

II THE SPECIAL GIFT.

I have taught thee in the way of wisdom; I have led thee on right paths. When thou goest, thy steps shall not be straitened; and when thou runnest, thou shalt not stumble. Proverbs 4:11-12

The noise and activity of the quickly assembled camp was dizzying. Boys chased loose sheep and goats as they tore through black-colored tents, tipping over pots of water, with angry women yelling behind them. Camels stood calmly but frequently bellowing, and cattle restlessly mooed in their confined, hastily assembled paddocks, all adding to the noise, chaos and confusion. Men and women were organizing their supplies, getting them ready for the long journey in the morning while young children were running about, largely unsupervised, getting into mischief.

Mashda slipped away to see his friend one last time in the city. He ran from the hustle of the camp, past green fields of swaying grain in the late afternoon sun, stately orchards of date palms and carefully tended vegetable crops. He then came to the high, thick walls of the city and entered through the very impressive gate, guarded on each side by great lions, into the narrow streets of Ur. He passed numerous merchant shops, many with large displays of fine linen and wool and others with tables full of idols and other ceramics, located close to the gate. Next came the great Ziggurat, and the quieter neighborhood of scribes, teachers and priests associated with the temple. There he entered the spacious home of Namkuzu. It had thick clay brick walls, with small high windows. It was illuminated in the center patio by a two-story high open skylight. It was a pleasant shock to leave the bright, hot, dusty air of the street and enter into the dim, cool, almost cave-like home of Namkuzu. Mashda's family never lived in a structure like this and the difference from what he had known growing up, always amazed him. His own home was much smaller, a one-room dwelling made with tightly bound reeds just outside of the city walls. It was cooler than outside, but not like this, and Namkuzu's house had many rooms. Yet, Mashda did prefer the wide-open space and peacefulness outside of the busy city. And he loved caring for the family's flocks of sheep and goats and watching the reed boats travel up and down the Euphrates.

It was an unusual friendship. Mashda was a commoner and shepherd boy while Namkuzu was of the intellectual class. Namkuzu's father was a scribe and he was in school studying to be one as well. Mashda's father had regularly done business with Namkuzu's family, selling them dairy products and meat that they raised. Mashda and Namkuzu would often meet each other on hot afternoons swimming in the Euphrates and it was during these times that they developed a very unlikely friendship.

"You are really leaving?" Namkuzu asked Mashda, incredulously. "Early in the morning," replied Mashda. "I snuck away to see you one last time. I might get into trouble, though. Everyone is pretty busy right now." Namkuzu then responded, "Many have been leaving Ur lately, since the Elamites came and conquered us." Mashda

responded, “I think we are leaving for different reasons.” Namkuzu then quietly asked, so that no one else in his family could overhear and with some trepidation, “Is it true your great uncle, Abram, now rejects the gods?” Mashda felt uncomfortable with this question, but he also felt obligated to answer likewise in a very quiet whisper, “Yes, my uncle has ordered us to put away all of our idols and not take them with us to Harran.” A flash of horror spread on Namkuzu’s face. “You know, the great feast for Nanna will be celebrated later this week at the temple. How can you leave without her blessing? Both Harran and Ur are under her care.” Mashda became even more uncomfortable. He loved his friend. He loved the many times spent swimming with him in the cool refreshing waters of the Euphrates and playing boyhood games. But both were growing up now, and each were heading in very different directions. He realized that he must go, and maybe he should not have even come. “Namkuzu, I just wanted to say goodbye and that I am going to miss our times together. But I must go because I will get into trouble.” Namkuzu got up and said, “Well then, I want to give you something to remember me by.” He left the room and then shortly after, returned with a small tablet that he had written on. “This is a portion of *‘The Lamentation of Ur’*¹ that I copied in school. I want you to have it, to remember me.” Mashda looked at its almost perfectly executed cuneiform on a small hand-sized clay tablet. He was not a strong reader, however. He spent more time helping his father in the fields with the flocks than at school. He shyly asked, “what does it say?” Namkuzu then read:

“I transgress and know it not. I sin and know it not. I wander on wrong paths and know it not. The Lord, in the wrath of his heart has overwhelmed me with confusion...” He then followed, “I pray you always follow the right path.”

Mashda carefully looked at it and then at Namkuzu and thanked him for it. It was something that he could keep, to remember his old friend and his old home. “I will not be able to bring much with me, but I will keep this always. I will miss you.” “I will miss you too, friend,” responded Namkuzu. They embraced and then Mashda quickly departed.

He was worried about getting into trouble. It was at this time that his family needed him most. But it was hard leaving home and not saying goodbye. And in the end, he was very glad to have gone to see Namkuzu.

When he entered camp, his mother saw him. Immediately, she started berating him, yelling where he had been, and that his uncle needed him now. He then ran to Lot’s tent.

His uncle looked at him with relief. He said, “Today you will become a man. I want you to be here in an hour with the other men so that I can give you instructions for tomorrow. Now go, check your flocks and make sure your chores are done. Your father has been looking for you!”

¹ *The Lamentation of Ur* was written, likely shortly before the time of Abram’s departure, when Ur fell to the Elamites.

Mashda then ran to where his family's flocks were contained and watered them. He grabbed some bundled reeds and willow that had been gathered earlier in the day from the river's marshes, and quickly fed the many animals. His father came up from behind, asking him where he had been. "I am sorry father, I had to see Namkuzu one last time. I know it was wrong to leave you without telling you, especially now. But look at what he gave me!" Mashda then showed his father the cuneiform tablet. His father looked at it carefully, and with more experience reading cuneiform, was able to decipher the script. "This is a very meaningful gift. But finish your chores and then go to your uncle. I cannot have you do this again! We have much work to do and I need you!" "Mashda replied with relief, "Yes father. Please forgive me. I will work very hard now." His father hugged him and then they both hurried to get the animals fed so that Mashda could go back to his uncle Lot's tent in time for the meeting.

When he got there, Lot chose several of the older young men, including an older brother of Mashda, to ride ahead very early in the morning on camels. They were to arrive to the next day's camp before the flocks, women and children. The caravan had to move the animals on the outer edge of the river valley, outside of many crops planted along the Euphrates. It was important that they moved quickly so that the large flocks didn't wander or damage any of the fields of grain. "We cannot allow the animals to feed much tomorrow during this first leg of the journey, so we must have reed and willow cut and prepared for them at tomorrow night's camp. I need you men to leave on camel early, to prepare their water and feed and the location for our camp. Mashda, you and the other shepherd boys must guide the animals carefully, keeping them out of any mischief. We cannot have angry farmers demanding retribution. I need you to be the one responsible for this." "Yes, uncle," replied Mashda. Lot then said, "We have a very long day tomorrow, so try to get some rest. May our journey be blessed."

Mashda ran back to his family's camp where his mother, who had just finished milking, was culturing some of the milk into yogurt. She was turning the rest into vinegar cheese to put in leather bags in preparation to be carried on one of the family's camels. "Mashda! Gather your things and get them ready for tomorrow. Then I need you to take some of this cheese and yogurt to the families of our relatives traveling with us." Mashda quickly responded, "Yes, mother," and then went to his sleeping area to gather all of his possessions, with the exception of his sleeping mat, and tied it in a tight bundle. Tomorrow he would wrap his mat around the bundle and tie it to one of the donkeys his family was bringing. He looked at his special gift one last time and then carefully wrapped it and placed it safely in the center of his bundle. It was a bitter-sweet moment. He then prayed for God's blessing, and protection in this perilously long journey and for his friend he was leaving behind. He was both excited but also was scared. He knew his life was about to dramatically change.