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CHOICES, CONSEQUENCES

Genesis 13:5-18

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Genesis Lesson 28

Choices, Consequences Genesis 13:5-18

There is a point along the Continental Divide high in the Rocky Mountains in Colorado at which the waters of a small stream separate. It would not seem to matter much whether a drop of water goes to the left or to the right. But the outcome of those drops of water is totally different. One drop goes to the west and eventually flows into the Colorado River and empties into the Gulf of California and the Pacific Ocean. Another drop goes east until it flows into the Mississippi River and dumps into the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. Two drops of water, two entirely different destinations, but one small turning point that determines the outcome.

Many choices in life are like that. At the time they don't seem significant. But those choices set in motion a series of events which shape your life and the lives of your children and grandchildren after you. If we could share how we all came to know Christ as Savior, I would guess that many of you chose to go somewhere where you met someone who started talking to you, which led to a chain of events resulting in your salvation. The original choice wasn't a big deal, but the outcome was life-changing. Or if we all shared how we met our mates, many of the stories would begin with seemingly insignificant decisions to attend some social event. That decision led to a relationship which forever affected our lives, not to mention our children's lives.

Sometimes people make unwise choices which aren't momentous in themselves, but they lead to tragedies: A teenager chooses to ride with a friend who has been drinking, resulting in a serious accident and the loss of life. A girl decides to have a drink at a party, resulting in her letting down her inhibitions. She ends up pregnant or with a venereal disease. Since seemingly small decisions can have such momentous consequences, how can we protect ourselves from making wrong choices? The story of Lot's choice (Gen. 13:5-18) teaches a crucial lesson about life's choices:

Since choices often result in eternally significant consequences, we must choose in line with God's principles.

The herdsmen of Lot and of Abram were quarreling because there wasn't adequate land to support all their flocks. So Abram gave Lot his choice of where to settle. Lot surveyed the land and decided to move down into the lush Jordan valley. That choice was the beginning of Lot's gradual but steady spiritual decline. First he *looked* toward Sodom (13:10). Then he *moved his tents* near Sodom (13:12). Next we find him *living* in Sodom (14:12). Finally he is *sitting in the gate* of Sodom (19:1)--he was a city official. He lost his wife, barely escaped with his own life and his two daughters, and goes off the Old Testament page hiding in a cave where his daughters make him drunk and commit incest with him. The offspring of those disgraceful nights were the Moabites and the Ammonites, two of Israel's perennial enemies. It all began with Lot's choice to live near Sodom.

1. Choices often result in eternally significant consequences.

There is a clear progression in this story. First, both Lot and Abram have increased wealth (13:2, 5-6). Their *increased wealth* leads to *increased strife* because there simply wasn't enough land for each of them, plus the Canaanites and the Perizzites (13:7). They didn't have that problem before. Where did we ever get the notion that wealth will solve our problems? Some of the most unhappy families in the world are those with the most money, where one member is set against the other, trying to make sure he gets his portion of the inheritance. The increased strife led to *increased responsibility* for choices. Lot wasn't just deciding for himself. His family and many servants and their families would be affected by his decision. The increased responsibility for choices led to either *increased wickedness* (in Lot's case, choosing Sodom) or *increased blessing* (in Abram's case, choosing Canaan).

Genesis 13 is the first mention of wealth in the Bible. Wealth can be a blessing, but we need to recognize something that isn't said very often in our prosperous culture: *Wealth is a dangerous blessing!* Increased wealth always results in increased potential either for evil or for good. To whom much is given, much shall be required

(Luke 12:48). When your income increases, so does your accountability to God.

We need to pay serious attention to the biblical warnings about wealth. As Jesus watched the rich young ruler walk away, He observed, "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" (Luke 18:24). The apostle Paul said, "Those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang" (1 Tim. 6:9-10).

Everyone is quick to point out, "It isn't money, but the *love* of money that's the problem!" (Whew!) That's true, but irrelevant. It's like handing a five-year-old a loaded gun and saying, "Guns aren't dangerous, just the people who use them." True, but irrelevant. The fact is, no five-year-old is mature enough to handle a loaded gun. And no sinner is capable of properly handling money unless he is constantly yielded to the Holy Spirit and is continually on guard against every form of greed.

So Lot's increased wealth led to strife which led him to make the worst decision of his life. Lot did something many American Christians do, usually without much thought: He made a major life decision based on the unchallenged assumption that pursuing prosperity should be the main goal in life. Lot chose Sodom because he saw the lush valley and thought he could prosper there. We're given a clue when verse 10 says that Lot saw the valley "like the land of Egypt." Lot's heart was still down in Egypt, where he had become rich along with Abram. Lot didn't want any part of the hard life of faith, of living in famine-stricken Canaan. He wanted to live the good life in Egypt. He never seemed to consider what verse 13 points out, the spiritual implications of moving his family to Sodom.

I've seen many Christian families make a decision to move because the husband is offered a better-paying job. But they never consider how the move will affect them and their family spiritually. You can't escape from living near sinners (Canaan was almost as bad as Sodom), but some people and places are exceedingly wicked. If God calls you to such a place as a witness, you go in

with your guard up. But many American Christians, like Lot, decide where they're going to live based on finances, not on spiritual reasons. Verse 11 states the problem: Lot "chose for himself...." He and his family paid an awful price.

Since many choices have eternally significant consequences, how do we make good choices?

2. We must choose in line with God's principles.

It's possible to gain the whole world and lose your soul. There is much more in life than the outward and material. We must base our choices on God's Word, not on the assumptions of our culture. Those principles encompass the whole Bible and take a lifetime to learn thoroughly. But there are four basic principles in our text that I want to explore with you:

A. Make choices which value relationships over rights.

Note verse 8: "Please let there be no strife between you and me, ... because we are brothers." Coming just after the statement about the Canaanites and Perizzites being in the land, this may point to Abram's concern about how their strife would affect the witness to the pagans around them. How can God's people bear witness for Him if the world sees them fighting among themselves?

Abram had a right to choose whatever land he wanted and let Lot take the leftovers. He was the older, the chief of the clan. God had promised the land to Abram, not to Lot. (Note, by the way, that even though Abram and Lot both had the freedom to choose, God's sovereign purpose to give the land to Abram overruled their choices.) But Abram graciously yielded his rights and trusted God to give him his portion. What mattered to Abram was, "We are brothers." He valued his relationship with Lot over his right to choose the best land.

So much strife could be avoided in the family and in the church if we would put a premium on our relationships, set aside our rights, and let the Lord take care of us. The next time you are about to quarrel with someone (and quarrelling is a choice we make!), stop and think about whether the quarrel is rooted in godly principle or in selfishness. Sometimes we need to confront sin or take a stand for the truth, even though it causes conflict. But be careful! It's easy to justify selfishness by calling it righteous anger.

The general rule is, "Let us pursue the things which make for peace and the building up of one another" (Rom. 14:19).

B. Make choices which value godliness over greed.

By faith, Abram had already renounced everything visible and opted for the unseen promises of God. So he had no need, as Lot did, to choose by sight. There is a deliberate contrast between verses 10 and 14. In verse 10, Lot *lifted up his eyes* and chose the land which looked the best to him. He took off for the good life and left Abram literally in the dust, in dusty Canaan, where there had just been a severe famine. In verse 14, as Abram is standing there wondering if he did the right thing (and perhaps Sarah was asking him the same question), God tells him to *lift up his eyes* and look in every direction. All the land he can see will be his. Perhaps as Abram was looking around, his eyes fell down to the dusty soil on which he was standing. So the Lord says, "Do you see all that dust? I'll 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."

Lot chose by sight and ended up spiritually and financially bankrupt. He escaped Sodom with the clothes on his back and faded out living in a cave. The things he saw and got didn't bring him the lasting happiness he expected. Abram chose by faith, not by sight, and ended up spiritually and financially blessed, seeing and possessing by faith the whole land of Canaan, although he died owning only a burial plot. Lot lived for greed and came up empty. Abram lived for God and came up full.

How can we know whether we are under the influence of greed? Charles Simeon, a godly 19th century British pastor, offered three helpful criteria for evaluating ourselves (*Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible* [Zondervan], XII:469-471). First, we may judge ourselves by the manner in which we *seek* the things of this world. If we find ourselves thinking more about the things of this world and how to get them than about God; or if the thought of having them brings us more pleasure than our thoughts about God; or if we are willing to violate our conscience or neglect spiritual duties to pursue those things, then we are governed by greed.

Second, we may judge ourselves by the manner in which we *enjoy* the things of this world. There is nothing wrong with enjoying the things God provides us. But, if we start thinking, "If I just had such and such, I would be happy," or if we think that by getting so much in the bank, we will be secure from the trials of life, then we've shifted our trust from God to material things, and we are governed by greed.

Third, we may judge ourselves by the manner in which we *mourn the loss* of the things of this world. Christians are not to be devoid of feelings. But here Simeon is getting at the principle which enabled Job, when he lost all his worldly possessions, to say, "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord." It enabled Paul to be content with much or with little, because Christ was his sufficiency. If our joy rides on our possessions or if we are filled with anxiety and grief if we lose them, then we are more governed by greed than by God.

One night in November, 1980, the Lord enrolled us in a crash course on this subject. The Panorama Fire was raging out of control in a canyon a few miles below our house. At 4 a.m. a neighbor whose husband was a volunteer fireman called and told us that we would be forced to evacuate our home at 7 a.m. My office was at home then, and we only had a Mustang with a top rack to carry everything we wanted to take from my office and for the four of us (Daniel wasn't yet born). We didn't know whether we would ever see again what we left behind. It's a wholesome experience I would recommend to everyone! It helps you clarify the question, "What are we really living for?" Remember, the same thing that happened to all of Lot's stuff when Sodom burned is going to happen to all your stuff when Christ judges the world.

- C. Make choices which value fellowship with God over the approval of the world.

Lot has often been criticized for moving to Sodom, but it is not often mentioned that both Abram and Lot lived in corrupt cultures. To compare the Canaanites with the Sodomites is like comparing Stalin with Hitler. The Sodomites rated a 10 on the wickedness scale, and the Canaanites a 9.5. So you have to ask, "Why did Abram remain untainted, but Lot became corrupted?"

The answer 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." We see again the two things that marked Abram's life of obedient faith, the tent and the altar: Abram the pilgrim, just passing through; and, Abram the worshiper, bearing witness to a pagan world. You don't ever find Lot building an altar in Sodom, and he traded in his tent for a townhouse. He settled in Sodom and blended in with their corruption. He was popular, sitting on their city council, but he was not prophetic. Abram lived in fellowship with God and became known as the friend of God.

As Christians, we always face a tension: If we pull out of the world too far, we lose our witness because there is no contact. But if we blend in with the world, we lose both our fellowship with God and our witness to the world. Jesus was the friend of sinners, but He was never tainted by their sin because He put a premium on fellowship with the Father and He never sought the approval of the world. He was in the world with a clear sense of His mission, to glorify the Father and to seek and to save the lost. If we want to line up with Abram rather than with Lot, we've got to be people of the tent and the altar, pilgrims and worshipers, here to bear witness. We must put fellowship with God above the approval of the world in all our decisions.

- D. Make choices which value God's eternal promises over immediate pleasure.

Lot's choice of Sodom was based on what would bring him quick gratification, but he didn't take into account God's promise to Abram about the land. After Lot moved to Sodom, the Lord reaffirmed His promise to Abram and even expanded on it (13:14-17). F. B. Meyer says that God wanted Abram "to feel as free in the land as if the title deeds were actually in his hands" (*Abraham* [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 50). God wanted to give Abram a graphic picture of what it means to possess by faith what God had promised, even though it wouldn't be an actuality in Abram's lifetime. The apostle Paul described it, "as having nothing yet possessing all things" (2 Cor. 6:10).

As believers we are to live by faith in the promises of God. When we face decisions, we take God into account and make those

decisions in line with His promises and principles, not the immediate gratification of the flesh. We deny ungodliness and worldly desires in light of the blessed hope of Christ's return (Titus 2:11-13), trusting that His promises concerning eternity are true.

The Lord Jesus said, "Seek *first* the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33, emphasis mine). Most of us want to seek the other things first and add the kingdom of God later in our spare time. The next time you face a decision that involves a major commitment of your time or a move to a different locale, make the decision based on how it will affect your own and your family's commitment to the kingdom, not on financial factors alone. If the extra hours and the move will bring you more money, you need to ask, "Why do we want more money? Is it so we can give more to missions?" If the bottom line is that you want more money because you want more things, then you're not seeking first God's kingdom.

Conclusion

We tend to think of Christian commitment as a bold decision to forsake everything and follow Jesus. There is a sense, of course, in which that is true. We must make that once and for all commitment. But Lot had done that. He had left his family and friends in Ur to go with Abram to the promised land. Lot's problem, like many Christians today, was in following through, walking step by step in dependence upon the Lord, saying no to the things of this world based on faith in the promises of God.

Someone has said that we tend to think of commitment to Christ like laying a \$1,000 bill on the table: "Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all." But the reality is that God sends most of us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there, in small deeds of faithfulness and obedience. But it's right there, in those little 25 cent choices, that our lives take their direction.

So make your choices based on God's principles: Relationships over rights; godliness over greed; fellowship with God over the world's approval; and, faith in God's promises over immediate pleasure from the world. Because if you have God and His promises, you have everything. So seek Him first, and all else is yours.

Discussion Questions

1. When (if ever) is it right to fight for your rights, and when is it right to give in? Are Christians supposed to be door-mats?
2. Is it necessarily wrong for Christians to desire a better life-style? How do we determine where to draw the line when it comes to amassing possessions?
3. Are you more prone to withdraw from the world or to join in with it? How does a Christian find the right balance?
4. To what extent should we protect our children from the pagan world in which we live?

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