

HOW TO SET A COURSE IN LIFE

SERIES: SEEKING FIRST THINGS FIRST

by Steve Zeisler

Let me propose a challenge: spend one day on a personal retreat. A retreat is not a vacation but a time of rest in Christ, a time of prayer, quiet, and listening in which you reflect on what has happened over the last months and years and ask honest questions about who you are and where you should be headed.

Matthew 7:13-14 records these words of Jesus: "Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it." I don't think there has been any time in history when the chasm between the broad and narrow road has been wider, especially in this valley. The offer of wealth and power, the chance to be part of the next revolution in knowledge and technology, shaping the future—the siren song that the broad road offers in our time is enormously persuasive. It has never been more dismissive of God or more likely to ridicule righteousness. The notion that there is a narrow road that leads to life is met with contempt. But Jesus' words don't go away.

Pastors are very often with people at the end of their lives, being part of the process of their going from this life to the next. In my experience, some look back over their lives and hear the words of Jesus in the parable as they anticipate glory: "Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your master" (Matt. 25:21, 23 RSV). But others near the end of their lives experience more regret than joy. These frequently name missed opportunities and realize that what they spent themselves on was not worth it. Another word of Jesus from a parable comes to mind: "You fool! This very night your soul will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself? This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God" (Luke 13:20-21). In a day of retreat with the Lord, we might ask him for clarification of what we are living for, what we are committed to, and what entanglements and compromises may have wormed their way into our lives without our noticing.

This message begins a three-part series in which we will examine a 4,000 year old story about two men named Abram (later Abraham) and Lot. It is my hope that this story and the contrast between these two men will provide insight about issues in the modern world. It's often much better to tell a very old story than it is to try to tell a contemporary one about the same things. The message is often more clear when we look at it through the lens of another culture and time.

Genesis 13 contains the story of a broad and narrow road chosen, and I think we can learn something from the parting of the ways that takes place between Abram and Lot.

So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.

From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the LORD.

not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together.

Let's set the context a bit. One of the reasons to undertake a study in which we compare Lot and Abram is that they share a common origin and history. From Mesopotamia, Ur of the Chaldees, they began a journey together with other family members to Haran. There God told Abram, "...go to the land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1). Abram obeyed, trusting God's wisdom, and he left Haran with his wife, Sarai, and his nephew, Lot.

Lot was there when Abram built his first altar. He was there when Abram failed his first great test from the Lord. During a famine, Abram determined that the promised land wouldn't support him, and lacking trust in God, he went to Egypt where there was water and food. There he endangered his wife's life, lied to everybody, and potentially threatened the plan of God to bring salvation to the world. Sarai and Abram were to have a child that would bless humankind, but the whole plan was endangered when Sarai was taken to the palace of the Egyptian king. However, Abram was humbled in his failure, and God brought him out of Egypt. Abram learned a lesson about his own weakness and capacity for sin.

Lot was with him the whole time. He was there for all of the lessons, all of the instruction from God, all of the humbling, all of the renewal. They were two men, walking together, shoulder by shoulder, Abram and Lot. But a day would come when they would separate, and that's where we will see dramatic differences between these two men.

God's call to Abram could be summarized simply, "Leave where you've been and go where I tell you." That's very much like Jesus' words, "...take up your cross and follow me" (Matt. 16:24). Crucify what was old. Trust me for what will be. I will be a blessing to you, and you will be a blessing to the world. It is the simple account of every conversion that's taken place in every generation since: "Leave where you've been, go where I tell you, I will bless you, you will bless them." Abram trusted God. Abram sinned, wrestled, and failed, but his failures led him closer to God. One of the things about the narrow road, about choices that are based on faith, is not that you do it right, not that you succeed, not that you are without failure and sin, but that your very sins, failures, rebellions, and inadequacies lead you closer to God rather than away from him. That's the great thing about Abram's story. Even when he resisted God, he ended up loving God more. But this story has a terrible outcome for Lot. The outcome is glorious and beautiful for Abram, but for Lot it is stark and hard and frightening. One outcome is filled with the presence of God; the other is filled with loss of everything and ultimate humiliation.

Now, how can this story help us? Well, let's learn from this opening division where the two men split apart. Verses 7-18:

And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time.

So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling 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."

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 toward 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. Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD.

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. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you."

So Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the LORD.

At the end of verse 11, we're told that the two men parted company. The split came not because of sin or hard-heartedness. It came about because God's blessing had been so great that both of them now had immense wealth. They had not only gold and silver, they had huge herds and flocks, and the land couldn't support both of them together.

Sometimes we can think of discipleship as being about the externals, but that is not the most important thing at all. It's not as if those who are in Christian professions have made a better choice than those who are not. Those who voluntarily choose poverty are not necessarily better Christians than those who find themselves with riches. It's not as if those who send their children to Christian colleges have always made a better choice than those who send their children to secular colleges. We cannot evaluate people and decide the quality of their discipleship based on external circumstances.

Abram could probably have lived near Sodom and had nothing like the experience Lot had living near Sodom. The problem is not that Abram made a good choice and Lot made a bad one. The problem is the *way* Lot chose what he chose, the basis on which he made his decision, the thinking, the instincts, the values that led him to choose as he did.

Three phrases help us to see Lot more clearly. Verse 10 says, "Lot lifted his eyes" (RSV). Verse 11 says, "Lot chose for himself" (RSV). Verse 12 says, "Lot...pitched his tents near Sodom." Verse 14 says, The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look..." "Eyes lifted" is exactly the same term that's used of Lot. Lot lifted his own eyes. Lot looked around and began to judge things based on his own ability to see and understand them, to make calls as to what was good and what was not good. Lot lifted his own eyes; Abram waited until God called him to lift his eyes. Abram saw things with the perspective of God, but Lot saw things from his own perspective based on his own ability to judge and evaluate.

One of the great lessons of this chapter is that we do not know what's good for us. Have you ever gotten, by your own effort, absolutely everything you wanted in a certain setting and it turned out to be absolutely the wrong thing? The subtle point here is that Lot couldn't tell the difference between Eden and Egypt. He looked down and he saw the plain was well watered, that it was productive, that civilization was thriving, that animals were growing fat and eating the produce of the land, and that the city looked strong and well defended. He could see that this was a flourishing place, and it reminded him of two things. It reminded him of Eden, the place of divine provision: benefits and glories and beauty and fruitfulness. But it also reminded him of Egypt, and he couldn't tell the difference between them. He'd been to Egypt, and he'd been in the court, in the presence of Pharaoh. The Egyptians had extraordinary authority and power. They were rich beyond counting. Their armies were invincible. They had slaves and harems and dazzling ostentation, and Lot had been there. He'd seen what Egypt had to offer. As he looked down on the city of the plain, it looked like Eden, and it looked like Egypt, and he couldn't tell the difference.

I think we're more like Lot than we want to admit. We don't know how to receive what God wants to give us versus what the world wants to give us, and there are some similarities. The language is not completely different. Let's look again at Eden. Go back to the beginning. What does the creation account tell us about the lavish giving heart of God? In the first chapter of Genesis, before the garden was planted, we read this: "Let us make man...in our likeness, and let them rule..." (Gen. 1:26).

One of the things God intended from the beginning is that men and women like you and me should have authority, that we should rule in life. We were made for greatness. We were made to accomplish important things and to leave lasting legacies. If you long for greatness, that longing was planted in you by God himself. I was watching a documentary on television the other night about Muddy Waters, the great bluesman who went from obscurity in Mississippi to become a founder of the Chicago Blues scene and a world-wide influence on blues musicians. One of the guys who knows Muddy Waters said, "You know what he always wanted all his life? He wanted to be a *known person*." Everybody wants to be a known person.

Everybody wants authority. Everybody wants his or her life to count for something. God said from the beginning, from creation, "Let them rule."

You can get a life of substance and authority and value in Eden, from God, or you can get it from Egypt. The world will also offer you prominence. Many of us have listened to those offers. The problem with Egypt's offer is that personal authority comes with a great many strings attached, and it doesn't last. Worldly success is a zero-sum game. For you to have authority, somebody else has to be diminished. We're always in competition with other people. If our startup company is going to make it big, it's because we beat out all the other competitors who were doing exactly the same thing. If I am going to rise to the top of the pyramid, it's because I stepped on everybody else to get up there. That authority and value and worth in the world always comes by means of competition, and it always ends. Some day you'll be replaced. Some day the next industry will overtake the industry that is so prominent now. Some day you'll get old, and the beauty that has dazzled people is going to be gone. Some day you'll get sick, and your memory will start to fail, and you'll fade, and the authority and value and worth that this world promises ends in a grave. Authority and worth that comes from God lasts forever. Whatever authority and value and worth that we get from Eden, that we get from God, begins now and lasts forever, more glorious with each passing moment.

Do you know people who have godly authority? I've known some who have known the Lord a long time. Charlie Luce gave a talk last week to a group of volunteers from PBC. Charlie Luce is shorter than he used to be, and you can tell that he's older than he used to be. He was an elder in this church for many years, and he's a man who knows who he is in Christ. Charlie walks into a room with the authority to bring blessing to other people. It's not based on externals. Physically, he's diminished, but Charlie is an intimate of God; when he speaks, people listen.

I once read an article about thoroughbred horses. The people who handicap thoroughbreds say that there's a mystery among race horses. As they're walking out from the paddock to the gate, the horses seem to know who the winner is going to be. There's an equine psychology that makes some horses dominate. Handicappers try to figure out what that mystery is, because there are certain horses that can't win some races just because they don't believe they can. There's a personal authority about great ones that transcends what you can measure. That is what God promises us, not worldly authority that comes from being the boss, being rich, having academic degrees, but real authority that comes from something inside us that God does, that makes us powerful to do things that are really worth doing in life. You can get authority from Eden, or you can get it from Egypt. Lot couldn't tell the difference.

The second thing to notice, as we turn back to the beginning and look at Eden, is Genesis 2:15: "The LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." We're given work to do, something to spend ourselves on. We are given gifts by God, intellectual gifts, spiritual gifts, physical gifts, health, opportunity, education, etc. And we're given work to do in the world. The gifts God gives us can become a gift we give to other people. Work is a good thing. It existed before the fall. Every day you can get up, put your hand to something that's worth doing, do it well, say thanks at the end of the day, and sleep with a clear conscience. Work can be accomplished with honor and provide income we can use to bless others.

But you also find work in Egypt, don't you? The world has a version of it as well, but it's never done, it's never good enough. There's always the promise that if you work a little bit harder and a little bit longer and a little bit more desperately that you'll turn the corner sometime and end up in a place of advantage, but it's never enough. I don't think in this valley there is anything that is more crushingly misunderstood than what it means to work. Individuals and families are being destroyed, and it's never enough. Lot looked at the cities of the plain and was reminded of Eden and of Egypt. There he could work according to the world's way or according to God's plan. He couldn't tell the difference.

The last thing I'd mention about Eden is Genesis 2:18: "The LORD God said, 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him.'" Intimacy, family, connectedness, sexuality within the context of love and commitment, honor, God's presence, those all were gifts from Eden as well. God intends to give us intimacy as his gift, his way for his

purpose with his presence. He knows it's not good for us to be alone. He wants to do something about that. He made us sexual beings. He wants to be honored in our sexuality. He made it possible for love to grow deeper over an entire lifetime. The possibility of being known by others, knowing them back, caring for them, that all came from Eden.

But there's an Egyptian version of sexual connection too, isn't there? There's a worldly way of relationships and sex. There's a worldly way to wallow in what's external and live from one infatuation to the other, to have sexual thrills without the context of love and commitment. There's a worldly way to grab what God wants to give us as a gift. Lot looked down from the mountain to the lush and wealthy cities of the plain, and he couldn't tell if it was from God or if it was from the world. Is this the world's version of the best possible life or is this God's version? He couldn't tell.

That is our problem, too. Very often, we long for authority, for intimacy, for good work. God created us with these longings. We're the way we are for good reason, but we can't tell whether the Lord is in this choice, this relationship, this job, this sort of family life, this place, or if we are responding to the pressures of the world to get stuff that is not good for us. We don't know what's good for us.

Lot's problem was not that he was a rebel. Going to the cities of the plain was not like the prodigal son who took his father's money and went off to live with gamblers and prostitutes. Lot didn't know yet how wicked Sodom was. Lot didn't know what he was getting into, but he didn't know how to think about it, either. He didn't know how to judge what was best for him, and he looked up, he lifted his eyes, and he chose for himself. Without being able to know what was best for him, he grabbed for a gold ring, and he went and pitched his tents near Sodom.

The last thing I would say of Lot is that he imagined himself to be more in control of the future than he was. "If a problem comes up, I can handle it. I'll pitch my tent near Sodom, and if things go wrong, I can always leave. I'll make this alliance because I can always disentangle myself later. I can handle what I have to handle." By chapter 14, we read that Lot was living in Sodom, and by chapter 19 we read that he was sitting in the gates of the city. First he pitched his tent near the city, then he moved into the city, and finally he rose to a position of authority and leadership and standing in the city. He couldn't break away. He couldn't stop. He didn't know what was best for him. He foolishly made choices assuming that he did, and then once he was put in a position that he would discover to be dangerous, he didn't know how to get himself out of it. It was more seductive than he realized. The biggest problem is that we see no active dependence on God. "Lord, you help me. What should I do? Where should I go? What sort of people, what sort of adventure, what kind of commitment, what sort of work, what sort of intimacy, what way shall my life have value?"

When we look at Abram, it is exactly the opposite. Abram waited for the Lord to teach him what was valuable. "I'm going to give you more than you'd get if you chose it for yourself." Isn't that a wonderful reminder of the lavishness of God? "Abram, look around. The cities of the plain. See those? They're yours. The mountains on every side? They're yours. The generations to follow are beyond counting. I'm going to give you more than you'd get if you chose it for yourself. But wait for me to lift your eyes. Wait for me to teach you about yourself. Wait for me to give you understanding about what is best for you." Abram is probably the most honored historical figure of all. He is revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims. He is the quintessential example in the New Testament of what it means to have faith. He waited and he trusted God, and whenever he pitched his tent, he built an altar. He put God first. The difference between Lot and Abram is not what they chose, it's how they chose. Lot believed he knew what was best for him. He believed he could defend himself from problems. He made a choice without asking for help. Abram waited for God to direct his steps. He waited for God to give gifts that were beyond counting. He waited for God to teach him, and, with an altar by his tent, he offered repeated thanks.

In what is probably Robert Frost's best-loved poem, *The Road Not Taken*, we read of a man who, while walking in the woods, comes to a fork in the road. How will he decide on the fork in the road? The last two stanzas of the poem read as follows:

*...And both that morning equally lay
 In leaves no step had trodden black.
 Oh I kept the first for another day!
 Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
 I doubted if I should ever come back.
 I shall be telling this with a sigh
 Somewhere ages and ages hence:
 Two roads diverged in a wood, and I-
 I took the one less traveled by,
 And that has made all the difference. (1)*

The roads diverged in a yellow wood. The poet chose the narrower one, the one less traveled by. That's the option Jesus declares in much more forceful terms. And so again, my encouragement to you is that God can make us Abrams-people who know how to build an altar wherever we pitch our tents. He can make us people who can get gifts that are worth having. He can distinguish Eden from Egypt for us. But we've got to listen, and for that reason we would all do very well to spend a day somewhere in a personal retreat alone with the Lord, listening, learning, and growing. "I took the road less traveled by, and that made all the difference." Maybe that will be your experience as well.

Notes

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