

The Journey of Faith
(3) From Failure to Faith
Genesis 13:1-18
Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers

Some years ago a friend of mine went for a job interview with high hopes. But the interview went south when he was asked by the panel, “Please tell us what you have been doing during the last few years.” “Well, I tried this business, unfortunately it didn’t work out, but I learnt from it.” “Then I explored that enterprise, but it failed for this reason.” “After that assignment I had a stint at such and such employment, but it was unsuccessful, let me explain why.”

On his way home he convinced that he’d never hear from the company again, but within hours of the interview he received a call—he got the job! “How come?” he asked them!? “Because you learned from all the ups and downs of your career— and that’s just the sort of people we’re looking for!”

And in a similar way, God is not looking for perfect saints, he is looking for people who will allow their faith to grow through the trials of life.

You see in Genesis 12 Abraham made a spiritual mistake. Faced by a serious famine in a moment of fear he decided to take matters into his own hands, leave the country God had led him to and seek help from Egypt. And since one mistake so often leads to another, he lied about his wife Sarah and selfishly put her life at moral risk. It was all a bit of a mess!

But the Abraham of Genesis 13 is so different from the Abraham of chapter 12! He has learnt to trust God out of the ashes of failure and discovered a God who does not treat us as our sins deserve or pay us according to our iniquities, but whose love is as high as the heavens above (Psalm 103).

The Story of the Separation

Here is what happened in today’s story. Abraham has returned from Egypt to the land of Canaan, the promised land, where he belongs. God has rescued him and even blessed him materially: “Abraham had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.” Some of that wealth came from Pharaoh in exchange for Sarah, remember, as a sort of wedding dowry.

Abraham returned to the place where he had earlier worshipped the Lord and he prayed to him once more. God has graciously restored him. He’s in good spiritual form. But then another crisis descends upon him!

Life is like that is it not? No sooner one trouble passes, another comes upon us! The world is hit by a global pandemic and then a pointless war spreads its ripples across the globe! There is nothing unusual about multiple trials, for the Scriptures say: “Man is born for trouble as surely as sparks fly upwards” (Job 5:7) When you sit around a fire, how sure are you that sparks will fly up in the air? 100% confident! That’s how certain it is that trouble will come to you and to me, and to everyone.

But for trials that come to believers, we know, first that God will protect us when we pass through them, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.” (Isaiah 42:3) And secondly, that God allows them to cause our faith to grow, James 1:2-4: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”

What a different outlook we have—we should have—on trials! The Lord will protect us, he will build our faith and trust in Him through them! Has a new trial has broken upon you recently? Do not be fearful, disappointed or angry, but ask the Lord to fill you with “pure joy” knowing that this new test of faith will, in the end, strength your trust in God.

Abraham new trial comes upon him, ironically, because he has become rich! His large flocks can't co-exist with Lot's flocks and quarrelling breaks out. We must never envy the rich. Instead we must pray, “give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread.” (Proverbs 30:8).

Because Abraham has become so rich and his flocks so vast, his herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen start quarrelling with each other: the land simply cannot sustain two large flocks living close together. We imagine the shepherds arguing about the best grazing grounds and the best watering holes. And although Lot and Abraham were personally on friendly terms, it is always possible for a squabble between servants to travel all the way up to their masters.

And to make things worse the people who lived in that land, the “Canaanites and the Perizzites”, are potential enemies could easily take advantage of an internal squabble among this new band of migrants. This is a serious problem for Abraham! Not a famine this time, but a feud between bickering servants which could erupt into a full-scale conflict between two households.

What will Abraham do? He could allow the bickering to continue, but that could possibly lead to open conflict. Or as senior partner Abraham could ask the junior party, Lot, to move away from him; that would have been in his Patriarchal right! But what does he do?

The Abraham of Genesis 13 has learnt that he can trust God to meet his needs. If he does the right thing, he can leave the outcome with God. So he makes a big-hearted decision—he gives Lot the pick of the land! Let's learn from Abraham three lessons that we can bring into our decision-making too.

(1) Abraham's decision was peaceful

“Let's not have any quarrelling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine for we are brothers.” (verse 8). “Let's not fall out, let's not argue! Let's be at peace!” If a decision you are about to take, an email you're planning to write, a Facebook post or Tweet you're planning to place, may or will lead to conflict, you can know for sure it is wrong. (The only exception is the Gospel. If your

actions flow out of preaching or living out the gospel, conflict may be unavoidable. Peter and John, for example, were told not to preach the Gospel, but they replied “we have to obey God not you,” Acts 4. Apart from the Gospel exception, we’re called to live at peace with everyone, as far as it is depends on us (Romans 12:18)

“..the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.” (James 3:17). “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Matthew 5:9), why? “for they shall be called sons of God.” “Sons of God” means like God - to be peaceful is to be like God. God is peaceful! And at great personal cost, he sent his Son into the world to make peace between himself and sinners who were his enemies! For the sake of peace, Abraham suggests that he and Lot go their separate ways.

Can we say this without being misunderstood, there are times when two believers are in conflict, should go their separate ways for we are called to live in peace. This is how the prophet Amos put it: “How can two walk together unless they are agreed?” (Amos 3:3). In Acts 15 we read that Paul and Barnabas could not agree over whether to take Mark on the next mission trip. And so they went their separate ways—and God brought two missions out of 1!

Abraham's decision was peaceful.

(2) Abraham's decision was loving

Secondly, Abraham's decision was loving: “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.” (verse 9) “Nephew Lot, you get first pick, of the land!” Abraham knew what Lot was like, he had known him from youth; he knew that Lot would most likely chose the best fields and leave him with scrubland!

There is a mountain in this area, I am told, which gives an amazing panoramic view of the whole territory. I imagine Abraham and Lot climbing the hill together.

Sure enough Lot chose the best for himself: “Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the River Jordan was well watered like the garden of Eden... so Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan...” Lot’s choices were selfish, “I’ll choose the best land!” What about Abraham and his flocks? And besides is he not the older man who deserves at least the respect of “Abraham, I’m thinking of choosing the plain of the river Jordan, what do you think, uncle?” How different from Abraham’s generous, expansive, big-hearted suggestion!

Whenever our decisions are generous, sacrificial, bountiful, lavish, big-hearted, it’s a sign they are on the right track. Why? Again, because, this is how God-gives! When Paul is encouraging Corinthian Christians about giving away some of their money to poorer believers Paul motivates his Corinthian friends into reckless generosity with the example of God’s generosity, “Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift.” (2 Corinthians 9:15). God’s giving sets the gold standard. Be generous for God your father is generous. We teach our children to sing, “I’m special because God has loved me,

for He gave *the best thing* that He had to save me; His own Son Jesus, crucified to take the blame for all the bad things I have done. Thank You Jesus, thank You Lord, for loving me so much. I know I don't deserve anything.”

Abraham's decision was peaceful, his decision was loving, and in the third place...

#3 Abraham's decision was filled with trust in God

What really struck me this week about the Abraham of Genesis 13 was how chilled he was! Gone is the fearful fretful “Severe famine, Oh no! What am I going to do? Lets all go down to Egypt, quick, Oh no, what’s going to happen to Sarah” of Genesis 12. Here he seems so relaxed. His problem is just as serious: the possible warfare between the two clans! Not to mention a surprise attack from the enemies who live in the land! But he’s laid back about it! What’s changed? Abraham’s trust in God has grown! God will look after me and my wife and my household! And where did Abraham learn such great trust? Through the disastrous failure of Genesis 12 and the experience of God’s loving and powerful rescue.

One sign of Abraham's increased faith was this: he allowed God to choose for him. Lot chose for himself: “Lot looked up” (verse 10), “Lot chose for himself” (verse 11). But Abraham allowed God to choose for him: Abraham, verse 14, “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 you and your offspring forever.” Because Abraham trusted the Lord he gave the decision into his generous and powerful hands.

If we choose for ourselves we might only get the east. But when we allow God to choose for us, he gives us the east AND the west, and he throws in the north and the south for good measure, pressed down and running over. Stop grasping and pushing and trying to make all the decisions yourself. Let God do the choosing for you!

Abraham's decision, by God’s grace, was peaceful, it was loving, and it was filled with trust in God.

Conclusion

Do you have this most amazing supernatural miraculous gift called faith? If so, thank God for it. Some believers today chase the showy spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues and working miracles, and despise, or at least overlook, the greater gift of faith. And if God has given you faith, stop worrying about your life! Ignore the gloom and doom merchants at the BBC: “Bank governor in 'apocalyptic' warning over rising food prices.” “Ukraine invasion could cause global food crisis, UN warns.” “Do not worry” said Jesus, for if God looks after the lilies of the field and the birds of the air he’ll look after you, for you are more valuable than they. (Matthew 6)

And if you don’t yet have true faith, that journey begins by trusting in Jesus Christ as your Saviour and your Lord. May the Lord both give faith and strengthen faith this morning.