

Choosing a Better Way

Genesis 13:1-18

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It's my first Sunday preaching twice - double the fun! I am excited to be continuing our summer series at All Saints - Being the Blessing. In this series we are looking at the life of Abraham in the book of Genesis.

Most of us have heard of Abraham. Even if you haven't spent much time in church or if you are new, I hope you might have heard that song "Father Abraham had many sons, many sons had Father Abraham!"

Over the past few weeks, we have been looking at Genesis 12 which shows the beginning of Abraham's journey. This complete patriarchal father of nations is not who we're looking at yet.

So, to set the scene, I want to give some context on who Abram was:

- At this point in our story, he is Abram, not Abraham
- He was a wealthy nomadic clan leader with livestock, servants and silver
- He wasn't a king, nor a priest, nor a religious professional. He was just a man God chose to speak to, out of nowhere!
- He was a man who just failed. Abram was kicked out of Egypt because he lied to the Pharaoh
- He was childless, but God promises one in the future

So, this is who we're dealing with. Just a man with a lot of animals, a failed track record and an impossible promise.

Before we jump into the reading, I want to explain that Abram is travelling with his nephew Lot. Abram's late brother Haran died and Lot went under Abram's wing. We will actually see in this passage that Lot is doing well for himself independently. He has garnered his own flocks, herds and servants and was very successful. But they're still family. So hopefully I've set up a bit of context for you as we go into the reading.

We'll start with Genesis Chapter 13 verses 1-7:

Genesis 13:1-7

¹ So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him.

² Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.

³ From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier

⁴ and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the Lord.

⁵ Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents.

⁶ 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.

⁷ And quarrelling arose between Abram's herdsmen and Lot's. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time."

So, a quick summary:

- We can see that both Lot and Abram are practically so wealthy that they need to be in different places to feed their livestock, graze land and access water. The sides start to argue and see pressure from the Canaanites residing in the land.
- Remember that Abram came from a very difficult and humiliating experience. He lied to the ruler of Egypt about his own wife and had to leave with all his belongings. But notice what happens when he comes back home:
- He goes **straight back to Bethel** - the exact spot where he built an altar and called on after God. Before making any decisions about the land or conflicts, he goes back to the altar. Not to perform or because someone told him. In his low moment he turned first and foremost to call on his name.

This comes at a time even before Moses and the Ten Commandments. I personally reflect back to Jesus in the New Testament. Time and time again we see Jesus withdraw from the crowd before making decisions or speaking significant moments. Luke tells us it was his habit.

There's a pattern here that runs from Genesis all the way through to Jesus:

The quality of our decisions is shaped by what we do before we make them.

I think we often forget to pray and seek guidance on decisions that open up for us.

I'll give an example: After finishing my bachelor's overseas, I had no plans to apply for a master's degree as on paper it wasn't the next move for me. There were easier, safer and more immediately practical options I could go down. But I felt that the Lord could be opening a door. So, I prayed first beforehand and spent time with Jesus through it.

I was told to expect a six week wait for a decision. FOUR DAYS after I applied, I was walking into staff meeting with All Saints, and got an email saying I was accepted with over half of my fees covered in scholarships!! I did not have the confidence, or feel like I had the skills, for this degree. I never actually thought I'd get in with the competition. but God has shown time and time again how he can change a 5% chance into 100% if it is his will.

Not every story is this straightforward, but let me ask you:

- When did you last actually pray and seek God before making a decision, rather than after?
- Or, if you've failed (if you've had your Egypt moment), did you turn back to the altar like Abram did? Or did you stay away, feeling like you'd disqualified yourself?

This is what strikes me about Abram, **he didn't wait until he had it all together before going back to God. He went to the altar fresh off his worst moment.**

Let's continue verses 8-13:

Genesis 13:8-13

**“⁸ So Abram said to Lot, ‘Let’s not have any quarrelling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are close relatives.
⁹ 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.’
¹⁰ Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan towards Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.)
¹¹ So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out towards the east. The two men parted company:
¹² Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom.
¹³ Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord.”**

So, let's see what just happened there:

- We can see that Abram immediately gives the choice of the land to Lot. In the ancient world until recently, there actually was a time where young people respected their elders! Can you imagine?! So, for Abram to turn to his nephew and say, “you pick first, I'll take whatever's left,” that's not just generous - that's culturally upside down! Nobody expected it. Nobody would have even considered it the done thing.
- Verse 10 it says Lot looked up. He immediately surveyed the whole Jordan plain, saw how well watered it was, how lush, like the garden of the Lord. This land looked like the best possible option by every visible measure

- Lot did NOT HESITATE. So, I've been a broke student the last few years. When someone takes me for food and then offers to pay, normally you got to at least say "no, I'm happy to cover myself!"; "oh don't be silly!" But Lot didn't! He took the land without a HINT of gratitude.
- The problem was what he used to make that decision. He looked up, assessed with his eyes, chose what looked most valuable by the world's measure: and never once brought God into it."

Another thing of note. **On this journey, the only thing Abram has done is pray to God.** God has not told him which land to choose from, so he is fully trusting that even if the bad looking land is his choice, he will be okay and taken care of. Abram just went to the altar.

This same God is alive in us today! We need to trust him!

This month marks one year of living in Bath for me after most of my life abroad. This place has been truly wonderful, and meeting all of you, exploring this city has been a blessing. But I have noticed something- Bath is very comfortable in the best way possible. It's beautiful, it's safe, and welcoming. And comfort is not a bad thing, of course many of us are called into this place where the Lord has given us that choice.

But sometimes it is good to still have challenges, to take a narrow path and step out of your comfort zone. For me, it meant literally moving or going to do a masters degree, but maybe it looks like joining a group that isn't specifically Christian, like a book club. Maybe it's being a light to your relative, a grandchild or a neighbour.

Especially if you are of an older generation, I want to remind you that the same God working in me is the same God working in you and the Lord can use you so much more than you might think. You haven't yet finished the race!

When I was at University in America, I spent 4 months at a time away from my family and the one group that I needed were elders in my life to guide me through decisions and trials I faced at Uni. Being with a bunch of 20-year-olds was not what I needed.

Many of you carry that. You have wisdom that younger people in this city are desperately looking for.

You are not too old, too settled, too ordinary to be used by God. So where can you be like Abraham in your life? Abraham was 75 when this story started.

Let's finish with the last bit, verses 14-18:

Genesis 13:14-18

“¹⁴The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, ‘Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west.

¹⁵All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring for ever.

¹⁶I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.

¹⁷Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.’

¹⁸So Abram went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he pitched his tents. There he built an altar to the Lord.”

- Honestly, the first thing I thought was ‘wouldn't it be great if God just gave me land like this?’...especially with these Bath housing prices.
- Whilst it looked like Lot would go on to have it all, Abram was the one who would have all the land from the north, east, south and west. And if we read on, it didn't go well for Lot at all. Lot went for comfort, but Abram went for God's promise.

So, here's what we've seen today:

- Two men from the same starting point. Same family, same journey.
- Lot looked up, saw what would be good without prayer and gratitude, and had a terrible destination.
- Abram went back to the Altar first and turned to God. God filled his hands with a better way.

So, I ask you:

- What is the thing in front of you that looks well-watered, but hasn't taken God into account? Is God in the picture?

I'll finish with Paul:

2 Corinthians 4:18

"¹⁸ So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."

The same God who spoke to Abram on those hills is the same God alive in us today.



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