

## CHOICES

### Genesis 13–17

In 1999 the country singer George Jones released a song which was autobiographical. It was called *Choices*. The lyrics go like this.

I've had choices since the day that I was born.  
There were voices that told me right from wrong.  
If I had listened, No I wouldn't be here today  
living and dying with the choices I've made.

I was tempted, by an early age I've found  
I like drinking. Oh no I've never turned it down.  
There were loved ones but I turned them all away.  
Now I am living and dying with the choices I've made.

I guess I am paying for the things that I have done.  
If I could go back, Oh Lord knows I would  
but I'm still losing this game of life I've played.  
Living and dying with the choices I've made.

There are some things in life where you have no choice. You didn't choose your parents or where you were born. You didn't actually choose to *be* born. There are things we can't change because we have no choice. For those, acceptance is peace.

But there are other areas where we do have choices and it's very important how we make them. As we read through the teen chapters of Genesis we find Abram being confronted with a number of choices.

The biggest and most important choice he had to make was his response to the call of God. In Genesis 12 verse 1 'the LORD said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.'" In verse 4 we read, 'So Abram left, as the LORD had told him.' That decision was to shape the rest of his life, the decision to obey God.

There comes a point in all our lives when we hear the voice of God. It may be through the beauty of a sunset. It may be through the power of a storm. It may be through the birth of a child. It may be through the death of a loved one. It may be through the pain of an illness. It may be through the guilt of a sin. Suddenly we're aware of God's presence. He's there and he's speaking.

How will you respond to the call of God, the call to follow Jesus? It is the most important choice in your life because it's a choice that doesn't just set your course for this life but determines your destiny in the next.

I thought of calling this message 'The PR356 factor'. PR356 is the text on our notice sheet this week, Proverbs chapter 3 verses 5 and 6. This is what it says. 'Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.' That's our guide for the choices we face in life. There are two positive commands. Trust in the LORD with all your heart. In all your ways acknowledge him. Notice the little word with the big meaning, 'all': all your heart, all your ways; all your heart: every aspect of your inner life, your thoughts and emotions; all your ways: every aspect of your public life, your actions and lifestyle.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart. Acknowledge him in all your ways. And side by side with these commands there is a promise. 'He will make your paths straight.' It doesn't say he will make your paths easy or popular. He will make your paths straight. He's got somewhere for you to go and he'll make sure you get there.

But there's one more thing in this text. Do not lean on your own understanding. There's a negative as well as a positive. There will be times when God says, 'Take the narrow

road,' and the broad road will seem much more attractive. There will be times when God says, 'Wait,' when it will seem much more sensible just to go ahead. 'Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding.'

We have some clear examples of how this worked out in Abram's life. In chapter 12 he faithfully followed the LORD's leading to the land of Canaan but then there was a famine and it was severe. What was he to do? Verse 10 says he 'went down' to Egypt. He went down in more ways than one. He panicked. He conjured up in his mind an imaginary scenario in which he would be killed so that his beautiful widow would be available. As we say today, 'What was he like?'

It was the wrong choice. He didn't trust in the LORD with all his heart. He didn't acknowledge him in all his ways. He leaned on his own understanding, and what a mess it got him into. But the LORD got him out of it and chapter 13 begins with the words, 'So Abram went up from Egypt'. Again, we can read that in more ways than one.

Perhaps in your actions you've gone down. Your standards have gone down. Your integrity has gone down. Your confidence has gone down. God can bring you up again. Abram was chastened. He was humbled. And we begin to see a difference in the choices which he made.

### **1. The choice not to choose**

Genesis 13:5-9. 'Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. And quarrelling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot. ... So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarrelling 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."

Do you see what's happening here? Abram was the older man. It was his right to choose but he chose not to choose. He gave Lot the choice. He was totally unselfish. He just wanted there to be peace. Lot had the chance to repay the compliment but he didn't. He should have done but he didn't.

Look after number one. Do others before they get a chance to do you. That's human wisdom, human understanding, and Abram rejected it. What about us? How selfish are we?

### **2. The choice to rescue Lot**

Chapter 14 describes how Lot was caught up in a war. He was living in Sodom and the King of Sodom became embroiled in a battle. He was in a coalition of five kings fighting against another coalition of four kings, but the four kings won. They seized all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and carried off the people who were still in the city, including Lot.

When Abram found out he went after them with a force of just 318 trained men. They defeated the enemy and rescued Lot, recovering all the goods which had been taken. It was a courageous act. He was putting his own life on the line but God honoured his faith.

The call of God is not a call to be cowardly but a call to be courageous, to speak out for truth and justice, to take action against evil and corruption, to fight the good fight.

### **3. The choice to honour God**

In verses 18 to 20 of this chapter (Genesis 14) we encounter one of the most enigmatic figures in the Bible. In the Old Testament he appears in just these three verses and Psalm 110 verse 4. His significance is not brought out until we come to the New Testament letter to the Hebrews. His name is Melchizedek.

‘Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.” Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.’

I talked earlier about the PR356 factor, Proverbs chapter 3 verses 5 and 6. That factor can be extended to verses 9 and 10. ‘Honour the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.’ Abram chose to honour God with his material wealth. He gave a tenth of everything to the LORD. God says, ‘Those who honour me I will honour’ (1 Samuel 2:30).

What is your standard of living? How does it compare with your standard of giving? It’s a choice. You can honour God with your generosity or despise him by choosing to be mean.

### **4. The choice to reject the world’s rewards**

At the very same time that Abram was giving a tenth to God he got the opportunity to make up his losses. The King of Sodom was very grateful for Abram’s rescue mission and he said to Abram, ‘Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself’ (verse 21). But Abram chose not to accept anything from the King of Sodom.

Verses 22–25: ‘But Abram said to the king of Sodom, “I have raised my hand to the LORD, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath 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, Eshcol and Mamre. Let them have their share.”’

I heard just last week about a church that accepted a large grant from the European Union to run community events through the week. It sounds great, doesn’t it. But the first thing they had to do was remove the word ‘church’ from the building. I’m told that since then things have gone wrong and the sharp edge of their witness has gone blunt.

The Lord owns the cattle on a thousand hills and sometimes it seems the devil owns the cash in a thousand banks. It can be a hard choice to say no to the world’s wealth. It can be hard to say no to promotion but that promotion will rob your family and your church of the time you should be spending with them. It’s hard to say no to the lure of the lottery ticket or the European Union fund.

### **5. The choice to do God’s will in his own way**

All these were good choices but in chapter 16 we find Abram making another bad choice. God had promised him a son. All the other promises were dependent on that one, but he was old and so was his wife. There was a chance he could still be a father but there seemed little chance of Sarai being the mother. So we read in verses 1 and 2:

‘Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; so she said to Abram, “The LORD has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her.” Abram agreed to what Sarai said.’

It was a mistake, a big mistake. It led to unhappiness in the home and was to lead to racial hatred and conflict in the future.

What I want you to notice is that after making one bad decision back in chapter 12 Abram had made a series of good decisions. He had chosen not to be selfish. He had chosen to be courageous. He had chosen to honour God with his possessions. He had chosen not to accept money that would put him under obligation to God's enemies.

But having made all those right choices it didn't stop him making a really awful mistake that would reverberate not just through his own home but throughout human history.

Paul's words of warning to the Corinthian church are relevant here. 'If you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!' 1 Corinthians 10:12.

Choices.

But finally, there is one choice that dominates these chapters and overrides every other. It wasn't made by Abram. It was made by God.

Look at chapter 15 verse 18. 'On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates ...".'

Look at chapter 17 verses 1 and 2. 'When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty ; walk before me and be blameless. I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers."'

In chapter 15 the covenant was sealed with a sacrifice. In chapter 17 the covenant was confirmed with a sign, the circumcision of every male in Abram's household.

These things have their significance but what I want you to notice is that this was God taking the initiative, God choosing to commit himself to Abram, God making it clear that the fulfilment of the promises was not down to Abram but down to him.

The most important choice in your life is not one that you will make but the one that God has already made in sending Jesus to be your Saviour, making a covenant, sealing it with his blood and confirming it with two signs, baptism and the Lord's Table.

Under that covenant 'we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose' (Romans 8:28).

'Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.' That's our guiding light, but ultimately our eternal security is not in our choices but in his.