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Being Peacemakers

Genesis 13:1-18

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Today we'll be looking at more of the story of Abram as it unfolds in Genesis 13, but first, remember where we left Abram last week. In Chapter 12 we first saw him step out in faith to follow God's call. He left home and country and family for a new land that God had promised him: a land he didn't know until he got there. And he stepped out in faith trusting in the promise of God to make him, a childless seventy-five-year-old with a barren wife, into a great nation. None of it made any sense from a worldly perspective, but Abram followed God in faith and in the first half of Chapter 12 we saw him arrive in this promised land—in Canaan—and travel the whole length of it, building altars, and worshipping God. And yet in the second half of the Chapter we were told that a famine came and we saw Abram forget God's promises. He left Canaan and went to Egypt. And not only did he step away from God's promise of the land, he also jeopardised God's promise of a son by dishonestly passing off his wife, Sarai, as his sister. Pharaoh saw she was beautiful and took her for his own wife. Eventually Pharaoh figured out what was going on and became angry, giving Abram back his wife and sending him back home to Canaan.

The contrast between faithful Abram following God to an unknown land in the first half of the Chapter and the Abram who abandoned both the promise of land and the promise of a son is amazing. Suddenly we see the man of God, the prophet, being rebuked by the pagan, idolatrous king for his dishonesty and for putting his wife in an adulterous situation. God's man lost faith and God used a pagan

king to put him back on track. Now as Chapter 13 opens we see God's promise back on track for fulfilment:

So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb.

Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. And he journeyed on from the Negeb as far as Bethel to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of the LORD. (Genesis 13:1-4)

Despite Abram's lack of faith, God continues to bless him. He was a wealthy man when he went to Egypt, but he now leaves even better off: "rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold." Even when we are faithless, God remains faithful. There's no guarantee in the Bible that God will manifest his faithfulness with worldly prosperity; more often than not, it seems, God's faithfulness responds to our faithlessness by giving us trials with the aim to get us back in his will. But regardless, God is always faithful and always seeking to bless us with what is good and what is ultimately best for us and what manifests his glory.

Anyhow, Abram returns to the promised land; first to the Negeb in the south, near Egypt, and then returning to his old camp near Bethel, not very far from Jerusalem. He returns to the place where he had built an altar and worshipped God before. This was a holy place. The Hebrew uses that word, *māqōm*, again—a world that describes not just any old place, but sacred space. The altar is a reminder of God's presence and promise; it's a tangible sign of Abram's return to faith and to God's will. Think back to Chapter 12 and remember that as Abram travelled through Canaan from north to south, at each stop he built an altar, worshipping God and acknowledging his faith in God's promise that this

land, now full of pagan Canaanites, would be his. And notice what was completely absent when he went to Egypt; in Egypt Abram built no altar—at least not so far as the text tells us. And that speaks to an experience that, I expect, we've all had: when we step out of God's will or when we walk in unrepentant sin, we lose our desire to worship God. It's natural. Who wants to come before God in worship when we know that we're doing something that displeases him. One of the most basic acts of worship we can offer is our obedience. If we aren't going to even do that, it's not very likely we'll be going out of our way to build him any altars.

As Abram returns to his altar we know that he's now back in God's will. But remember that Genesis isn't Abram's story any more than it's the story of Adam or Noah, Jacob or Joseph. No, Genesis—as is the whole of Holy Scripture—is *God's story*. It's the revelation of God and his love for humanity; it's the revelation of God's seeking lost people and restoring them to his fellowship and friendship despite their sins. It's the story of God's unfolding plan of redemptions and it shows us that absolutely nothing can stop that plan: not the sins of his people, not the hardships and adverse situation of life, not even Satan himself. It's in overcoming all these obstacles that Scripture shows us God's greatness and sovereignty and shows forth his glory. And so the Bible repeatedly shows us the obstacles that we might think would stop the wheels of God's redemption from turning and then shows us how God in his greatness overcomes them. In the process we learn something about God's character, how he acts and something about his people—things that are usually entirely applicable in our own lives. This is just what we see here. In Chapter 12 we saw the obstacle of Abram's faithlessness and sin overcome by God as he rebuked Abram through pagan Pharaoh. Now Abram's back on the track of faith, but a new obstacle crops up. This time it's not sin, but the

positive benefits of God’s blessing on Abram. Look at verses 5-7:

And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together, and there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were dwelling in the land.

Remember that when Abram left Haran, his nephew, Lot, left with him and has been travelling with him ever since. Lot, too, had his own flocks and herds—big ones. God had promised that he would bless others through Abram and as we’ve seen Abram enriched, Lot has been enriched too. But now, here at this place between Bethel and Ai, Lot and Abram are finding that the place just isn’t big enough for the two of them. There’s no indication that Lot and Abram weren’t getting along or that they didn’t want to remain together peacefully. It’s just that their flocks and herds have become so large that their hired hands, their shepherds and herdsmen, are starting to have run-ins with each other and are disputing over the wells and the grazing land.

The storyteller reminds us that “the Canaanites and the Perizzites were in the land. The point is that there wasn’t much land available to Abram and Lot. They were sandwiched between the Canaanites, who lived in the towns and cities, and the Perizzites, which literally means people who lived in the “open country”. These two men had found a nice spot of land on which to graze their livestock, but the abundance of God’s blessing had been so great that they’ve now got a new problem: their flocks and herds have outgrown that spot of land. The ancient Israelites hearing this would immediately have seen a new obstacle in the way of

God’s promise to Abram: Lot. It’s bad enough that the land God promised to Abram is already filled with Canaanites and Perizzites, but now Lot’s squeezing Abram out too, and Lot wasn’t part of God’s promise. In fact, Lot, was the father of the Moabites and the Ammonites, two enemy nations just across their border.

In verses 8 and 9 we see how Abram dealt with the problem:

Then Abram said to Lot, “Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.”

Notice two things here: First, notice how Abram treats Lot like an equal. Lot was his orphaned nephew and, based on what we’ll learn of Lot’s character as the story goes on, it wouldn’t be at all surprising if Lot had been contributing more to this problem than Abram had. And yet Abram addresses him graciously and as an equal, as his kinsman. The word “kinsman” refers to a close relative and is often used to describe the relationship between two brothers. Abraham could have come to him and said something like, “Hey, Junior, this patch of land ain’t big enough for the both of us. God promised it to me, not to you. Stop tagging along. You’re cramping my style here. It’s time you take a hike.” From the standpoint of a shallow faith, getting rid of Lot might seem like a good move. God had promised the land to Abram and Lot was jeopardising that promise and needed to go. But, brothers and sisters, remember that there’s more to faith than believing that what God promises will happen. Deep faith *also* trusts that God will bring about his promises without us helping him with our own worldly or sinful tactics. Abram learned this lesson in Egypt.

And so instead of forcing God’s promise by being a jerk—which may well have only aggravated the situation—he becomes a peacemaker. Bruce Waltke puts it this way: “The magnanimity of the patriarch of the clan and the uncle of the orphan is truly remarkable. The social superior humbles himself before the inferior to preserve peace, thereby proving himself the spiritual superior. Abram’s faith gives him the freedom to be generous.”¹ Let me say that again, “*Abram’s faith gives him the freedom to be generous.*” Shallow faith says, “God gave this to me; it’s mine; get out—take a hike!” Deep faith trusts God enough to be generous with his promises. How often does that kind of faith characterise us? How often are we willing to give up God’s blessings in order to bless others—even to bless the very people who are troublemakers in our lives? Abram certainly stands in stark contrast to his modern-day descendants as they’ve dealt with that very same land over the last century and he stands in stark contrast to how we often deal with similar situations in our own lives. To be a peacemaker is often to give up our own God-given rights in deference to others—even to our enemies. It’s a hard thing to do, but as we see with Abram, it is faith that makes it possible: faith that God will take care of us, faith that God will be true to his word, and faith that there is more to this life than the things of this world.

So, Abram was gracious. How does Lot respond? Look at verses 10 to 12:

And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they

¹ Bruce Waltke, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), p. 221.

separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD.

We can picture Abram and Lot standing up in the mountains near Bethel, close to 900 metres high, and from there they could look out over the hill country and the Jordan Valley. They saw two very different types of land. The people who raised livestock in the hill country had to trust God for the rains. In contrast, the valley was always fertile thanks to the river running through it. As the text tells us, it reminded Lot of Egypt—that fertile land where the harvests were always rich. It was good land—certainly better land than the hill country. And it's that good, fertile land that Lot picks, leaving his gracious uncle to fend for himself in the dry hills.

Not only does this show a character flaw in Lot, but the story is full of red flags that point to Lot's future troubles. The Jordan Valley, we're told, was like the garden of the LORD, but going back to Eden isn't our answer. Even in paradise human beings rejected God's goodness and chose sin. The Jordan Valley is compared to fertile Egypt—a land of plenty—but Egypt wasn't the Promised Land. It was outside of God's will. God's desire is to manifest his glory by giving his people bread in the wilderness. But Lot goes anyway. Not only does Lot settle across the Jordan, outside the Promised Land, but he travels "east", which is never a good thing in Genesis. Adam and Eve were cast out and went to the east; Cain murdered his brother and was exiled, travelling to the east. One commentator puts it this way: "[T]he easterly direction...symbolized distance and exile from the divine presence, and without the sacred there could be no

blessing."² And just in case we don't pick up on all these subtle hints, the storyteller makes it clear: "the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD". Everything screams at us that Lot has made a very bad choice. A good choice from a worldly perspective and from the standpoint of human wisdom, yes, but from the standpoint of faith a worse decision could not have been made. The scene ends with contrast: Abram pitches his tent back in Canaan—in the land of promise—and at the place where he had built his altar to the Lord, while Lot sets out to leave the promised land and settles in a place notorious for its evil.

I'm reminded of the scene at the end of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*. Indiana and the Nazi archaeologists both reach the Holy Grail at the same time, but instead of finding just one chalice in the cave, they find a room filled with dozens and dozens of beautiful, golden, and jewelled chalices. The bad guy looks them over and selects the grandest and most beautiful, dips it into the fountain, drinks, and promptly dies a gruesome death. The guardian knight watches as the bad guy collapses, dead, and turns to the others saying, "He choose...poorly." Indiana, on the other hand, looks the chalices over and picks one hidden in the back—a plain, small, unornamented cup and with it saves his father's life. The knight tells him: "You have chosen wisely." Lot chose poorly and we'll see how it works out for him in the coming chapters. Abram, like Indiana Jones, is left with something that doesn't look like much, but as he returns home to his tents and to his altar, God comes to him with the message: "You have chosen wisely." He reiterates his promise to Abram, expanding on the details, and putting it in the legal language of the day.

² Karen Armstrong, *In the Beginning: A New Interpretation of Genesis*. (New York: Ballantine, 1996), p. 59.

The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you." Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD. (Genesis 13:14-18)

Notice that as they stood on the mountain and looked over the land, Lot "saw" that the Jordan Valley was good. That's another red flag. One of the things that Genesis teaches us, going all the way back to Chapter 1, is that only God truly knows what's good. Only he has the knowledge and wisdom to know good and evil perfectly. He created us to trust him for that knowledge and trust him to provide it for us. Sin is what happens when we try to see for ourselves and choose the good based on our limited knowledge and wisdom. Think of Eve. She saw the fruit and despite God's warning, she thought it looked good. It wasn't. And, with the eyes of human wisdom, Lot looked out on the Jordan Valley and "saw" that it was good. Again, we clearly know that it wasn't. In contrast, God now tells Abram to look out over the land: "Lift up your eyes." But this time Abram looks out with God's direction. God doesn't ask him to choose what is good for himself. God directs his gaze and tells him: *This* is the good. *This* is what I'm giving you.

Back in the 1960s Martin Noth located a spot northeast of Bethel—a spot called Ramat-Hazor—where you can stand and look out in every direction. You can see all the way to the Mediterranean in the west, the

mountains of Transjordan in the east, Mount Hermon in the north, and the Dead Sea to the south.³ It was most likely this very same spot from which God told Abram to look out and as he looked God promised—promised that all this would belong to Abram’s descendants. And as God promises the land he elaborates on his promise of offspring. Abram’s not simply to have a son, but his children, God promises, will be as uncountable as the dust of the earth.

Abram no doubt understands, that he won’t be the one to see this promise fulfilled. As we’ve been told, the Canaanites and Perizzites were in the land, but God asks him to step out in faith for the benefit of his children: “Arise, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I will give it to you.” This is what the ancient pharaohs did when they ascended to the throne: they made a festal procession around the walls of the city. The Hittite king made a circuit of his kingdom every winter to assert his possession of it and kingship over it. In Syria the people believed that the god, Baal, made the rounds of the towns and cities to show his kingship over both gods and humans.⁴ God now directs Abram to show his ownership over the land by making the rounds of it and in faith Abram does just that, eventually settling near Hebron where he builds another altar to worship God and to give him thanks—to show his faith in the God of promise.

Now, what does all this mean for us? We’ve seen already by Abram’s example that God’s people are to be peacemakers. Jesus reiterates this, not only in the Sermon on the Mount, but as he offers up his very self on the cross. We’ve also seen that part of

being peacemakers means being willing to give up our rights for the sake of peace. In fact, one of the most profound ways in which we manifest God’s peace to the world is by following our Lord in sacrificing our rights and sometimes even our very selves for the sake of others.

These are not easy things to do. It wasn’t easy for Abram to offer first choice of the land to Lot. But Abram teaches us that we become peacemakers through faith. He trusted that God would be true to his promise and did what he knew to be right. Brothers and sisters, you and I are called to do the same thing. The key is to walk by faith and not by sight. Sight is deceiving. Eve “saw” that the forbidden fruit was pleasing to the eye, but it led to the fall of the entire human race. Lot “saw” the fertile Jordan Valley and it was pleasing to his eye. Calvin writes, though, “[Lot] fancied he was dwelling in paradise, [he] was nearly plunged into the depths of hell.”⁵ You and I, if we were in Jesus’ shoes at Calvary would have “seen” the Cross and thought it was evil, and yet with the heavenly perspective and wisdom of God, Jesus “saw” the Cross and knew that it was good. Through his sacrifice, as he gave up his rights and his very life for us, he paid the penalty for our sins and opened the way for us to the presence of God—to that very place we lost through our own attempts to choose good for ourselves. And it’s on the basis of Christ’s sacrifice that St. Paul calls us, in Philippians, to be humble ourselves. Let me close with his words:

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in

Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.
(Philippians 2:3-11)

Let us pray: Gracious Father, deepen our faith, we pray. Let us not grasp selfishly at the rights you have given us or at the good things you have promised, but give us the faith to be generous with your gifts, to let them go and to give them up for the sake of peace. Remind us that there is more to life than the things of this world and that we witness your love, your mercy, and your grace as we follow the example of Jesus, humbly giving of ourselves, even to our enemies. Let the world see you through our witness. We ask this in the name of Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

³ “Das Deutsche Evangelische Institut für Altertumswissenschaft des Heiligen Landes in Jahre 1965,” in *Zeitschrift des Deutschen Palästina-Vereins*, 82 [1966], p. 266.

⁴ Theodor Herzl Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 2:411-12.

⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses called Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), p.