



Faith in the Face of Strife

Grace Reigns: God's Gospel for All Peoples Series #23

Genesis 13

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Praise God that our God is a God of new beginnings. He's a God Who gives fresh starts. He's a God Who redeems our failures. He's a God Whose grace and mercy never fails.

The Lord has promised good to me.
His Word our hope secures.
He will our shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

(Amazing Grace by John Newton, 1779)

We are debtors to His amazing grace in Christ Jesus. We need that grace. Abram needed that grace. We left off last week with Abram in Egypt. He lied about his wife, Sarah, saying, "She's my sister" because he was afraid for his life. He put her at risk. It was an example of cowardice and failure of faith. He heard the great promises of God and had a great start, but then he lost sight. He turned back. Praise God the story of Abram's life did not end at the end of chapter 12.

Today we turn to Genesis 13 and find Abram retracing his steps. He left Egypt in 13:1-2 and was a wealthier man than he was when he went down into Egypt. We read in 13:1, "*So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb.*"

Negeb is a word that means "the South land," or "the area to the south." Verse two tells us that Abram was "*very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold.*" He had been blessed by the Egyptians. The Pharaoh may have felt guilty for nearly stealing Abram's wife, so he loaded him up with all these riches. It was a foreshadowing of what the children of Israel experienced when they were released from their bondage in Egypt. They also left laden with goodness and riches from Egypt.

This is a great example of God's grace. In spite of Abram's failure, he still experienced generous provision from God. He still had his wife and his marriage was intact. The promise remained and Abram's faith continued.

Friends, think about it. If you have known the Lord for a while, are you not almost embarrassed by His goodness to you in spite of your many failures? Do you not agree with the Psalmist who said, "The Lord does not treat us as our sins deserve" (Psalm 103:10)? He has lavished mercy and compassion on our lives.

Those of you who are married, do you sometimes look at your spouse and marvel that she is still with you and loves you? After all the things you have done to hurt and disappoint one another through the years, you still have warmth in your relationship. Even more than that, God is good in spite of our failures.

As Abram began to retrace his steps back up to the Promised Land, I can imagine him singing this:

All the way my Savior leads me.
Who have I to ask beside?
How can I doubt His tender mercy,
Who through life has been my guide?

(All the Way My Savior Leads Me by Fanny Crosby, 1875)

God guided him step by step, back to the place where he once enjoyed rich communion with the Lord. We read this in 13:3-4: "*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.*"

He went back to the beginning, back to where he once enjoyed worship and fellowship with the Lord. There Abram called upon the name of the Lord. This is a wonderfully simple and clear expression of prayer. Prayer is calling upon the name of the Lord. He is alive and hears us. He is involved in our lives and answers our prayers. Yahweh is a living God and He rewards those who seek Him.

So Abram prayed, giving us an example of what we should do when we fail and falter. What you do when you fail says much about the quality of your faith. Men and women of faith falter, but they do not fall away altogether.

Psalm 37:23-24 says:

*The steps of a man are established by the LORD,
when he delights in his way;
though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong,
for the LORD upholds his hand.*

That is the story of the life of every believer. “I stumbled, but the Lord keeps me from falling. The Lord upholds me with His hand. The Lord makes my steps firm.” That is what God did in Abram’s life, and that is what God does for the life of every believer. He will hold us fast. Therefore, rather than driving us away from God, our failures should drive us back to Him.

Iain Duguid of Westminster Seminary asks this question: “Does failure drive you away from God, or does it drive you back to square one—back to where you started, back to the altar, the place of sacrifice, so that you can call on the name of the Lord?”

I want to encourage you who are feeling a real sense of your failure today. You have not walked closely with the Lord this week. You have done things, said things, looked at things and desired things that now fill you with shame. You come to church, see the communion table and think, “There is no way I can come to this table. I have been so bad this week. I am not worthy of what Jesus has done for me.”

My friend, if that is how you are feeling, that is the very point of this table. Jesus died for sinners, not just for people who need a little bit of help. He died for wicked sinners. He died for your failures. He died for your rebelliousness. He died for your wretchedness. He died for your lust. He died for your shame. He died for your greed. He died for your anger. He died for your hatred. He died for you.

Don’t diminish the value of Christ’s blood. If you realize your sin right now, thinking, “I need Him to be my Savior,” don’t say, “I can’t come today because I am not good enough.” Instead, praise God for the mercy that He has shown through Jesus.

Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus, ready, stands to save you,
Full of pity, love and power.

(Come Ye Sinners by Joseph Hart, 1759)

And He is here. Let your failures drive you “back to square one, back to where you started, back to the altar, the place of sacrifice,” and call on the name of the Lord, the Living Savior. Come to Jesus today. Don’t leave today without having come to Jesus, Who redeems our failures.

James 1:3 tells us that the testing of your faith produces endurance. We see that in Abram’s life. His faith was tested in chapter 12, and he failed. His faith was given a new test in chapter 13. We read about it in 13:5-7, which says:

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.

What is the test here? It is the test of prosperity. Prosperity is not always an unmingled blessing. Prosperity also brings conflict and tests with it. We see that when a wealthy relative dies and leaves an inheritance. Strife ensues in the family, as everyone fights over who gets his share and who is more favored.

That was the case with Abram and his nephew, Lot. They both had so much stuff that the land could not support them dwelling together. There was strife between their herdsmen, which needed to be solved. The quarrelling had to be quelled because the Canaanites and Perizzites who dwelt in the land would love nothing more than a civil war to erupt between Abram, Lot and their people because they definitely would have had an advantage against them.

So how was this strife and conflict resolved? You know what it's like to be in a conflict and think, "I've said my part and done what I've needed to do. It's up to him now. I'm not going to go to him; he has to come to me. I've said it." A person often thinks like that in the face of conflict. In this case, if both Abram and Lot took that position, there would be trouble.

I heard a story about the summer of 1986, when I was still in high school so I vaguely remember this. Two Soviet ships passed in the Black Sea. One was a cruise liner with 1,234 people. The other was a commercial ship filled with oats. The plan was for these two ships to pass by one another at sea during the night. Instead, they collided and the ships sank so fast that they could not release the lifeboats. Within 15 minutes, hundreds and hundreds of souls drowned in the cold depths of that sea. I read a New York Times article that said what made that event even more tragic was that the Soviet authorities later revealed that the captains knew for 45 minutes that they were on a collision course. However, they ignored the warnings and refused to budge until it was too late. In fact, one of the captains jumped off the bridge and abandoned ship in the final minutes before the crash.

How could they be so stubborn? Well, look in the mirror. Have you ever found yourself on a collision course with another person, saying in your heart, "I will not turn, yield or divert my course, even if it brings suffering and tragedy to myself and others"? Are you on a collision course with anyone in your life right now? Are you demanding your rights, convinced that you deserve to maintain your position?

What does it take in a situation like this? It takes someone who is willing to relent, let go and say, "It doesn't have to be my way or the highway. I know that, whatever God has promised

to give me, He will give it to me even if I give it away. I could give it away and God will give it back again. He will take care of my needs.”

Abram had that kind of faith. Abram had a faith that was magnanimous. Let's define that word for a minute. It means “very generous or forgiving, especially toward a rival or someone less powerful than oneself.” Magnanimous. Synonyms include generous, charitable, benevolent, big-hearted and princely. He had a princely faith.

Abram had every right to demand that Lot obey his orders. Lot was his nephew. Abram was the one with whom God had made the covenant. Lot was rich only because Abram was rich. Lot benefitted from the crumbs off his master's table.

Look at what Abram does in his magnanimity in verse eight: *“Then Abram said to Lot, ‘Let there be no strife between you and me...’*” He was a man who recognized the beauty of Psalm 133: *“Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!”* That was a gift he did not scorn or treat lightly. “Let there be no strife between us.” Oh, that God would give that kind of attitude to every church member. “Let there be no quarrelling. Let there be no strife. What can I do to draw close to you in this conflict? How I can make things right?” Oh, that that would be the impulse of our hearts. “Let there be no strife between you and me, between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. We are family! Is not the whole land before you, Lot?”

There is a high peak up near Bethel where, if you to get to the top of that peak, you can look out and see the Jordan Valley in one direction and the Mediterranean Sea in the other direction. You can see to the north and to the south. You can see all the way down into the desert, into the vastness of the Promised Land.

Picture Abram and Lot on the top of that peak, looking out on all this land that God had promised, Abram saying, “Lot, you choose. You want the right? I'll take the left. You want north? I'll take south. You want east? I'll take west. Really, Lot, it's fine. I'm happy to do it. Take it, Lot. It's yours. I'll take whatever is left over. Really, go ahead, my nephew. It is yours.”

What was Abram doing? Jared Wilson of Midwestern Seminary says, “He is giving Lot first choice. But, really, he's giving God first choice. He's abandoning himself to God's sovereignty.” He was saying, “God, I have tried long enough to orchestrate things to my advantage. I want You to decide this time, God. You have promised me this land. You have promised to make me a blessing in all the earth. I'm going to trust You to bring that about as You please.” He abandoned himself to the sovereignty of God.

The results of this choice for Lot were ominous. Look at verses 10-13. We see several ominous notes that signify that Lot's decision-making process was tragic. Verse ten says, "*And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw...*" Where have we heard something like that before? How about back in the Garden of Eden with Eve? Genesis 3:6 says that when the woman saw that the tree was good for food and was desired to make one wise, she took.. She saw and she took. Oh, the devastation that followed!

"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 brings us back to Eden and also to Egypt, another ominous note. This theme will return in the story of the Pentateuch. Abram left Egypt—both physically and spiritually—but Lot had not really left Egypt in his heart. He was drawn back there, just like the children of Israel wanted to go back to Egypt when they made their journey through the wilderness to the Promised Land. It is a lure that sinks its hook into many believers' hearts—the allurements and enticements of this world, especially its riches and pleasure.

Another ominous note is at the end of verse ten: *"...in the direction of Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.)"* So the land that looked so lush would not always remain so attractive. It was under a sentence of doom. This garden was really Death Valley, or Death Row.

It can be the same today. Just because something looks lucrative, promising and like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in this world does not necessarily mean it is the right or best choice. When we judge simply by what our eyes can see and not by faith, we will sometimes be led into decisions that prove to be the downfall of our faith and families.

Scripture warns us in 1 Timothy 6:9:

But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.

That was the story of Lot's life and family. Many pangs pierced this man's soul.

Another ominous note is in verse 11: *"So Lot chose for himself..."* I heard Erwin Lutzer say that in those four words is the downfall of many a life. How many marriages have been destroyed because someone chose for himself? How many business ventures have gone sour because someone said, "I'm going to choose for myself"? How many addictions have been spawned by those four words—"I choose for myself"?

To every selfish choice there are unknown numbers of unintended consequences. We are told in verse 11 that Lot would begin to experience those consequences as he moved eastward. This is similar to the path of Cain, who moved east of Eden, and the migration from the east to the plain of Shinar in Genesis 11 with the Tower of Babel. He began to face some of those unintended consequences, dwelling with a people that the Scripture tells us in verse 13 were “*wicked, great sinners against the Lord.*”

Instead of protecting his family from their influence, even the way Lot pitched his tent indicated that he was enticed by what he could find in Sodom. We read this in verse 12: “*Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom.*” (Some versions say “facing Sodom.”) These are all just literary cues that we have here. It was an ominous, disastrous choice.

When we choose by sight instead of by faith, the consequences can be devastating. However, Abram let God do the choosing. In doing so, Abram discovered a valuable lesson: nothing that we take or grab can ever compare with what God is able to give. Learn that lesson. Nothing we take or grab can ever compare with what God is able to give.

Look at verses 14-17. Abram let God do the choosing for him and God said, “Abram, I am not going to just give you north, south, east or west. I am going to give you all of it. It’s yours!”

Genesis 13:14-17 says:

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.”

All of it! Jared Wilson writes, “Abram meekly said, ‘Whatever you want,’ and God gave him the earth—all of it.” It’s like he gave up his seat on the bus, then God said, “Here, you take the keys. It’s yours.”

In Christ, what does God say to believers? In 1 Corinthians 3:21, He says, “All things are yours. Whether death or life, things present or in the future, all are yours! You are rich in Christ.” Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly place is yours in Christ. We are not impoverished. We are rich in Jesus. You are Christ’s, and Christ is God’s.

So what are we to take away from this story? I see several very practical, penetrating and important moral lessons for us to learn. We must take them to heart. The first is that God is

able to redeem our failures. Thank Him for that. He restores our souls. Trust Him and rejoice in that truth.

Second, learn from this story that possessions and wealth can seduce us. Wealth and possessions promise the same things God promises: “I will be with you. I will protect you. I will bless you. You will have all you need if you just hold on to me.” That’s seductive. Learn from this that nothing we take from this world can compare to what God is able to give.

A third lesson is about strife. When two people are bound and determined to choose for themselves there will be strife and discord. However, *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God”* (Matthew 5:9). That takes a magnanimous faith.

Proverbs 17:14 says, *“The beginning of strife is like letting out water, So quit before the quarrel breaks out.”* Children, this afternoon when you are playing video games and trying to decide if you want that thing in another’s hand, drop the matter before a dispute breaks out. Don’t let a dam burst with quarrels and strife in your homes. Husbands and wives, when you are seeing signs of strife, draw near. Say, “How can I bless my spouse? How can I diffuse this conflict?” Paul said, *“And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil...”* (2 Timothy 2:24). This applies to the workplace as well.

Be willing to humble and empty yourself. Give up what is rightfully yours. Let others take the higher place, the better land, because nothing you give away will ever prevent God from giving what He is determined to give you. Nothing we relinquish in this life is greater than what God will restore in the new creation—the new heavens and new earth.

This isn’t the health, wealth and prosperity false gospel. This takes a heavenly perspective. When Abram died, how much land did he have? He had burial ground for himself and his wife, and that was about it. But now, along with Abram, the earth belongs to us. We inherit the world through Christ.

These are some of the moral lessons we learn about possessions, strife and failure. They are all good, true, necessary and important. However, they are not quite the heart of the gospel yet. How do we see the heart of the gospel through this chapter of Scripture? It’s easy to look at Abram and Lot in this chapter and think, “You know what? I need to be like Abram and not like Lot.” I’d say Genesis 13 affirms that for you, but, in chapter 12, Abram wasn’t such a good example. And in chapter 16, he blew it again with Hagar. This man did not always get it right.

You know what the Bible tells us about Lot? You would probably never know it from reading Genesis, but listen to what the Apostle Peter tells us about Lot in 2 Peter 2:7-9a:

And if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their

lawless deeds that he saw and heard); then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials...

How many times did Peter just tell us that Lot was righteous? Three times. Lot was righteous?

So what do we see from this passage? As far as we can tell from Scripture, each of these men were both righteous and sinful at the same time. They were simultaneously saints and sinners. Both of them were righteous—only through faith.

You know what? That's the story of you and me—simultaneously saints and sinners. Sometimes, we get it right like Abram in Genesis 13, and we entrust all that we have to God. We see His blessing and bow down in worship toward Him. At other times, we are like Abram in Genesis 12—afraid, cowardly and doubting God. Sometimes, we are like Lot, grabbing after this world. The world has such a lure on our hearts.

That's us. We have a hard time letting go. We have a hard time emptying ourselves. We have a hard time giving up everything and trusting it all to God. But we also have a Savior Who completely emptied Himself. He had it all and gave it all up for us. We have a Savior Who was rich beyond all splendor. For Love's sake, He became poor, so that we, through His poverty, might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).

The best response to this chapter is to do what Abram did at the end. What did he do? Verse 18 says, *"So 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."* That's what we need to do as we come to this communion table. An altar called Calvary has been raised. A sacrifice has been offered once for all, never to be repeated. It is for sinners who trust in Jesus. A Savior Who had everything gave it all up. He emptied Himself utterly and completely for us because He wanted us to be able to share in His wealth and riches forever.

So let us come to His table and adore, love and trust Him. Let us receive from Him the fullness of His blessings which were purchased at the cross. Let us rejoice in what He has done for us.

R.C. Sproul says, "We are secure, not because we hold tightly to Jesus, but because He holds tightly to us." Let's rejoice. All who recognize their sin and their need for a Savior, come to Jesus. Come to Him at His table and receive. If you do not see yourself as a sinner who needs a Savior, do not come to His table. If you see yourself as a sinner right now and say, "I wish I could be saved," you can be saved today. Jesus stands ready to save every sinner who says, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

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