

***Foundations: Departure and Promise***  
***By Jason Huff***  
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***John 8:31-39; Galatians 3:7-18; Genesis 13***

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Genesis 13. May God add His richest blessing to His perfect, infallible, and holy Word. “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. Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. 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. And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time. So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. 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." Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company: Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD. The 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. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. 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 moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the LORD.”

“This town ain’t big enough for the both of us!” That phrase comes from the movie *The Western Code* from 1932. Very few people these days have seen it, but the phrase has outlived the movie. Most of us who are over 40 first heard it from Yosemite Sam in *Bugs Bunny Rides Again*,” a cartoon parody of a western often found on Saturday morning television. It’s been used and parodied countless times. When I was telling my family a little bit about the sermon, Jackson said, “Didn’t that come from *Toy Story*?” Of course, he was right too.

The idea of it bounced around in my head as I read today’s passage. Abram and Lot have grown so wealthy that the two of them can’t travel together and have enough resources on their wanderings for all their people and all their animals. In the ancient world, this was a pretty great problem to have. There literally isn’t room for the two of them – not because of animosity, but because of God’s blessings. And as we look at the entirety of the passage, we get a deeper look at God’s blessings and how we are to live in God’s blessings today.

If you were with us last week, you know that Abram and Sarai came out of a mess of their own making in Egypt. They fled there to escape a massive drought, but Abram told Sarai to pass herself off as Abram's sister. Pharaoh attempted to marry her, only for his whole household to be struck with disease at the hand of God, who was looking out for Abram in his foolishness. Pharaoh was both enraged and terrified, so he sent Abram and Sarai out of the country, but they were sent back north with all the bridal goods Pharaoh had given them. Abram was now an extremely wealthy man from his sojourn in Egypt, but he'd also failed to trust God. He'd tried to save his own skin rather than to believe that God would see them through their trip south.

But something has changed in Abram. Unlike during his sojourn in Egypt, he's more ready to acknowledge the Lord's hand in everything. None of his travels between Egypt and Bethel really matter; he wanders until he returns to the place where he first built the Lord an altar in the land. And when he gets there, he once again worships God and acknowledges everything that God has given to him.

That's so very important. Throughout Scripture, we're told that wealth and poverty are both in the Lord's hands – He is the one who makes poor and makes rich. Proverbs 3:9 advises us to honor the Lord with our wealth. Proverbs 11:4 warns that wealth will be useless on the day of judgment, but righteousness will stand. Ecclesiastes 5:19 says, "When God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work -- this is a gift of God." In Matthew 6:24, Jesus warned that you cannot love both God and money, and Jesus spoke about how we use wealth often.

The Bible says so much about it because our human tendency is to become less reliant on God the more wealth we have. A 2015 study showed that as a country grows more rich in spending power, the less people pray – whatever their religion or their faith system might be. The lone outlier to this, the only one that was different, was the United States. When you combine that with other studies, you'll still find that the most wealthy Americans are often the most liberal in their faith and least likely to pray. Around the world, the more wealth we have, the less we turn to God, no matter what thoughts you have about who God is. When we don't have money, we turn to God to help us; when we do have money, we think that we've earned it.

Abram knew that wasn't the case. Because despite Abram's failing in Egypt, he saw the hand of God directly involved in keeping his wife safe and keeping their plan from ruining everything. Abram saw that God had been responsible for bringing him all this immense wealth. And so, when he returns to the land God had shown him, he worships. And that's a good reminder for us. We should be mindful how many praises we offer versus how many petitions we make of God. God says we can ask for all we need, and we should. But how ready are we to offer praises to God? May our lives be filled with joy at all the Lord has provided for us!

Then we come to the major problem of the passage: we're running out of space. Abram and Lot are sharing the same land as they travel, and the land they are traveling through is still inhabited by the Canaanites and Perizzites. All these herds take a lot of grazing space, and the land needs to feed several hundred people at any given time. The herdsmen are grumbling with each other, probably because no one wants to be the guy having to take the cattle five miles away every day and explaining to the local Canaanites why he's feeding the sheep on their grassland.

The resolution to the problem shows that Abram has been humbled by the incident in Egypt and awed by the work of God. He is the one who offers a resolution to the problem he and Lot are facing, and his solution means that whatever Lot chooses, he receives. Abram gives Lot free reign to choose. He has stopped trying to work out a scheme. He doesn't say, "Lot, you can take anything but this land I've chosen for myself." He doesn't pretend that God has laid out the boundaries of the land he is to be given, because that hasn't happened. Instead, he just tells Lot, "Choose, and I'll go the other way." His faith is moving in the right direction.

Then we learn Lot's choice. He wants the plain of the Jordan to the east. There is no doubt this is prime real estate. The text compares it to the Garden of Eden. I mean, this looks like paradise. Coming out of a drought, this well-watered, beautiful, sprouting land is nothing short of amazing. At first glance, who wouldn't want to call this home?

Before we go any further, I want to note that the Apostle Peter in his second letter calls Lot righteous. Lot is not an evil person. Lot has been changed by his interactions with Abram and with God. So we can't come down too hard on Lot, despite what all happens to him. Lot's problem is not that he is unrighteous or not a man of faith.

And by no means is it a problem that the land was good. God doesn't have something against wealth for His people – He poured wealth out on Abram. In Mark 10:29-30, Jesus said, "No one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life." Believers are not called to lives of abject poverty but to contentedness whatever God gives us.

Lot's problem is three-fold. First, he doesn't seek the Lord before making his choice. Second, he lets the greed of his eyes and the desires of his heart influence his decision. And finally, he assumes that the evil of the people around him will not rub off on him and his family. As the prophet Jeremiah would later say, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" Lot makes a decision that seems right in his own eyes. He does what will keep him safe – like Abram in Egypt. In multiple passages to come, however, it will spell disaster.

And there's deliberate foreshadowing – we're told that this was before the Lord's destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. This means that the original readers of Genesis already knew about this event and were expecting it because it was so notorious. Not only that, but we're told that the people of Sodom were wicked and sinning greatly. These were not just sinners like everyone else; that's to be expected. You can't move anywhere and not expect to be living among sinners because we're included. Just because we have the Lord's blessing and the gift of the Holy Spirit and the desire to be sanctified doesn't mean we're not sinners. But these folks were extraordinarily bad. They would go beyond the pale in their wickedness. And yet Lot is aware of this, and he moves there anyway.

For us in the modern era, trying to be faithful to Christ, we have the same temptations. If I were to sum it up in three words, I'd say this: *guard your heart*. Guard your heart against the beautiful things of this world that aren't what God intends for us. Guard your heart against desiring to own things God simply meant for us to enjoy for themselves. Guard your heart against anything that might make you discontent for the blessings God has already given you. Guard your heart against leaping before the Lord leads. And guard your heart against the thought that you can surround yourself with wickedness and not yourself be overcome.

When I think of Lot's view of what he sees, the first thing that actually comes to mind is the housing crisis of 2007-2008. So many people had loans on homes they just couldn't afford, propped up by banks eager for profits willing to give them loans they knew they had little chance of paying off. It wasn't that the homes were a bad investment; it was that they were too expensive and the people sold the loans weren't rich and the whole country suffered for it. Lot got a great deal on the surface, a land that was gorgeous and well suited to take care of his people, but as we'll learn in the upcoming weeks, what it costs to live there in spiritual terms isn't worth it.

It's good to ask ourselves, what does my heart desire? Where can it get into trouble? Is it impatient – it wants the right thing, but it wants it at the wrong time? Is it covetous – am I tempted by all the goodies my neighbors have? Is it naïve – do I think that somehow I can remain pure when I am constantly tempted by those around me to do the wrong thing? And perhaps most importantly, is my heart constantly checking in with the Lord to see what is truly good and noble and pure, that what I seek might be the Lord's desire for me? If we are honest with ourselves about our shortcomings and place them before the Lord, we are far less likely to get ourselves in the mess Lot does when he makes a quick judgment with his eyes rather than a thoughtful judgment made through prayer.

So Abram lives in Canaan, while Lot sets up shop near Sodom. Once Lot leaves, God says, "Look in every direction. This land that you see will be yours. And not only that, it will belong to your seed – translated here as your descendants – forever. And your seed, your offspring, will be more numerous than the dust of the earth." It's a beautiful promise. And then, as part of the promise, God says, "walk through it all, because I'm giving it to you." And that's what Abram does, going from there into what we now know as the West Bank, and there he builds another altar to worship the Lord.

We might not think a foot tour of the land of Canaan would be all that exciting or interesting. But according to the earliest rabbis well before the time of Jesus, to go from one end of a land to the other was a symbolic mode of legal acquisition – a way to say, "this is mine." It was well known in other cultures of the time, too. Egyptian and Hittite kings of the day would periodically tour their countries to signify their continuing rule and reign. When God tells Abram to walk through Canaan, God is symbolically giving it all to him.

This is perhaps the most important thing we can get out of the passage: *Abram walked by faith, and we by faith gain Abram's spiritual inheritance through Christ.* Abram didn't receive the land that was the most fabulous at first glance. There was no promise of salvation from another drought like the one they'd experienced. The soil was not as fine, the grasslands not as green. But this was the land God had promised Abram. He would walk its length and breadth, staking his claim to Canaan in faith that God would give it to him and his offspring forever. And Abram's faith was marked by worship, nearby where he would live for some time.

As scholar R. Kent Hughes says, "A look at Abram and Lot side by side is instructive. Lot chose the things that are seen and found them corrupting. Abram looked and saw through the eyes of faith the things that are unseen, and he found great assurance and peace. He could even give away the promised land, because he knew it was his by God's word. Thus he lived in royal magnanimity, like Christ."<sup>1</sup> That's what we want, that's what we want to latch hold of tightly – faith in God's promises to us.

And as our passage from Ephesians 3 today indicates, the promise is on one level to Abram and his physical descendants. But there's also a promise made to Abram at a spiritual level – all those who are believers in Christ are also counted to him as his descendants. The children of Abram are those who follow in faith like He did. And we receive several blessings as part of our inheritance – not the physical land of Israel but eternal life, the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the real presence of Christ with us always. The dust of the earth would be far too numerous to live in small Israel – but we exist now as Abram's spiritual children, having communion with God now and in the life to come.

So how do we become a part of the blessing of Abram? Faith. Abram had to trust that this land God showed him would become his. He had to trust it would go to his descendants. He had to trust what his eyes couldn't see. The pastures of Sodom were deceiving, but the riches of the Promised Land still pour out today. Abram had to trust that would be the case.

Your situation might not look as good as someone else's. God's provision for you might not include all the luxuries someone else has. You might not have the family you want, the job you want, the place you want, the relationships you want. Remember that God did not give Abram the land that looked the most satisfying; God gave Abram the land meant for him. Keep trusting in God despite your immediate circumstances. Have faith that God is there for you all the time. He is; He was there for Abram and He is here for us now.

And unlike Abram, we have the lives of the saints in front of us to show us it can be done. Unlike Abram, we have our savior Jesus, who has already died and been resurrected to eternal life to show us that God's promises are all coming true. The hardest work is in the past. We get to reap the benefits of all those who came before us and lived trusting in the Lord. All it requires of us is faith – faith that God's way is true, and faith to put Christ's teachings to us in action. In the midst of a corrupt and unjust world, God's promises hold true for those who will keep clinging to Him. Look to God and ask Him His will and His path for your life, rather than following your own way. Trust that He is in control of all those things you can't control. Seek Him in faith. And you will find Him, and all His richest blessings besides.

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<sup>1</sup> Hughes, R. K. (2004). *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing* (p. 203). Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books.