

THE PRICE IS WRONG

by Steve Zeisler

The Christian life is lived on a tightrope. We are asked to balance ourselves between conflicting temptations and pressures. One of the tightrope experiences is the requirement that we be "in the world but not of the world"--a difficult balance to maintain. In some generations, the Christian church has succumbed to the pressure to run away from its responsibilities and has refused to be in the world. This has led to ideas such as monasteries and other Christian communities removed as far as possible from any influence of those who do not know the Lord. Other ages have given in to the pressure to be of the world.

Our generation faces this last temptation much more than the first. As the people of God, our tendency is to accept the thinking and goals of the world system, those who do not know the Lord. Although we try to whitewash this tendency with Christian language, we believe the thinking and never call it into question. There are Christian attempts to ape the media, the entertainment industry, politics, and professional societies. Even Christian yellow pages and Christian punk rock music are available. Rather than have Christian thinking change any of these opportunities, they are taken as they stand and given Christian names. Worldliness, the desire to be like the rebel system in our thinking, actions, preferences and goals, has strong appeal among contemporary Christians.

This is the subject I would like to consider as we continue our study of the life of Abraham. In chapter 13 of Genesis, we come to the moment of decision when Lot and Abram made choices that would determine their individual futures. Up to this point, they had experienced everything together. But because of a tension arising between them, they were forced to make choices which set them on courses leading to radically different conclusions--one to honor, the other to dishonor.

Lot is a very complex person. In some ways he is one of the most fascinating people in the Old Testament. He is also one of the saddest because the outcome of his life is heartbreaking. The New Testament records that he had a concern for righteousness all of his life, but his righteous heart was tormented by the place where he chose to live. Because he decided to choose alliances with the world, the righteousness that resided within him was forever at war with the circumstances in which he lived. By the end of his life, he could accurately be described as a "worldliness addict." He had come to love what this life has to offer. In a short article about Lot, Frederick Buechner captured in a wry understatement what many of us feel when we try to understand the man: "When God decided to wipe the city of Sodom off the map for its sins, he sent a couple of angels down to make sure that Lot was safely out of it first. Therefore he must have had something going for him, On the other hand, it is hard to see just what." As an affliction that can happen to any believer, worldliness always brings about the shameful conclusion that overtook Lot.

John White, in his book "The Golden Cow", speaks of the effects of worldliness upon believers:

It comes to this: we Christians are too often like sponges soaked to capacity with the value system of the society we live in. Whether we sympathize with labor or industry, whether we are Republicans, Democrats, conservatives, liberals, socialists or whatever, our value systems in practice are one. We may argue fiercely with one another but we base our arguments on the same promise: the greatest good in life is a bigger (or better cooked) slice of this world's pie, a pie to which we all have an inalienable right.

All too often, we are "like sponges soaked to capacity with the value system of the society." Our lives too often resemble the choices Lot made and the outcome he experienced.

As we study chapter 13, we will learn by contrasting Abram and Lot, men who shared a history but who diverged at a critical point in their lives.

"So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, he and his wife and all that belonged to him; and Lot with him. Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold. And he went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place of the altar, which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord. Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. And the land could not sustain them while dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they were not able to remain together. And there was strife between the herdsman of Abram's livestock and the herdsman of Lot's livestock. Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling then in the land."

Chapter 12 began with the promise made to Abram that God would alter the course of his life. Abram believed God and left Haran to come to the promised land. At Shechem, the voice of God met Abram and said, "This is the land." Abram believed God again and began to experience the place God had given him. He moved to the region between Bethel and Ai where he built an altar and led the people in public worship. He was a source of light to the people of that region and to all who followed him as he publicly called upon the name of the Lord. He was in the midst of the will of God, being where he ought to be and doing what he ought to be doing.

But when he was given the first test of his faith, he failed miserably. When a famine arose in the land, Abram concluded, "I should leave." Rather than seeking God to find out how he might remain where he ought to be, he took his family down to Egypt where he fouled up everything. He brought dishonor to himself and plagues to the people of Egypt. He abandoned Sarai, his wife, and threatened their future. He did everything wrong, but the Lord God sovereignly intervened and brought him back to the promised land.

In chapter 13, we have the account of what happened after Abram's return. Abram learned his lesson, for he returned to the place where he first began his worship of God and set his feet on the path of faith again. He started acting the way he should have acted during the time he was in Egypt--worshipping God, listening to God, telling others of him, and believing that the promises of God were faithful and life-giving.

Lot and his family were part of the whole journey. He had followed Abram everywhere he had gone to date, even down to Egypt. Thus, Lot saw how unwillingness to believe God produced tragic results in Abram's life. He had a chance to both hear the truth and observe the failure and its lessons firsthand. He, too, had returned to the land of promise, where he and his uncle dwelled together with their families.

But a tension arose between them. These two great families with flocks, tents and servants could not easily exist together in the same general region. The tension that existed and the test administered to these two was different than the one encountered in chapter 12. What led them to Egypt was famine. They were afraid that they would lose their livelihood, perhaps even their lives, if they stayed in the promised land. Now the pressure came not from the threat of losing everything but from having too much. The problem that existed before when the land looked inadequate to them now existed because they were both well off. Thus, Abram and Lot had to learn how to deal with prosperity. And dealing with prosperity--having the blessings that this life can offer in terms of wealth, prestige and opportunity--is an important and difficult lesson to learn.

Each of them handled the test differently, causing the outcomes of their lives to be drastically different. Lot began to love the things of this world. His choice, as we shall see, was toward further and further worldliness. Abram, having sojourned in Egypt and having seen the tragedy of his choice there, learned to not listen to what this world has to offer.

I have a friend who is in a small business in which most of the senior people are Christians. He shared with me what he has recently come to see as a slow decline in their lives as Christian men. At first, he was not even aware of the decline because it sloped so gently downward. For years, the business has been very successful, but increasingly the success has produced thanklessness and arrogance. The relationships between the men have deteriorated, as have the lives of some of the families. Now, even though there is greater financial reward

than ever, there is less joy, less appreciation, less hope, and more anxiety. As my friend has begun to see, they have failed the assignment of learning to live with prosperity. They have become less and less thankful to God and more and more certain that they deserve what they have.

Abram and Lot were faced with having to learn the same lessons in the midst of their prosperous times. We will learn some important truths from them. We need to be people who do not let what this world has to offer seduce us. We need to be men and women who do not want to have the riches, the standing, the comfort and the security of this life so much that we stop listening to God and stop appealing to him as our resource. We must never reach the point of being unwilling to be where he wants us to be.

Let us look at the choices made by Lot and Abram in verses 8 through 18:

"Then Abram said to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsman and your herdsman for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me: if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left." And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere--this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah--like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar. So Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan; and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord.

And the Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Now 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 it to you and to your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered. Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you" Then Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord".

When Abram felt threatened during the famine, he used his best worldly judgment and went down to the great granaries of Egypt for food. This time, when there was tension as to whether the land would successfully accommodate everybody, Abram said, "I know I am supposed to be here because the Lord God has called me to be here. Therefore, it really doesn't matter where I go in the land because my sustenance comes from the Lord. I do not have to be an agricultural expert who can precisely anticipate which part of the land will produce the most food for my animals because this is not the basis on which life will be given to me." Abram realized that since God would take care of him it did not matter where in the land he dwelled. He knew the Lord God would meet his needs. Thus, we hear Abram's magnificent speech to Lot, "You choose. I am perfectly comfortable with whatever is left over. I am glad to be anywhere in the land God has chosen for me."

There are two qualities I want to highlight that stand out in Abram's statement: freedom and selflessness. Abram was announcing that he was a free man. He did not have to have what looked the best. He didn't require the financial security that lured Lot toward the well-watered valley. He did not need the soft life and luxury of the cities of the plain that Lot seemed to love so much. He did not demand anything because he was a free man. Christians who have learned to deflect and resist the siren song of worldliness will always be characterized as free because they do not have to dance to the tune of the world. They do not have to have what everybody else seems to require for life.

Two of our ninth graders had a conversation which was overheard by one of their fathers who shared it with me. One of the boys said, "It will be great to be a senior because seniors get to wear anything they want." His point was this: when you are in ninth grade you must rigidly conform to your assignment. If you are a jock, you have to look, act, and speak like a jock. If you are a nerd, you have to dress like a nerd. If you are a doper, you have to look like a doper, Everybody has an assigned role; they have to conform and dance to the tune that is played for them, But as a senior, the student can wear whatever he wants. The boy speaking could see that what he was saying was ridiculous, but he was not free to live any differently. There was no reason why he

should have to live as assigned, yet he was not free to break out of the mold.

On a perhaps more subtle level, the same lack of freedom applies to almost all of us. We all have assignments given to us by this world--desires, longings, and fashions--causing us to crave things not because they are good or from God but because we want the standing, approval and apparent life that the world says comes with them. Abram was a free man because he did not have to have anything, He was willing to accept whatever God gave him: "You choose, Lot. I will take anything."

The second word to remember is "selflessness," another characteristic of those who reject worldliness in their Christian life, They do not have to measure everything that happens or comes to them based upon self-interest. In fact, they are able to rejoice in the benefit that comes to someone else as much as they rejoice in what comes to themselves. They are equally glad to see a brother or friend succeed in business, recreation, or family life as they are to succeed themselves. They can even rejoice in another's success whether they attain it or not. They do not have to compete. They do not live their lives unable to rejoice in someone else's fortune because they are too busy measuring their own gain.

I believe Abram wanted Lot to make a choice that would bring him life. He was obviously committed to Lot and cared for him. In fact, he will risk his life for Lot in an incident in the next chapter. It did not matter to him that wanting the best for Lot might cost him something. He wanted Lot to choose what was best for him. This selflessness--rejoicing in another's good fortune and not having to compete--is characteristic of people who have defended themselves against worldliness. They are free; they are not required to dance to the world's tune. And they are delighted to see good come to others whether or not it comes to themselves.

The competitiveness that requires me to have for myself all that I desire is a sure sign that I have been taken over by worldliness. For years, I played on one of the church's softball teams in a league made up entirely of church sponsored teams from this area. I was always a defensive liability. I was there mostly as comic relief, and each game the team had to decide where to put me so that I would not ruin our chances. Frequently, therefore, I was the catcher, and because of this I began to know some of the umpires from the local association of professional umpires. I will never forget what one umpire said after a brutal game in which he was vilified and the teams were at sword's point, As he walked off the field, he said, "There is nothing I hate more than umpiring church leagues. There is less joy, less honesty, and less good will in these games than anywhere else." He was disgusted by the level of competitiveness exhibited. I was embarrassed for myself and for everyone else on the field because this presumably non-Christian umpire wanted nothing to do with the churches he saw represented in front of him. Competitiveness--having to win and to be the best, not being able to rejoice without having success and not being able to accept somebody else's success without acquiring it ourselves--is a sure announcement that you or I have been swayed by the thinking of this world. Though we may be Christians, we are not living like Christians.

Abram evidenced freedom and selflessness in his statement to Lot. I think we need to examine ourselves in regard to these two qualities to discover the extent to which we have succumbed to loving what this world has to offer. Lot declared himself to be a different kind of person than Abram. There is no indication that he concerned himself with what might have benefited Abram. His decision was calculated to obtain what he wanted when he wanted it. It was selfishness in place of selflessness and bondage instead of freedom.

A very interesting phrase is introduced in verse 10 when Lot analyzed the scene before him. He was probably standing in the hill country that runs down the center of Israel where Bethel and Ai were. As he looked down at the green, well-watered Jordan valley, he was reminded not only of the garden of the Lord but also of "Egypt as you go to Zoar." He had recently been in Egypt, making a fool of himself in his rebellion against the Lord. Nonetheless, he sure liked what he saw: the riches of Egypt, the culture, the soft life of the cities along the river. And he remembered, I am sure, not just Egypt but Ur of the Chaldees which was also a city on a well-watered plain where life was easy. The advantages of fleshly existence were evident all around. Thus, when given a choice, Lot remembered all the things he had learned while living in the world in Ur and in Egypt. He loved what he saw, and he chose to go where he could have the things the world had to offer. Instead of caring for righteousness, instead of seeking a place where he could follow the Lord most closely, he sought a place that offered all this world could give. He was not free; he was in bondage to the love of things that would never give him life.

There are a couple of other telling phrases revealed in the choices of Abram and Lot. The phrase "lifted up his eyes" is used of both men, Verse 10 reads, "Lot lifted up his eyes and saw the valley." In verse 14, we read, "The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, 'Now lift up your eyes and look.'" In the first instance, Lot lifted his eyes and looked at things, basing his evaluation on his own thinking without any consultation with the Lord. He looked and assigned value to what he saw. But the only basis for doing so was his own insight, his own memories of Egypt and Ur, and ideas from his background of what was life-giving and healthy. He looked up and evaluated what he saw based upon himself.

Abram waited until the Lord God came to him and told him to look up. When Abram lifted his eyes, it was at the command of God, and Abram was told to look everywhere. The Lord God said, "I will give you all you see: east, west, north, south, as far as you can see and as much as you can imagine. I will make a great nation of you." The values in Abram's sight came from the statements of God. He did not evaluate the scene himself. He waited for God to give him insight into what was valuable and what was not.

The second set of telling phrases is found in the concluding words describing each man's choice. Verse 13 tells us the outcome of Lot's decision to go to the well-watered plain: "Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord." The phrase that summarizes in tone Abram's choice is in verse 18: "Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord."

If there were a videotape of this scene, we would see these two great families trying to live together while their herdsman clashed. There arose an acquisitiveness, a desire to have things, that resulted in anger over prosperities clashing with one another. The camera would catch Abram and Lot as they met to decide what to do. Because he was a free man and because he wanted the best for Lot, Abram gave him first choice. Lot, lifting his eyes with no other values than those that came from his worldly heart, chose the well-watered plain. The camera would pan the landscape as Lot moved his family down to the valley as far as Sodom. In the background, a voice would be heard announcing what Lot did not as yet clearly realize: "The men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord." The next scene would capture Abram also moving away from Bethel. But he stayed in the mountains, what was left to him, and moved to Hebron. With the concluding strains of music, we would hear the last echo as the videotape played out the migration of Abram: "He built an altar there." This is the capstone statement of Abram's story.

Lot moved to a place of unequalled wickedness and became an addict of the world. Abram moved to Hebron and built an altar.

The future of these two men was cast by the decisions they made. They would continue to interact with each other, and as will be seen later, Abram will have to intervene to save Lot's life. But their destinies were now set in different directions. Lot ended up loving what this world has to offer and was utterly degraded by it. At the end of his life, we find him drunk in a cave, living incestuously with his daughters and ultimately fathering nations that defy the intentions of God. His story ends in shame because he loved the things of the world. Abram grew to increasing faith in God and righteousness, and he has been honored in every generation since. Their stories diverged at this point because, although both men were believers, one of them wanted what the world had to offer and the other wanted only what God would give him.

Let us ask ourselves hard questions about whether or not we are free. Do we dance to the tune of this world? Do we long for all the things everyone else longs for? Do we require, crave and follow all the same things that those in our category in the world require, crave and follow? Are we free?

Are we selfless? Do we experience joy when someone else is benefited even if we are not? Or are we competitors who must always win, doing good in life only when it is good for us? It is important to evaluate ourselves on this basis.

One of the longest running game shows on television, The Price Is Right, consists of people standing in a prominent place (as Lot stood in the hill Country) being shown the goodies of this life. They are asked to evaluate and put a price on them. How much is each item worth? The people who come away rewarded are

those who know how best evaluate, the ones who assign the proper price to what is displayed in front of them. For Lot the price was wrong. His evaluation, made only in worldly terms, brought disaster. And Abram, because he let God lift his eyes and give him insight, saw things from a different perspective. He was given everything.

We make choices every day that are going to bring us to one place or the other, either to Lot's destiny or to Abram's. Faced with these kinds of decisions, we need to ask hard questions and make tough choices. Worldliness and faith are mutually exclusive: one of them will last forever and one will not. Let me end by asking you to consider carefully the warning of I John 2:15-17:

"Do not love the world; nor the things in the world. If any one loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God abides forever."

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