

Lessons from the Life of Abraham (Genesis chapter 14)

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

SEPARATION FROM THE WORLD

Genesis 14 presents a vital aspect of the Christian life – separation from the world and what this means for our relationship with other believers.

The chapter begins with the account of a rebellion that took place in the days of Abraham and Lot. The kings in five cities of the Jordan river plain rebelled against twelve years of subjugation to Mesopotamian rule and fought four Mesopotamian kings (led by Cherdolaomer) in the so-called 'Battle of the Vale of Siddim'. (*Genesis 14:1-12*)

Now this appears a strange introduction to another episode in the life of Abraham! But what is clear in Scripture is that the Spirit of God is interested in the political and military affairs of this world *when these involve the people of God*.

And this particular conflict did just that. You'll remember that Lot had chosen to live in Sodom at that time and we're told that he taken away by the victorious Mesopotamian kings when they ransacked and pillaged Sodom and Gomorrah:

"The four kings seized all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food, then they went away. They also carried Abram's nephew Lot and his possessions, since he was living in Sodom." (*Genesis 14:11-12*)

(This historical detail does highlight one interesting feature of Old Testament prophecy. *Only* those nations directly affecting the nation of Israel are contemplated in the prophetic writings: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome. And even *then* these nations are only discussed insofar as they are relevant to Israel's issues. This is why the area occupied by all these countries (the 'prophetic world') is often in Scripture described as 'the whole world'. Only *these* countries have any *direct significance* in the unfolding history of God's redeeming work).

But to return to our story - the revolt of the kings!

An important thing we need to understand is that Abraham *personally* had nothing to do with the war or its consequences. They didn't involve his *tent* or his *altar*. The life of the spiritual man will never stir up the envy or ambitions of influential people in this world. As strangers and pilgrim, we should be obedient to the Spirit's word in

"Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody." (*1 Thessalonians 4:11-12*)

But Lot had identified himself with Sodom! He had made a place for himself in this world – and this involved him in the whole affair.

The path of simple faith lies outside the range of this world's circumstances. We can trust in God alone and remain peacefully separated from the political, economic and social upheavals in this hectic world of ours. In spite of religious conflict, terrorism, the declining of Christianity in America and the western world, Government interference in personal faith, and the impending threats to freedom – we can rest in the Lord, knowing that *everything* is as it *should* be.

When Paul addressed the Areopagus in Athens, he said the following of God:

“From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.” (Acts 17:26)

What confidence this should give us! God has put every nation in its proper place. Whatever horrors the newspapers scream out, whatever the latest acts of terror dumped into our living rooms by the media or whatever natural catastrophe causes men’s hearts to fail them for fear, we know that God,

“works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.” (Ephesians 1:11).

The citizen of heaven *rests* in this and leaves the affairs of *this world where they belong – in the Lord’s hand*.

But if we abandon our high and holy position as those whose citizenship is in *heaven*, and if we seek a name and a position and a reputation *on this earth*, we must expect to participate in *earth’s* convulsions. If, like *Lot*, we make our home near *Sodom*, we must expect - like Lot - to be deeply affected by the *wars* of Sodom.

God’s word is quite clear on this. It is *never* advisable; it is *never* in God’s will, for the child of God to identify with the children of this world. We must live *in* the world – but we must not share the same *direction*, the same *ambitions*, the same *hopes* and *prospects*. We must not join in their way of life.

Writing to the saints in Corinth, Paul gives this solemn piece of advice:

“Be not yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What has a believer in common with an unbeliever?” (2 Corinthians 6:14-15)

We usually relate this passage to *marriage* – a believer shouldn’t marry an unbeliever! And that’s *true*! But what about in *business*? What about in shared *pleasures* and *pastimes*?

Lot was a righteous man - but because *he came to live in Sodom*; because he made *his home in Sodom*; because he chose to invest *his future in Sodom*, his testimony there was *feeble* – if it existed at all! *Settling in Sodom* was a deathblow to his ministry!

To speak against Sodom would have been *hypocrisy*. After all, why was he *there*?

Lot had obviously allowed personal and family reasons to dictate his priorities and because he became *worldly*, he wasn’t in a position to *testify against the world* – even if he was inclined to?

And so the apostle Peter describes Lot’s hopeless position:

“For that righteous man, living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard.” (2 Peter 2:8)

Lot reminds me of the story I heard of a man in the cancer ward of a major hospital. Even when coughing his lungs out and gasping for breath because of advanced lung cancer, he still puffed on a cigarette. His words to a visitor were, ‘I loathe these cigarettes. They’ve destroyed me – but I can’t give them up!’

In our Christian walk, we must make a definite choice between the world and the things of God. We can't be governed by two objects at the same time. We can't serve both God and Mammon.

The bottom line for us is this: the child of God can't have be preoccupied with worldly interests *and* the gospel of Christ at the same time!

Is *my career* my priority in life or *the gospel*? It *must* be one or the other!

If I settle down in a place to make money – to be a success, - and preach the gospel or minister to others *only as a sideline* (when I can find the time) - then I can expect no blessing from God!

Certainly, we should work to keep ourselves. Paul makes this point very forcibly:

“If a man will not work, he shall not eat!” (2 Thessalonians 2:10)

We have a *responsibility* to do our very best our chosen careers. But this should never be the motivating object in our lives. It's not the primary reason why we're on this earth!

Paul preached the gospel - and made tents to support himself. But the gospel was his aim and purpose – not tent-making!

Lot lived in Sodom – he had made Sodom his home - and because he had done so, when opposition and evil arose, he became a prisoner-of-war

“The four kings seized all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food; then they went away. They also carried off Abram's nephew, Lot and his possessions, since he was living in Sodom.” (Genesis 14: 11-12)

In Paul's second letter to Timothy, and speaking of opponents who are quarrelsome, Paul advises his young son in the faith, to instruct them gently, in the hope that

“they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will,” (2 Timothy 2:26)

As children of God, we're in a war! But, as Paul describes it:

“... our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.” (Ephesians 6:12)

And if we *participate* in the world and identify with its *ambitions* and its *aspirations*, we'll have no strength to fight the enemy and, like Lot, we'll become a 'prisoner- of-war' – unable to play any effective part in the spiritual conflict.

The most *effective* way to serve the world is by remaining separate from it and testifying *against* it.

But there's a right way and a wrong to remain separate from the world!

The wrong way – the fleshly way – is to withdraw from the world (join a monastery; become a Quaker; live like the Amish). Or at the very least, live an exclusive life – distancing ourselves from friends and neighbours. People who do this, find that this exclusivism chills the soul and actually destroys any effective testimony. People with this mindset are the ones who truly are - in the wrong way – 'too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use'.

Then there's the right way – true separation from the world which can only come as a natural consequence of communion with *God*. It's *not* separation from others – it *is* separation to God; This warms and expands our hearts – it results in genuine love and interest in others.

We have, after all, been left in the world to preach the gospel and to show the life of Christ to others. But even though our Lord mixed with publicans and sinners, He was separate from sinners and his holy life testified against them.

Have you ever noticed that even though a fish lives in the salty ocean - it doesn't taste salty itself?

But this kind of separation – the ability to live *in* the world but to remain *separated* from the world - only comes about by us making *God* and *his* glory, the central object of our lives.

The story goes on:

“When Abram heard that this relative had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and went in pursuit as far as Dan. During the night, Abram divided his men to attack them and he routed them, pursuing them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus. He recovered all the goods and brought back his relative Lot and his possessions, together with the women and the other people.” (*Genesis 14:14-16*)

Faith makes us independent but never indifferent! Abraham heard that his brother was in trouble, and he acted immediately.

The Bible tells us that true faith has three properties:

Acts 15:9 tells us that it purifies the heart

Gal.5:6 tells us that it expresses itself through love

1 John 5:4 says that it overcomes the world

Abraham's heart was purified from Sodom's pollutions, he showed genuine love for his brother Lot, and he was completely victorious over the kings.

But all this was only possible because he had remained separated from the world. If he'd lived in Sodom himself, how could he have rescued Lot? He would have been taken prisoner himself!

The only way that I can rescue someone else from the world, is if I am separated from the world myself.

If I'm *in* the fire – it's quite impossible than I can pluck another *out*!

There were two construction workers who fell into a muddy pit on the building site. One of them thrashed about in the soggy mess and kept crying out to the other man 'Please get me out of this! Help me – set me free!'

The other man shouted back - 'You idiot. How can I help? I'm in this pit myself!'

Finally, a fellow workman – a man *not* in the pit – lowered a rope and both men were taken out.

This illustration also shows, of course, why only Jesus Christ - Himself the *perfect* man - could rescue us from the pit of sin.

So, Abraham was able to rescue Lot but immediately after his victory,

But then he had to face a fresh, temptation. And this time the temptation was insidious and devious.

“After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the valley of Shaveh (that is, the king’s valley).” (*Genesis 14:17*)

This showed a different phase of the enemy’s power, and it was a deadly threat to Abraham. Why?

Because of the following:

“The king of Sodom said to Abram, “Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself.” (*Genesis 14:21*)

If, in the ferocious battle of the kings, we hear the roar of the lion – it’s in the King of Sodom’s offer that we hear the hiss of the serpent.

First Abraham overcame the *hostility* of the world but now he had to resist its *temptations* and *seductive offers*.

And notice that this happened immediately *after* his victory over the kings – when he was on his way home!

In our spiritual lives – it’s immediately after a victory that we’re at our weakest – and it’s then that the enemy takes a *different* tack.

You remember what happened after Joshua and the children of Israel took Jericho? Flushed with success, they decided to go right ahead and attack Ai with only a small force of two to three thousand men. They didn’t wait on God! Instead, they reasoned that an army that defeated Jericho would have no trouble with little Ai.

But what they forgot was that the ‘battle belonged to the Lord’! They had done *nothing* to bring the walls of Jericho down except to march around them in obedience to the Lord. The result was that they lost thirty-six men in a humiliating defeat at the hands of a tiny township.

When a spiritual victory is gained, when we’ve enjoyed wonderful fellowship with the Lord and each other, when we’ve participated in a tremendous prayer meeting or been used effectively by the Lord - that’s the *very point* at which the enemy comes in. And he comes in offering *gifts* like the king of Sodom!

These seductive gifts take many forms. Sometimes we’re tempted to congratulate ourselves - to take some credit for our success. We want to be recognised for our efforts and not taken for granted. We think that we’ve done a good job and then we become self-reliant.

It’s precisely because of this danger, that Paul in says

“So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall.” (*1 Corinthians 10:12*)

Bobby Leach, an Englishman, astonished the world by successfully walking on a rope across Niagara Falls. A few weeks later, walking along a city street, Leach slipped over a banana peel on the pavement and broke his hip

The moment of victory is the moment of greatest danger!

And the danger posed by the King of Sodom is frequently more deadly than open hostility! When Satan is out in the open, his attacks are easily recognised and we're on the alert! We flee to God in an overwhelming sense of our dependence on Him. However, when he panders to our pride, when he exploits our hidden weaknesses and when he offers us a little piece of the world, then we can be thoroughly defeated without even having recognised the danger!

But praise God - his grace is sufficient, and he comes at our exact moment of need.

He always comes at right time to refresh us and to strengthen us.

“For the eyes of the Lord range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.” (2 Chronicles 16:9)

You see – the attack might not have been anticipated by Abraham, but it was anticipated by the Lord. Just before Abraham's meeting with the king of Sodom, Melchizedek comes out to intercept him, to refresh him and to strengthen him with God's blessing.

Notice that Melchizedek didn't come when Abraham was in pursuit of Kedorlaomer - he came when king of Sodom was *in pursuit of Abraham*.

The reason? A deeper character of communion was needed to prepare Abraham for the deeper character of the conflict!

“Then Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God most High, and he blessed Abram, saying,

**“Blessed be Abram by God Most High
Creator of heaven and earth
And blessed be God most High
Who delivered your enemies into your hand.” (Genesis 14: 18-19)**

Melchizedek is described in Hebrews chapter seven as a type of Christ. His name means '*King of Righteousness*' and He came out from *Salem* - later to be called *Jerusalem* – which means '*Peace*'. He is therefore a type of the King of Righteousness and the King of Peace – our Lord Jesus Christ. Melchizedek was also a High Priest, and as such, typifies our Great High Priest who ministers to us his righteousness and peace in the moments of conflict in our daily lives.

Righteousness and peace! Only in the full realisation of these two wonderful pillars of our Salvation will we be able to meet the enemy!

So, in writing to the church in Rome, Paul says this:

“Therefore, since we have been justified (or declared righteous) through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Romans 5:1)

And to return to Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek, we find that the bread and wine refreshed his spirit after the battle.

I can see in this meeting a foreshadowing of the Lord's supper. At the end of the battles of the week, we draw aside to meet with the Lord, to commune with Him and share the bread and the

wine, symbols of his blood shed for us, and his body given for us. And this both refreshes our spirits and prepares us to meet the coming conflict.

But Melchizedek didn't only refresh Abraham with bread and wine: He also blessed him as the representative of "God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth." (*Genesis 14 :19*) and declared Abraham to be blessed of that same God

Now all this was to prepare Abraham for his encounter with King of Sodom

Someone who has been blessed by a God who has created heaven and earth - certainly doesn't need anything from the King of Sodom. For such a person, Sodom would have little attraction.

When we've met together to share the bread and the wine, and we've been reminded of the riches in glory available to us in Christ Jesus, why would we want to accept anything from the world?

Abraham's vision was full of the greatness of God and the wonderful inheritance promised to him. So, he refuses to be enriched by the King of Sodom, and says to him:

"I have raised my hand to the Lord, God most High, Creator of Heaven and earth, and have taken an oath, that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, "I made Abram rich." (*Genesis 14: 22-23*)

The world, in all various forms, is a deadly temptation to the servant of Christ. It is Satan's most effective weapon for weakening our hands and alienating our affection from the Lord.

And so John solemnly advises in his letter to the saints:

"Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him". (*1 John 2:15*)

A reputation in this world, wealth, and security, acknowledgment for what we do – even in the Lord's service - are not what we should be looking for.

After Henry C Morrison had spent 40 years on the mission field in Africa, he was returning home on the same boat as American president Theodore Roosevelt. As they entered New York Harbour – there was a great fanfare and celebration to welcome Roosevelt on his return home.

Henry felt dejected. After 40 years labouring in the field, shouldn't he also have received some recognition.

Even as he was thinking this, he heard as still, small voice say to him: 'You're not home yet!'

Taking nothing from this world – needing nothing from this world, let us, with Paul, learn to be able to say with all the sincerity of a heart fully fixed on Him:

"But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (*Philippians 3:13-14*)

May God bless His precious word to each one of us.