

Dear friends of our Lord Jesus,

I'm so glad that God gave us the example of Abraham as the father of all believers. I can relate to Abraham. He tried to follow God's leading but often went astray. God repeatedly tested Abraham's faith to help him lean more fully on the covenant promises and grace—to trust God more.

How much do you trust God? Does it differ from time to time? In the last half of Genesis 12, we saw how the Lord tested Abram when he went to Egypt. Remember how he lied to save his own life? Abram failed that test and God had to rescue him. In chapter 13 it's time for Abram to try again. When another trial comes, will he walk by sight again, walk according to his own human wisdom or will he walk by faith--trusting in the Lord to give him exactly what he needs?

### **Covenant Renewal**

As we examine Genesis 13 and watch Abram deal with his problems, first of all, we learn that we can trust God to bring us where He wants us. As we look at Genesis 13, we see God bringing Abram back to Canaan, just as He covenanted to do. In chapter 12, Abram went in to Egypt looking for food for his family, servants and livestock. He received all he needed and more. Notice how chapter 13:2 describes Abram as he leaves Egypt:

*Gen 13:2 "Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold."*

Despite Abram's faithlessness and lying when he found himself in a tough situation, the Lord spared him and his family and even increased his possessions.

And then we notice that the Lord didn't only bring Abram out of Egypt with his dear wife and with increased possessions. The Lord also brings Lot back to Canaan with Abram, according to verse 1. It is significant in v.1 that Lot is mentioned last because now the plot switches from Abram and Sarai to Abram and Lot. Just as no mention of Lot was made in ch.12 even though he most certainly was present, now Sarai faded into the background.

When Abram leaves Egypt, you can be sure that he is feeling like a spiritual loser. The father of all believers has just blown it with God and needs to be rescued. So he sets out to re-establish his relationship with God. In response to God's amazing deliverance from Egypt, Abram heads right back for Bethel to renew his commitment to the God who covenanted to make him great. Now, Bethel, as you might know, means *house of God*. Abram wants to get back to living for and with God in the Promised Land. God hadn't failed Abram, but Abram knows he has failed his Lord.

If we're honest with ourselves, we can all relate to that. How many times haven't you and I failed God. Every day in some way, we don't trust Him. And Abram

recognizes his failure but more importantly he recognizes God's faithfulness in bringing him where he needs to be.

So when Abram gets to Bethel, he responds to God's graciousness to him. He returns to an altar he made earlier. As in ch.12, Abram again calls on the name of the Lord, meaning He prays. This is a matter of the heart. You can imagine that Abram had a lot of things to talk to God about. He needed to get right with the Lord. Confession before God was called for. And that's an important part of what we need to do every time we come back to God after some faithless act.

And hand in hand with confession is recommitment or rededication. That's what we also need to do after we fail. We need to start afresh with God. Leave the past behind us and move forward trusting God again. You see, friends, repentance means turning around. It's leaving the past and going in God's direction. As Abram offers sacrifices to God on the altar in Bethel, he testifies before the nations of the land that he is trusting the Lord. Sacrificing to God in the midst of the pagan Canaanites is an outward sign of his renewed commitment to follow God. It is a type of public profession of faith in God before his neighbours. It is a covenant renewal with God as the world looks on.

He has failed God, but God has been faithful to Him. This is the wonder of being saved by the grace of God. We may try to follow God, and we may not succeed, but we can always return to our Father in heaven and He will grant us forgiveness. And like the father of the prodigal son, God will rejoice that we have recognized our sin and have come back to Him. God hears the cry of His humbled child. Forgiveness is always just a prayer away. God forgives us based on the full and complete sacrifice of Jesus upon the "altar" of Calvary.

This is what we celebrate in the Lord's Supper again this morning. Jesus made the ultimate covenant commitment to us, promising us eternal life by God's grace, through faith. In this sacrament, Jesus says to you and me that we are welcome to dine with him in this covenant meal and He will strengthen us for life with Him in this world. Though we wander far and though we fail Jesus miserably, He still loves us and works out His plan in our lives. God brings Abram back to the place he needs to be, back to the house of God—forgiven, restored and renewed. And Abram responds by recommitting himself to the God of the covenant.

## **Retesting**

Secondly, friends, let us look at how we can trust God to increase our faith in Him. God retests Abram in the situation he is in. How will Abram respond to conflict this time? Last time, he trusted himself--his own ideas. Will he do the same this time? Do you remember one of those times in school when you did poorly on a test and the teacher offered to let you do a retest? God does something like that with Abram. But when God tests us, it's not so He can see how much we know or how faithful we'll be to Him. He already knows that. The tests are for our benefit.

What trials are you presently undergoing? Is God testing your faith in Him? Is it a health concern? Finances? Tension at work? Trouble with friends? We face all kinds of tests that God uses to strengthen our faith.

But listen to this: sometimes tests come in the form of too much good. That's right. Abram's situation comes as a result of all the blessings God has showered on him. Between Abram and Lot there is too much livestock and not enough land. That's always a nice problem to have. Churches like it when we've got more Sunday School kids than teachers or classrooms. It's a blessing. Likewise, we like to have more money or resources than we really need. We like the luxuries we can afford when we've got money to spare. We like "sitting comfortably." But just remember, dear friends, when Abram got to that point, God tested him.

Here's the problem that presented a test to Abram. We read in v.7,  
*Gen 13:7a "And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot."*

And then Moses, the writer, adds,

*Gen 13:7b "The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at the time."*

This is not insignificant information. This is historical information, given for a purpose.

Abram, like us, was called to be a blessing to the nations. Abram had confessed his faith by sacrificing on the altar at Bethel and by praying to the Lord. But now his faith had to take action. How Abram responded to this problem between his herdsmen and Lot's would reflect on his faith. Remember, the way he handled his problems in Egypt in chapter 12 certainly did nothing to help Pharaoh see that Abram served the Lord. Now Abram has a second chance to show his faith. This time his choice will be seen by the Canaanites and Perizzites as well as his own family and servants.

It seems that time after time God is revealing Himself to the nations through His people. It's important to remember who we are as God's people. Abram's way of resolving conflict will have an impact on how his neighbours' view him and his God. And the same holds for us. Our neighbours see us head off to church each week, but do they also see us live our faith the rest of the week? When we get in a bind with a brother, do we treat him graciously as the Lord treats us? Whether we get into tough financial straights or have material blessings galore, what do others see in our lives? Do we love our neighbours and trust God to help us treat them in a way that will show our faith and, more importantly, will show God's grace at work in us?

With this second test, Abram is prepared to trust the Lord. He is ready to take God at His word--to do what God wants without necessarily knowing how God will make things work out. That's what faith does. It takes God at His word, even when it seems that following His commands may mean we get the short end of the stick.

You and I must try to understand the inner conflict Abram must have faced in trying to divide the land. It wasn't just a simple case of letting Lot choose first and Abram would take what was left. By letting Lot choose first, Abram was taking the

chance that Lot would take the better land. Abram had more cattle than Lot. He could make the case in his mind that he needed the best land, the fertile land of the Jordan Valley much more than Lot.

In this test, Abram walks by faith. He reacts to the test as God wants. He lays aside his own interests, trusting God's promise even when it seems that humility might cause him to lose out on some good real estate that he likely believes he needs. The Bible tells us,

*Gen 13:8 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...."*

*We are brothers.* Self-interest would have caused Abram to set that aside. But in the name of keeping the peace, Abram lets Lot choose first. He follows the humble road, forgetting self-interest, and he comes out the winner in the end. God increases his faith.

## God Delivers

And that leads to the third point. By trusting God, we learn that God will give us all He has promised. Abram's choice to let Lot take the better land did not stop God from giving the Promise Land to His child. Our Lord Jesus taught us this when He said,

*Mt 6:33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

As we follow the story of Abram and Lot, we see that Lot wasn't choosing with kingdom values in mind. Notice how he made his decision. Verses 10 & 11 tell us,

*Gen 13:10 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. [then comes this little indicator of the future] (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) <sup>11</sup> So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east....*

Lot made his decision for the Jordan Valley much like Eve made her decision to sin. She looked and saw that the fruit was good to eat and so she ate it. She followed her eyes and Lot did the same thing. Greed and selfishness motivated him.

Notice that Lot's choice to walk by sight instead of by faith had far-reaching negative effects. V.11 reminds us that Lot headed east. In the Bible, east is often used as a reference for wickedness or places of evil. Moreover, Lot moved right up close to the wickedness. Following his selfish heart, he chose the fertile plains of the Jordan, and we read in v.12

*Gen 13:12 ...Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom.*

We know from the following chapters that Sodom and Gomorrah were places opposed to God and the holy life He wants for us. Yet Lot ignores that. Lot made bad choices that led to alienation from God, if not for him then at least for his family. Perhaps he thought he was strong enough to avoid the temptation. And he may well have been. 2 Peter 2:7 calls him righteous. Yet he should have thought also about his

children. Our choices have an impact on our kids—for good and bad. Lot's daughters, you likely know, later committed incest with their father... something that they undoubtedly learned in Sodom.

Living an unholy life separates us from God, from His people and from His blessings. And by *unholy* I'm not just talking about people who do bad stuff. No, it's all of us whenever we forget and neglect our calling as God's people who are set apart—that's what holy means. We are set apart by God. We must be careful not to become like the people before whom God is calling us shine for His glory instead of people who point others to God. We're a people belonging to God. Our words and deeds ought to declare to our world that God is light. Our lives should let people know that through Jesus Christ we have been rescued from darkness to live in His wonderful light. So be careful, dear people, to remember who you are as children of God. And remind your children of that too. Stay close to the Lord and beware of the temptations that surround you!

This is why we come to worship each week to be reminded of who we are and Whose we are. Lot drew near to Sodom and Abram drew near to God. So, when you come to worship and when we receive the Lord's Supper again, the Lord promises to strengthen our weak faith! That's also why we ought to come to the Lord's covenant meal. This Supper is a means of grace, a means by which it pleases God to nourish our souls and strengthen us to live for Him more fully as His holy people. In this supper, we confess that we need Jesus more and more and we rededicate ourselves to serving Him in this world with the strength He gives us.

Abram walked by faith, wanting to follow the Lord, and as a result he was richly blessed by God. While Lot found alienation, Abram found liberation. While Lot found worldly comforts, Abraham found the grace of God, the power of God and joy of the Lord in his heart. While Lot found earthly riches for a time, God reaffirmed for Abram that he would receive the Promised Land. While Lot chose instant gratification, Abram rediscovered the path to greater blessing that came by walking with God, seeking first God's kingdom and His way of life. Lot leaned on his own understanding. Abram learned to lean on God's grace and His direction for life.

Following God's ways leads to blessing. When we walk by faith in God, we are not promised that our lives will run smoothly all of the time. No, Abram had rough patches in life. But in temptations and trials, God repeatedly tested our father's faith. And God's tests increase the strength of our faith and character. As Abram stepped out in faith to make his love for the Lord shine through, the Lord caused his faith to grow. And He will do that for us too. No matter what God calls us to do, when we lean on Him, we will be blessed.