

11 October 2009

Some Really Good Decisions in Some Really Bad Situations

Gen 13:5-18; 14:17-24

Whether we are conscious of it or not, we are constantly making decisions. Some are relatively unimportant, even inconsequential. It doesn't much matter what you'll have for breakfast tomorrow or what toothpaste you decided to purchase last month. Other decisions have far-reaching consequences, like the choice of a life partner or your career path, whether to sell up and move into a retirement center, or whether or not to have debilitating medical treatment for a terminal condition.

You may have heard of the couple who were celebrating their diamond wedding anniversary and were asked the secret of their successful marriage. "It is simple," said the husband. "We agreed when we got married that my dear wife would make all *small* decisions and I would make the *big* ones. So, over the years, I have decided on all the weighty matters, like the best economic policy for Canada and who should be president of the United States, and she has decided on the trivial matters, like where we should live and what schools our children should attend.

Clearly, there are "good" decisions and "bad" decisions. But there's more to this than following a sensible, seemingly beneficial course of action. There's the important question of *motivation*. It's what lies behind the decision. For example, I may refuse to accede to the request of my child because I am lazy or indifferent or selfish, or I may do so because I love my child. From a superficial point of view, two decisions may look identical, and they may even seem to have the same end result, but they may be poles apart in terms of motivation and intent.

Decisions regarding where you live, how you react to circumstances at work or in the family, whether you accept a job offer can be taken in faith, with God in view, or in unbelief, independently, from fear or greed (with self interest dominating).

We are about to see some good decisions this morning (and at least one bad decision). More importantly, we are going to see what it was that makes some decisions good and others bad.

Last week we noticed that there had been a lapse of faith in the life of Abram. When confronted with difficult circumstances, he settled on a course of action without consulting the LORD.¹ This happens to us as well! For one or other reason we take our eyes off the Lord. Through fear or self-interest, *we take the law into our own hands*. We forget God's word or his promise to us. We act as though our future is in our own hands.

¹While we should not argue from silence, it seems clear that from the way the account is narrated that the author wants us to come to this conclusion.

All Christians are called to live a life of faith. “We live by faith, not by sight” (2 Cor 5:7). “Everything that does not come from faith is sin” (Rom 14:23). A decision of this import, taken in our own wisdom with an eye on the circumstances, without asking, “What would the Lord have me do,” undermines our walk of faith. It certainly did so in the life of Abram. We are about to see him return to the life of faith that was so characteristic of his life. In the process, we shall discover three important features of the life of faith.

I. WHEN WE DECIDE IN FAITH, WE LEAVE MATTERS IN GOD’S CAPABLE HANDS.

Back to Square One

Yes, when Abram faced a serious famine in the land of promise, *he took the law into his own hands* and headed for Egypt. There he resorted to another expedient and lied about his wife, Sarai. We read of not altars and no worship during that sojourn. There is no vision and no divine voice. It certainly seems as though Abram was going it alone.

But, after a near calamity, he retraced his steps back through the Negev to the place between Bethel and Ai where he had built an altar and there he called on the name of the LORD. It may be that someone here this morning needs to do just that, to retrace your steps, going back to the point where your walk with God was characterized by faith. That’s usually the best course of action when you know you have taken a wrong turn. Back to square one! Look at Abram: “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” (Gen 13:3-4).

An Unavoidable Decision

Now that he is back in the land of promise, he has to face another problem. Ironically, it is a problem occasioned by God’s blessing. Lot, who was travelling with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. The land could not support them both and the tension was beginning to mount. There had been some incidents between frustrated herdsmen on both sides. And land was limited; the Canaanites and the Perizzites were also living in the land.

It is clear that they are going to have to part and the parting was bound to be painful. Perhaps Abram had seen this coming for some time. You somehow sense when such a parting has become necessary.

A Panel of Conventional Wisdom Experts

So let’s call in a panel of conventional wisdom experts, put the situation to them and ask them to adjudicate. What should happen here? Without the slightest hesitation, they would say that Abram should give Lot his marching orders. Lot is his nephew,

so Abram has seniority. God has promised the land to Abram, not to Abram *and* Lot. “You can talk nicely to the man by all means, Abram, but it is for you to decide where you want to go and he must go the other way.”

But that’s not what happened. Instead, “Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarrelling between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are close relatives. 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" (13:8-10).

The Basics of Bad Decision-making

The two men would probably have been standing on an elevation close to Bethel, which is about 880 meters above sea level. From it they could see the luxurious Jordan Valley. By comparison, the rest of the land looked pretty arid. I have stood not far from there and it’s a most impressive sight. Lot *should* have deferred to Abram. But he saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered and rationalized that it was “like the garden of the LORD.” More pertinently he noticed that it was “like the land of Egypt.” And he opted to move into the valley that they had purposely avoided up till this point.²

How we are able to rationalize our unspiritual decisions! Over the years I have spoken to people who wanted to take questionable courses of action. A person comes to you seeking counsel. Deep down they probably felt that it is wrong or they wouldn’t have been bouncing their dilemma off me. Often they present a few good, spiritual-sounding reasons for their proposed course of action. You know, “it is like the garden of the LORD.” In reality, it is the resemblance to Egypt that they find so hard to resist. Let’s be honest with ourselves, acknowledge the attraction, and try to understand our motivation.

Making Our Own Lives Unnecessarily Difficult

As we follow Lot’s life from this point, it has the sadness of compromise written all over it. At first he seems to have moved into the plain, probably finding a spot that was not too densely populated. It was not too long before Lot pitched his tents *near* Sodom. I’m sure he could have rationalized that decision as well. It was only a matter of time and he moved *into* Sodom and began to share its fate. Several commentators suggest that since he was later sitting at the gateway of the city, he had become (or was aspiring to become) an alderman or councilor.

Lot gets some really bad press. He is an easy target for preachers. We need to know that he wasn’t a bad man. Peter refers to him in these terms: “Lot, a righteous man, who was distressed by the depraved conduct of the lawless (for that righteous man,

²If we follow Abram’s (and Lot’s) journey in chapter 12:4-9, it is clear that they confined themselves to the central highlands and the Negev. The region “east of Bethel” is not in the Jordan Valley.

living among them day after day, was tormented in his righteous soul by the lawless deeds he saw and heard” (2 Pet 2:7-8). Indeed, Abram knew him well and obviously assumed that he was essentially righteous.³

Here we have a clear warning about the now neglected teaching of “separation.” How the pendulum has swung! Some of us can remember a time when we were taught to live as far from the “world” as possible. You know, the key verses quoted were:

“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers . . . ‘Therefore come out from among them and be separate,’ says the Lord” (2 Cor 6:14, 17).

“Don’t you know that the friendship of the world is hatred toward God?” (James 4:4).

“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If you love the world, the Father’s love is not in you” (1 John 2:15).

Now it is perfectly true that this was overdone, or perhaps we should say, distorted. Too often, “*separation*” degenerated into *isolation*. We got into a ghetto and sometimes lived our own particular form of “worldly” life in strictly Christian company. We forgot that Jesus petitioned the Father on our behalf, “My prayer is not that you will take them out of the world but that you will protect them from the evil one” (John 17:15-16). We forgot that we really live separated lives not by being *absent* but by being *different*. We who live in the world ought not to be conformed to the world but transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2).

Having said all that, let’s face it; *the pendulum has swung too far*. The church of the early twenty-first century tends to adopt an anything-goes approach! A legalistic identification of “no-go-zones” for committed Christians is not the answer. Church-decreed prohibitions are almost always counter-productive. *BUT*, if we’re honest, we know full well that there ought to be places we don’t go, things we don’t do, movies we don’t watch, company we don’t keep. Let’s not say, “Everything is permissible for me” (1 Cor 6:12). In doing so, we are not quoting Paul. We are quoting Paul, quoting a Corinthian slogan of which he disapproved! Rather let’s say, “Not everything is beneficial . . . I will not be mastered by anything” (1 Cor 6:12). Jesus once warned, “Remember Lot’s wife! (Luke 17:32) We could say, “Remember Lot, too!” If God sends us to Sodom to be a light in a dark place, by all means, let’s go! But, if the lush vegetation and the loud lifestyle attract us, we are only making our lives almost intolerably difficult. Lot found that out to his great sorrow. His was undoubtedly a bad decision, a very bad decision!

³Abraham’s plea for Sodom was in reality a plea for his nephew Lot, whom he assumed to be righteous.

The Essentials of Good Decision-making

By contrast Abram provides us with an example of decision making on the basis of faith. He realizes that no matter where Lot goes, God has promised the land to him and only God can bring the promise to fruition. He had learned that *when you take the law into your own hands* you invite trouble. But God is faithful. The land is his to give, not Abram's to seize. He is beginning to learn that he does not have to attempt to engineer the fulfillment of God's promise.

Now look what happens: "The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the 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 went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he pitched his tents. There he built an altar to the LORD" (13:14-18).

F B Meyer sketches the progression for us: "In Mesopotamia, God said, 'I will show you the land.' At Bethel, 'This is the land.' Here he says: 'All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.'"⁴

So, there are times when it is appropriate for faith to rest in God's promise, but that's not the whole story. It is important that we see the other side of this coin.

II. WHEN WE DECIDE IN FAITH, WE TAKE APPROPRIATE ACTION NO MATTER HOW RISKY IT MAY SEEM.

A War in the Region

Not long after Lot has settled in Sodom, he becomes embroiled in a war. Sodom and four other cities in the valley rebelled against their overlords. This was a familiar occurrence in the ancient Middle East. A major power or alliance would gain the upper hand in a region. It would assert its authority by exacting tribute from smaller city-states. When the reigning monarch faced trouble at home or in another part of his territory, the more distant tributaries would rebel. The cities in the valley had paid tribute for twelve years. In the thirteenth year they rebelled. And in the fourteenth year, King Kedorlaomer marched against them.⁵

To make a long story short, the five cities of the valley were routed and both prisoners and plunder were taken. And with them, guess who? None other than the

⁴F. B. Meyer, *The Life of Abraham* (Lynnwood, Washington: Emerald Books, 1996), 58.

⁵In all probability Kedorlaomer had, in the meanwhile, overcome his domestic problems.

‘luckless’ Lot! A man who escaped came and reported the events Abram, who was now living near Hebron in the south.

The Panel Again

Let’s re-assemble the conventional wisdom panel of adjudicators. What should Abram do about this situation? “Nothing at all! What can you do anyway? Rejoice that Lot chose the Jordan Valley and that the foreign alliance has headed north and is leaving you alone. There’s nothing that you *can* do. And Lot, yes, we know he’s your nephew, but he made his choice. He’s a big boy now, and it’s high time he looked after himself. You’re not in the least bit responsible. Let it go, Abram, let it go! That’s life!”

A Decision Made in Faith

Such was the conventional wisdom. But Abram mobilizes the 318 trained men who had been born in his household. They are joined by some of his neighbors. This unlikely posse pursues the invading alliance. Remember, this powerful coalition had defeated the forces of the five kings despite the fact that they had home advantage. Now Abram is in pursuit of them with his handful of shepherds and herdsmen. He has the element of surprise, divides his troops into two columns and attacks them at night. Not only does he defeat them at the foot of Mount Hermon, but he also chases them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus. (That’s a long, long way from Hebron). He rescues the prisoners, who were probably being taken back to the east to be sold as slaves. In addition, he recovers the plunder.

The *same faith* that caused him to stand at that elevated spot close to Bethel, and say to Lot: “The whole land is before you; you choose,” now causes him to mobilize his men and chase the formidable alliance. So often the faith that will not lift a little finger to defend our own rights will not hesitate to undertake the impossible when it comes to the rights of others.

And, by the way, although Abram had not planned it this way, I have no doubt that this military expedition enhanced his standing with his Canaanite neighbors.

So here is God’s friend, in the Promised Land, acting humbly and sensibly, trusting God and leaving the results to him. But that does not mean passivity. And now let’s look at the sequel to these events.

III. WHEN WE DECIDE IN FAITH. WE HANDLE SUCCESS APPROPRIATELY.

I wonder how Abram felt as he headed home. No doubt he was elated. There would have been singing in the caravan as it made its way south. There was Lot, ‘lucky’ Lot. There were the men who faced humiliation, captivity and enslavement. And the women and children, who would almost certainly be abused. With them were the

animals and the plunder. Their gratitude and virtual adulation of Abram would have been obvious. And in such circumstances pride is a real possibility.

Two very Different Kings

But as he heads home and reaches the Valley of Shaveh (the King's Valley) very close to present day Jerusalem, two kings arrive on the scene.⁶

The king of Sodom (Bera) is mentioned first, and he's not a very happy gentleman! No doubt he had fled for the hills to avoid capture. And he's a little peeved that Abram has not travelled via Sodom. It's a very steep climb from the Dead Sea region where Sodom was (way below sea level) to the Valley of Shaveh in the central highlands. We'll return to him in a moment.

The Good King of Salem

The other is an amazing man called Melchizedek. He appears on the scene, apparently out of nowhere, and then disappears just as suddenly. His name means "King of righteousness." Names were, of course, extremely important in that culture. They were much more than labels for the purpose of identification. A name described the person who bore it. This man was King of Salem (later Jerusalem). Salem means "peace." He was priest of *El Elyon* (God Most High). *El* is a kind of generic term for God. Since *El Elyon* is identified as Creator of heaven and earth, it is clear that though he lived among the Canaanites, Melchizedek was a worshipper of the true God.⁷ Abram certainly recognized him as a representative of the living God.

This priest-king brings out bread and wine and blesses Abram in the name of God Most High:

‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High,
Creator of heaven and earth
And praise be to God Most High,
Who delivered your enemies into your hand.’

Then Abram gives him a tenth of everything!

⁶Some suggest that the valley referred to is just to the south-east of the Old City of Jerusalem, at the junction of the Kidron valley and the Valley of Hinnom. Others place it to the north of the city. One way or another, it was very close to present-day Jerusalem.

⁷One only has to think of Genesis 1:1 where God (*Elohim*) is the creator of the heavens and the earth, and hear Abram saying, "I have raised my hand to the LORD (*Yahweh*), God Most High, creator of heaven and earth," to realize that Melchizedek and Abram worshipped the same God. Yes it is true that *El* was also the chief God in the Canaanite pantheon, but there is no need to confuse the use of the generic term for God with the specific designation of a particular Canaanite deity.

This is not the place to go into detail about this fascinating royal priest. What invests him with such significance is the fact that he is mentioned in Psalm 110. Now Psalm 110 is undoubtedly a messianic psalm. And in it the LORD addresses his promised Messiah declaring, “You are a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.” In addition, he is mentioned again in Hebrews.

The Surly King of Sodom

By contrast, the surly King of Sodom begrudgingly tries to make a deal with Abram. He gruffly says to Abram, “Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself.” He does not add the “particle of entreaty” (roughly the Hebrew equivalent to “please”).

The Panel Yet Again

Let’s call in the panel of adjudicators once more. Referring to the custom of the day, Bruce Waltke informs us: “The victor, not the defeated king, has the right to stipulate the disposal of the spoils of war.”⁸ It is within Abram’s rights to do what he pleases with the spoils. And the impudent king of Sodom deserves to be sent packing. “Abram, you are speaking from a position of indisputable strength. Let him know that it is not for him to call the shots. When he was cowering in the hills, you went after the alliance.”

But listen to Abram: "With raised hand I have sworn an oath to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, 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.' I will accept nothing but what my men have eaten and the share that belongs to the men who went with me—to Aner, Eshkol and Mamre. Let them have their share" (14:22-24).

Typology

In the Old Testament we are sometimes given a preview of things to come. Persons or events provide us with a picture of a greater reality in the future. The Bible calls these “types” or “shadows” (1 Cor 10:6; Heb 10:1).⁹ Yes, it is true that some people have resorted to fanciful interpretations and have brought the whole process into disrepute. But, since God’s revelation is progressive, and since it deals with great themes that are developed, it is not unreasonable to see genuine anticipations of greater (more fully revealed) realities.

The King of Salem and Jesus

Now Melchizedek undoubtedly prefigures Christ. The Bible itself says as much when it spells out the similarities between the priesthood of Melchizedek and that of Jesus. In responding to Melchizedek, Abram was, of course, responding to God

⁸Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 235.

⁹The Greek word translated examples in 1 Cor 10:6 is *tupoi*.

Most High. Furthermore, there is a sense in which we may say that in responding as he did to Melchizedek, Abram was, in fact, responding to Jesus. Isn't this the kind of thing that Jesus was referring to when he said to some of his critics, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56).

The King of Sodom and Satan

If Melchizedek makes us think of Jesus, Bera, the king of Sodom makes us think of Satan. He does so in this sense at least: knowingly or unknowingly, he was encouraging Abram to take a short cut. God had promised Abram's descendents the land – *all in his good time*. It was to come in God's way. Abram's prosperity was not to come at the behest of the king of Sodom through this kind of bargaining. His suggested compromise reminds us of the way Satan came to Abram's great Descendant and offered him a short-cut to the crown (Matt 4:1-11). Like Satan, he was assuming a right of disposal that was not his to give. Abram did well to reject his offer. Yet another good decision!

Conclusion

We have seen one bad decision and several very good decisions. *Lot's decision was not bad because it cost him; it cost him because it was bad!* And Abram's decisions were not good because they happened to work out for the best in the long run. *They were good because they were decisions taken in faith.*

Sometimes our decisions, like those of Abram, will run counter to conventional wisdom. We may have to face short-term hardship because we're taking the *right* way, not the *easy* way. But we may be sure of one thing. When our decisions are motivated by faith, God is glorified and we are blessed.