of the story, and nor is it with any others of us. Faith is the most necessary thing, but faith is a response that we make to what comes from God to us, and what is that? Why, in simple language, it is a call; God *calls*. He called Abraham. It is a very remarkable thing, if you consider that, among the millions upon millions of those who in those centuries and since, but at that time, the millions who were alive upon the earth, the large number of people even in such a city as Ur of the Chaldees, that one who might have been just a unit in the millions living and dying unrecorded, unknown, that that one should be marked out by this most singular thing, that God Almighty, the eternal God of glory, as Stephen describes Him, should call this one — Abraham. If we could make the comparison aright between the littleness, the insignificance, that was Abraham, and the greatness and the glory that was God, that is God, what a remarkable thing! Not that Abraham should call to God, but that God should call Abraham!

We have become so accustomed to this sort of thing, and yet that same comparison could be made with us. Who are we? What are we? There is no means of measuring the greatness of the disparity between our littleness and God's glory, and yet here we have in the Word of God repeated again and again that He calls and He calls us.

I wonder whether we have given sufficient weight to the fact that God's word to us is a call. Always, when God appears to us, He calls. Not merely that we listen to that which is said about God. It is not that we just consider some truths that are brought to us. It is that, right definitely to us, as if God personally stooped to us and Himself breathed the words, when He speaks in our presence, when we are gathered together, and hear Him speaking, He is calling us; not setting something before us for our approval or rejection, and asking, 'Now, what do you think of this?' He did not deal with Abraham like that. 'I have some plans, some ideas. What do you think of these. Abraham?' God does not talk like that, but we often take God as if He dealt with us like that. No man and no woman without a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ can lightly consider the gospel as something offered for their approval or otherwise, something that they are to consider and see if they like it. God has not spoken in those terms, and, remember, when we speak of God calling, we are in an age and a dispensation in which God is making His call in His Son. I do not think we need be in any difficulties like folk get into when they begin to get their minds mixed up in the doctrines of predestination and election, as to whether the Lord has ever called them. God has called in Christ. He does call. The call has gone forth, and, wherever you come under the sound of the gospel or are within the compass of the sphere in which the Word of God is known and spoken, God is calling.

Of course, you can refuse the call. This is not one of those impositions of divine

sovereignty that He calls, and, because He calls, that is all right and we are saved. By faith, Abraham, when he was called, obeyed, and that is the only reasonable response that we can give when God calls, whoever we be, for He is constantly calling, as we shall see in a moment — not the one simple initial call out of darkness into light, that is the call of God, and, if you need it, it is God's call to you — but the whole of God's dealings with us are as with the called ones. You know how often that word occurs in the New Testament, as to God's people being the called ones. It does not just mean the specially favoured ones. It means the ones to whom God speaks Himself and personally expresses His mind concerning them and God expects that, when He calls, we shall obey.

We read in Revelation concerning those who are with Him, called and chosen and faithful. "*Many are called*", said our blessed Lord on more than one occasion, "*many are called, but few are chosen.*" That is one side, an unspeakably tragic side, of God's calling. He calls and men do not heed. It is not a wonderful thing that, when God called, Abraham obeyed. The wonderful thing is that, when God calls, so many do not obey. It is not a wonderful thing that we have done to respond to God's call. The surpassingly wonderful thing is that so often we have not responded to His call, for, beyond that general sense in which God calls men, we know when He calls *us*. I believe every soul knows when the Lord speaks to him or her, whoever they be, saved or unsaved. Whatever your condition, whatever your need, whatever your knowledge of the Lord, be it none at all or little or much, when the Lord speaks to you and calls you, you know it. He called Abraham, singled him out. He singles you out, calls you. The question with us all the time is whether we will obey.

Now, I want to say this. It is shown so clearly by the life of Abraham that it is a very blessed and happy thing, a glorious thing, to heed God's call. I know Abraham did not always feel like that, and I am quite sure that those of us who have sought to walk with the Lord will confess that very often we have not felt like that. The call of God has brought us, as it brought Abraham, into difficult and trying circumstances and situations, but the end of the story, as it is found in this life, is that everything of blessedness, of an eternal name, a destiny, a glory. Everything that came to Abraham hinged on this matter of the divine call and his response to it. Not only once but very many times God called Abraham, and because he responded, because he was willing to heed the divine call, not because he had a wonderful knowledge himself of what was the right thing to do or was a strong-willed devoted kind of man who could do what he knew was the right thing, not because of what was found in Abraham in the realm of his own ability and merit, but this simple fact, that he responded when God called, marks him out as a man of faith, and this must be our characteristic if we, too, would know an inheritance of blessedness, eternal glories with the Lord — the recognition of God's call.

God speaks. Yes, but His speaking is something more, as I have said, than the setting out of an idea or a thought or a way for our approval or otherwise. It is not in that realm at all. It is the divine invitation, if you like to put it that way, the divine summons. We may disobey it, but to our eternal loss. We may obey it with no other merit and no other qualification from our side. Eternal blessedness at every step is the undoubted result of heeding the divine call. Now, I have spoken very simply, and I have sought, first of all, just to impress this very clear, plain, well-known fact that we do well quietly to lay to heart. What a privilege is ours! Not that we have a lot of good teaching, not that we are able to listen to expositions of the Word of God, but that God Himself, not His servants, deals with us personally and He calls. Can you imagine any greater, more unspeakable privilege, than being called of God?

Called Out

I want to take Abraham's life and, with three little prepositions, enlarge this matter of the

divine call. In the first case, we think of being called *out*. That is very marked in the whole of Abraham's life. It is said quite definitely at the beginning. The Lord's first words to Abraham were, "*Get thee out ...*". Called out, that is the first thing. Out of somewhere, out of something. Called out.

Of course, what Abraham was called out of in the simplest sense was the world. When he was in Ur of the Chaldees, he was called out of the world. When he went down to Egypt, he was called out of Egypt and all that Egypt meant, and that is the nature of the divine call to you and to me, and it is that that stumbles people so often. It is that it involves hardship and the disagreeable side of things, but it must inevitably be so. God could do nothing with Abraham while he was in Ur, and He could do nothing with him while he was in Egypt either. God does not begin to do anything worthwhile for any man or woman until they have obeyed the first call to come out of the world. Of course, there is a lot more in it than the first call, but that is the nature of God's call in the first place — to come out.

Out of what? Well, Ur was a great city, a place of man's glory; to come out of the realm of that which is glorious to the world. For the world has many things to offer and one of them is a sense of glory, things that please man, things that are worthwhile to man. But Abraham has got to learn, first of all, (and it is the God of glory Who appears to him to teach him this), that the way to true glory, the way to that which is lasting in its magnificence, is the way out of this world's glory. In the time of the Lord, it was said concerning many that, though they heard His voice and saw His miracles, they believed not, and John gives a very simple, but a very searching reason for why they did not believe, because they sought the glory of men. If you are wanting the approval of men, whoever the men are, you will not hear God's call, because it is exactly out of that realm that He calls you. 'Get thee out, out of Ur'.

Then you see, he passed from the great city, and, as we are told in Hebrews 11, became a dweller in a tent. What is the outstanding difference between the big walled-up city and a tent? Is it not security and otherwise? And there is a security of this world as expressed in Ur. It is not really secure, of course, but it looks secure, and the call of God to come out of that and live in a tent looks a very precarious kind of life. But that is exactly the nature of the divine call — out of the world, out of the world's security and all that may seem to be something to protect us and hold us in and make life to have a certain sense of stability and lastingness about it. That is a realm from which God calls us to find our security in Him instead of in this world.

When Abraham got down into Egypt, it was the same thing from another point of view. It was the world's resources that he was after there. There was a famine in the land, nothing to eat, no prospects, and Egypt was a place of plenty, and Egypt is a place of plenty in some things. You know how, in this world, if you walk in that realm and live in that realm, there is a good deal that can satisfy the flesh and bring that temporary kind of sense of sufficiency and pleasure that this world can offer. The world is only an empty place when you are disillusioned about it, but it is a very full place until you are, and Abraham had not yet become disillusioned about the world and he went down into Egypt, but God did nothing with him there. And if we, like Abraham, have first heard the call and, in some measure have followed the Lord, but then we have felt that this life of faith, this life of seeking to be true to the Lord, is rather a dry life, we are not getting much pleasure out of it, there is no resource in it to satisfy our hearts' needs and we wander back into perhaps not blatant and culpable worldliness, but into some realms of it to find our satisfaction and resources in what this world can offer, the Lord will do nothing worthwhile with us. He will do nothing that lasts until again we have responded to that call to come out. That is, then, one of the features of the divine call, as expressed so clearly in Abraham.

Of course, it goes so much deeper than the world. He had to come out of himself, out of his own ways, even of serving God, out of his own efforts to fulfil the promise of God, out

of it all. Out — out ... was the word. And that is the divine call to us — to come out.

Well, that sounds very hard, as if it is an unpleasant thing to be called by God, but let us recognize this, that God calls out of that which is essentially dangerous, futile, passing, harmful. Ur of the Chaldees, doubtless, looked a very glorious and secure place to live in, but Abraham might have lived and died in Ur of the Chaldees and remained in obscurity. That to him would have been a way of tremendous loss. Egypt would seem to be a land of plenty, but we should not be talking about Abraham now if he had stayed in Egypt. We should never have heard of his name. He would have been a nobody. His inheritance? — well, he could have had what Egypt had to offer, and even if as a man he prospered, his inheritance would have gone when he went. No, the word appearing so often in this letter to the Hebrews is just the word which characterised God's call to come out, and that word is 'better'. Every time God calls you and me out of something, though it may be painful, it is for something better. I have no doubt that to leave his home city and to leave his father's house was a painful thing to Abraham, but the thing that marked his life, God's dealing with him, was that it was for something better. And surely that is the mark of all the lives of those who respond to the divine call.

Called Up

Then the second preposition related to the divine call is 'up'. It is, perhaps, not so obvious in Abraham's case in actual words, but I think you will agree that that was the nature of his life. When he was in Egypt, it was down in Egypt. It is remarkable that, when Scripture speaks of Egypt, it always speaks of going down. When he emerged, he not only came out but up.

The life of Abraham is a most remarkable illustration of the heavenly calling. The Christian calling is spoken of as a heavenly one. That does not just mean that if you hear the Lord's call, one day you will go to heaven. It includes that, but it means there is a call from God to a continuous life of mounting upward ever into higher experiences of heavenly life. Abraham was a pilgrim. Of course, people of the world would say, 'Poor chap, he is a wanderer'. He was not a wanderer, he was a pilgrim. A wanderer is just covering ground without getting anywhere particular. A pilgrim has a goal. It may take him a long time to get there but he marches steadily forward, and Abraham was a pilgrim; he was never allowed of God to settle down. But the true spiritual nature of Abraham's pilgrimage was that all the time he was moving on to higher ground. That is the nature of the divine call, and, next to the sinner who will not heed God's call to be saved, next in pathos and tragedy, is the Christian who, once having been saved, insists on staying in the same position when God would have him move on. That is by no means an uncommon thing — to be fixed, to be rooted. It is a terrible thing to be rooted in this world, for the world is under judgment, but it is a terrible, sad thing, to be rooted in your own position with regard to God, to be rooted and fixed in your ideas as to God's will for you, to be rooted and fixed as to your way of life and what you feel and what you are sure you are going to do until you die. There are many Christians who have heard the call in one sense to come out; some are remarkable for their great zeal and earnestness to be out, but who refuse the divine call to come up. Now, that is another feature of the same calling. It is one calling, it is a heavenly calling, a calling on high. Blessed be God, it is going to be consummated in one blessed call when literally we shall go up, but that is only the final manifestation of a spiritual movement upward all the time.

Let me try and show you how that is exemplified in Abraham's life. Actually it is expressed. It says that it was a heavenly country that they sought. Abraham did not think that at first. I do not believe when he left Ur of the Chaldees that he knew that he was never to possess any of the Promised Land, to have none of the outward, visible, earthly signs of the divine favour. He had no home, no manifest proof of the fact that this was his land and that he was in possession of it by the favour of God. He never could have dreamed, when he first heard that call, that the real nature of it was to a heavenly

inheritance and a heavenly city. Nor did you when you were first saved. I am sure I did not. We were thankful to be saved. That is one blessed feature often of God's calling out of a thing. He makes us disillusioned about it first so that we are glad to get out, glad to get out of the world, glad to get out of ourselves. We came out because we were glad to get out, and what ideas had we, I wonder, as to what would be the result of our being Christians. I suppose we hardly credit them now if we have gone on with the Lord. One thing is certain with most of us, I expect — none of them have come true. Abraham's life was a life of learning that his ideas as to what God meant by the call, and his ideas of how God would fulfil His promises, and his ideas of what it meant to follow the Lord, were all wrong, and it is a part of the heavenly way to be shedding our own ideas and to be entering into something very much above and beyond them. So Abraham was all the time moving away from earthly ground. That is what it means to be heavenly.

You see, earthly ground, even for a child of God, a servant of God, is to have something here on earth to justify your faith and to vindicate you before men. If Abraham had been a man who had produced in the Promised Land a city as big as Ur, a lot of people would have come from Ur and said, 'Abraham was right. There is something better here', but the betterness is not better as man judges better. The better thing is always something more off the earth every time, and so Abraham has nothing, he has less and less to justify himself before men, he has less and less to find satisfaction in himself, he has less and less that he possesses. Even when at long last, after a period that must have seemed interminable to him, he has a son, a new step on to heavenly ground means that he has to let go even of that son. Heavenliness is all the time letting go of earthly things, and for Abraham it meant finally that the most precious promise that God had fulfilled to him in giving him his son had to be let go. And again, the mark of the call upward, as of the call out, is always better. It is always better in heaven. Well, that is true of the heavenly life. It is always better when God calls us to more heavenly ground. It is not always easy to believe, but nevertheless, when you look at it from the end as we are able to do in Abraham's case, and in our own case at the end, we can say this honestly before God, 'The heavenly way is the better way'.

So it is an upward calling away from our thoughts and ways, away from what we can do and away from what we would like to do, up to higher ground, until Abraham at last is seen as one who has nothing here, not even promises, but who has seen them afar off, and his glad confession is that every treasure, every hope, every joy that he has is bound up with heaven, not with earth at all. God's response to that is that He is not ashamed of him. I wonder if God is ashamed of us. I think He is very often. I am afraid He is ashamed of me. Whenever, by His grace, we turn away from the earthly thing, cease to envy others, cease to fret as to God's way with us and embrace and confess that we are pilgrims and strangers, and our hearts are set, by His grace, on the heavenly thing, whenever we do that, in spite of all our faults, and Abraham had many, but in spite of them it is said that God is not ashamed of him. Of course, it means something far stronger than that. That is merely a negative way of saying that God was proud of him. I do not think that is exaggeration. God is proud of those who follow the call.

Called Unto

The third preposition which characterises this call is 'unto'. Out of, up, unto. Unto what? Well, in Abraham's case, that was why he took the step, because it was unto something. Nobody is going to come out to be left out nowhere. We are not going to come out of the flesh and our own way and earthly ways and out of any realm unless we have somewhere to come into. There is always somewhere to come into, but the great thing that marks Abraham's life is that what he came into was not a land merely, was not an inheritance as a thing, it was unto God Himself, and that is the nature of the divine call at every stage of the road. From the first time that God, in His mercy and grace, calls you to trust in Him to that last great call that shall summon us up to glory, the great feature of God's calling is always that He is calling us nearer to Himself. It is a call unto Him.

That explains the betterness of it all, does it not? Coming to God — until at last Abraham is the man who is known as the friend of God. By simple obedience to the call, because he was willing to come out, because he was willing to come up, he has come unto God in such a way that God owns him as His friend, and that, dear friends, is God's call to you and to me. It is to Himself. Oh, the sad thing that so often we have come to a series of ideas or we have come to a place or we have come to some blessing instead of realising that the true direction of the Lord's call was to come to Himself and find our satisfaction, our blessing, our inheritance in Himself.

So that the most remarkable thing about Abraham is the end, the goal, of the call, and what is it? We are told that he somehow finally realised, looked for and expected and is to receive the city which hath the foundation, and it says, "*God is not ashamed of them, to be called their God; for he has prepared for them a city.*" What is that city? Well, we have to move over into the book of the Revelation and to pass out of the realm of time and into eternity before we may find that city, but, when we do find it, what a city! That is what Abraham is called unto. He is still waiting for it but it is assured. God has prepared it for him; He has prepared it for us.

Now that city — so much is said about it, I have no intention to begin to expound what is said, let us put it in its simplest terms — that city is God's home. It is unspeakably glorious, it is wonderfully illuminated and transfigured and resplendent with the glory of God, but He is at home there. It represents surely that state, that sphere, in which God has found His fullest heart satisfaction. That must be a very wonderful place; to be with God where, even with all the infinity of His desire and the unspeakably high standard of His judgment, and where He is perfectly at rest, perfectly happy, fully satisfied. Well, you know the end of Abraham's pilgrimage was that he could never be satisfied with anything less than what satisfied God. God said, 'You shall have the satisfaction of sharing that which satisfies me.' You can find some sort of satisfaction in Ur, in Egypt, in the world, in Ishmael, in the flesh, in Isaac, in God's blessings to you. But they are as nothing, they are things to be forsaken, to move away from, in comparison with the ever-increasing, glorious satisfaction of being found in the very thing that brings the deepest heart joy to God Himself. You see the effect of Abraham's obeying the call. The effect of his obedience was this, that finally his heart was set in the same direction as God's. That is the call, a call unto God. It is not just to be somewhere near God as one of His creatures, enjoying some of the blessings of proximity to Him. The call unto God is a call to see, to desire, to long for and to experience that upon which His own heart is set. And in the measure in which, by His grace, we are called and are obedient to the call to move higher and higher on to heavenly ground, we shall find that our hearts' purpose and desire is right in line with that of God Himself. And I believe that is just what will bring about those final issues that make possible the possession of the inheritance, that God from His side, and redeemed man, from his side, come to desire the same thing and that thing shall be Abraham's. Because he obeyed the call he shall know that, and you and I, if we will hear the Lord's call to come out, to come up and to come unto Him, we shall know, too, that God has prepared for us the city. We shall be in the blessed experience of sharing with God in the eternal joy of His own heart. May it be so!