

Abraham and Lot

A Sermon by the Rev. Peter M. Buss, Jr.

Today we turn to the lives of two men who lived thousands of years ago--to Abraham and his nephew, Lot. In looking at this part of the Bible we have a challenge: to see that the actions of these men, and the historical details recorded about them, have meaning for us today. People who have spent time with the Bible know that God delivers substantial, vital messages through the stories of His Word. In the New Church we call this deeper meaning "the internal sense" of the Word.

In this particular story the challenge is heightened by the fact that the internal sense is not apparent at first glance--it is hidden beneath many seemingly trivial historical facts about Abraham and Lot. In fact, one teaching in the Writings for the New Church, which explains this says that:

"the internal sense seems to be so withdrawn from the sense of the letter that it is scarcely recognizable" (*Arcana Coelestia* 1540).

But the Lord has revealed that meaning. He has given us some tools to help us unlock the message beneath the story, and it is indeed vital for us to understand.

We begin by looking at a single scene in the lives of Abraham and Lot. They are standing on a mountain. It is just the two of them, as I picture it. From what we know of the land of Canaan, that mountain would have been fairly sparse. It would have had patches of scrub-grass, and lots of rocks. There might have been some shrubs but no trees--nothing to block the wind as it swept up the slopes. In that setting Abraham and Lot were saying good-bye to each other. There had been strife between Abraham's herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen. They were both rich men with many possessions, and the place where they were staying was not able to accommodate both of them. So Abraham offered Lot the choice of the land. He said:

"Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, then I will go to the left." (*Genesis* 13:8-9)

From the top of that mountain Lot looked around at the miles of countryside before him. His eyes lingered on the land he saw below him, called the plain of Jordan. In contrast to where he stood it would

have been green and well-watered. He would have seen lots of trees, plenty of open spaces for his flocks to graze, and the Jordan river snaking its way through the valley. Lot chose this area for himself, and the two men separated: uncle from nephew.

The message of the internal sense correlates with the land itself: the mountains and the valleys. The Lord tells us that the Land of Canaan is a picture of our minds. The mountains represent the higher regions of the mind, and the valleys represent the lower parts (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1585:2-3). The Lord also tells us that Abraham, who chose to live in the mountains, represents the higher or internal part of our mind, called *the internal person*; and that Lot, who chose to live in the valleys, represents the lower or external part of our mind, called *the external person* (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1563). This is the subject of the internal sense: the internal person and the external person within us.

Importance to Us.

Our goal in this life is to prepare for heaven, or to become spiritual people. As we try to live a good life, we allow the Lord to develop the higher parts of our mind. But this preparation takes place in the natural world. We are asked to be spiritual in a natural environment to care about heavenly things and our preparation for eternal life, in the midst of our busy schedules, filled with work, raising children, preparing meals, and running errands. Given all these practical duties we can see how important it is to recognize the reality of the spiritual world. We can see the need to raise ourselves above the natural world, to see that there is something beyond our external survival—something more internal and everlasting.

The stories of Abraham and Lot drive home the reality of these two parts in our minds. They are two men with separate personalities and characteristic ways of acting. By means of them the Lord brings out many teachings about how to use our mind to live spiritual lives here in the natural world.

Stories of Abraham.

First we look at the internal part of the mind, as reflected in the stories about Abraham. The Lord appeared to Abraham in Haran. He asked him to leave behind his family and the land of his nativity, and journey to a new place—the Land of Canaan (see *Genesis* 12:1). This

represents our first awareness of spiritual life-that there is some higher potential within us, that there is a place called heaven to which the Lord invites us (*Arcana Coelestia* 1410). We respond by giving up our hereditary home-by realizing that this earth is not our destination by coming to see that we should care for more than our own welfare; by learning the kind of life the Lord would have us live (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1411). The Lord promised to make Abraham into a great nation. So too, He will multiply the good parts in us and prepare us to live in heaven, if we respond to Him. This was the first covenant the Lord made with Abraham. He went on to make six more throughout Abraham's life: his descendants would become like the dust of the earth (*Genesis* 13:16), he would inherit Canaan (*Genesis* 12:7), and he would have a son born to his aging wife, Sarah (*Genesis* 18:9-15).

Knowing that Abraham represents the internal part of our minds can help us to see that this part of us hears the Lord's promises of eternity in heaven. The internal part in us is what responds to the Lord. These promises of the Lord are supported by hundreds of other truths in the Word. In the story of Abraham this is reflected in the fact that the Lord made Abraham rich in livestock, in gold and in silver. This represents becoming rich in knowledges about spiritual things, and also affections or desires to become spiritual people by doing what the Lord asks (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1549-52).

Another detail about Abraham's life is the number of times he worshiped the Lord. When he first entered Canaan he built an altar (*Genesis* 12:7). When he moved his camp to the mountain east of Bethel he built another altar, and "called upon the name of the Lord" (*Genesis* 12:8). When he returned from his sojourn in Egypt he went back to that altar near Bethel and again worshiped the Lord (*Genesis* 13:4). This shows that we worship the Lord from the internal part of our minds--a further characteristic of the internal person within us (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1559, 1561).

But all was not smooth sailing for Abraham. He heard the Lord promise him many times that he would become a great nation, and yet Sarah was barren. He needed a son to make the promise come true, but Sarah was well beyond child-bearing years. Abraham worried about this. He took Hagar as his handmaid, and she bore him Ishmael. But the Lord said that he was not the one. Sarah would give him a son in her old age (see *Genesis* 17:18-19). Abraham also worried about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot lived near Sodom, and he

didn't want him to be killed when the Lord destroyed that city. So we see him interceding for Sodom on Lot's behalf-asking the Lord if He would destroy the city if there were fifty righteous people there, or forty-five, or forty, and so on (see *Genesis* 18:16-33).

All this shows that our internal person doesn't always understand the promises of the Lord. We aren't always sure that the Lord's ways will bring us happiness. The internal person is the part in us which wrestles with the truth, and struggles to gain meaning from the Lord's teachings.

Generalizations.

From all these stories of Abraham, we see that the internal person is the religious part of us. It is reflective, caring, generous, and thoughtful. It is the place where our conscience resides. It is the place where we feel the Lord working within us: touching our affections, enlightening us, and leading us. As we read, "the spiritual person is, in a kind of image, a spiritual world, and so loves those things which are of that world, or of heaven" (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 251).

Stories of Lot.

However much we are aware of this spiritual dimension within us, we can't always live in that part of our minds. We have far too many practical things to do. That's not bad. In fact, it's the way we carry out those spiritual principles. The Lord doesn't want us to sit around and think spiritual thoughts all day-He wants us to be active and useful. So we enter the domain of the external person.

The first thing we realize about Lot is that he is not the main character. Abraham was the patriarch; Lot was just one of the people who traveled with him. The Lord teaches us that the external part of our minds is supposed to be subservient to the internal part (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1563:1). Our external person carries out our spiritual goals. The Lord asks us to be honest, and our mouths speak the truth. The Lord asks us to learn from His Word; we use our eyes and ears to take in the information. The Lord wants us to worship Him; the external part of our minds allows us to drive to church and participate in the ritual, which is one form of worship. So we see Lot traveling with Abraham: from Haran to Canaan, from Canaan to Egypt, and back again. We need both parts of our mind: the reflective part and the active part; the part which plans for our eternal future, and the part that helps us live right now.

But there is another side to our external person. We can choose to shut out anything spiritual from our lives if we want to. We can focus only on what will give us immediate pleasure in this world: the most expensive clothes, a large, well-furnished house, a great car. None of these things are bad in themselves, but they can become bad if they are our only focus-and not just for a short time but as a pattern of life. The external person can be self-serving and worldly. It can receive stimulation, not from Lord though the internal person, but from hell, through the senses and their persuasive pleasures (see *Arcana Coelestia* 1563:2, 1568). This side of the external person is represented by Lot when he was separated from Abraham. Lot got into trouble. He chose to live in the valleys and camped near Sodom (*Genesis* 13:11-12). He was captured in the war of five kings versus four (*Genesis* 14:11-12). He was caught up in the whole destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (*Genesis* 19). His wife was turned into a pillar of salt (*Genesis* 19:26).

Generalizations.

The external or natural part of our minds is the doing part. It is oriented to the present. It is concerned largely with ourselves. It is the part in us which "loves those things which belong to the natural world" (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 251). It allows us to live in this world. It is our scientific part, which feels, observes, and senses the things and people around us. It can be a servant to the internal part or it can be self-serving.

Summary of things we know.

It might be useful to stop for a moment and return to the opening idea. Our challenge was to see the internal messages the Lord had in store for us by means of the lives of Abraham and Lot. We have come a long way from two men, to the internal and external person within us. That's the beauty of the Lord's Word: it has heavenly truths wrapped up in simple Biblical imagery. So we know that:

1. We have two parts to our mind: a spiritual part, motivated by the Lord and a desire to go to heaven, and a natural part, which sometimes carries out spiritual goals and other times leads us astray.
2. The external part or person, left to itself, will choose selfish and worldly ends. A person who shuts off influx from the higher regions of the mind will choose a life of evil. He will be cold and heartless. He will be selfish, and desire worldly pleasure. He will

be in spiritual darkness. He will be associated with the hells (see *Divine Love and Wisdom* 254).

3. To encourage us *not* to become evil, the Lord promises to multiply our internal person. He wants us to be complete people, with the higher levels of our mind open and functioning. He promises that we will be associated with the angels of heaven if we allow Him to develop this part of our mind. He promises to fill it with "thousands of arcana of wisdom, and with thousands of delights of love" (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 252).

What can we do?

But the Lord's Word isn't just descriptive. He doesn't want us to stop with the knowledge that we have an internal and external part in us. He wants us to see the usefulness of this information-to see that it can make our lives better. From these teachings we can derive some principles of living a good life.

1. Control the external part of our minds. The Lord asks that we make it a servant to the internal part. We touched on one story of Lot getting captured in a war, together with Sodom and its allies (see *Genesis* 14). Abraham pursued the victors and rescued Lot. This is a picture of controlling or taming our external lives-of compelling ourselves to do what the Lord commands.
2. In order to do that, the internal or spiritual part in us has to be open and aware. We need to learn the Lord's laws of order. The more we learn, the more we will be able to tame our more external inclinations which do not accord with that order. We also need to allow time to retreat into the internal person-to hear the Lord speaking to us, and feel Him guiding us in the right direction.

As we live our busy lives down in the valleys, filled with schedules, duties, homework, having fun, and all sorts of other things, we need to remember Abraham up on the mountains, building altars to the Lord. If we do, we will hear the Lord promising us over and over again that we will be genuinely happy when we live with the higher level of our mind open-when we use it to govern our way of thinking and acting. In the internal person we meet with the Lord and allow Him to touch us. If we make time for spiritual refreshment, He will revitalize us, and give meaning to all those duties we are called upon to do in our lives. He will promise us a secure and prosperous future, as He did so many times to Abraham. He will take care of us-in this world, and to eternity in heaven.

We close with one of these promises. When Abraham was ninety-nine years old the Lord said to him:

"I am Almighty God; walk before Me and be blameless. And I will make

My covenant between Me and you, and will multiply you exceedingly."

(*Genesis 17:1-2*)

Amen.

Lessons: Genesis 13; Divine Love and Wisdom 251.