**THE EXPOSITION OF HOLY SCRIPTURE BY ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

**GENESIS-017. THE IMPORTANCE OF A CHOICE by ALEXANDER MACLAREN**

*"And Abram went up out of Egypt, he, and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the south. And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold. And he went on his journeys from the south even to Beth-el, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Beth-el and Hal; Unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first: and there Abram called on the name of the Lord. And Lot also, which went with Abram, had flocks, and herds, and tents. And the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together: for their substance was great, so that they could not dwell together. And there was a strife between the herdmen of Abram's cattle and the herdmen of Lot's cattle; and the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelled then in the land. And Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren. Is not the whole land before thee? Separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: if thou wilt lake 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. And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar. Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan; and Lot journeyed east: and they separated themselves the one from the other. Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent toward Sodom. But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly."*

*Genesis 13:1-13*

And Abram went up out of Egypt, he, and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the south. And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold. And he went on his journeys from the south even to Beth-el, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Beth-el and Hal; Unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first: and there Abram called on the name of the Lord. And Lot also, which went with Abram, had flocks, and herds, and tents. And the land was not able to bear them, that they might dwell together: for their substance was great, so that they could not dwell together. And there was a strife between the herdmen of Abram's cattle and the herdmen of Lot's cattle; and the Canaanite and the Perizzite dwelled then in the land. And Abram said unto Lot, Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen; for we be brethren. Is not the whole land before thee? Separate thyself, I pray thee, from me: if thou wilt lake 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. And Lot lifted up his eyes, and beheld all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered every where, before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, even as the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, as thou comest unto Zoar. Then Lot chose him all the plain of Jordan; and Lot journeyed east: and they separated themselves the one from the other. Abram dwelled in the land of Canaan, and Lot dwelled in the cities of the plain, and pitched his tent toward Sodom. But the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly.--GENESIS xiii. 1-13.

The main lesson of this section is the wisdom of seeking spiritual rather than temporal good. That is illustrated on both sides. Prosperity attends Abram and Lot while they think more of obeying God than of flocks and herds. Lot makes a mistake, as far as this world is concerned, when he chooses his place of abode for the sake of its material advantages. But the introductory verses (vv. 1-4) suggest a question, and seem to teach an important lesson. Was Abram right in so soon leaving the land to which God had led him, and going down to Egypt? Was that not taking the bit between his teeth? He had been commanded to go to Canaan; should he not have stopped there--famine or no famine--till the same authority commanded him to leave the land? If God had put him there, should he not have trusted God to keep him alive in famine? The narrative seems to imply that his going to Egypt was a failure of faith. It gives no hint of a divine voice leading him thither. We do not hear that he builded any altar beside his tent there, as he had done in the happier days of life by trust. His stay resulted in peril and in something very like lying, for which he had to bear the disgrace of being rebuked by an idolater, and having no word of excuse to offer. The great lesson of the whole section, and indeed of Abram's whole life, receives fresh illustration from the story thus understood, which preaches loudly that trust is safety and wellbeing, and that it is always sin and always folly to leave Canaan, where God has put us, even if there be a famine, and to go down into Egypt, even if its harvests be abundant.

But another lesson is also taught. After the interruption of the Egyptian journey, Abram had to begin all his Canaan life over again. Very emphatically the narrative puts it, that he went to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, to the altar which he had made at the first. Yes! that is the only place for a man who has faltered and gone aside from the course of obedience. He must begin over again. The backsliding Christian has to resort anew to the place of the penitent, and to come to Christ, as he did at first for pardon. It is a solemn thought that years of obedience and heroisms of self-surrender, may be so annihilated by some act of self-seeking distrust that the whole career has, as it were, to be begun anew from the very starting-point. It is a blessed thought that, however far and long we may have wandered, we can always return to the place where we were at the beginning, and there call on the name of the Lord.

Note how we are taught here the great truth for the Old Testament, that outward prosperity follows most surely those who do not seek for it. Abram's wealth has increased, and his companion, Lot, has shared in the prosperity. It is because he went with Abram that he had flocks, and herds, and tents. Of course, the connection between despising the world and possessing it is not thus close in New Testament times. But even now, one often sees that the men who will be rich fall into a pit of poverty, and that a heart set on higher things, which counts earthly advantages second and not first, wins a sufficiency of these most surely. Foxlike cunning, and wolf-like rapacity, and Devil-like selfishness, which make up a large portion of what the world calls great business capacity, do not always secure the prize. But the real possession of earth and all its wealth depends to-day, as much as ever it did in Abram's times, on seeking first the kingdom of God, and His righteousness. Only when we are Christ's are all things ours. They are ours, not by the vulgar way of what the world calls ownership, but in proportion as we use them to the highest ends of helping us to grow in wisdom and Christ-likeness, in the measure in which we subordinate them to heavenly good, in the degree in which we employ them as means of serving Christ. We can see the Pleiades best by not looking directly at, but somewhat away from, them; and just as pleasure, if made the direct object of life, ceases to be pleasure, so the world's goods, if taken for our chief aim, cease to yield even the imperfect good which they can bestow.

But now we have to look at the two dim figures which the remainder of this story presents to us, and which shine there, in that far-off past, types and instances of the two great classes into which men are divided,--Abram, the man of faith; Lot, the man of sense.

Mark the conduct of the man of faith. Why should he, who has God's promise that all the land is his, squabble with his kinsman about pasture and wells? The herdsmen naturally would come to high words and blows, especially as the available land was diminished by the claims of the Canaanite and Perizzite. But the direct effect of Abram's faith was to make him feel that the matter in dispute was too small to warrant a quarrel. A soul truly living in the contemplation of the future, and filled with God's promises, will never be eager to insist on its rights, or to stand on its dignity, and will take too accurate a measure of the worth of things temporal to get into a heat about them. The clash of conflicting interests, and the bad blood bred by them, seem infinitely small, when we are up on the height of communion with God. An acre or two more or less of grass land does not look all-important, when our vision of the city which hath foundations is clear. So an elevated calm and sweet reasonableness will mark the man who truly lives by faith, and he will seek after the things that make for peace. Abram could fight, as Old Testament morality permitted, when occasion arose, as Lot found out to his advantage before long. But he would not strive about such trifles.

May we not venture to apply his words to churches and sects? They too, if they have faith strong and dominant, will not easily fall out with one another about intrusions on each other's territory, especially in the presence, as at this day, of the common foe. When the Canaanite and the Perizzite are in the land, and Unbelief in militant forms is arrayed against us, it is more than folly, it is sin, for brethren to be turning their weapons against each other. The common foe should make them stand shoulder to shoulder. Abram's faith led, too, to the noble generosity of his proposal. The elder and superior gives the younger and inferior the right of option, and is quite willing to take Lot's leavings. Right or left--it mattered not to him; God would be with him, whichever way he went; and the glorious Beyond, for which he lived, blazed too bright before his inward sight to let him be very solicitous where he was. I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. It does not matter much what accommodation we have on ship-board, when the voyage is so short. If our thoughts are stretching across the sea to the landing at home, and the welcome there, we shall not fight with our fellow-passengers about our cabins or places at the table. And notice what rest comes when faith thus dwindles the worth of the momentary arrangements here. The less of our energies are consumed in asserting ourselves, and scrambling for our rights, and cutting in before other people, so as to get the best places for ourselves, the more we shall have to spare for better things; and the more we live in the future, and leave God to order our ways, the more shall our souls be wrapped in perfect peace. Mark the conduct of the man of sense. We can fancy the two standing on the barren hills by Bethel, from one of which, as travellers tell us, there is precisely the view which Lot saw. He lifted up his greedy eyes, and there, at his feet, lay that strange Jordan valley with its almost tropical richness, its dark lines of foliage telling of abundant water, the palm-trees of Jericho perhaps, and the glittering cities. Up there among the hills there was little to tempt,--rocks and scanty herbage; down below, it was like the lost Eden, or the Egypt from which they had but lately come.

What need for hesitation? True, the men of the plain were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly, as the chapter says with grim emphasis. But Lot evidently never thought about that. He knew it, though, and ought to have thought about it. It was his sin that he was guided in his choice only by considerations of temporal advantage. Put his action into words, and it says, Grass for my sheep is more to me than fellowship with God, and a good conscience. No doubt he would have had salves enough. I do not need to become like them, though I live among them. A man must look after his own interests. I can serve God down there as well as up here. Perhaps he even thought that he might be a missionary among these sinners. But at bottom he did not seek first the kingdom of God, but the other things.

We have seldom the choice put before us so dramatically and sharply; but it is as really presented to each. There is the shameless cynicism of the men who avowedly only ask the question, Will it pay? But there are subtler forms which affect us all. It is the standing temptation of Englishmen to apply a money standard to everything, to adopt courses of action of which the only recommendation is that they promote getting on in the world. Men who call themselves Christians select schools for their children, or professions for their boys, or marriages for their daughters, down in Sodom, because it will give them a lift in life which they would not get up in the starved pastures at Bethel, with nobody but Abram and his like to associate with. If the earnestness with which men pursue an end is to be taken as any measure of its importance in their eyes, it certainly does not look much as if modern average Christians did believe that it was of more moment to be united to God, and to be growing like Him, than to secure a good large share of earthly possessions. Tried by the test of conduct, their faith in getting on is a great deal deeper than their faith in getting up. But if our religion does not make us put the world beneath our feet, and count all things but loss that we may win Christ, we had better ask ourselves whether our religion is any better than Lot's, which was second-hand, and was much more imitation of Abram than obedience to God.

Lot teaches us that material good may tempt and conquer, even after it has once been overcome. His early life had been heroic; in his young enthusiasm, he had thrown in his portion with Abram in his great venture. He had not been thinking of his flocks when he left Haran. Probably, as I have just said, he was a good deal galvanised into imitation; but still, he had chosen the better part. But now he has tired of a pilgrim's life. There are men who cut down the thorns, and in whom the seed is sown; but thorns are tenacious of life, and quick growing, and so they spread over the field and choke the seed. It is easier to take some one bold step than to keep true through life to its spirit. Youth contemns, but too often middle-age worships, worldly success. The world tightens its grasp as we grow older, and Lot and Demas teach us that it is hard to keep for a lifetime on the heights. Faith, strong and ever renewed by communion, can do it; nothing else can.

Lot's history teaches what comes of setting the world first, and God's kingdom second. For one thing, the association with it is sure to get closer. Lot began with choosing the plain; then he crept a little nearer, and pitched his tent towards Sodom; next time we hear of him, he is living in the city, and mixed up inextricably with its people. The first false step leads on to connections unforeseen, from which the man would have shrunk in horror, if he had been told that he would make them. Once on the incline, time and gravity will settle how far down we go. We shall see, in subsequent sections, how far Lot's own moral character suffered from his choice. But we may so far anticipate the future narrative as to point out that it affords a plain instance of the great truth that the sure way to lose the world as well as our own souls, is to make it our first object. He would have been safe if he had stopped up among the hills. The shadowy Eastern kings who swooped down on the plain would never have ventured up there. But when we choose the world for our portion, we lay ourselves open to the full weight of all the blows which change and fortune can inflict, and come voluntarily down from an impregnable fastness to the undefended open.

Nor is this all; but at the last, when the fiery rain bursts on the doomed city, Lot has to leave all the wealth for which he has sacrificed conscience and peace, and escapes with bare life; he suffers loss even if he himself is saved as dragged through the fire. The world passeth away and the lust thereof, but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever. The riches which wax not old, and need not to be left when we leave all things besides, are surely the treasures which the calmest reason dictates should be our chief aim. God is the true portion of the soul; if we have Him, we have all. So, let us seek Him first, and, with Him, all else is ours.