

A SELFISH CHOICE

Genesis 13:1-13

God spoke to Abraham saying, "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred." Instead of obeying God, Abraham took his nephew Lot with him. Lot's father, Haran, died when his son was a youth of tender years. Lot was then taken into the family of his Uncle Abraham, who seems to have acted toward him as an affectionate father. Together they left their native hills, became companions in wandering and went down into Egypt. They went to Egypt because Abraham did not trust God for the necessities of life.

While they were in Egypt, both Abraham and Lot acquired great wealth. Materially, Abraham was far richer because of his sojourn in Egypt, but, spiritually, he was poorer. There is no mention of Abraham being rich before he went down into Egypt. He and Lot got rich down in Egypt outside the will of God. It is worthy of note that this is the first time that riches are mentioned in the Bible. Abraham had become a very rich man, and Lot had shared in his prosperity. Here for the first time, though not the last one, wealth proved a source of trouble among relatives. Wealth is almost universally considered as a source of happiness, and for that reason it is most eagerly desired. But, it is much more often a source of trouble and vexation than of satisfaction and comfort. Contentions have arisen in many families over the subject of wealth. Many families have spent years in love and harmony until they were called to share the property that had been bequeathed to them. Not for the first time in human experience, nor the last one, was it found more difficult to bear prosperity than adversity.

What is the teaching of the Bible about wealth as possessed by a child of God? The Bible teaches that there is no sin in being wealthy provided the riches have been obtained honorably, are regarded as belonging to God and are being constantly used as in the sight of God. At the same time wealth very seriously increases the responsibility of a believer, and his riches will soon become a sin if they are not used properly and with a sense of stewardship rather than ownership.

After their return from Egypt into Canaan, there took place an incident which made it necessary for Lot to make a choice. The remainder of his career was greatly affected by this choice. They brought back with them some cattle in addition to the flocks of sheep. This is the first mention of cattle among the possessions of Abraham. Before he had gone into Egypt, he was a shepherd, but, when he returned, he was a cattleman, and these cattle became the occasion for the sad story of the strife between him and Lot. Notice that the strife was not between their shepherds. Twice we are reminded that it was strife between the herdmen or cattlemen of Abraham and Lot.

Sheep can graze and forage where cattle would starve to death. Sheep crop the grass; cattle graze. Sheep have teeth in both the upper and the lower jaws; cattle have teeth only in the lower jaw, the front upper jaws being toothless. As a result, sheep can crop the grass right down to the ground, but cattle can only graze where the grass is long enough for them to grasp it with their tongues and to cut it off by holding it against their lower jaws and moving their heads upward. Hence, land that was able to support many sheep was unable to support the same number of cattle.

No sooner had they become stationary until they discovered that the land was not able to furnish their herds with sufficient pasture and water. When the herds were driven to the wells in the evenings, there were clashings, bickerings and quarrels between the herdsmen. Consequently, it seemed wise to divide the land. Abraham saw that this quarreling must not be permitted to go on. He was too wise, statesmanlike and God-like to tolerate it.

So Abraham took Lot out on a hilltop from whence they could get a wide view of the surrounding country and where they could talk the matter over. He suggested to Lot that in the interest of peace they should separate, each to his own domain. He knew that the existing state of affairs was untimely, unseemly, unwise, unrighteous and unnecessary. Abraham's conduct on this occasion was such as became his exalted character. It was conciliatory. He well knew the value and blessedness of peace. He refused to participate in contention because he knew that no man could tell when or how it would terminate. Hence he was desirous of promoting peace. How much better it is to prevent contention than it is to cause it or to be a party to it!

His conduct was condescending. As standing in the superior relation of an uncle, while Lot was only a nephew and an attendant, Abraham might well have claimed the deference and submission that were due to him. But, instead of asserting his own rights, he was ready to act the part of an inferior; rightly judging that condescension is the truest honor. Accordingly the proposal came from him that, since circumstances demanded a separation, they should separate in a manner that became their holy profession. He said, "Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren." His proposal was exceedingly gracious and beautiful. He was the senior, and the one to whom God had promised to give the land, yet, he generously waived his rights. There was no insistence on any rights for himself. He was entirely free from any spirit of strife.

His proposal was very generous. Common justice required that in the division of the land Abraham should have equal advantages with Lot. But Abraham waived his rights, and cheerfully conceded to Lot whatever portion he chose to take. He wanted Lot to occupy whichever he preferred, and to leave the other to him. With a magnanimity that is very captivating, Abraham left the whole decision with Lot. He said, "Is not the whole land before thee? Separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left." With all that nobility of character which characterized him always, Abraham said, in substance, "Lot, take your choice, and I will take what is left." "You choose the part of the country that you want and I'll take the rest." There was not a trait of selfishness shown in his conduct. Most people insist on having their rights but Abraham was willing to give up his rights for the sake of peace.

I wish you would notice another significant statement which he made, namely, "And the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelled then in the land." He mentioned that fact in order to emphasize the seriousness of strife in the presence of such lookers-on. Those people took great pleasure in the quarrels of the herdsmen, just like the world and its newspapers now are secretly delighted at any dissensions among God's professing people. Enemies are always looking on and noting what happens among those who profess to be believers. It is certainly a poor testimony if there is strife between professed Christians. There is nothing which hurts the cause of Jesus Christ as much as strife between those who call themselves Christians. The Holy Spirit is grieved when the people of God cannot get along.

Admirable as was the example of Abraham, we observe a perfect contrast in the choice of Lot. In this great crucial test of Lot's character he, as no doubt he often did before, met Abraham's generosity with selfishness. Lot might have said, "It is not for me to choose. You take your choice and give me what is right." But the world had taken possession of him. He was glad for an opportunity to take advantage of the privilege of increasing his wealth. The unselfish offer of Abraham ought to have called forth a similar expression from Lot but the quality was not there. The selfish man will take advantage of the generous man, but always to his own hurt. Instead of refusing to choose, insisting that his uncle should have the best, he greedily took the best. His soul had been taken captive by the desire to be rich. Worldly advantage was the first element in his choice.

When Lot looked upon the magnificent well-watered Jordan Valley and the fine pasture lands adjacent to Sodom, with its business and social opportunities, he thought of the advantages he would have there and how he could increase his fortune there. So he decided to pitch his tent toward Sodom. Worldliness and covetousness were the governing principles of his heart. His selfishness was deeply reprehensible. His conduct argued too little regard for the interests of his soul. As he left Abraham without regret, so he went to dwell in Sodom without fear, and knowing full well the character of the people there. What benefits he was losing, and what dangers he was about to rush into, he little thought of; his earthly prosperity was all that occupied his mind; the welfare of his soul was not considered. This conduct everyone must blame; yet how many there are who pursue the same heedless and pernicious course. Let us guard against the love of this world. Love of this world generates unhappy dispositions and produces unworthy conduct.

Lot's motive in making his choice was to advance his worldly interests. It was a selfish choice. He took into account his own worldly circumstances, the suitability of the Jordan Valley to advance them, his ambition to become much richer, and his desire to excel Abraham in worldly goods.

What were some of the results of his living in Sodom?

1. A deep unrest.
Unrest of soul is always the result of a lack of submission to the will of God. When a man sets himself up against the will of God he always finds unrest of soul, regardless of how prosperous he may be.
2. His children were ruined.
He was quite proud of them but they were ruined because he moved into Sodom. What a price to pay for his business prosperity! What a price to pay for any kind of a life, however great and glorious and splendid, that would ruin his children! Lot never was able to get those children back to the place where they were when they moved into the city.
3. He never made anybody any better.
This is true because his motive was bad, so how could his influence have been good? The underlying motive of life has a great deal to do with a man's influence.

When Lot pitched his tent toward Sodom, he faced in the wrong direction. The outcome of any life is a matter of the direction in which it faces. Any choices that take in nothing but the seen and temporal are foolish and fatal. It is always disastrous to neglect or ignore God. What we admire in another, let us cultivate in ourselves.