

## Genesis 13:1-18

### Introduction

We left Abram, last week, having made a mess of things. He had travelled from Ur of the Chaldeans, in modern day Iraq, to Harran in modern Turkey. From there, he had set out with his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot, and gone to the land of Canaan. And God had appeared to Abram in Canaan and told him that he would give this land to his offspring. But when famine struck, Abram left Canaan and went down to Egypt. We read last week how he had resorted to deception. He had allowed Pharaoh to take Sarai into his harem, thinking she was Abram's sister, and giving a handsome dowry in return. But when Pharaoh discovered that Sarai was Abram's wife not merely his sister, he was furious and sent them both away.

Abram's made a mess of things. He's gone badly wrong and needs to get back on track. And he does that by going back and retracing his steps. And that's our first heading: Going back.

### Going back

Please look at verses 1 to 4 again. They say this: **So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.**

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

Having been shamed by Pharaoh for his deception, Abram leaves Egypt. During his short stay there, he had become very wealthy – no doubt due to the dowry he'd received from Pharaoh, which Pharaoh apparently allows him to keep. He leaves, and he retraces his steps. He goes back up through the Negev in the south, to Bethel, and then to the place between Bethel and Ai where he had first built an altar to the Lord. In effect, he goes back to the beginning, to the place where his relationship with God had been good and strong, before he'd messed up. And there, he calls on the name of the Lord.

In his book, *The Case for Christianity*, C. S. Lewis writes that if you've taken a wrong turn and got on the wrong road, then going forward won't get you any nearer where you want to be. Being pig-headed and refusing to admit your mistake won't help. If you're on the wrong road, you need to do an about turn and walk back to the right road. And the sooner you do it the better.

That's what Abram does here. He's taken the wrong road. Rather than living by faith, he's followed his own logic. Rather than trusting God's promises, he's been dominated by fear.

He's taken the wrong road. And he's messed up. But now he retraces his steps and goes back to the beginning, so that he might get back on the right road. And we're told in verse 4 that he goes back to where he had first built an altar, and he renews his commitment to the Lord. It was a step that no doubt involved repentance and a heartfelt plea for forgiveness.

It's an important lesson for all of us. When we mess up. When we do things our own way, following our own logic and letting fear call the shots. When we take a wrong turn and our relationship with God isn't what it should be. We need to turn around, retrace our steps and get back to the place where we can have confidence that our relationship with God is good and secure.

And for us, that place is the cross. That's where we first experienced God's love. When someone becomes a Christian, they come to the cross of Christ and admit they've been on the wrong road. They've been living life their own way rather than God's way. And they've come to realise that they rightly deserve his condemnation. So, they do an about turn. They repent of their sin and ask God for mercy. And because of Jesus, that's what they receive. They receive cleansing and forgiveness through faith in his sacrifice for sin on the cross. They are welcomed by God. They discover that he isn't an angry school master but a loving Father. And they receive a new identity as sons and daughters in his family. That's how the Christian life begins.

Maybe, this morning, you need to come to the cross for the first time, to receive God's mercy, and to start a new life under his loving rule. You can do that simply by saying a prayer. Ask God to forgive your sin because of Jesus. Turn away from your old way of life and ask him to teach you a new way to live, as a member of his family. And he will welcome you with open arms. If you want to talk with me about that, then please do, after the service.

But maybe, this morning, you need to come *back* to the cross. Perhaps you've already experienced God's love and mercy. You know what it is to live each day in fellowship with your heavenly Father. But somewhere along the road, like Abram, you've taken a wrong turn. You've made a mistake. You know that your relationship with your heavenly Father isn't what it should be. You've made a mess of things. But come back to the cross and you will receive the cleansing and the pardon you need. It's what we all need to do, every time we mess up. We need to come back to the cross in humility and repentance, renew our commitment to the Lord, and get back on track with God.

That's what Abram does here. He comes back to the altar, re-dedicates himself to the Lord, and the Lord restores him. What comfort he must have enjoyed, there, at the altar. But troubles soon come upon him once again. Abram may have missed one opportunity to learn what it means to live by faith, but another soon arises. He encounters another test of his faith. Not a famine this time but a lack of space. The wealth acquired in Egypt leads to tension between *his* herdsmen and Lot's. And a solution needs to be found. In the verses

that follow, he and Lot have choices to make. And our choices matter. That's our next heading: our choices matter.

### Our choices matter

And this time, Abram rises to the occasion. Look at verse 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. 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.'**

This time, Abram's solution bears all the marks of faith. He's secure in the promises of God. So, this time, rather than depending on logic or being dominated by fear, he lets Lot choose which way to go. His faith is growing before our eyes.

When someone starts trusting God's promises, they begin to hold lightly to the things of this world rather than trying to grab hold of them. They are liberated to be generous and selfless.

Lot, on the other hand, judges with his eyes. We're told in verse 10 that he looks and sees that **the whole plain of the Jordan... is well watered, like the garden of the LORD**, (in other words, like the garden of Eden) and **like the land of Egypt**. It's a land with a river flowing through it. A land that is well irrigated and rich in resources. He looks at Canaan and thinks, 'No, thank you.' But when he looks at the plain of the Jordan, he says, 'Yes, please!' He can see a life of prosperity and ease beckoning. How well he would be able to provide for himself and his family if they lived there. In worldly terms, he would be a fool not to.

It's the way most people around us make their choices. What will I gain? What new opportunities will I have? How will it enable me to improve my circumstances and prosper?

But there's another perspective. It's to ask ourselves what God's will may be. And that's hinted at with the mention of Sodom. We're reminded, in verse 10, that Sodom will eventually be destroyed. It's a fairly big hint that Lot should stay clear. Yet we're told in verse 12 that he **pitched his tents near Sodom**.

Perhaps he had heard about Sodom's wickedness already. If not, he soon discovers that the people of Sodom are sinning greatly. But he's undeterred. He takes his family and pitches his tents nearby. Before we know it, by chapter 19, we find that he's living *inside* Sodom, and that his daughters have married men of the city. He may have prospered materially but he made it very hard indeed for his family to prosper spiritually.

Abram trusted God's promises. Lot trusted his eyes. Abram put his confidence in what is unseen. Lot put his confidence in what can be seen and touched. Abram's faith will be

vindicated. The object of Lot's faith is headed for judgement. It will be destroyed, and Lot and his daughters will only survive through Abram's intervention.

The New Testament tells us that Lot was a righteous man. But the choices he made landed him in a whole heap of trouble. His mistake was to underestimate the downward pull of evil and to let personal gain be in the driving seat. It's a mistake we're all prone to repeating. We compromise with sin here. Tolerate a little worldliness there. Because we think we'll gain something through it. But the choices you and I make will lead us in one of two directions. They'll either lead us closer to *God* or they'll lead us closer to *Sodom*.

Each day, we should be asking ourselves: Am I seeking God's will? Am I paying attention to what he says to me in his word and seeking him in prayer? Am I seeking to live by faith in his promises? Or am I letting some other concern take priority?

Our choices really do matter. Not only for our own sake, but for the sake of our families too, if we have them. When we make decisions... where to work, where to live, whom to marry, how to use our time and money... if we don't pause to consider the direction our choices are taking us, like Lot, we'll live to regret them. Our choices will either lead us closer to *God* or they'll lead us closer to *Sodom*. They really do matter.

So then, Abram's gone back. He's started learning to trust the promises of God. And now he must find the way forward. That's our final heading: the way forward.

### The way forward

Please look down at verse 14 to 18.

**The 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. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring for ever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.'**

**So 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.**

I imagine it must have been painful for Abram to part company with his nephew Lot. But God's earlier command, to leave his father's household and sever his family ties, had now finally been fulfilled. And God responds to Abram's faith by repeating and amplifying his promise. He tells Abram to look around him. And he assures him, once again, that the whole of the land will be his, as far as his eyes could see. Lot may have settled in one part for now. The Canaanites and Perizzites may also be living in the land for the time being. But one day, the whole land would belong to Abram and his offspring. It would be home to a

people so numerous that they would be uncountable. This vast land is God's gift. A gift of grace. And God tells Abram to walk through it, inspect it, and enjoy it.

Abram's learning that despite his generosity to Lot, he could not deprive himself of what God had promised.

It's a lesson we all need to learn. Living by faith in God's promises, and holding lightly to the things of this world, will never be to our detriment. We could sell our possessions and give all that we have to the poor, yet we could not deprive ourselves of a single blessing that God has in store for us in Christ Jesus. We are secure in the promises of God.

So, the chapter ends as it began. With an altar. Once again, Abram pitches his tents, builds an altar, and dedicates himself to the Lord. This is the way forward. It's not chasing after the things of the world as though our happiness and security is to be found in *them*. But continually dedicating our lives to God, knowing that our blessing and security is found in *him*.

### Conclusion

You and I are so much more privileged than Abram. He may have had a direct word from God, but we have a whole Bible packed full of words from God. He may have had wonderful promises. But we have even greater promises in Christ, of a glorious future, among God's people, in a new heaven and a new earth. And we have God's Spirit in our hearts to teach us and help us. Like Abram, we need to learn to live by faith, trusting God's promises, and fixing our eyes, not on what is seen, but on what is, as yet, unseen.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, please help us to come back to you when we make a mess of things, through faith in the cross of your Son, Jesus Christ. In all the decisions we make, help us to choose wisely and to build our lives upon your promises. And please help us to hold lightly to the things of this world and to fix our eyes on what is yet unseen. We ask this not only for our good but for your glory. And we ask it in the name of Jesus. Amen.