

A summary of Genesis 13:1-9

- 1. Once we start to drift away from the church life, we experience famine (Genesis 12:7-5-10).** God appeared to Abraham, not just once but three times by the time he reached the midway point between Bethel and Ai (Acts 7:2; Genesis 12:1-3,7). Abraham responded each time, perhaps in a more positive way than we, by leaving his country and his relatives the first time (Acts 7:2), then by leaving his father's house in Haran (when his father Terah died in Acts 7:4), and then by building an altar (Genesis 12:7). Yet in 12:8, he continues his journey and pitches his tent between Bethel (signifying the church or the house of God) on the west and Ai (in Hebrew "a heap of ruins," signifying the world) on the east, and again builds an altar and this time calls upon the name of the Lord. Why did Abraham not pitch his tent wholly in Bethel, and have nothing to do with Ai? Did he not consecrate himself to the Lord by building an altar? Further, in v.9, he continues to journey towards the Negeb. "Negeb" in Hebrew denotes the south, but has a connotation of "parched" because of drought or famine. It is striking to note that the "famine" or drought did not take place in the land of Canaan, contrary to popular belief, nor in Egypt, but rather in the Negeb, if we read Genesis 12:9-10 carefully: "And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb. Now there was a famine in the land." This shows that Abraham left Canaan (the good land, a type of Christ and Christ lived out in the church life), and drifted into the Negeb, which, according to our Christian experience, signifies a parched or thirsty condition because we are drifting away. In a sense, the Negeb experience is a "no-man's land," that is, neither in the church life (Canaan, the good land), nor in the world (typified by Egypt). Did not God appear to Abraham three times? Did not Abraham respond? Yet, like us, he was still a sinner, a man in the flesh with desires, emotions and fears, prone to drift away from the Lord and His desire despite his strong consecration and oneness with the Lord. We can probably relate to this. For example, a certain brother, much used by the Lord, when in high school, preached the gospel in his high school to the extent that the whole school heard the gospel, and all his classmates came to know the Lord. Yet a year later, he drifted away from the church life and stopped meeting. As a result, most of his classmates also stopped attending the church gatherings. We are not exempt, nor are the saints around us. We are not stronger than Abraham. What should we do to avoid drifting away? We need to have an older companion (an older brother if we are a brother, or an older sister if we are a sister), as well as a younger companion, not to mention a group of brothers and sisters as a service team where we can pray, serve and function together. This three-fold protection may preserve us from drifting away from the fellowship and growth that we experience in the church life. At the same time, we need to pay attention to the saints around us. Are any drifting away? Are any lonely? Do any need a companion? Are any without function? Have any stopped attending the Sunday gatherings and the corporate prayer gatherings? Our eyes need to be opened, for ourselves first of all, and then for others. For example, many saints have taken the step to stop coming physically to the gatherings due to the danger and fear of the current virus epidemic. This is a legitimate and indeed even, in certain cases, recommended step. This may continue for several months (we do not know). Once the epidemic has abated, some saints may struggle to return to the church gatherings, having been away for so long. Again, this is in a sense "normal" and there is no need to condemn anyone. As serving ones, or as "Abrahams," how do we react now? This is a critical time. We need to pay attention to saints going to "Negeb," perhaps drifting away unconsciously, through no fault of their own. If they cannot physically come to the gatherings, can we bring the gatherings to them, electronically, to encourage them to participate, to pray, to read the Bible and to pursue, even for a few minutes or a few seconds? They may even participate in the financial grace offering, by offering electronically! May we be creative to find ways to accompany, encourage and attract saints to Christ and the church life so that no one drifts away.
- 2. We may be still attracted by the world in certain respects, but we may still be able to grow (Genesis 12:8;13:3-4,8-9).** As we saw in the previous point, Abraham pitched his tent between Bethel (signifying the church or the house of God) on the west and Ai (in Hebrew "a heap of ruins," signifying the world) on the east, and built an altar and called upon the name of the Lord. In other words, he consecrated himself to the Lord and was one with the Lord. Did he fully fulfill his consecration? As we read Abraham's life, and consider our own, we realize that he did not (neither do we), but God remembered his consecration. Therefore, after Abraham's sojourn in Egypt and his return to Canaan (the good land), he came back to his original place of consecration, again between Bethel and Ai. "Ah, Abraham, why couldn't you have pitched your tent in Bethel second time around, after your experience in drifting away into Negeb and ending up in Egypt in a messy situation? Did you not learn your lesson the first time?" Such may be our reaction. "If only I had been Abraham, I would not have..." Actually, many of us would have done the same, if not worse. We are not as strong as Abraham. Let us consider the second episode of pitching the tent between Bethel and Ai, the similarities and differences, and what they mean to us. Firstly, Abraham returned "to the place where he had made an altar at the first" (Genesis 13:4). This may signify that when we drift away, but return to the Lord and the church life, we remember and return to our original consecration. Actually, it is the Lord who remembers our initial

consecration, even though we may forget it. Abraham also called upon the name of the Lord the second time, as well as the first time. This may mean that each time we take a step to follow the Lord, we must be one with Him, depending on Him and not on our own strength, even in our consecration. Secondly, Abraham developed the boldness to ask Lot to separate from him (Genesis 13:8-9). This was God's doing, as we will see in a later point). This indicates that Abraham grew from his previous experience of Bethel and Ai to his second experience at the same location despite the attraction of the world. Do we grow? Yes, we may pitch our tent between Bethel and Ai. To the degree that our heart and our person love the Lord and the church, do we consecrate ourselves and take step, like Abraham, to cut the ties with something that might be frustrating us from responding to the Lord's speaking? Even in our response, the world (Ai) is still attractive. Yet we grow in the process.

- 3. Are we merely "good" people enjoying the church life, or do we understand and testify God? (Genesis 13:8-12).** Lot did not take the initiative to separate from Abraham. Rather it was Abraham who initiated the parting of ways. This shows that Lot loved his uncle and did not want to leave him. He had a good humanity and he was no doubt cognizant of Abraham's care and love of him in raising him up as practically his own son and bringing him out of Ur into Canaan. It was because of Abraham that Lot had become rich. Lot probably realized that when he was with Abraham, he was blessed and he was grateful for such a person in his life. Peter in his second epistle even describes him as "righteous" and "godly" (2 Peter 2:7-9). He was what we might call today a "good" brother. Yet when Abraham proposed the parting of ways, Lot agreed and left. Why? He did not know or understand God. Indeed, he enjoyed the blessing of being with Abraham, but when he was given the choice to leave and priority of choice of land, he promptly departed. He was not a bad person, but he left. Are we like this? Many saints are "good" brothers and sisters. We may like to help people (cook for them, help them move etc., all very precious virtues). We may enjoy the social aspect of the church life (which we need), caring for one another and even testifying how sweet the church life is. But somehow we may leave. This may be an indication that we may not understand the Lord. We may even read the Bible and attend meetings. This does not necessarily mean that we grow. This should be a warning to us, concerning ourselves and also the manner in which we serve younger saints. Does the Lord speak to us personally? Do we ask questions? Do we testify Him? If not, we also may leave. It must have been very hard for Abraham to ask Lot to leave. Lot did not ask to leave. Yet he left. What a warning to us.
- 4. In the church life, if we are shepherding (taking care) of a brother or sister who may be heading in the direction of Lot, what do we say? (Genesis 13:9).** Let us analyse Abraham's proposal to Lot and consider its implications. It must not have been easy for Abraham to take such a step. What must have been going through his mind? Here is his nephew whom he has raised up. If he leaves, what will happen to him? Who will protect him? Abraham may even have felt guilty in taking such a step. Yet it was necessary. Several Bible commentators consider Abraham's proposal as a demonstration of faith. He allowed Lot to choose first, not grasping his own choice, but trusting in God that He would be faithful to His promise to give his offspring the land. No doubt this is a possible interpretation. But let us go a step further. Suppose Lot had chosen the land of Canaan instead, and not Sodom? Would not Abraham have been "forced" to remain with him in the good land, thereby remaining "kidnapped" by a person who did not see the same thing that he saw, and had no vision of God? The Bible may have had a different script in that case! Might Abraham's proposal have been the expression of natural love, in that in allowing Lot to choose, he still left the door open for Lot to continue to remain with him, in case Lot chose Canaan? No doubt Abraham initiated the separation (a sign of his growth, as we have seen earlier), but couched the proposal with an ulterior "escape clause," thus reserving the option of holding on to Lot. He was faithful to cut ties, but his natural love for Lot still surfaced. This is another interpretation. What does this mean to us? In the church life, it is not easy to shepherd "Lot." Who is Lot? Actually we do not know, and it is dangerous to label people "Lot." Yet we may spend months and even years with someone, always thinking that they will respond to the Lord (and maybe they will), but we do not preach the gospel to contact new people. Our natural love for people may override God's purpose for us to raise up pillars, those who want to serve Him and raise up His testimony. Must we care for Lot? Absolutely. But if we are "kidnapped" by such ones, we may be lulled into thinking we are loving people when that love is mainly natural and not motivated and inspired by God.
- 5. God is in control, but we need to "build an altar" to consecrate ourselves to Him (Genesis 12:8;13:4,14-17).** God sovereignly arranged Abraham's life and circumstances, and blessed Him. He knew who Abraham was and He also knew who Lot was. He wanted Abraham to leave Lot. Therefore, when Lot left, God still protected Abraham (Genesis 13:14-17). This was God's doing. But what about Abraham? What if Abraham had not built an altar, would God have had a way? Surely not. Therefore, if we do not build an altar (consecrate ourselves), we will become like Lot and forsake the Lord. God never forsakes us. We forsake Him. Abraham built an altar and God blessed him. We also consecrate ourselves. We may not know how we consecrate and we may not know what it means, but God knows and He will bless us and protect us because He needs us in His purpose and economy. But we need to continually consecrate ourselves to Christ and the church.