The Danger of a Step in the Right Direction

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I want to talk to you about the subtle danger of a tendency common among many Christians. On the surface this tendency may seem harmless, but in reality it can cause shipwreck. I call this dangerous tendency the practice of "taking a step in the right direction."

Now, it is always good to take a step of faith when we have placed our trust in Christ. As a minister of the Lord, I applaud that kind of step. Yet the Bible shows us there is great danger if we don't follow up that first step with increased faith.

Lot is one of the Bible's prime examples. In Genesis 19 we read of Lot's supernatural deliverance from Sodom and Gomorrah. The angel of God's wrath had appeared on the scene, warning Lot, "We will destroy this place, because the cry of them is waxen great before the face of the Lord; and the Lord hath sent us to destroy it" (Genesis 19:13).

When Lot heard this he immediately acted in faith. "Lot went out, and spake unto his sons in law, which married his daughters, and said, Up, get you out" (19:14). Lot believed the angel's warning and took it seriously enough to tell his family about it.

Then we read that Lot "lingered" the next day: "When the morning arose, then the angels hastened Lot, saying, Arise, take thy wife, and thy two daughters, which are here; lest thou be consumed in the iniquity of the city. And while he lingered, the men laid hold upon his hand…

"And it came to pass, when they had brought them forth abroad, that he said, Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed. And Lot said unto them, Oh, not so, my Lord: Behold now, thy servant hath found grace" (19:15-19).

Lot knew he had been blessed with the saving grace of God. He had been mercifully delivered from Sodom, which God was poised to judge. The Lord even gave Lot specific direction, telling him to flee to the nearby mountain.

But again Lot hesitated, making a request of God that was self-serving: "Thou hast magnified thy mercy, which thou hast shewed unto me in saving my life; and I cannot escape to the mountain, lest some evil take me, and I die: Behold now, this city is near to flee unto, and it is a little one" (19:19-20).

The truth is Lot didn't want to go to the mountain. He wanted instead to settle on the plain, in a city called Zoar, whose name means "little." In Lot's mind, it was a "little matter" to request of God.

Here is a picture of a man taking a step in the right direction, a step of faith. If Lot had followed up on that first step with further faith, he would have been on his way to a place of blessing, in the perfect will of God.

In my opinion, Lot is like many Christians today. It is possible for us to be delivered from our own type of Sodom. We can be saved from a life of sin, fear and disappointment and instead taste of the wondrous mercy of God. And we begin to hear the Lord directing us, "Go up on the mountain."
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Here is the first lesson we are to draw from Lot's deliverance: We are to go where God tells us to go.

For Lot, the mountain was meant as a place of further blessing. Yet Lot didn't have a single ounce of faith, despite being blessed so greatly. He had tasted God's salvation, mercy and deliverance, yet he didn't translate any of this into faith.

As a result, Lot wasn't dependent on the Lord at all. You might think someone who had experienced such saving grace would think, "I have been delivered by the very angels of God. Surely the Lord has his hand on me. I can trust his merciful love."

But Lot resisted, going his own way. And he had no idea of the consequences of his self-directed decision.

The same is true for us today. Like Lot, we who make up Christ's body have been delivered out of Sodom. We have tasted mercy and grace. But do we always believe we're headed for a place of blessing when we follow God's direction?

The fact is some of the places God sends us are going to be hard.

As a minister of the Lord, I have learned something crucial over the years. It is never to stand in the way of a godly man or woman on their way to a place where God has directed them.

When these servants get to the place God has sent them, they may endure one of the most difficult periods of their lives. Nevertheless what they experience is God's way for them. I have seen destruction result when well-meaning, "logical" Christians stand in these servants' way, hindering them from entering a place that seems risky or dangerous.

Lot, who had no faith, was drawn to Zoar because it is was easy and comfortable. To him it was a step in the right direction — and so he went. Yet Lot couldn't have known the saving, delivering benefit of following God's specific direction.

The fact is the sulphuric fumes devouring Sodom were soon to engulf and cover the entire region. Picture the volcanic cloud that emerged from Iceland recently, affecting that entire part of the world. It must have been very much like what God's judgment of Sodom produced. That's why God told Lot to go to the mountain instead of to the plain.

When we disobey the voice of God, we have no idea the terrible things he wants to spare us from. Eventually, Lot was chased up the mountainside by the fiery destruction. And because he had no faith, he ended up in despair. His lack of faith resulted in incest and other horrible consequences. That is never God's way for us; he doesn't want to take any of his children on that route.

Perhaps right now you are struggling against a certain itch. Like Lot, you want to move ahead of God and do something on your own. I can only say one thing to you: Be exactly where God has told you to be. If you are there now, then you are at peace. If you are not at peace — if you're not trusting the Lord in the place he has put you — I assure you, you won't trust him anywhere.

Perhaps the things you're doing right now seem insignificant to you. In your mind, they may not be up to your high calling. But when you make peace with where God has sent you, you will be blessed. The Lord who knows your frame will keep you, instruct you and bless you beyond anything you could know. The point is always to go (or stay) where he has directed you in his infinite wisdom.

Jacob spent twenty years with Laban outside of God's blessing and plan for him.

During the two decades Jacob spent working for his father-in-law, he was not under God's full blessing. On the contrary, he was in a place of deception. The Lord was determined to change that for his servant. One day he told Jacob, "I want you to pull up stakes and go back home. Get to your kindred in Bethel."

Jacob took his first step toward blessing. He did as God directed him, gathering his clan and heading toward Bethel. And I can imagine Jacob was glad to go. He had been toiling for Laban in Syria for twenty years. And all that time he continually lived in disappointment with little to show for his labors.
You see, years before, Jacob had made a deal with God that concerned material things. Like many responsible believers, Jacob had reasoned, "I have to provide for my family." But if you want to follow the route to God's greatest blessing, you must follow his direction all the way, no matter what the cost. And now God wanted more for Jacob. He had a greater purpose for him.

When Jacob and his clan came to the border of Canaan, he was tired and weary. He had the pressure of caring for his two wives and all of their children, as well as their servants and herds. This man had responsibilities that stretched beyond his mental capacities. He was also fearful, because soon he would be facing his brother, Esau, from whom he had stolen the family inheritance years before.

So when Jacob came to a little town called Selah, he was tempted to stay there. Indeed, he bought a piece of land, building a house and even an altar where he could worship the Lord. Up to that point Jacob had taken a step in the right direction. But now he faced the danger that faces everyone who has taken that first step.

The name "Selah" means "safe place."

"Selah" indicates green grass, a nice home, good things. In short, the peaceful little town of Selah had great appeal to the embattled Jacob. It must have attracted him the same way Zoar attracted Lot.

But God's direction for Jacob was to build an altar to him at Bethel. The name "Bethel" means "house of God." The Lord was saying to his servant, "Jacob, you spent twenty years living for your family and yourself. Now I want all of your heart. I want my vision to become a part of your very being. Therefore, I want full control of your life. You are to take directions from me from now on."

To Jacob, moving forward looked risky, even dangerous. But God wanted to bless him. And Jacob couldn't enter that blessing unless he gave up his own self-made plans. From that point on, there could be no more deception, no more deal-making. God was saying to this beloved man, "I want to offer you something beyond your imagining. In the process, I'm going to make you the servant I have purposed you to be."

Beloved, that is the wonderful thing about grace. Jesus not only has bestowed grace on us by casting our sins into the sea, he also leads us by his merciful grace.

Once while in prayer, I heard the Lord say to me: "David, if I gave you the chance to direct your own life, doing everything right in your human ability, you still couldn't get close to my blessing for you. I have your steps outlined for you."

If we are going to follow him, we are to do so all the way, with no shortcuts. That is the only path to his purpose and blessing.

In the Old Testament many of God's servants took a first step of obedience but murmured and complained when things got tough.

I'm not referring to the normal human reaction we all have when we're in such a battle. When we're in a deep struggle, things can come at us fast and furiously. At such times we may think, "Lord, I don't know if I can handle this. I don't see how I can ever make it through." At such times the enemy takes advantage, moving in with principalities and powers to try to rob, steal and shipwreck our faith.

Dear believer, this happens to every true servant of God. Peter lovingly warns us it would happen, saying, "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy" (1 Peter 4:12).

What I'm talking about is a heart that has become hardened. This type of murmuring, complaining spirit is infectious, and God chastens such. Throughout the Old Testament we see what happens in every instance of hardened complaining: God does not abide it. When he tells his servants to trust him, we are to do what he says without murmuring, knowing he has our best in mind.

Israel under Moses is the most obvious example. The people had been camped at Mount Sinai for a year and had
become somewhat cozy there. Then word came from the Lord they were to move out into the wilderness. And the people obeyed.

Now, when you line up a million or more people, you can imagine the scale of such an undertaking. And what a glorious sight it must have been. Trumpets sounded and banners waved as every tribe and family assembled. Everyone was coming under the Lord's divine order.

It was a step in the right direction. But after only a short time, a group whom one translation calls "the rabble" began to murmur. These people's hearts had become hardened by their trials, and now they were just going through the motions. Soon their murmuring infected the whole camp and nearly everyone was complaining. It made God angry.

Think of it: Here were God's people who had been saved miraculously. They had been delivered from the hand of their enemy through a supernatural work at the Red Sea. But now the rabble weren't walking according to God's word. And because of their murmuring and complaining, God chastened them.

Terrible things fell upon Israel after that. It was a series of consequences they brought on themselves. Because they resisted God's direction, they suffered until an entire generation of murmurers finally died out in the wilderness.

After decades of service to the Lord, I am still learning.

I can honestly say I am still being trained by the Lord in this area of following his clear direction, especially into hard places. I am still learning not to say, "That's it, God, I've had enough." I'm also still learning to say, "Lord, I don't see the way ahead. I don't know where I'll find the grace to get through this. But you promised to provide it. You said you would be my strength."

This is the place of true faith. It is also where we find our rest: by fully trusting in the Lord's love for us. As Paul states, what else do we have to present to him but our faith? Not works. Not performance. We have only our belief in him and reliance on him to provide all.

At each day's end now, my wife, Gwen, and I will bow our heads and say, "Lord, you did it again. You brought us through."

And, dear one, he is going to bring you through. He wants to take you to a place of incredible blessing. You may have to be willing to do insignificant things. You'll face tests and trials that will be hard, seemingly beyond your ability to endure. Yet that is the training ground God has set apart for multitudes of his most beloved ones. It is where we learn his nature, his character, his blessing and his goodness.

It's hard to understand that in spite of our failures we are cherished by a holy God. But we are loved with the same love he has shown his Son. And he has a holy purpose for us, just as he did for his own Son. Therefore, we have a peace that passes all understanding. And we rest knowing his blessing lies ahead of us. Thank you, Lord — Amen!