

Lessons from the Life of Abraham (Genesis chapter 13)

(Based on the writings of C.H.M.)

WHY DO CHRISTIANS FAIL?

In chapter twelve of Genesis, we found that Abraham experienced trials and difficulties in the land of Canaan. The Canaanites were already in possession of the land and the famine drove Abraham to seek relief in Egypt.

In chapter thirteen we find yet another trial for Abraham's faith – and this one proved to be even more severe than the famine. Why? Because this trial didn't come from the elements – it didn't come from an enemy tribe – it didn't come out of Egypt!

Far more insidious; far more hurtful than all these things - it came from within Abraham's family itself. It came as a result of him living in the company of somebody who was *not* walking in the energy of personal faith. It came from Abraham's nephew, Lot.

The situation was that Abraham and Lot had so many sheep, cattle and tents, that the land they occupied simply wasn't 'big enough for the both of them'.

“Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. And quarrelling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot. The Canaanites and the Perizzites were also living in the land at that time.” (Genesis 13:5-7)

What an indictment! Why are the Canaanites and Perizzites mentioned at this particular juncture? Surely it points out the futility and tragedy of God's people arguing among themselves - at the very time that they're surrounded by enemies! We've all heard the statement “With friends like you, who needs enemies” and how often do God's people tear at each other. In the words of Paul to the Galatian church:

“If you keep on biting and devouring each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.” (Galatians 5:15)

Surely, in a hostile world, we need all our strength to combat the enemy – rather than each other!

But the problem confronting Abraham was inevitable because Lot didn't really belong. He hadn't been called to leave Ur of the Chaldeans. The call of God was to Abraham, who was told to *leave* his family and father's household. But Lot tagged along – he was carried along by Abraham's influence and example right from the very beginning - rather than by his own faith in God.

This is something that's been very common in the history of God's people. Every great movement has produced its hangers-on. Every outreach - every revival, has swept up people who haven't personally participated in the power of the particular movement. These people will go for a while - but eventually they become either a dead weight or even an active hindrance to the testimony.

How then did Abraham resolve this situation? Our chapter continues:

“So Abram said to Lot, “Let’s not have any quarrelling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Let’s part company. If you go to the left, I’ll go to the right. If you go to the right, I’ll go to the left

Later, of course, we find Lot living in Sodom itself.

As we said before, the Lord had called Abraham to leave his family, but he brought them with him - and the results were unfortunate. His father, Teran, held him up in Haran until death took him out of the way. His nephew, Lot, certainly followed further, but eventually he was attracted away by Sodom - the lust of the world overpowered him, and he completely broke down.

Remember when Israel first came out of Egypt? They brought along hangers-on as well – what the King James Version calls a “**mixed multitude**” (*Exodus 12:38*). And it was this group that defiled the Israelites. It was the carnal, natural urges of those that hadn’t been called by God and who subsequently caused God’s people to waver, to look back and to long for their old life in slavery:

“The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, onions, leeks and garlic.’” (*Numbers 11:4-5*)

In every movement of the church – in every revival - people have found their own level. The principle remains eternal: nothing will last unless it’s of God. I must be certain that I’ve been called by Him into the position I occupy otherwise there’ll be no stability and no consistency.

It’s no good following in someone else’s path. God has given to you and to me a path He wants us to follow. He’s given each one of us a responsibility to fulfil and a sphere of life in which to move.

We need to know our calling and what is involved in that calling. God is only interested in seeing us fulfil the specific purpose *He* has for each individual.

Can you *imagine* the shock Archippus must have got when Paul’s letter to the Colossians was being read out in the church? There he was, probably sitting in the back row, quietly drinking in the wonderful truths flowing over the rapt audience - when suddenly he hears the words:

“Tell Archippus, See to it that you complete the work you have received in the Lord.” (*Colossians 4:17*)

That was a message for Archippus – and for nobody else in the church. It was the work *he* had received in the Lord – and he alone!

This is the point Paul makes in his letter to the Corinthian church:

“God has arranged the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be. If they were all one part, where would the body be?” (*1 Corinthians 12:18-19*)

It doesn’t matter whether you’re up at the front of the assembly or sitting quietly in the back. It makes absolutely no difference whether your ministry is public or private. Seemingly important or apparently insignificant. Whether you have five talents or one

talent. If we use the one talent with our eyes fixed on the Master, we'll hear from his gracious lips the words "Well done" just as surely as if we had used five talents.

Let's put this in practical terms. You could go knocking door to door with tracts in your hand, or you could go down the street every in a *Roger Rabbit* costume collecting children for Sunday School, but unless God has called you to do this – you'll be wasting your time!.

When you get to glory, the Lord will want to know this: what did you do with the gift He gave you? Did you answer the specific call that He put upon your life – not what you thought you should do because that's what other people were doing?

Paul and Peter had different ministries. In the second chapter of Galatians we read that they came to an understanding that Peter's mission was to the Jews and Paul's was to the Gentiles (*Galatians 2:7*). These ministries would obviously overlap to an extent (Peter, we know, preached to the household of Cornelius and Paul preached in the synagogues of most of the cities he visited), but neither of their ministries interfered with each other.

If I *set out* to occupy a certain place in the local church; if I seek a position of *importance* - then there's likely to be strife.

So, Paul gives this advice to Timothy:

"Don't have anything to do with foolish and stupid arguments, because you know they produce quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not quarrel. Instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful." (*2 Timothy. 2:25-26*)

The problem arises when we form an idea of what we *should* be doing. We *should be* the one speaking at the front. We *should be* leading the Bible study. We *should be* involved in this ministry or that ministry because we believe we have the necessary talents and gifts.

What we forget are these two things. Firstly, unless God calls us to a particular work, to a particular area of ministry, then we are simply wasting our time, energy and efforts. Worse than this, we're robbing God of the opportunity to work His way in our lives and fulfil His perfect will for us. Perhaps the area of ministry isn't right for us. Perhaps the time isn't right!

Secondly. If it *is* God's will for us to operate in a particular area, then nothing - nothing on this earth, or below this earth - is able to prevent us from doing so, providing that we wait upon God patiently, asking Him to reveal to us just what His calling is. As we read in the book of Proverbs:

"A man's gift makes way for him." (Proverbs 18:16)

Now a man's gift may make way for him, but what we must remember is that the expression of that gift, and the time for that gift to be used – is entirely dependent on God and His calling – not on us, other people or circumstances.

Two ladies in the Philippian Church obviously hadn't learned that lesson. We don't know what the problem was between Euodia and Syntyche but it was probably competition for recognition in some area. No wonder someone once said that their names sound very like "Odious" and "Soon touchy"

Back then people had trouble working together in the assembly. And it's just the same nowadays. That's why somebody wrote the following:

*To dwell above with saints we love,
O that will sure be glory;
But to dwell below with saints we know,
Well - that's another story*

A carpenter has a saw; a chisel; a hammer; a plane and uses each as he needs it. Nothing more useless and worthless than imitation and nothing is more destructive than competition.

Someone has wisely said: '*We might be too big for God to use, but never too small.*' In every house we find different vessels for different purposes and Paul, writing to Timothy, points out that the Master *wants them all*.

"In a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble. If a man cleanse himself from the latter, he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work" (2 Timothy 2:20-21)

So, we need to search and see whether the influences in our lives are divine or simply human? Does our faith stand in wisdom of man or in the power of God? Do we do things because other people have done them – or have done them in the past

Or do we do things *because the Lord has called us to do them?*

Are we propped up by others or are we sustained by personal faith in God? We need to be sure of this because if we *are* propped up, we'll soon make a shipwreck of our faith

Paul spoke to Timothy about *"..holding onto faith and a good conscience"* But then he goes on to say *"which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith" 1 Timothy 1:19)*

If we go beyond our depth without learning to swim, we'll flounder and we'll drown. Lot left Ur of the Chaldeans but fell in the plains of Sodom because the call of God hadn't reached his heart and the inheritance of God hadn't filled his vision. He was irresistibly drawn to the well-watered plains of Sodom. Although a *"righteous man"*, (as he's described in Peter's second epistle (2 Peter 2:7)), he couldn't resist the call of the world.

"Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt toward Zoar. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out towards the east. The two men parted company; Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom." (Genesis 13:8)

But what *really* caused Lot to turn off the path?

There is a critical point reached in everyone's life. And how we decide at that time will reflect, to a greater or lesser extent, how we've lived our lives up till then.

Lot didn't die at Haran; but he did fall at Sodom – and the *apparent* cause of the fall was the strife between his herdsmen and those of his uncle Abraham.

But was this the real reason? After all, the problem could have been solved without spiritual damage. In Abraham's case, the problem of land availability gave him an opportunity to display the power of his faith. In Lot's case, however, it was an occasion for him to clearly exhibit just how thoroughly worldly his heart was. He was given the *choice* and he chose the *well-watered* plains of Sodom.

When we're not walking with our eyes on the Lord, with our affections set on things above, and not on things below, then we'll inevitably find some stone to stumble over. – if it's not one thing, it'll be another. Whatever the apparent cause of our turning aside from following the Lord, the real reason always lies underneath – hidden – in our hearts. Because always, this is where the world, in some shape or form, is sought after.

The strife between the herdsmen didn't produce this worldliness in Lot – it simply brought out what was already there!

Whenever there's controversy in the church; and whenever there are divisions, we find that there are those who are driven back into the world because of these things.

Now it's true that we have a grave responsibility to live together in peace - Gods hates the actions of someone who sows discord among brethren (*Proverbs 6:19*). And it's equally true that we mustn't stumble one another. Nevertheless, no-one can escape individual responsibility because these things only serve to develop the real condition of the soul. They bring out the hidden tendency and direction of the heart.

The world was in Lot's heart and would be reached by one means or the other. And in our heart too, if we're not walking before the Lord in simplicity of faith and love for Him, the world will be seen in ambition, competition, unrest, resentment of other Christians, and strife.

Instead of this, we should be saying, like Abraham:

“Let's not have any quarrelling between you and me..for we are close relatives.” (*Genesis 13:8*)

“How good and pleasant it is” the Bible says, **“when brothers live together in unity.”** (*Psalms 133:1*). In fact, Jesus himself reminds us that our love for one another is the only real way that the world can tell we're God's children. (*John 13:34-35*)

So why didn't *Abraham* choose Sodom? Why didn't the strife between the herdsmen drive *him* into the world?

For this reason: He looked at things from God's point of view!

No doubt Abraham had a heart that was capable of being attracted by the well-watered plains just as powerfully as Lot's heart - but the difference was that Abraham *didn't allow his heart to choose*. He let Lot take his choice and then *left God to choose for him*.

Abraham knew that Lot would choose what looked attractive to the natural man. And he knew - just as certainly - that God's pathway would lie in the opposite direction.

What heavenly wisdom! This is what faith always does. It sets its course in the opposite direction to what seems good, worthwhile and attractive to the world. It seeks its future

and fulfilment in quite an opposite direction. It lays up its treasure in a place which nature would never dream of examining

Not only this, but faith is always satisfied with the portion that *God* gives. On one occasion King David exclaimed:

“The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance.” (Psalm 16:6)

It doesn't matter where the boundary lines fall in our lives because, in the judgment of faith, they are always pleasant *because God puts them there*.

But now look what Lot chose! He chose Sodom - the very place that was about to be judged!

And why? Because he looked at the outward appearance, and not at the essential character of Sodom and its future destiny. Sodom was marked for destruction. In the not-too-distant future, that sinful city would be buried under an avalanche of fire and brimstone. Lot knew nothing of this – and neither did Abraham. - but God did!

He knows the future. He knows the dangers and the pitfalls.

We're warned that **“..... friendship with the world means enmity against God.” (James 4:4)** We're told not to **“love the world, neither the things that are in the world.” (1 John 2:15)** And for very good reason! - Like Sodom, this present world is headed at breakneck speed for judgment and destruction **(Acts 17:31; Romans 2:16)**.

And Lot was eventually pulled out of the city 'in the nick of time'. If we compromise with the world, if we love the things of the world, we will certainly be rescued from the judgement that falls upon the unsaved, but we'll have nothing to show for our lives – we'll be those described in the book of Jude:

“Snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear – hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh.” (Jude 23)

Somebody once said that 'One half of our problems come from wanting our own way. The other half come from getting it'

Lot left the place of testimony and finished up in the place of judgment. All because He was attracted to the world. He looked for his security in the world.

Charles Dutton – the Successful Broadway Star of the 'the Piano Lesson' did what no-one would have imagined. He spent years in prison for manslaughter.

So how did he make such a remarkable transition from disgrace to success?

He explained it like this. He said 'Unlike the other prisoners, I never decorated my cell'

Dutton resolved never to regard his cell as his home.

As believers we can accomplish such a lot if we don't accommodate ourselves to this world. Our experience should be that of those men of faith, described as **“longing for a better country – a heavenly one.” (Hebrews 11:16)**

And what was the result of Abraham's decision of faith?

"The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever." (Genesis 13:14-15)

The strife and separation, far from damaging Abraham, brought his heavenly principles into focus and strengthened his faith. The result was that God blessed him greatly. His vision was enlarged, his future was assured, and God's promises were made good in his life.

Sometimes the ground must be cleared of dead wood if we're to see a harvest of blessing. People who run unsent, uncalled by God – like Lot – will break down in one way or another, sooner or later – and they find their way back into the very things they profess to have left.

Because there was no altar in Sodom! Everyone who travels to Sodom are after something quite different. It's never the worship of God but the love of the world that leads them there.

And the result?

"He gave them their request; but sent leanness into their soul." (Psalm 106:15)

Everyone should receive his call and his commission directly from the Master Himself. If we wait on God and His will, our faith will develop and grow. Our path, the Bible says, will be

"like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day." (Proverbs 4:18)

May He provide the power and the grace to sustain each one of us
Amen