

Three ways to respond when trouble comes; two are bad choices

Message for Sunday, October 3, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Genesis 14

Here is the main thought for today: Whom are you concerned about? How do you respond when someone you know is in trouble?

Last week we were reading chapter 13 of Genesis. Abram and Lot had so much livestock that the land could not support all of them. One of them would have to move his operation. Abram let Lot take whatever land he wanted, which turned out to be the good flat land in the valley. Abram was left with the hill country. Abram trusted God to provide for his needs, so he wasn't worried. Here's what happened:

Genesis 13:12–13, Today's English Version:
Abram stayed in the land of Canaan, and Lot settled among the cities in the valley and camped near Sodom, whose people were wicked and sinned against the LORD.

In my message last week, in response to that passage, my Abram character said:

“Lord, you know, I have a bad feeling about all this. He's still a young man, and if I'm not around to give him guidance... well, I'm afraid he's going to fall under the influence of the people of this land. You know they don't follow you, Lord. He should be the one to testify about your goodness, but I don't think it's going to work that way.”

Let's go ahead to the next chapter of Genesis, chapter 14. There's a battle going on between two groups of kings. Back then, you didn't really find nations. A king ruled a city and the surrounding land. Yes, there was a king who ruled over all of Egypt, but Egypt was a very advanced society.

So here's the picture: a king in the north had conquered several cities in the area where Lot had chosen to live. That meant those people had to pay heavy taxes to the king in the north. Five kings of those cities got together and said, “Enough of this! Let's stand together and tell this tyrant king that we're no longer under his domain.”

So the king in the north got together with his buddies from other cities and came down with a joint army to show the southern kings that he's still in charge.

Guess where Lot had set up his farm! Right smack in the middle of what turned out to be a war zone.

But there's a little tidbit here that gives us a clue about how Lot's faith is developing.

Genesis 14:12, Today's English Version:

Lot, Abram's nephew, was living in Sodom, so they took him and all his possessions.

At first, Lot simply liked the land in the valley. Then he set up his farm near the city of Sodom, a city notorious for its wickedness. Now we see that he had actually moved into the city and made it his home. Maybe he had prospered so much that the slaves could look after the farm, and he could relax with his new friends in Sodom. Abram was right to be worried what was happening to his nephew Lot. This will be a recurring theme over the next several chapters.

Back to my original question: Whom are you concerned about? Can you see the direction they're heading, the people they hang around with?

NOTE: It is good for Christians to hang around with non-Christians. We are to be salt and light; hard to do that when we're tucked away in a closet. But what was happening with Lot was that he was being influenced by his neighbours, rather than the other way around.

So what do you do? Especially when that person doesn't want you meddling in their life?

1) Pray for the other person

The first thing is to pray for them. Not just that, but *tell* them you're praying for them. While that might annoy some people, deep inside they will be touched that you consider them so highly as to keep them in your prayers.

This passage in Genesis doesn't mention anything about praying for others, but it is a theme found many other places in the Bible. Here's something interesting: In Paul's letters, the opening greeting usually says something like “I pray for you regularly.” But then he often ends his letters, “Pray for me, too.” [See Ephesians 1:16 & 6:19; Colossian 1:3 & 4:3; 1 Thessalonians 1:2 & 5:25; 2 Thessalonians 1:11 & 3:1].

2) Seek ways to help

Abram didn't have to look far to find a way to help Lot. As I mentioned a moment ago, he was captured during the battle between the kings, and taken away prisoner, he and all his family and everything they owned. One of the survivors of the battle managed to avoid being captured. He ran to Abram's camp and told him what had happened.

There are different ways to respond when we see others in trouble.

a) Isolation

One response is to say, “I don't care.” Of course, we are too polite and civilized to put it that bluntly. So we have many phrases to choose from:

- “That's not my concern.”

- “He brought that trouble on himself. Let him deal with it.”
- “If I stopped to help everyone in trouble, I’d never get any of my own work done.”

It’s not just individuals; churches do the same thing:

- “Our mission is to preach the word, not get involved in earthly matters.”
- “If we set the precedent of helping this person, then we’ll have to do it for everyone.”
- “We’re barely meeting our budget; we can’t afford to do any more.”

Abram did not hesitate. He jumped to action immediately and went to Lot’s rescue.

Genesis 14:14, Today’s English Version:

When Abram heard that his nephew had been captured, he called together all the fighting men in his camp, 318 in all, and pursued the four kings all the way to Dan.

Of course, it was his kinsmen who was in trouble. But Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, which is about as far as you can possibly go from isolation.

Perhaps Abram and the Samaritan knew of that old saying:

**If not me, then who?
If not now, then when?**

b) Identification

A second response to others in trouble is to join with them, to *identify* with them. That reminds me of what happened in 1963, two years after the Soviet Union erected the Berlin Wall, completely surrounding West Berlin. US President John F. Kennedy visited West Berlin and said in a speech “Ich bin ein Berliner,” meaning “I am a Berlin citizen,” thus indicating the solidarity of the United States with the people of West Berlin intimidated by the Soviets.

That is identification in a good sense. There is a bad sense to identification, though. We see it with Lot: he was becoming assimilated with the people of Sodom, and was losing his values as a worshipper of the Lord God. Often in war, the side which likes to think of itself as the “good guys” ends up committing the same atrocities as the enemy. We have seen this in every war from Vietnam to Iraq and Afghanistan.

c) Involvement

Abram certainly came to the aid of the people of Sodom and the other cities, who were all taken prisoners along with Lot and his family. He became *involved* in their lives, but he was by no means becoming one of them.

What does it mean to be involved? It means:

- You develop a relationship. You don’t just put a cheque in the mail: you speak with people in person, you become part of their lives.
- You sacrifice. Being involved means giving your time and your money.
- You even give your name to the cause. You’ve stepped across the line from being someone on the outside who can safely criticize the efforts of others, to being one of those who will now be the target of criticism.

Come to think of it, isn’t this a close description of what it means to become a follower of Jesus? You develop a relationship with Jesus; following him means that you sacrifice your time and money; and you publicly state that you are now one of his people.

John Ortberg preached a sermon on Peter walking on water.

The boat is safe, and the boat is secure, and the boat is comfortable. The water is high, the waves are rough, the wind is strong, and the night is dark. A storm is out there, and if you get out of your boat, you may sink.

But if you don’t get out of your boat, you will never walk because if you want to walk on the water, you have to get out of the boat. There is something, Someone, inside us that tells us our lives are about something more than sitting in the boat, something that wants to walk on the water, something that calls us to leave the routine of comfortable existence and abandon ourselves in this adventure of following Christ.

I’ll go back to the start now. Who are you concerned about? How can you be involved in this person’s life for the good?

Maybe it’s an entire group that you are concerned about: the school, people living on Old Age Security, single moms. Same question: how can be involved to bring about good?

The answer to that is not simple. And living that answer is not easy. But God has placed us here in this community to be salt and light, to make a difference in the lives of those around us.

Take a minute right now to talk with someone near you. See what ideas God may be giving to you.