

Genesis 13-14 A Short Goodbye

Abram, the Weightlifter

Fellas, do you want to impress the girls with your strength, the great weights you can carry? A 16-year old boy kept pestering his dad to buy him an expensive weightlifting kit. His father thought his son would treat this like all his other toys, that he would be enthusiastic at first but soon discover it was too much like hard work to keep it up. But the son was so persistent that he got his dad to take him to a sports shop. "Please, Dad," whined the boy, "I promise I'll use them every day." "I don't know, David. It's really a big commitment on your part," the father pointed out.

"Please, Dad?"

"They're very, very expensive, you know."

"I'll use them Dad, I promise. You'll see."

Finally won over, the father paid for the equipment and headed for the door. From the corner of the store he heard his son yelling at the man in the shop, "What! You mean I have to carry them to the car?!"

In the Christian life you can't avoid carrying weights. God made Abram a weightlifter. Abram was in Canaan and, according to 12:10, "the famine was heavy." Abram's knees buckled under the crushing weight. Unable to bear the load, he went to Egypt. God used the time in Egypt to prove that not even the most powerful king on earth could prevent him from fulfilling his promises. So great were the riches with which Abram left Egypt that he was staggering to carry it all - it was so "heavy" as the Hebrew says in 13:2.

Abram's experience, of course, anticipates the later experience of Israel. Jacob's entire family went into Egypt because of famine. Israel also came under threat while in Egypt and yet God prevailed over the ruler and Israel left with riches endowed on them.

Abram experienced crushing famine, then shame as he stood helpless to prevent the most powerful king in the ancient world from taking his wife away from him. But he came out of such trials with something more precious than gold: with a stronger faith in God's ability to fulfil his promises, as symbolised by his return to the altar between Bethel and Ai (v3). For that was where God promised to give him the land. Abram had no land of his own. But just as the Canaanites had sacred sites all over the land where they worshipped their false gods, so Abram has his sacred site where he calls on the name of the true God and lays hold of God's great promise. Significantly, this was also the place where the first great battle took place when Joshua's Israel later claimed the land promised to Abram.

In the hour in which we live we worship neither on this mountain or in Jerusalem or at any other sacred site. When some Christians continue to treat church buildings like sacred sites they might as well be living in Old Testament times. There is only one sacred site for you and me - Calvary. Abram returned to the site at Bethel. We return over and over and over again to Calvary. Do you feel like you've been through the wringer, like Abraham no doubt did? Head back to Calvary. *"But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."* Bethel reminded Abram of God's commitment to him. Calvary reminds us of God's complete commitment to us.

Abram, the kind of relative you'd like to have

How are your relationships with the members of your family? Being part of a family carries with it obligations and responsibilities. You have responsibilities towards your parents, your brothers and sisters, and especially to those relatives who have depended on you in the past, just as Lot depended on Abram.

Abraham was a responsible relative. Whenever you read narrative stories as in Genesis 13 and 14 always pay particular attention to anything said in direct speech. In verse 8 we overhear what Abram said to Lot, *"Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers."* In the chapters which follow Abram consistently treats Lot as his brother, as his close relative; as a person for whom he is personally responsible.

During one "generation gap" quarrel with his parents, a youth in his late teens cried, "I want excitement, adventure, money, and beautiful women. I'll never find it here at home, so I'm leaving. Don't try and stop me!" With that, he headed toward the door. His father rose and followed close behind.

"Didn't you hear what I said? I don't want you to try and stop me."

"Who's trying to stop you?" replied his father. "If you wait a minute, I'll go with you."

Abraham's objectives are different. He is set upon staying in the land God has given him, and there's adventure enough in that alone. But he is not interested in quarreling with Lot and he does not try to stop the inevitable. However, it is impossible for them to go together. We are informed in verse 6: *"the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together"* (v6). Abram and Lot did not separate because of a quarrel. They separated because there wasn't enough pasture to cater for all of their herds and flocks, hence the dispute that arose between the herdsmen. It was to preserve the relationship that Abram told Lot it would be better for them to separate. To demonstrate this Abram told Lot he could make the first decision about where he wanted to go. Abram was a responsible relative. Are you? Is there a relationship with a relative you have neglected? Maybe you need to resolve to make a phone call or write a letter before this day is out.

There's another side to this. God made his promise to Abram, not to Lot. The separation of Abram and Lot puts the focus on Abram. God is taking a photo of those he chooses to bless. He says to Lot, "You don't belong in this photo." How many people are in this snapshot? Just Abram and Sarai, they are the only beneficiaries of God's promise to inherit the land. In the New Testament who is the beneficiary of God's promises? Who stands in the frame? To start with just one, Jesus. But Jesus says, "Come on you lot, stand with me, you belong in this photo too." And he says to Pharis, "Pharis, you'll have to stand at the front because the photographer can't see you when you stand at the back." And he says to Kerrie, "Hey, Kerrie, stand a bit to the right so we can get your face too." How many people will stand together around Jesus for that camera shot? Millions upon millions, "from every nation, tribe, people and language". And it matters that Tania's face be captured in that photograph along with every other one of God's people. Because the promise of inheritance belongs to every one of the Lord's people. And the photographer doesn't have to ask any of you to smile, for your faces are all shining with radiant joy without any effort at all.

What a Silly Lot!

Lot does not belong in the photo. So there must be a parting of the ways. Not that Lot is cursed. Far from it. He parts from Abram on good terms and it is precisely his link with Abram that saves him. However, Lot does not share Abram's promise and, therefore, he has no desire to stay in Canaan. In verse 12 we learn, *"Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom."* Lot chose to live in Sodom, a place on the very border of Canaan. Later, when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed he ended his days outside of Canaan altogether.

Do you have on your heart what Jesus has on his heart? Do you share his vision, his passion? If you don't then your life will end as tragically as did Lot's. See the world through Lot's eyes (v 10): *"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."* Lot compared the Jordan plain with the garden of Eden. Now that takes your mind back, doesn't it? Remember what happened in the garden? *"When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye ..."* (3 :6). Lot represents fallen man and Abram represents the new humanity God is creating. Lot behaves like Adam and Eve at the Fall. What Thomas Moore once said applies to Lot:

Like Dead Sea fruits, that tempt the eye,
But turn to ashes on the lips!

All that Lot lusted after with his eyes would one day turn to ashes. Lot was also after a place "like the land of Egypt." The time in Egypt with Abram had exposed Lot to a world of plenty and he craved living in such a world. Once again, this story is deliberately told in anticipation of the later problem that would emerge after Israel had made its exodus from Egypt. For many Israelites, like Lot, craved for the food and pleasures they had once enjoyed in Egypt - with similarly disastrous consequences.

When I was training Christian leaders in Pakistan we faced a problem. We lived in a large agricultural town named Sahiwal. It was nothing like a modern city. However, when men came to be trained and lived in Sahiwal for a while they often wanted to find a church ministry in Sahiwal itself rather than go back to the village churches for which we were especially training them. Some promising Christian leaders in the Third World are sent to places like the US for training and never come back. They are lured by the comforts and luxury of the West. By contrast, Abram heads away from the attractions of Sodom and back into an hard land which so far seems to fall far short of expectations.

Then God *"said to him 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'"* (vv14-15). God blessed Adam and Eve and gave them the whole earth. In the same way, he gives Abram the whole "land." Once again this anticipates the way God shows Moses the whole land and promises that he will give it to his people (Deuteronomy 34).

Lot had no interest in the promises of God. He simply "chose for himself." We know it was an appalling decision that Lot made. As we are told in verse 13: *"Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord."* Here as in many places in Scripture, contrary to a lot of contemporary but naive evangelical Christian thinking, you have a clear indication that some sins are worse than others, and some people are worse sinners than others. The men of Sodom

didn't even know the Lord so they didn't consciously sin against him. But their behaviour was extremely offensive in the eyes of the Judge of all the earth. We do not know whether Lot knew of the reputation of Sodom but chose to ignore it, or whether he made his decision in complete ignorance. Saki once said, "I always say beauty is only sin deep." That was true of Lot's understanding of beauty. Don't make Lot's mistake in your own life. Don't flirt with Sodom. For example, don't look at the non-Christian girl or that non-Christian boy and decide you like what you see and give her or him your heart. You belong with Abram not with Lot. Decide to stay in Canaan, don't live your Christian life on the borders of God's kingdom.

Abram had received a fresh promise from God that he and his innumerable descendants would one day possess the entire land of Canaan. His response is the same as in Chapter 12. He can't at present claim any land as his own. But he can build an altar by way of laying hold of the promise of God. Significantly, he does this at Hebron. No Jewish reader could have read this without thinking of how David's great kingdom, which eventually, under Solomon, laid claim to the entire land, began at Hebron.

A Sorry Lot

Immediately, in Genesis 14, we begin to see the tragic consequences of Lot's foolish choice. A war erupts between kings. John Osborne quipped, "Royalty is the gold filling in a mouthful of decay." Almost all the royalty mentioned in Genesis 14, with the sole exception of Melchizedek, stinks with the decay of the ancient world. The king of Shinar, with his allies, is the one who goes to war (v1). Remember the land of Shinar? That's where a united humanity sought to build a great empire (Gen 11). Ironically, Shinar is still into empire building but this time unity is imposed and enforced by the king of Shinar. The rebel kings are allied to the king of Sodom (v2), the very place where Lot chose to settle.

Lot becomes a casualty of war. He is captured along with all his family, possessions and entourage. Abram, the responsible relative, does not hesitate. His obligation is clear. He boldly springs into action and effects the daring and successful rescue of Lot. Yet again the future is anticipated, the repeated need in Israel's history for the faithless Israel, which flirts with the world, to be delivered from the mess in which it continually ensnares itself. Are we any different? Well we might ask where we might be were it not for the way our Lord so graciously rescues and restores us over and over again.

The White King and the Black King

I don't know if you play chess. When Abram returns, having rescued Lot, it is as though he steps on to a chessboard. He has shown himself to be a powerful piece and the king of Sodom wants to recruit him as a powerful ally, to use as you might a knight or bishop or rook in a chess game. So when Abram returns the king of Sodom goes out to meet him (v17). He wants to place Abram in his debt so he tells him to keep all the goods he has plundered from the enemy kings. Lot established a relationship with Sodom from which he was never to shake free and the results were disastrous. Abram, by contrast, refuses to have anything to do with Sodom and tells the black king, the king of Sodom, "*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'*", (v23). The king of Sodom is the black king and he is contrasted with the king of Salem, Melchizedek. The name "Melchizedek" means "king of righteousness." The king of Sodom is the king of a place of great wickedness. Indeed, his name, *Bera* (v2) only has to be changed a little to become

the word for "wickedness", an obvious play on words. Further, Melchizedek is the "king of Salem". While this, of course, refers to the future Jerusalem, the word "Salem" means "peace." The king of Sodom is the leader of the rebels, a king of war. Melchizedek, by contrast, is the king of peace.

It is no coincidence that "righteousness" and "peace" are associated with the blessing of God Most High. In verses 18-20 we read, *"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.'" Melchizedek is referring to a Canaanite god whom he calls God Most High, as is confirmed by evidence outside of the Bible. But Abram recognises that his own God, Yahweh, is speaking through this man and indicating to him how he should respond to the king of Sodom. So he immediately says, "I have raised my hand to the God I know as Yahweh (the Lord) who is the true God Most High, the true Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath that I will accept nothing from you."*

Let God be the one who enriches your life. Don't depend on this world for your enrichment. Do you have it settled clearly in your mind and heart that you will place your complete dependence on God? Your mind is made up. You will follow Jesus with all your heart and look to him for his blessing.

Jesus is the one whom God has made "a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 5:6). The writer to the Hebrews also informs us that Jesus was perfected or qualified for this role by virtue of the fact that "although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered" (verse 8). Of course, Jesus' sufferings far transcend those of Abraham, as does his flawless faith and obedience. It is because of all this that Jesus "became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (verse 9). May the Lord enable you and I to obey Jesus, spurning the disastrous example of Lot who loved the world, instead taking up our cross daily to follow him.