

Genesis 13 (1984 NIV)

Faith-based Choice Amid Conflict

Introduction

I once read of two sad incidents reported in the news media in the same week.

One was a road incident given wide coverage in Malaysia. It was about a man who was badly beaten up by a bully in Kuala Lumpur. The bully was later arrested. But the injured man was a sorrowful sight when he appeared on TV to tell his story—three slashes on the left side of his face that required 200 stitches, and a badly swollen left eye that might be going blind.

In the second incident, a narcotics officer in Singapore was shot dead in his home. He was highly regarded as a good officer by his colleagues. The killer was his girlfriend. Apparently, the couple had quarreled because of the repeated refusal of the man to marry the woman.

Though the road bully had been arrested, his victim had already been badly injured, and may go blind in one eye. Though the woman who fired the pistol would be tried in court, the officer concerned was already gone—shot dead by a bullet in the head.

I shudder to imagine what life will be like if people go about settling their conflicts or differences in such violent manner.

As Christians, such violent behaviour may be farthest from our mind when we handle the conflicts we face in life. However, the fact that we do not resort to such violent behaviour does not necessarily mean that we are always God-pleasing in the way we handle our own conflicts.

In Genesis 13, we read how Abram handles the tension between himself and his nephew Lot.

We see him returning to the land of Canaan after some time in Egypt where he has been seeking to find relief from the severe famine in Canaan. While in Egypt, he has been greatly blessed. So he now returns to Canaan with great possessions and great numbers of herds and flocks. His nephew Lot who has been with him in Egypt is also similarly blessed.

Therefore after their return to Canaan, it becomes increasingly difficult for both of these prosperous men to live and stay together. There is not enough “elbow room” because they have become too big for each other. Their herdsmen begin to quarrel over the right of space to feed the sheep and flocks of their respective masters. There is not enough pasture to be shared by both sides.

The Bible does reveal to us that Abram may not always be right in his decisions and actions. But in this particular instance, I believe he decides and acts in a

way pleasing to God as he handles the growing tension between himself and his nephew Lot.

What kinds of choices do we make in our own conflict situations?

- Emotional kind?
- Impulsive kind?
- Stubborn kind?
- Selfish kind?

Have we ever pray about the faith-based kind?

In Genesis 13, we see Abram making a faith-based choice as he handles the conflict/tension between himself and Lot. And his faith-based choice teaches us that ...

I. Those who live by faith are to be generous in actions (vv. 8-9).

Abram takes the initiative to tell Lot in v. 8:

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."

Abram comes to Lot not with the intention to get even or to get the better of Lot, but to save their relationship.

- Lot is Abram's nephew (see Gen. 11:27, 12:5), but they are identified as "brothers" in Gen. 13:8. This implies that Abram loves Lot dearly like his own "brother" because they are related in blood.
- In spite of all the unpleasantness that is building up, Abram still regards Lot as a "brother"—he greatly treasures this relationship, and this is reason enough for him to work towards a peaceful resolution between them.
- Abram sees Lot as someone worthy to be reconciled with even if it means he has to forego part of his claim over the land.
- Thus, Abram makes a faith-based choice (a choice of faith), believing that God can put things right in the matter.
- Abram decides that Lot as a blood relative is more important than land as a possession—people are more important than things to Abram.

Abram decides that it is wise and best that he and Lot separate if their relationship is to be kept intact. And so he says to Lot in v. 9:

"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."

The important thing to note is not Abram and Lot have to separate. The important thing is in this separation, Abram has to be generous enough to let go of his two rightful claims—the right to keep his nephew Lot with him as the

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kinsman guardian, and the right to keep the whole land to himself as he is still alive as the first heir to the family inheritance.

But in making a faith-based choice, Abram decides to choose the way of generosity—he decides to let Lot and his men go their own way.

- Perhaps Lot and his men feel that they are already “established” enough to go their own way, and Abram may have heard their silent cry for independence.
- Thus, Abram reasons that to continue to keep them with him will be like a kind of forced dependence, thereby heightening the tension between them.

Also, in making a faith-based choice, Abram decides to divide the land with Lot.

- Traditionally, any inheritance will only be divided or shared when the owner is dead.
- Thus since Abram is still alive, he still has the right to hold on to the whole land.
- But not only does Abram divide the land with Lot, he also allows Lot to choose first.
- As the most senior member of the family clan, Abram has that priority to choose first, but he did not exercise it—he decides to make a faith-based choice of generosity/big-heartedness.

Abram releases his right to keep Lot, his right to keep the whole land to himself, and his right to choose first.

- Abram trusts that God can put things right, and so he decides to make a choice of faith—by faith, he decides to give the lesser in order to gain the greater.
- Abram decides to give up a piece of choice land in order to keep his relationship of goodwill with Lot intact—people are more important than things.

Today, we are blessed with many rights:

- The right to keep.
- The right to express.
- The right to accept.
- The right to reject.
- The right to expect.
- The right to demand.

On one hand, rights are good and proper because these help protect our personal/human dignity and freedom. On the other hand, if everyone keeps pressing for his/her rights, then things can become very wrong—many of the

interpersonal and international conflicts today are the result of people and nations insisting stubbornly on their rights without giving away any quarter.

- Perhaps the pattern of life today has conditioned us, consciously or unconsciously, to hold on to our rights lest we should lose out to others.
- Little wonder, “giving way”, “giving in”, and “giving up” are terms we frown upon today as being weak, and thus should have no place in one who supposedly has a healthy self-esteem.

When people keep fighting for their rights without giving any quarter, we see a lot of wrongs happening.

- In international dispute, we see how one nation engages another in a bloody war, resulting in irrecoverable loss of human lives, senseless human suffering, and massive devastation of properties and livestock.
- In office politics, we see how colleagues back-stab one another in order to get ahead of one another.
- In family conflict, we see family members estrange themselves from one another, and even bringing one another to court.
- In business competition, we see how businessmen slander and sabotage one another in order to win higher-profit deals.
- In doctrinal differences, we see how Christians throw malicious labels at one another in order to be the only “True Jesus Church”.

But Abram chooses the way of generosity towards Lot. And in so doing, he has honoured God not so much by way of “giving way” to Lot, but by “giving in” to God—i.e. submitting and surrendering to God’s way with his faith-based choice.

- Abram decides to give up the lesser in order to gain the greater.
- Abram decides to give way to Lot and considers his nephew as even more important than himself (though not necessarily better).
- Abram decides that Lot is more important than the land—people are always more important than things to him.
- Abram decides to use things to honour people, not use people to honour things.

Indeed, Abram’s way of generosity—the way of big-heartedness—is not an easy one to choose and follow. It goes against our natural tendency to fight for our rights so that we will not lose out, or be taken advantage of.

Years ago, a large statue of Christ was erected high in the Andes on the border between Argentina and Chile. Called “Christ of the Andes”, the statue symbolizes a pledge between the two countries that as long as the statue stands, there will be peace between Chile and Argentina. Shortly after the statue was erected, the Chileans began to protest that they had been slighted—the statue had its back turned to Chile. Just when tempers were at their highest in Chile, a Chilean newspaperman saved the day. In an editorial that not only satisfied the people but made

them laugh, he simply said, “The people of Argentina need more watching over than the Chileans.”

(Bits & Pieces, 25 June 1992)

Such unhappiness is often the case when people fight for their rights over one another rather than fulfil their responsibilities towards one another—they major on the minor; they become small-minded and not big-hearted.

Yes, the way of generosity—giving way to others in a big-hearted manner—is often not a natural choice. Abram’s experience and example here teaches us that God may be calling us to make a faith-based choice in a conflict situation. This means He wants you and me to choose to be generous in actions, not afraid to lose because we trust in faith that God will put all things right.

I have often preached these words at the pulpit—“We trust God in faith. This implies we believe that wherever God leads us, He will provide. So we receive from His grace with gratitude, and we give in His name with generosity. It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

So as I live my life, I need to often remind myself of my own words. E.g. if every time you ask me out for lunch, and I expect and even demand that you pay for my share, then I am acting as if I don’t believe in what I preach. It is as if I do pay for my share or for all, even time to time, I am afraid that I will not have enough for my next meal. That’s not really living by faith when you and I are always taking and never giving.

A faith-based choice will lead to living by faith that should manifest in generosity. This implies that you and I must not only take gleefully every time, but also to give generously time to time. Now, I suspect that some of you will be checking your calendar after service to fix a date to lunch with me!

Abram’s faith-based choice shows us that those who live by faith are to be generous in actions. Also, his faith-based choice shows us that ...

II. Those who live by faith are to trust in God’s compensation (vv. 10-17).

As Lot makes his choice, v. 10 tells us that he “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 ...”

The narration seems to hint that a certain desire is aroused in Lot as he casts his eyes on this piece of land before him. Just like the tree in the Garden of Eden and the rich land of Egypt, the fertile valley of Jordan somehow entices Lot with a certain seductive attraction.

Also, v. 12 tells us that when Abram parts with Lot, he “lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom”.

This seems like a picture of Abram living in the backward countryside while Lot lives in the advanced, developed neighbourhood of that time. Indeed, it seems like Abram has made the wrong choice, and Lot has made the right one.

But this picture is quickly erased when we look again at verses 10 and 13. The parenthesis in v. 10 tells us this—“This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.” And v. 13 says, “Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord.”

It is as if the narration is trying to tell us this—“No, Lot has not made the right choice. In fact, he is not in the right place. The area is populated with wicked people and is destined to be destroyed. Lot has not chosen a place of secured prosperity, but a place of destined panic and destruction when the time comes. No, Lot has not made the right choice—he chooses just by sight, and not by faith.”

Conversely, we see God reassuring Abram that he has made the right choice. Abram may seem to have given up too much to Lot; so much so that he seems to be at the losing end of the bargain.

But in vv. 14-17, God reassures Abram that he will be blessed with a land beyond limits and descendants beyond count—“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.”

These are words to reassure Abram that God will compensate him beyond measure. Indeed, no one can out-give God. No one can give away so much that God becomes his/her debtor. God give this great promise to Abram not because God feels indebted to Abram. Rather, it is God’s way of saying that He is pleased with the choice of faith made by Abram. And God honours that faith because Abram chooses to glorify God, and not to gratify himself in the situation. Abram is prepared to lose materially in order to win spiritually in the situation.

Also, the promise of land and descendants is actually a restatement of God’s promise to Abram when he first answered the call of God to go into an unknown land (Gen. 12:1-3). So God is here reminding Abram that He intends to keep good His promise to Abram. He intends to be faithful, and Abram is to have faith in His faithfulness. Both God and His man are in it together—this implies that if Abram loses, then it is God who loses. But can the Almighty God ever lose? Indeed, Abram will not lose out because God Himself promises to be faithful to

His man. Thus, Abram is to press on in faith. Those who live by faith will not lose out for they can trust in God's compensation—God Himself will honour their faith with His own faithfulness.

Abram makes that choice of faith to trust in God's compensation. His giving up, giving in, and giving way is all done with a mind of peace. And God affirms Abram's choice of faith with the words in vv. 14-17. Even more importantly, God reminds Abram of His own divine faithfulness with the same words in vv. 14-17. Those who choose and live by faith are to trust in God's compensation.

Today God calls us, just as He has called Abram, to trust in His sure faithfulness and sufficient provision. We would not lose out as we obey His leading to be generous and big-hearted in our actions. We are called to exercise faith and freedom in being generous and big-hearted in our actions; we are blessed by God so that we can bless others. In His faithfulness, God will compensate us surely and sufficiently. As they say, "Even if you lose your face by giving in, giving way, or giving up to another, God will give you a new face of honour in His way and time."

Are you jealously guarding something in a conflict situation, afraid that you may lose it or lose out? So often we hear protest like this—"Why must I give way? Why must I make the first move? I am right and he's wrong. If he wants peace, let him take the initiative!" Unfortunately, no one makes the first move, nothing happens, and the tension remains.

Perhaps, God is calling you to give that thing away and trust Him to compensate you because of His faithfulness and provision. Indeed, you and I need God's wisdom to choose the battles that He wants us to fight. And sometimes, He is calling us to "lose a battle so that we can eventually win the war".

David Livingstone was the famous missionary explorer who went to Africa in the 1800s. When he was there, he opened up area after area for development. A fellow missionary once misjudged him for striving to gain selfish ends. A conflict seemed very much at hand.

But Livingstone chose to give up his house and garden, rather than have any scandal before the unbelieving natives. His choice would cost him all the money and hard work he had put into the building of these properties. Parting with his garden was especially painful to him, but he said, "I like the garden, but Paradise will make amends for what we lose here."

What words of faith indeed! Livingstone's choice was one of faith, believing that God will put things right, if not here, then on the other side of eternity.

God is faithful and He honours those who live by faith as they trust in His compensation for what they may have lost or given up in order to glorify Him.

(https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/The_Personal_Life_of_David_Livingstone/CHAPTER_IV)

Conclusion

In our times of conflict, we need to make faith-based choices, believing that God can put all things right. Our conflicts often need God's help. In such times, we need God to help us be generous in actions and to trust in His divine compensation, without fear of losing as we learn to give way, give in, or give up to others.

A peaceful resolution to any conflict situation is often easier said than done. Thus, every peaceful resolution is somewhat like a "miracle". Thus, in times of conflict, we need to look to God as the miracle-working God, and seek Him to work a miracle yet another time. More importantly, we need to ask God to first work the miracle of making you and me choose by faith, believing that He can put all things right in our own conflict situation.

The Lord helps us. Amen!