

LETTING GOD CHOOSE

by Ray C. Stedman

Someone has pointed out that life seems to be arranged backwards. We are called upon to make our most important choices at a time when we have the least amount of experience to guide us. Because of this, we so frequently hear expressions of regret like, "If only I had known," "If I had it to do over again," etc. But it is this very quality of life which reveals the inability of man to handle life by himself. It is a wise person, indeed, who learns this lesson early and gives heed to the Biblical admonition,

**Trust in the Lord with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.
In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths. (Prov 3:5-6 {RSV})**

After the temporary failure of faith which took Abram from Canaan into Egypt, we find him once again in the land, with his tent and his altar, enjoying the fullness of divine supply. As we saw earlier, however, life in the land is a life of continual conflict; we must go from victory to victory. Furthermore, it is a life of unending choice. We are now given a very illuminating account of what happens when strife and trouble break out in the Christian life. Who has not stood at this place?

And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together, and there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's cattle and the herdsmen of Lot's cattle. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelt in the land. Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen; for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left." (Gen. 13:5-9 {RSV})

We have been reading of this man, Lot, all through the story of Abram. He was Abram's nephew, and he came with him out of the land of Ur. The whole story of this man is told in one brief phrase in Verse 5, "Lot, who went with Abram." That sums up Lot's whole life. He went with Abram! Wherever Abram was, Lot was. When Abram stopped, Lot stopped. "With Abram" -- that is all that can be said of him.

Many of the commentators seem to feel it was wrong for Abram to take Lot with him out of the land of Ur. There is no doubt he was a continual weight around his neck. But Scripture never implies that it was wrong to bring Lot along. Lot evidently responded when God spoke to Abram and called him to go out into a land which would be shown him. Lot wanted to go along, and Abram, wishing to help him, agreed. The trouble is not with Abram, but with Lot.

Lot seems to be a picture of those Christians who depend upon others for faith and inspiration to act. There are many Lots around. They never seem to learn to walk alone with God, but lean on another's faith for strength. As long as they have a strong church to lean on, or a close friend who is a faithful Christian, or they can listen to a gospel radio station all day long, or they have a Christian magazine coming regularly, then all goes well. But where the prop is weak, they are weak also. When Abram's faith failed, Lot's faith failed. Lot just leans on Abram all the way. He is clearly a second-hand Christian. Although his own faith is genuine (and the New Testament makes it clear that Lot was indeed a righteous man), nevertheless, he depends wholly upon Abram for the effectiveness of his service.

This works well as long as the pressure is on. As long as things are a bit tough, Lot will stay with Abram for he senses his need for the strength of the man of faith. Lot feels his weakness to act upon his own faith. There are so many like this. As long as things are a bit difficult, they lean hard upon their Abram, whoever or whatever it may be. But there is one kind of test that this type of Christian cannot stand -- the test of

prosperity, when all goes well. Material prosperity, especially, will always show up the Lots in our midst.

So we read here that when their possessions were so great they could no longer dwell together, strife came between them. Today, we would call this a conflict of interests. There are many parallels to this in modern life. Here are two men, for instance, who are partners in business, both of them Christians.

For the stronger of the two, the man of faith, this business exists for only one purpose: to benefit the work of God. He knows that God expects him to take his normal living from it, but that is not why he is working. His real reason for working is that he may use the strength and wisdom God gives him to invest and make money to advance the work of God.

At first, the other partner goes along with him and agrees that this is a worthy basis for the business. But prosperity comes! They make a little money, and the second man raises his standard of living and gets his eyes on the material things of life. He becomes more concerned about building up the business and making a big thing of it than about anything else. When that happens, there is only one thing to do. As with Lot and Abram, there comes a time for a dividing of the ways, and it is the man of faith who takes the initiative. Lot would have let this thing fester until it broke out into some serious conflict, but Abram says, "There is only one thing to do. We must separate now before there is any further difficulty."

Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen; for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left." {Gen 13:8-9 RSV}

Note the reasons Abram gives for suggesting this separation. Every word here is instructive. In the last part of Verse 7 we are told, "At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelt in the land." Why are these mentioned here? Is it not a warning to us that whenever strife looms between Christians, the enemies of the Lord are ready to take full advantage of it? These Canaanites and Perizzites, dwelling in the land, are clearly representative of the evils of the flesh that lurk in every Christian heart -- jealousy, envy, resentment, bitterness, malice, etc. They are always ready to spring into action if there is any dissension or grievance between Christians. Abram acted before these could be awakened, for he knew they were in the land. There is that in each of our hearts which, if allowed to fester, will come to the fore, and we will be possessed by the spirit of jealousy, resentment, or bitterness. Abram acted before this could happen.

The second reason is found in his words, "Let there be no strife, for we are kinsmen," that is, "brethren." We are brethren! That means we are tied together in the same bundle of life, and if I hurt you I am hurting myself. If you hurt me, you are hurting yourself. Brethren cannot have strife without injuring one another. Whenever strife develops between members of the Body of Christ, it always has this result. It is a case of cutting off your nose to spite your face. If you hurt your brother, you are surely hurting yourself.

Abram, in his God-given wisdom said, "Let us not have any of this. We are brethren, so do not let this become an issue between us. Let us calmly settle the matter now before it breaks out in open conflict." Then Abram did a magnificent, God-honoring thing; he gave up his own rights without a murmur. He was the older man of the two and the acknowledged leader, Lot's superior in every way. Yet he said to him. "Lot, you take the first choice, I will give up my right to first choice. If you want to go this way, I'll go that way." How evident it is that the tent and the altar have already done a work of grace in this man's heart!

I once heard Dr. H. A. Ironside tell of an experience in his early life when his mother took him to a meeting where two Christian men almost came to blows over a disagreement. One man finally stood and pounded the desk and shouted, "I don't care what you do, but I will have my rights!" At that, an old, partially deaf brother, who had been sitting near, leaned forward and cupped his ear in his hand and said, "Eh? What's that? What did you say, brother? Your rights, is it? Is that what you want? Ah, brother, if you had your rights you'd be in hell! The Lord Jesus didn't come to get his rights -- he came to get his wrongs, and he got them." And with that the belligerent fellow flushed and sat down, saying, "You're right, you're right, settle it any way you like." Soon there was perfect agreement. It was this same spirit that moved Abram to give Lot the first choice.

Now we learn what happens when Lot chooses:

And Lot lifted up his eyes, and saw that the Jordan valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan valley, and Lot journeyed east; thus they separated from each other. Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, while Lot dwelt among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord. (Gen. 13:10-13 {RSV}).

Evidently Lot and Abram went out on a promontory overlooking the valley and Lot lifted up his eyes. What did he see? It is quite obvious he only looked in one direction. He had been out looking around before! Without hesitation now, he looked to the east and saw the well-watered plain below like the garden of the Lord in the midst of the desert. He saw the Jordan River cutting through its great gorge, the deepest point on the face of the earth. On either side of the Jordan, the lush green grass was growing, and the variety of palm trees made the whole place a veritable garden, and he was greatly attracted to it; it was a modern real estate developer's dream!

Then he saw the cities of the plain. They were like Egypt! Lot remembered Egypt well as a place where one could get rich quick, with its vast commercial enterprises and its blind materialism. This is what Lot saw as he looked across the valley.

But the passage suggests there were some things that Lot did not see. Although the Jordan valley was there before his eyes, he did not see the significance of its name. The word *Jordan* means "death." The river descended out of the living waters of Galilee, dropping far below sea level into the Dead Sea, from which there is no outlet. Outwardly it was fair to look upon, spiritually it meant the place of death, and this Lot failed to see.

Then it is specially pointed out here that the men of Sodom were wicked -- great sinners before the Lord. Lot saw the profitableness of these cities, but he did not see their moral corruption. The name of Sodom today is linked to a most disgusting and revolting form of sin. Though the life of the city was morally rotten, it was hidden beneath an attractive prosperity.

We have our Sodoms today. Moral corruptness has permeated our social life and is one of the consequences we must take into consideration as we face the choices of life. This Lot failed to do.

We are told yet another thing that Lot missed: "This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah." Here is a mention of the judgment that was to come. Again, Lot saw the prosperity and the beauty, but he did not see that this was a place marked out for judgment; it was all to be swept away forever. You may say there was no way for Lot to know these things. This is true. Neither Lot nor Abram could foresee the death, the rottenness, the judgment that life in Sodom would bring. But the whole point of the story lies right here. Lot, presuming to run his own life, "chose for himself," and, deceived by what he saw, stumbled blindly into heartache and judgment. Abram, on the other hand, was content to let God choose for him, though it meant apparent second-best. And long before the true nature of Sodom became apparent to Lot, Abram saw it in its true light.

When will we learn that the inner nature of things as they really are is only revealed to the man with the tent and the altar? It is only as we take the pilgrim character and remember we are not to have our final dwelling place here on this earth, and we hold lightly the things of earth, that the Word of God begins to unfold to us and we see something of the judgment, the moral corruptness, the deadly character of what otherwise looks so attractive and is highly regarded on every side.

So we read, "Lot chose for himself." What a descriptive term that is! As he looked out, Self said, "Ah, this will advance you, this will make you prosperous, this will give you status and position." So he chose for himself, and pitched his tent toward Sodom. That is, every time he moved his tent, he moved it constantly nearer Sodom. We shall see more of what this meant to him in a later chapter.

But now, what happened to old Abram? How did it go with the man who was willing to let God make the choices for him?

The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Lift up your eyes, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land which you see I will give to you and to your descendants for ever. I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your descendants also can be counted. Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you." So Abram moved his tent, and came and dwell by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron; and there he built an altar to the Lord. (Gen 13:14-18 {RSV})

Lot had lifted up his eyes and chosen for himself; now God says to the man of faith, living in his tent on the hillside, "Abram, lift up your eyes." Where? Everywhere -- to the north, the south, the east (the portion Lot chose), and the west. All the land is his!

This land is consistently the symbol for us of the fullness of life in the Spirit of God; the life of joy, power, love, and glory; the life of refreshing ministry to others. Surely this is what Paul longs for us when he prays, "That you may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God," (Eph 3:18-19 {RSV}). This is all yours, if you are willing to let God make the choices of life for you.

Lot will never know this! Nor will we, if we make our choices on the basis of what we see, relating to the materialistic, commercial standards of those about us. But if, like Abram, we are content to have what God gives us in life, all the fullness of Christ will be ours. Paul says in First Corinthians 3:21b-23 {RSV}: "For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours; and you are Christ's and Christ is God's."

Then God said to Abram, "Not only do I give this land to you, but I will fill the land with your descendants." That is, "I will make you fruitful beyond belief. I will make your life one of such blessing that after you are gone there will be those who will stand up and say, 'I received my spiritual life through that man; there came to me strength for my journey through him; he has been a great blessing to my heart and life.'"

Then he said to Abram, "Arise, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I will give it to you." The land is all that Christ will be to us through the eternal ages to come. But God is saying to us, "Don't wait for it. You don't have to wait until you die to enjoy this. You can have it now, if you will possess it in Christ. Walk through the land. Set your feet upon it. Possess it -- now!"

If we, seeing Abram walking up and down the land, had said to the Canaanites and Perizzites, "Do you know who this man is? This is the owner of all this land!" They would have looked at us with pity, laughed, and continued on their way. But it was true! Wherever Abram wanted to move in that land, God opened the door for him. The whole land was his. He could go where he wanted. He could live where he chose. The Canaanites and the Perizzites had to move out when Abram came in. Thus the Spirit of God declares to us in Romans 6:14 {RSV}: "For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace." Whenever you want to be free from the weakness, and ruin, and power of sin, you can! The land lies open before you. Possess it!

So we read, "Abram moved his tent and came down to the oaks of Mamre." *Mamre* means "fatness," the place where the soul is made fat with the fullness of supply. And there at Hebron, which means "fellowship," he built an altar to the Lord. In the place of fatness and fellowship, Abram confessed again by the building of an altar that he was nothing but a fallible human being, without strength in himself, needing that constant supply of the cleansing of God. It is a wonderful picture, isn't it?

Everyone dwells in a world exactly like that of Abram and Lot. A world in which material values constantly clamor for us to make a choice. We have only so much time to invest, so much life to spend, and we are

pressured to try to grab the best for ourselves while we can. We can say with Lot, "I want what the world can offer me now, I want the cities of the plain." Or we may wait with Abram, content with our tent and altar, enjoying the blessings of the land by faith now, and waiting for God's fulfillment of all his promises in that wonderful age yet to come. The Christian who is content to let God make his choices finds it easy to fulfill the New Testament word: "Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you," (1 Th 5:18 {RSV}).

Prayer

Our Father, we understand now something of the shortsightedness of human choices. How many heartaches we have chosen by insisting that we choose for ourselves! Give us grace to let you make these choices for us. Create in us a hunger for the fullness of the land. Make us discontented with our present possession of it but lead us into the full knowledge of the love of Jesus Christ our Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

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