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## Training in the House of God

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

*First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, Sep-Oct 1963, Vol. 41-5.*

*"When Abram heard that his brother was taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, three hundred and eighteen, and pursued as far as Dan." Genesis 14:14.*

"His trained men, born in his house." This raises some interesting questions. It must refer to a big encampment, for they were not living in an actual house but in tents. The reference is really to a household, and it is in this connection that the word is used in the New Testament with regard to God's house. We have been born into a household (Hebrews 3:6), and this household is meant, above all other things, to be a place of spiritual training and education.

Whatever else Abram's men were trained in, they were certainly trained for war. We also have to learn that the House of God is the place of training for spiritual conflict. The household of God is the relationship and fellowship of believers: it is not a place, but the relationship in the Holy Spirit into which we are born again. It is the sphere of our training, so that we do not live our lives in the realm of mere theories, but are subject to the disciplining work of the Holy Spirit.

There are many blessings in the House of God, many amenities which are for our good, our comfort and our protection. We thank God for these but must never forget that this also is the place for our spiritual education. Spiritual training is not academic. It consists of learning the lessons of life together in fellowship with other believers, and because of this we may at times feel that we would like to run away and escape from such testing.

"Trained men, born in his house." What is the meaning of love if it is not a corporate thing? What is the meaning of patience, if it has not to do with other people? What is the meaning of so many things in the Christian life if they are not found in the context of related life? It is in this community life that we are tested. It is there that we find our real discipline and training.

"He led forth his trained men." Notice why he had to do this. Lot, the compromiser, was in desperate need. There is so often the difficult person, constantly getting himself and his friends into trouble, the awkward man, the selfish man who has put his own interests first and suited his own pleasure without seeking the will of God. At this time Lot had been captured, with all his family and possessions, and carried off by enemies. Abram might have rubbed his hands and said, 'Good riddance to bad rubbish! Thank God he has gone!'. But he did not do so. It was for this 'weak brother', this failing brother, this difficult brother who hardly seemed to deserve help, that Abram led forth his trained men, and he did not return until he could bring back this needy 'brother'. It is a lesson for us and an indication of what it means to become a member of the Father's household.

It hardly becomes any of us to judge or condemn Lot, for in fact we are all very awkward people. We all are the cause of trouble for the Lord. How wonderful to remember that "Having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them to the uttermost" (John 13:1). That is a household matter; learning to love like that in God's House. Have you never felt that everything would be better if only some difficult brother or sister could be taken far away? This action of Abram's reminds us that the household in which we are being trained demands willingness to fight for the weaker fellow believer.

Not that Abram would allow himself to be involved in Lot's compromise. No, he would fight for his failing brother, seeking to win and save him, but he would have nothing to do with Sodom and its king. The king was grateful to him for seeming to support his cause, but Abram would have none of it. He refused Sodom's gifts and their flattery. He kept himself unspotted from the world, but he devoted his trained household to giving aid to the man of compromise. He himself was in God's House and had had to learn lessons of obedience and sanctification. Somehow we never think of Abraham as a fighting man, and yet the life of faith is one in which we have to learn to fight the good fight.

After Abram had left Ur and entered into the land of promise, he might well have presumed that he had arrived and that since he was now in his God-appointed place he could expect an experience of tranquility. We, too, are apt to expect that once we have obeyed the Lord and stepped out in faith we ought to enjoy a smooth experience of serene contentment. Are we not in the place of God's purpose, of His will and His covenant? We have to learn, as Abram did, that the opposite of this is true. To be committed to the totality of God's will as a member of His household is to find that one difficulty overcome only means a greater one yet to be faced. The realm of the greatest spiritual values is the realm of the most difficult education, the sphere of the fiercest and most persistent conflict.

It seems that whatever else these three hundred odd men were being trained for, they were called to enter a war and pursue a foe. This is one of the great lessons that we who have been born into the House of God have to learn, the lesson of spiritual warfare. We need to be trained in this matter for there are enemies - spiritual enemies - who will contest the will of God and harrass God's people. It is not enough just to have experiences, however deep these may be. It is not enough only to have history. We have to learn the meaning of our experiences, to be able to extract the Lord's intentions from our history. We have to learn in the House of God, which is the school of holiness.

According to Paul, one of the great purposes of the Scriptures is that we may know "how men ought to behave themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God" (1 Timothy 3:15). Abraham was able to train others because he himself had to learn severe lessons. While he was in Chaldea it was different, but now he had moved on with God and what belonged in his new life was altogether different from what belonged to Chaldea. In Chaldea he could perhaps do things which he could not now do in the land. If we are to be trained to face and conquer the spiritual enemies of God's purposes, then we need that Bible truths should be wrought into our own personal experience so that we become embodiments of those truths. No teaching will ever be true teaching if it is not worked out in experience. And it is in the House of God, the related life together of believers, that such experience is obtained.

The temptation is to try to get away from such spiritual discipline, to break away from fellowship, to ignore the implications and great values of being born into God's house and trained there. Rather than succumb to such temptations by dividing up and separating, we should recognise that for our training in heavenly things we need to maintain the unity of the Spirit. The moment will arise, as it did in Abram's household, when there is a great challenge from God's enemies which will call us forth to make a stand, to prove the power of God to give us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ, and so much will depend upon our having submitted to the discipline of being trained by the Holy Spirit and prepared for the spiritual conflict by the tests which will come to us in our fellowship life.

The very fact that we are considering God's great servant, Abraham, stresses the need for obedient and persevering faith. There must have been many times for him when it seemed that, far from enjoying the fulfilment of that hope which was based upon the strength of the Lord's word, everything was becoming less likely and more impossible. But he kept on believing. No doubt this was the kind of training which the rest of the household shared with him. And in the case we have been considering, there was a total victory and complete recovery of what seemed to have been lost. They "pursued as far as Dan". They did more than that. They returned in great triumph and demonstrated for us the New Testament assurance that "faith is the victory that overcomes the world".

We are "in a great house" (2 Timothy 2:20-21). Let us so respond to the Spirit's training and sanctifying work that we may be vessels unto honour, sanctified, meet for the master's use, prepared unto every good work.