
SERMON NOTES

Genesis #15 Walking in Faith When You Don't Have To (Genesis 13:1-18)

In the last part of Genesis 12, we see Abram failing to trust God. As a result he missed an opportunity to see God do a miracle on his behalf, he treated his wife like a piece of property and got himself into a real mess. He put himself in a position where God could not give him children – because he had given up his wife. And he got into a very awkward situation with the Pharaoh of Egypt. Even so, God blessed him, showed him grace, and helped him out of his mess.

As we move on to chapter 13 and 14, we see that Abram has in fact learned something from his former screw ups. Later on we'll see that maybe he hasn't learned his lesson quite as well as we could hope, but for now, we see that he is once more willing to trust God. In fact, he seems eager to show faith in God and depend on him, even when maybe he didn't have to.

To really understand chapter 13, we need to know just what sort of situation Abram was in at this point in time. He was in fact, quite wealthy. The movies *Ben Hur*, and *Lawrence of Arabia* each have a character who is a desert chieftain, with a huge family and lots of camels and wives and slaves. This is a lot like Abram was. For a more modern movie showing something like this, think of *Hidalgo*. In any case, Abram was the chief executive of a pretty major operation. In 14:14 we hear that Abram went to battle along with 318 trained men, *born in his household*. So he had at least 318 men who were either slaves or servants. Probably he had others who were left behind when he went into battle. Put this together with the families of these men, and Abram's "household" might have involved about *one thousand people*. Now consider that he also had livestock and equipment to support those thousand people, and you realize that Abram's position was something like the owner of a medium sized business today. He was responsible not for his own life only, but for the lives of several hundred other people as well.

Now, simply because of the size of his operation, trouble crops up. Lot, Abram's nephew, has been traveling around with him. Lot also has a big household and his people – his herdsmen, specifically, begin to quarrel with Abram's herdsmen. Basically, there were too many people and too many animals in too small of an area. There weren't enough resources to go around. Now, this is not the same thing as a famine, but it holds similar challenges. It was a time of lack.

Abram responds in a completely different way to this challenge than he did to the famine. It seems that he recognized the grace God gave him in Egypt, and he has repented, and is once more walking in faith. Last time when things didn't go well, Abram ran away. He took control of the situation and tried to ensure his own survival and safety. This time, he does exactly the opposite.

Understand this: Abram had every right in this situation to respond differently than he actually did. By custom, by age, by power and by family – by everything held true in that time and place – Abram was the leader, and Lot was the follower. If Lot was a prince, then Abram was his King, and Lot was bound to obey him. Abram had the right to tell Lot to bug off, and to ensure that he, Abram, got the best, even at Lot's expense. The problem was Abram's to solve, and he could have solved it however he wanted.

As we compare this situation to the famine of chapter twelve, it seems that in this particular instance, there would have been more justification for Abram to choose common-sense over faith. True, there was less danger of disaster this time than there was in the case of the famine. But Abram's rights were much more clear cut here. What I am getting at, is that **Abram did not have to do what he did next. But he made a clear and conscious choice to respond to the situation in faith.**

Abram did not insist on his rights. Instead, he said to Lot, "Why don't we split up?" He could have told Lot to sell some goats, to trim down so that he wouldn't be in competition with Abram. But he deliberately chose a course that would not hurt Lot. Next, not only does he avoid hurting him, but he goes overboard to help him. He says to Lot: "Why don't you choose where you would like to take your people and your animals, and then I'll go somewhere else?" He wants to allow God to bless Lot through him.

It is safe to assume that by this time, Abram knows his nephew pretty well. He knows that Lot is the type of man who will quickly accept this offer, and, when he does, choose the very best area for himself. Lot is **not** the kind of guy who is going to say, “Oh no, I couldn't.” Abram knew that, when he made his offer.

There is one more important aspect involved in this choice. At the time all this was happening, Abram and Lot were living in the mountains, near the edge of a great valley – the valley of the Jordan river. The land drops away quite steeply in that area, and they could see that strip of lush green stretched out at their feet, maybe 70 miles long and 30 miles wide. They had recently come back from Egypt, and both of them must have been thinking about how Egypt was immune from all but the most severe famines because of the river Nile running through it. Now, directly in front of them, was something very much like what Egypt had. That valley right there below them was a major security blanket for a nomadic herdsman. And Abram left the choice to his opportunistic nephew.

Lot looked out and saw that the entire Jordan Valley as far as Zoar was well watered everywhere, like the Lord's garden and the land of Egypt. This was before God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose the entire Jordan Valley for himself. (13:10-11).

It's sort of like Abram said to Lot, “have a piece of cake.” Lot cuts a modest chunk out of the cake, and then takes the whole cake as his “piece,” leaving only the slice for Abram.

The Jordan Valley could have been Abram's answer to the problem of famine and lack. He could have chosen it for himself, and then he would have had his own river to provide for him when the weather was wrong. It would have been hard to criticize Abram for a move like that. I mean God had promised him the whole land, right? It was up to him, not Lot, to decide what to do. But Abram chose instead to consciously rely on God, even when it looked like he had the opportunity to avoid future problems. He placed his future firmly in God's hands. It is almost as if he is saying, “I won't make that mistake again Lord. You can take care of me, wherever I end up. I don't need to make something happen for myself – I'm relying on you, not on my choices. I'm relying on you – not on a river – to guide me and provide for me.”

Now, if we put ourselves in Abram's shoes, we might look at Lot with resentment, and maybe even envy. Why does *he* get to take the easy road? Why do I have to rely on God, up here in the dry, rocky highlands, while he can go have it rich and easy in the pleasant valley? To be honest with you, I've wondered that sort of thing sometimes. Why don't other people seem struggle with certain things like I do? Why is it that God asks me to walk a hard road of faith, while other believers – and even people who don't know Jesus – seem to get it easy?

I think there are several ways to approach this kind of question. First, look at *relationship*. Abram's relationship with God grew far deeper than Lot's. There is no indication that living the easy life in the valley did anything to strengthen Lot's faith, or bring him closer to God. In fact, there is some evidence to the contrary. Abram's choice of trust, and his harder road, led him closer to God. Lot's choice of security and ease led him away from God.

Second, look at the long term result. Lot had it easier *for awhile*. But the easy life by the river and the towns turned out to be much more complicated and troublesome than he intended. After he's been there awhile, Lot gets caught in the middle of a war. Abram, up in the mountains, isn't affected by that war. Later on, Lot is surrounded by troubles that come from living in the midst of an immoral society. Then he almost gets caught in God's judgment upon that society. Finally, Lot – this man who once had been head of a household involving hundreds of people – ends up growing old in a cave, living alone except for his two daughters. He may even have become an alcoholic. Now, I am not saying that everyone who has it easy today is going to have it rough later on. What I am saying is, what looks easy right now might prove to be much harder than you thought. We can't predict results based only on how easy something looks in the present.

Finally, look at *legacy*. Abram's legacy is so much greater than Lot's that you can't even really compare them. In the short term, Lot's life was easier. In the long term, God was able to do immeasurably more through Abram than he was through Lot. Abram's choices of faith led him to be a great asset for God. God used him, as he promised, to bless others. Abram's legacy of faith is still bearing fruit today. Lot's choice

was to get blessing for himself, and he ends up as a pathetic, broken man, a mere footnote in the history of faith.

God's response to Abram's – perhaps unnecessary – demonstration of faith, is to give more grace to him. He reaffirms his promises to him. And Abram continues on in close faith-relationship with God:

¹⁴The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, “Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. ¹⁵All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. 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 moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the LORD. (Genesis 13:14-18)

Now, what does all this mean for us? I do not believe that every hard choice is godly and every easy choice is from the devil. But what I do see is that Abram gives us an example to follow. Base your major choices upon trusting God, **and upon letting God bless others through your life**. I'm not talking here about what kind of deodorant to buy (though I highly recommend, if you are over 13, that you buy *some* kind of deodorant). I'm talking about choices that involve trusting God and allowing him to use you.

Now, one of the things about the life of faith is that it is a relationship with God, not a detailed list of how to behave in every situation. So your life is going to look different from Abram's. My life is going to look different than yours. But let me offer you a few brief examples.

By the summer of 2005, I was convinced that God had called me back into ministry, after I had been running from it for 3 years. But that summer I had three different career opportunities. The first one came with a lot of financial stability and reward. The second one didn't pay as well, but it was something I always wanted to do – teach at a college. The third one didn't pay even quite as well as the second. It was to serve Faith Lutheran. The first one might have been easiest, and certainly the most financially rewarding. The second would have given me a personal ego boost. They were both choices like Abram had, to go down to the green valley of the Jordan. But I am so glad I chose the third thing. It involved some trouble, but it also involved (more than the others) allowing God to bless others through my life. I'm not trying to say I've been this incredible blessing to all of you – in fact there are some people who probably think the opposite. But I am saying that more of my life is used in blessing other people than it would be if I had chosen the other things.

Brian and Sarah McKay show another example of choosing the high, rocky ground instead of the easy road. It wasn't about a career with them – it was about the adoption. It would have been easier for them to say, “never mind.” But the McKays have made their lives available to be a blessing to others. Sometimes they may wish they'd chosen the easy life in the valley, but I believe they will leave a legacy of faith and grace.

Another example comes from the Leu family. One way they choose to bless others is by giving up their Thanksgiving day each year to serve meals at a homeless shelter.

I don't know exactly what it might be for you – it may look different than these things. As I say, it's about a relationship with God, so it has to be worked out as you get to know God, stay close to him, and trust him in all things. When you do that, your legacy of faith could go on for generations to come.