

The Antidote for Affluenza

Genesis 13:1-18

Introduction

It seems that every time I travel, I am faced with concerns about health and safety. In 1993, I led a team to Russia to participate in an evangelistic outreach. Two weeks before we left, there was an attempted political coup in Moscow which resulted in tanks firing on the Russian Parliament. People asked us, “Are you still going? Are you scared? Will you be safe?”

In November 1994, I was part of a team heading to Ukraine to help train Walk Thru the Bible instructors in that nation. One month before our departure, there was a cholera outbreak in the city of Simferopol in the Crimean Peninsula, where we were scheduled to teach. Before leaving I visited a travel doctor and received shots for cholera.

In August 2000, Gary Ericson and I went to Nigeria. I visited my travel doctor once again. He had a map in his office from the CDC—Center for Disease Control, showing all the “hot spots” in the world for various diseases. Most of them were centered in equatorial Africa, exactly where we were headed. Needless to say, I paid for my ounce of prevention and received shots for meningitis, hepatitis A, typhoid, yellow fever, diphtheria, along with a prescription for pills for malaria. My arm was a pincushion, which my compassionate children hit and said, “Does it hurt?”

I leave next week on another ministry trip, this time to Spain and Russia. I will spend two days in Spain making a pastoral visit to Steve & Cathy Crawford. I want to see how they are doing and hear more about their dreams and hopes to buy a building for their church in Ponferrada.

I will arrive in Moscow on May 17 and meet up with Bob & Barb Sorensen, Zip & Marsha Trower, Daniel Adent, and John & Naomi Musgrave. During the week of May 19-23, our team of eight will be leading a conference on “Biblical leadership in the local church” for the alumni of the New Life Bible College in Moscow. John was hoping for 25-30 people. As of today, 62 pastors, elders, and church leaders have registered. Counting our team of 8 and 5 translators, we’ll have at least 75 people at the conference. Please pray for us.

As I have talked to people where we’re going and what we’re doing, one of the comments I received was, “Don’t bring home SARS.” SARS—Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome—is the latest on the list of the world traveler’s nightmares.

“SARS” is the cover story of this week’s TIME and Newsweek magazines. In the six months since the SARS outbreak emerged, there have been 4,800 cases in at least 26 countries. The disease has rocked Asian markets, ruined the tourist trade of an entire region, nearly bankrupted airlines, and spread panic through some of the world’s largest countries.

On the one hand, the worldwide toll of 300 deaths thus far is tiny compared to the 3 million people who died of AIDS last year. On the other hand, the fear is that if SARS continues to spread, its numbers could skyrocket.

As frightening as SARS is, there is a disease that is far worse. In fact, this disease is more lethal than SARS, AIDS, and Ebola combined. It is a disease that is rampant and endemic on the Eastside. This disease will rob you of joy, steal sleep from your eyes, reduce you to poverty, and ultimately take your life.

When you are afflicted with this disease, your senses become dulled. Your appetite increases, yet nothing will quench your thirst. You become driven and manic. You are easily agitated and frenzied. You battle low self-esteem and depression. You no longer care about the future. You become paranoid and overprotective.

“What is this disease?” you ask. It is Affluenza—the disease of affluence. When you are in the throes of this disease, you **MUST** have **MORE**—bigger, better, faster, more exciting. Toys, gadgets, cars, bigger homes, newer things, the latest styles—all of these are merely an anesthetic to dull the pain of an empty life.

You may think, “I don’t suffer from this problem. I’m not rich. I’m not affluent.” Psychologist Jessie H. O’Neill has stated, “Anyone—regardless of their net worth—who believes that they must be rich, that more is always better, is a self-condemned prisoner of the ‘golden ghetto’.”

When you step into another culture such as Russia or Tijuana, you discover that your “little” is greater than their “lot.” Materialism has nothing to do with amount. It has everything to do with attitude. We are all afflicted with affluenza.

About a month ago, our next door neighbors put a merry-go-round in their backyard—an electric merry-go-round. Our kids are way too old, but we still thought, “Wow, what a cool toy! Wouldn’t it be fun to have one?” Affluenza.

In 1 Timothy 6:9-10, the apostle Paul spoke about the dangers of affluenza. Listen to his words in The Message. “But if it’s only money these leaders are after, they’ll self-destruct in no time. Lust for money brings trouble and nothing but trouble. Going down that path, some lose their footing in the faith completely and live to regret it bitterly ever after.”

The problem with affluenza is that if truth be told, most of us want this disease. Most of us approach agree with Teyve in “Fiddler on the Roof.” During a conversation one

character pronounces money to be the world's curse. Tevye retorts, "If riches are a curse, may God smite me with it, and may I never recover!"

This morning we are going to read medical files of two individuals who suffered from the disease of affluenza. One took advantage of the antidote. The other rejected the cure and succumbed to the ravages of the disease.

As we discovered in the first half of Genesis 12, God came to a man named Abram, or Abraham as he is known today. He told him to leave his father's house in Ur, near the Persian Gulf, and set out on a journey of faith. Abraham set out on the journey, but he took his extended family with him. In addition to his wife, Sarai, or Sarah as she is known today, Abraham took along his father, Terah, and his nephew, Lot. After Terah dies on the journey, Abraham, Sarah, and Lot arrive in the land of Canaan.

God promised to give Abraham three specific blessings. He promised to give the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants. God promised to turn a childless couple into a great nation. He promised to bless the entire world through Abraham.

In the second half of Genesis 12, Abraham was faced with a test and he flunked it badly. There was a famine in the land, and Abraham packed up the caravan and headed south to Egypt. He compromised his faith in every way possible. He left the land behind and he abandoned his wife. Instead of being a blessing, he was a source of plagues. To add insult to injury, he and his party were thrown out of Egypt.

As bad as those things were, something worse awaited him. Unbeknownst to Abraham, he caught a deadly virus in Egypt. He became afflicted with affluenza. He became very rich.

Following the debacle in Egypt, Abraham returned to the land of Canaan. He rebuilt his altars and he renewed his relationship with God.

Instead of living happily ever after, the virus of affluenza began to spread and soon infected other people. Conflict rose between Abraham's and Lot's shepherds. Now that both of them were very wealthy, they began to argue over whose flock should graze where. Abraham, accepting the antidote to affluenza stops clinging to his possessions. Lot, succumbing to the disease, grasps for more and more. Faced with the realization that "this town's not big enough for both of us," the family band breaks up and parts company.

In the end, God blesses Abraham and expands his promises to him.

Genesis 13 explains that the antidote for affluenza is to renew our relationship with God and to release our rights to accumulate more stuff. Only then can we truly receive our rewards from God.

Turn with me to Genesis 13. If you don't have a copy of the Scriptures with you, there is a handout in your worship folder with this passage, as well as an outline of the message. Please listen as I read from the New American Standard Bible.

Genesis 13:1-18

1 So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, he and his wife and all that belonged to him, and Lot with him. 2 Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold. 3 He went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, 4 to the place of the altar which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord.

5 Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. 6 And the land could not sustain them while dwelling together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to remain together. 7 And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling then in the land.

8 So Abram said to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. 9 "Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me; if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left." 10 Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere—this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah—like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar. 11 So Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they separated from each other. 12 Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom. 13 Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord.

14 The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; 15 for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. 16 "I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered. 17 "Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you." 18 Then Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord.¹

¹All Scripture taken from the *New American Standard Bible : 1995 update*. 1995. LaHabra, CA: The Lockman Foundation.

Renew Your Relationship (13:1-4)

Significantly, after the disastrous situation in Egypt, Abraham returns to his roots and renews his relationship with God. Abraham journeys back to Bethel, the place where he had previously built an altar and worshipped God. Back in his own backyard, Abraham's first priority is to renew his life of worship. Look again at verses 1-4.

1 So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, he and his wife and all that belonged to him, and Lot with him. 2 Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold. 3 He went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, 4 to the place of the altar which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord.

The antidote to affluenza begins by renewing your relationship with God. When we disobey the will of God, the only right thing to do is to go back to the place where you left him and make a new beginning.

A casual observer of Genesis 12 might conclude, "What happened to Abraham wasn't all bad. Pharaoh gave Abraham a lot of wealth, and Sarah was given her own maid, Hagar. God forgave Abraham's sin, and he started over again. So, what's the problem?"

The "problem" is that everything Abraham received in Egypt later caused him trouble and grief. While God forgave Abraham and renewed his relationship with him, the mistakes of that journey continued to plague Abraham for years. God did not overrule the consequences of the trip to Egypt.

As a result of his sojourn in Egypt, Abraham became "very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold" as verse 2 explains. That prosperity would create a rift between uncle and nephew. The presence of Hagar, one of the Egyptian servants Abraham received, would soon create a rift between Sarah and Hagar, and between Abraham and Sarah.

The disease of affluence would forever alter the makeup of Abraham's family. They would never recover fully from that virus. In fact, the conflict in the Middle East today is one of the lingering effects of Abraham's battle with affluence.

If you have disobeyed and stepped out of God's will and God is disciplining you, go back to the place where you left him and make things right. Someone once said, "The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings." That is not an excuse for sin, but it is an encouragement for repentance.

The antidote for affluenza begins by renewing your relationship with God. The second step is to release your rights to accumulate more stuff.

Release Your Rights (13:5-13)

One of the principles that runs throughout Scripture is the “Teach-Test Principle.” After God draws people into a relationship with himself, he teaches us how to live and how to worship. God then brings a test to see whether or not we have learned the lesson. He will not move us along until we learn the lessons he has for us today.

In the first half of Genesis 12, God called Abraham into a relationship with himself and gave him some amazing promises. He then tested him with famine in the second half of chapter 12. God asked Abraham, “Can you walk with the eyes of faith and trust me?”

Now, in Genesis 13, God brings a second test—a test of prosperity. This time, Abraham responds completely different than he did in chapter 12.

Look at the setting in verses 5-7.

5 Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. 6 And the land could not sustain them while dwelling together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to remain together. 7 And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock. Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling then in the land.

It is evident that both Abraham and Lot were wealthy by the standards of the day. Both had accumulated much on the journey to Egypt. Each had unique possessions in abundance. Verse 2 says that Abraham was “very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold.” Verse 5 indicates that Lot wasn’t exactly a pauper either. He also had “flocks and herds and tents.”

When Abraham received sheep, oxen, donkeys, and servants from Pharaoh, he probably shared these gifts with Lot. It would appear that Lot cashed in on Abraham’s Egyptian bonanza. God’s gifts to Abraham resulted in his blessings on Lot.

Verse six states that between the two of them, “their possessions were so great that they were not able to remain together.” The land could not sustain both of them because the Canaanites and Perizzites were present. They held the best parts, so Abraham and Lot had to scarp for water and food in the rest.

Abraham’s response to the test of prosperity is completely different from his previous approach in chapter 12. There, he was self-centered. He declared, “Me first,” and abandoned his wife in an act of self-preservation and self-protection. Now, out of loyalty to family, he says, “You go first.” He puts the needs and choices of others before his own. He wants to keep peace, because “we are brothers.” Listen to verses 8-9.

8 So Abram said to Lot, “Please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. 9 “Is not the

whole land before you? Please separate from me; if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left.”

Based on his response in Genesis 12, you would expect Abraham to cling to what is his. Instead, Abraham releases his rights. He lets Lot choose first.

Abraham was the older one and the leader of the company. Yet he was magnanimous enough to leave the choice to his nephew, who was the younger partner. Abraham treated his orphaned nephew as an equal.

Knowing that God had already promised the land to him, Abraham rested in the confident assurance that God would direct the decision, so that his promise would be fulfilled.

Rather than grasp his possessions in a clenched fist, Abraham demonstrated an unselfish, generous spirit. A person who has the promise of God’s provision does not have to cling to his possessions.

Abraham certainly knew that God had blessed Lot because of him. Yet he was willing to put Lot on an equal footing, to offer him a choice that could possibly allow his nephew to end up with a better deal.

Abraham said, “Lot, you pick first. Whatever you want is yours. I’ll take whatever is left.”

In making this offer, Abraham was not naïve in terms of what the stakes were. He knew what lay eastward toward Jordan, a virtual Garden of Eden. He was well aware he might end up with the least desirable land. But his love for Lot, his desire for unity and peace, and his concern about his personal witness in a pagan community seemed more important to Abraham than his own material welfare.

Abraham was still a long way from where he ought to be spiritually, but at this moment in his life he was not the man he once was. It seems that Abraham’s return to the altar and meeting with God resulted in a positive change of heart.

Instead of deferring to his uncle, Lot makes his choice. In the process, he reveals a selfish, grasping nature. Look at verses 10-13.

10 Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere—this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah—like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar. 11 So Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they separated from each other. 12 Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom. 13 Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord.

When it comes to the disease of affluence, the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. Lot had a worldly, selfish, grasping heart.

Lot was the kind of man that game shows go after. Game shows like “Let’s make a deal,” “So you want to be a millionaire,” “Wheel of Fortune,” “Survivor,” and others all appeal to our basic greed. Trade something you have for the chance at getting more. Take a risk. Don’t be content. Cut others out of the deal.

Lot wasn’t satisfied with being second in command. He wanted to run his own ranch. So he traded a secure family for what was behind “Door #3.” Poverty and labor, wants and wanderings, could not separate Abraham and Lot; but riches did.

Problems often begin with the eyes. It’s what we see that leads us to make wrong decisions. The lust of the eyes leads to all kinds of trouble.

The eyes see what the heart loves. This was especially true of Lot. His experience in Egypt resulted in greater possessions which in turn stimulated a taste for more and better. Lot’s material wealth combined with a selfish heart made him vulnerable and susceptible to being even more selfish.

Sadly, his choice would also have a very negative effect on him and his whole family. He was about to become even more deeply rooted in the things of the world.

Lot chose what appeared to be the best portion of the land. He chose the whole district of the Jordan. This included the valley on both sides of the Jordan. Verse 10 describes it as a beautiful land—like a garden of the Lord, like Egypt.

Abraham could take Lot out of Egypt, but he couldn’t take Egypt out of Lot. It appears that Lot’s time in Egypt gave him a taste for the finer things of life.

On the one hand, Lot’s choice made sense. As a shepherd, you need grass and water for your flocks. If it was up to you, you’d pick a place where both were in abundance. In addition, if you’re concerned about raising your family, you’d settle near the cities rather than camp out in the wilderness. If you were Lot and had first choice, why not pick the best?

At first blush, it was a great choice materially. It would advance his career. However, it was a disastrous one, spiritually.

Lot didn’t take into consideration that separation from Abraham meant separation from God. And separation from God mean separation from blessing.

In addition, Lot had yet to discover that the Jordan Valley was a center of moon worship. The region was characterized by unbridled wickedness that was centered in the city of Sodom. Interestingly, Ezekiel 36:49 says that the root of Sodom’s sin was affluence—

she was arrogant, overfed, and unconcerned. It was Sodom's affluence that led to the practice of detestable things.

Little did Lot know that the physical beauty of the area was small compensation for the destruction and calamity yet to come. Lot had a severe case of affluenza. His senses were so dulled that he didn't even recognize the presence of evil.

Lot had a great opportunity to become a man of God as he walked with Abraham, but we don't read of Lot's building an altar or calling on the Lord. He didn't even consider calling on the Lord for wisdom in making decision. Abraham walked by faith, but Lot operated purely on sight. Lot was a carnal follower of Yahweh. 2 Peter 2:7-8 says he was a righteous man, but he was not fully devoted to the Lord.

Instead of being a pilgrim who made progress, Lot regressed into the world and away from God's blessing. Lot looked toward Sodom (13:10), then he moved toward Sodom (13:11-12), and finally, he moved into Sodom (14:12).

How can you tell if you have affluenza? When faced with a decision, do you pray about it first? Or do you respond impulsively based on what looks best to you? Do you consider what pleases God? Or do you put your desires and needs and wants first? Do you hold onto your family, possessions, career, and vacation time with an open palm or with a clenched fist? Do you relax and trust God for the outcome? Or do you try to control the details or manipulate the process so that you come out ahead?

Affluenza is rampant here on the Eastside. To combat its effects, consider refraining from shopping for new clothes, new cars, new houses, and electronic gadgets for one month. Put your credit cards away for two weeks. Loosen their grip on your life. Instead of consuming all of your income on yourself, give a portion of your money back to God. Support a missionary. Support Crossroads financially.

Give away some of your possessions to demonstrate they don't control you. Clean out your closets and give the garments you haven't worn in two months to the Salvation Army. Encourage your kids to pack up some of their toys and give them away to a family that doesn't have any.

Invest a portion of your time in serving others. Give up a holiday and serve dinner at the Union Gospel Mission. Instead of planning a vacation to Hawaii or Cancun, use your vacation time for a ministry trip to Russia or Spain or Tijuana.

When it comes to fighting affluenza, the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart. We need a heart transplant. The antidote to affluenza begins by renewing our relationship with God. It also includes releasing our rights to accumulate more stuff.

Receive Your Rewards (13:14-18)

Once we fully obey God's commands, we are then in a position where he can bless us fully. That's what Abraham discovered in verses 14-18.

14 The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; 15 for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. 16 "I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered. 17 "Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you." 18 Then Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord.

Abraham had now fully obeyed God's command in 12:1 to leave his father's house. He was now in a position where God could fully bless him. God becomes even more specific in his revelation. He told Abraham that his unselfishness would be rewarded many times over. Not only does he confirm his promises to Abraham, he also expands them.

In 12:7, God said, I will give **this land**. Now God tells him, I will give you **ALL** the land. Before, God gave the land to Abraham's descendants. Now, God gives the land to Abraham and his descendants **FOREVER**. In 12:2, God said he would make Abraham into a great nation. Now, God promises to make Abraham's descendants as numerous "as the dust of the earth."

Strikingly and unmistakably, God deeded the land to Abraham and his descendants. Everywhere Abraham looked, everywhere he walked—it would all be his.

Being left alone, Abraham stood in need of special encouragement. God wanted Abraham to know that compared with what his descendants would receive, he hadn't really given up very much. With every step of obedience, Abraham experienced more light and greater reassurance. Although he stepped out by faith, not knowing where he was going, he could now see what God had in mind. He could feel the sand between his toes as he walked through the promised land from one end to the other.

Abraham puts down his roots at Hebron, by the oaks of Mamre, about 20 miles SW of Jerusalem. Hebron was at the junction of all the principal highways of the region. It stood out on the landscape, 3,040 feet above sea level. The Jewish historian Josephus speaks of it as being more ancient than the city of Memphis, Egypt. He also says that an old oak tree had been there since the creation of the world. Surrounding the city were olive trees, grapes, springs, and wells, and grazing ground. The cave of Machpelah, later bought by Abraham for a tomb for Sarah, was very near. It became the burial place not only of Sarah, but of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Rebekah, and Leah.

Once Abraham sets up his homestead at Hebron, he builds an altar to the Lord. He was devoted to worshipping God.

We live in a world that is permeated with affluence. Until you go to another culture like Russia, Nigeria, Tijuana, you don't realize how much you have. We are so deeply infected with the disease of affluenza that we don't even realize its symptoms. When it comes to affluenza, the heart of the problem is the problem of the heart.

The antidote for affluenza begins by renewing our relationship with God. It is significant that Genesis 13 begins and ends with Abraham at an altar, the symbol of worship and fellowship. The building of an altar is the key to Abraham's spiritual triumph. It is through communion with God that our hearts are transformed.

Once our relationship with God is the central focus of our lives, we can then release our rights to accumulate more stuff. We don't have to be concerned over what the neighbors are driving. We don't have to compete with the vacations our coworkers go on. We can drop out of the rat race and not worry about keeping up with the Jones', the Smith's, or whoever else is out in front. We don't have to dress to impress. A person who has the promise of God's provision does not have to cling to possessions.

Once we fully obey God's commands, we are then in a position where he can bless us fully. We can relax and enjoy the gifts that he gives us, knowing that they are better than anything we may have given up.