

DECISIONS AMIDST
THE BLESSINGS AND CHALLENGES OF PROSPERITY
GENESIS 13

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

High in the Swiss Alps (PROJECTOR ON--- ST. GOTTHARD MASSIF) on the St. Gotthard Massif there is a stream that flows down the mountain. At one point the stream collides with a boulder which divides the water into two separate streams that head down the mountain in two different directions. This one rock determines two separate and distinct destinies for the unsuspecting water of that stream.

Some of the water that strikes the rock will tumble down the mountain toward the Rhine River. (RHINE RIVER) It will flow through Germany and eventually reach the cold waters of the North Sea. Some of the water that strikes the boulder will head down the mountain toward France. (RHONE RIVER) It will join the Rhone River and eventually reach the warm, inviting waters of the Mediterranean Sea. One rock determines two different destinies. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Sometimes in life we face decisions that are like that boulder. We may not realize it at the time, but those decisions determine our future destiny. When I look back at my own life, I can pick out certain decisions that I made that significantly affected the course of my life. I chose to go to a particular college. I decided to become part of a Christian group at that college. I chose to go to a seminary. I decided to take a job in a church in Massachusetts. That led to a decision about a wife.

Often we don't realize the significance of the decisions that we make and the consequences that they may bring. Today we are going to look at a decision that Abraham made and a decision that Lot made. In the process we will hopefully discover Biblical lessons that can help us to make wise decisions when we encounter the rocks in our stream of life that determine our future destiny.

Last time we looked at a bad decision that Abraham made, and we saw the consequences which resulted from it. (PROJECTOR ON--- ABRAHAM'S JOURNEY) Because of a famine in Canaan he moved his clan to Egypt. Because Abraham's wife Sarah was a beautiful woman, and because he feared that he would be killed if the Egyptians discovered that he was her husband, he passed her off as his sister. Sarah was put in the king's harem by the Egyptians. God intervened, however, and the truth came out. The pharaoh rebuked Abraham and kicked him out of the country for his deceit.

Fortunately the God who is there is the God of the second chance and the third chance and the fourth chance. Abraham acknowledged his wrongdoing and learned from his failure of faith. His faith in the Lord grew.

I.A.

Now in #13 of Genesis Abraham encounters another test of faith. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. PROSPERITY BRINGS STRIFE) In vv. 1-7 he discovers that PROSPERITY BRINGS STRIFE. In the first five verses of this section we learn about THE BLESSING OF PROSPERITY. (I. PROSPERITY... A. THE BLESSING OF PROSPERITY) According to v. 1 Abraham and his family returned from Egypt to the Negev in the south of Canaan. Verse 2 tells us, **“Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold.”**

This is the first mention in the Bible of anyone being rich. Abraham is described as not just rich, but very rich. He has assets of gold and silver and cattle. God has been faithful to the promise which He made to Abraham back in #12 v. 2 when He said, **“I will bless you.”** Abraham has become prosperous, in spite of his missteps in Egypt.

According to vv. 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.”** Bethel (BETHEL MAP) is in the central part of Canaan, what we know today as Israel. He worships God here.

Verse 5 tells us: **“And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents...”** Lot’s wealth was apparently not as great as that of Abraham. But both Abraham and Lot have prospered. They have been blessed materially.

B.

In vv. 6 & 7 we encounter THE DANGER OF PROSPERITY. (I. A. B. THE DANGER OF PROSPERITY) The text tells us in vv. 6 & 7: **“...so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together, 7 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.”** The growing herds in a place of limited pasture, land, and water create a problem. There are also Canaanites and Perizzites around who may have controlled the best land.

We don’t know exactly who the Perizzites are. The term literally means “village dwellers.” In #10 of Genesis the Perizzites are not listed as descendants of Canaan. So they may have been a separate ethnic group which had occupied part of the land for many years.

With Lot and Abraham having separate families and people working for them, it is understandable how disputes could have arisen. One group comes to a water hole or cistern and discovers that the other clan has already largely drained the water. An animal or animals disappear, and one clan gets suspicious that the other has taken them. One group shows up in a field and discovers that the flocks from the other have already eaten most of the grass. Quarreling results. Abraham and Lot are brought into the dispute as they get reports from their herdsmen and shepherds.

The last statement in v. 7 about Canaanites and Perizzites being in the land not only explains why there were limited physical resources, but it also suggests that there are unbelievers who are watching what is going on with Abraham and Lot. God had told Abraham to be a blessing to other people. He was to be a witness to others about the one true God. Now his material possessions and Lot's material possessions are contributing to a problem of strife. Is there anything different about Abraham's faith that will affect the way that he approaches this conflict?

Herein lies one of the ironies of the life of the children of God. God delights to bless His children. He often blesses them in material ways. Biblical principles about hard work and saving and planning for the long term generally produce material rewards. But God's children can have difficulty in handling these blessings. Sometimes our material possessions create strife. Sometimes they contribute to a wrong focus on material stuff and to a loss of faith in God.

In the time of King David and Solomon Israel was a prosperous nation. It was greatly blessed of God. But Israel began to turn away from faith in God, the source of all great blessings, and it began a long moral, economic, and political slide that ended in God's judgment

God's blessing of material wealth has also presented a problem for Christians down through history. Over two hundred years ago John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist Church, wrote, **"I fear, wherever riches have increased, the essence of religion has decreased in the same proportion. Therefore I do not see how it is possible, in the nature of things, for any revival of true religion to continue long. For religion must necessarily produce both industry and frugality, and these cannot but produce riches. But as riches increase, so will pride, anger, and love of the world..."**

As prosperity increases for us--- for you and for me--- there are also dangers. As our bank accounts grow and our retirement funds accumulate, the temptation is to think of that money as resulting primarily from our skill and hard work, rather than from God's grace. The temptation grows to think of it as our money. The temptation grows to pursue money as an end in itself and to regard material wealth as an accurate measure of our value and standing in the world. The temptation also grows to get more things than our neighbor and sometimes at our neighbor's expense. Thus the possibility of strife enters the scene.

II.A.

(II. STRIFE REVEALS THE QUALITY OF FAITH) In vv. 8-13 we find that STRIFE REVEALS THE QUALITY OF FAITH. Strife, brought on by prosperity, reveals the quality of faith in Abraham and Lot. In vv. 8 & 9 we learn about THE QUALITY OF ABRAHAM'S FAITH. (II. STRIFE REVEALS... A. THE QUALITY OF ABRAHAM'S FAITH)

Abraham tells Lot, **“Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. 9 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...”** Abraham’s primary concern was that there be good relations within his extended family. His secondary concern, perhaps, was that they be a good witness to the Canaanites and Perizzites.

With the situation before them Abraham recognizes the need for a separation. This appears to be the logical course of action. A famous German scholar by the name of Claus Westermann points out, **“Responsibility for one’s brother can express itself in a solution to a quarrel which results in a separation.”** (*Genesis*, Volume 2) Separation occasionally may be the wisest course of action when there is a situation of friction in a family or among the children of God.

There is another factor that is at work here. It is the providence of God. When God called Abraham in #12 v. 1, He said, **“Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.”** It would appear from this that God ultimately wanted Abraham to be on his own, apart from his extended family. He was to make a separation from his relatives. For whatever reason Lot had accompanied his uncle thus far on his journeys. Now the time was right to make a separation.

The custom in this part of the world was that the leader of the clan was to settle any dispute arising within his clan. The normal course of action was to make a settlement that was in his own best interests. In this particular situation God had promised the entire land to Abraham and his descendants, not to Lot. It was Abraham who was the key to God’s plan.

But notice what Abraham does. He gives Lot the first choice. Ancient custom said that it was Abraham’s right to choose. God’s promise of the land had been made to Abram, not to Lot. But Abraham gives up his rights. Perhaps we should see this as evidence of progress in the development of his faith. The only two responsibilities that God had given to him were to go to the land that God would show him and to be a blessing. The six promises, including possession of the land, were the responsibilities of the Lord to bring about. So Abraham made a decision to be a blessing. He decided that peace was a priority. The best way to promote peace was to offer Lot the first choice of land.

It is not clear what the choice here involved. Some scholars suggest that there was a northern grazing area and a southern grazing area. (CANAAN MAP) We have seen that Abraham built altars and spent time in Shechem to the north and Hebron to the south. Now he was in Bethel in the middle of Canaan. Perhaps as the two clan leaders faced east toward the Jordan River valley, Abraham offered Lot the territory to his left in the north or territory to the right in the south. Lot surprised his uncle by choosing the territory in front of him in the Jordan River valley, which was perhaps not considered part of Canaan.

Whatever was involved in this choice Abraham had learned from his painful experience in Egypt that selfishness and lack of trust in God have severe consequences. Abraham's offer to give the choice to Lot reveals a maturing faith.

B.

In the next four verses we learn about THE QUALITY OF LOT'S FAITH. (II. STRIFE REVEALS... A. B. THE QUALITY OF LOT'S FAITH) Verse 10 tells us, "**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.)**" There was a hill near Bethel where the entire lower Jordan River valley could be viewed. (JORDAN RIVER VALLEY) The view may have looked something like this. One of the first things that Lot could see was a river. Water was an essential commodity which had been a source of friction between Lot's men and Abraham's men.

Lot also saw lots of green vegetation, lots of food that could be used to feed his animals. It resembled the stories which he had heard about the Garden of Eden. It resembled what he had seen in the Euphrates River valley and the Nile River valley.

This inviting picture is marred by one parenthetical comment about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. That comment, I suspect, was made for two reasons: 1) It explained why the valley before them did not look so inviting at the time when the author later wrote his account. This valley apparently was adversely affected by the destruction that God brought upon Sodom and Gomorrah. 2) It hints at the presence of a problem with the quality of life in the valley.

In v. 11 Lot makes a key decision. He chooses to move into the valley of the Jordan. It was a bad decision. It became the first in a series of decisions that would ruin his life. The right thing for Lot to have done would have been to let Abraham make the choice and to still stay in some part of the highlands of Canaan. The right thing for Lot to have done would have been to consider the kind of people among whom he would live. He could have justified it by saying that those sinners needed a witness about the one true God. But that was not his real motive. He liked what he saw, and he thought that it would mean prosperity for him.

The Apostle Peter indicates in his Second Epistle in the New Testament that Lot had a genuine faith in the true God. But clearly it was an immature faith. Lot may have been the kind of person who takes right steps because his friend, or his parents, do. He may have been caught up in the excitement of God's appearance to his uncle. The prospect of an adventure to foreign lands may have appealed to him. He may also have been smart enough to realize that good things happened when he hung around Uncle Abe. But when it came down to this key decision, Lot's choice revealed that the controlling influence in his life was the prospect of material prosperity.

(SODOM AND GOMORRAH) According to v. 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.” Apparently Lot initially settled in the Jordan valley to the north of the Dead Sea. But after a while he moved down toward Sodom. We still don’t know the actual location of these two famous cities. Many archaeologists suspect that it was somewhere on the south side of the Dead Sea. Later in the story we shall find out that Lot moves into Sodom itself and even becomes an official in the community. He marries his daughters off to men in the city.

Verse 13 provides a spiritual analysis of Sodom and gives us an evaluation of Lot’s decision: **“Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.”** The Hebrew literally says that the men there were wicked and sinners.’ But they were not just “wicked and sinners,” but they were “very much wicked and sinners.” And they were not just “very much wicked and sinners,” but they were “very much wicked and sinners against the Lord.” Lot’s choice of the land of the Jordan valley was the first in a series of bad decisions. He encountered a boulder in his stream of life, and he chose to follow that stream all the way to Sodom. In the end even the material prosperity that he sought would be taken away from him.

C.

Consider then THE QUALITY OF OUR FAITH. (II. A. B. C. THE QUALITY OF OUR FAITH) The decisions that we make often reveal the quality of our faith. The New Testament commands Christians to walk by faith, not by sight. This means that we are to put our faith in the promises and commands of God’s Word. This means that we should seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and trust Him to provide us with what we need. This means that we should not make decisions on the same basis as the world around us which says that we are to decide on the basis of what we can touch and see and hear. We should not make decisions on the same basis as the presupposition proclaimed by Carl Sagan that the material universe is all that there is, all that there was, and all that there ever will be.

Those decisions are not always easy to make. Three hundred years ago John Bunyan wrote in *Pilgrim’s Progress* , **“...heaven is but a fable to some... and things here are counted the only things substantial. ... ‘Give me not riches’ is scarce the prayer of one of 10,000. Straws, and sticks, and dust, with most, are the great things now looked after.”**

Some years ago one of my brothers was offered a job in Maine working for Great Northern. It would have meant a promotion for him and a substantial raise in pay. His skills matched up well with the job. I was hoping that he would take the job so that he would be closer to me and my family. But he turned it down. He did so for two primary reasons. First, there was not a church in the area that fit his theology. Second, he and his family wanted to send their kids to a Christian school, and there was none in the area. I was disappointed that his family would not be closer to us, but I was proud that he displayed a noble quality of character, that he put faith in God above material prosperity. A few years later Great Northern also shut down that plant in Maine.

It is not wrong to consider finances in making a job change. There is nothing wrong with wanting one's family to prosper materially. But money and material things should not outweigh spiritual factors in the decisions that we make. Our faith in the God of the Bible should have a controlling interest.

III.

In vv. 14-18 we find that GENUINE FAITH WINS GOD'S APPROVAL. (III. GENUINE FAITH WINS...) Separation from Lot must have been difficult for Abraham and Sarah. Lot was the only relative that they had in the entire area. He had been with them for many years. Perhaps they also sensed something of the danger that awaited Lot as a result of his decision. But that separation was necessary. The circumstances required it, and it was part of God's plan.

So Abraham receives reassurance from God in vv. 14 & 15: **“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, 15 for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever.’”** For the third time God promises to give Abraham and his descendants the entire land of Canaan. The one thing that is added to this promise is the statement that his descendants will possess it forever. To whom does the land of Canaan belong? The Canaanites? The Palestinians? Or the Jews?

In v. 17 the Lord tells Abraham to walk through the land. There is some evidence that there was an ancient custom that when land was given that the recipient was to walk back and forth upon it to seal the deal. Perhaps that is what is pictured here.

We find then in v. 18 that Abraham moves to Hebron. (HEBRON MAP) Archaeologists have discovered evidence of a city there centuries before the time of Abraham. In Hebron he builds another altar. Thus he continues his worship of God. Abraham's faith wins God's approval.

When we make decisions based upon a Biblical faith in God and His Word, we also win God's approval. (PROJECTOR OFF) Sometimes we receive evidence of that approval in this life. Sometimes we do not.

After seminary I began to look for a job in a church. An opportunity came along in Massachusetts. I visited the church for a week and sensed that it would be a good fit. But there was one thing that bothered me about this opportunity. I was single, and there were about ten other single guys in the church and just one single gal. I was hoping for better marriage prospects, and the outlook did not seem to be great. But I went and eventually the right person came along. The point is that our efforts to step out in faith win God's approval.

In the late 1700s Dr. John Thomas went to India as a ship's doctor for the East India Company. While he was there, he became a Christian. He began doing medical work among the Indians and telling them about Jesus. In 1793 he returned to England

looking for financial help and for someone to assist him in telling the Indians about Jesus.

William Carey (PROJECTOR ON--- WILLIAM CAREY), the shoemaker turned preacher who had become convinced from his reading of the New Testament that churches should be sending missionaries to people who did not know about Christianity, got connected with Dr. Thomas. He agreed to go back to India with him.

William Carey had been involved in forming the Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel to fund and sponsor just such a mission. Eventually the Carey family and the Thomas family headed to Calcutta with funds to start a mission station. Because of his previous experience Dr. Thomas was entrusted with the money. Before they all left England, Carey discovered that Dr. Thomas had creditors in England who had to be paid off. When they arrived in India, William learned that there were more people there whom Dr. Thomas owed money.

The two missionary families had to separate for a time when they got to India. Dr. Thomas set up a medical practice in Calcutta (CALCUTTA MAP) to pay off some of his debts. The Carey family located in another area and struggled to get by with very little money. Some months later when Carey was offered a small parcel of land on which to build a house, he went to see Dr. Thomas in Calcutta. He discovered that the doctor had spent all of the remaining missions funds on his own living expenses. Furthermore he found Dr. Thomas to be living in relative luxury. He was living in a beautiful house and had twelve servants taking care of his family. Furthermore Dr. Thomas had borrowed additional money in the name of the mission. As happened with Lot the temptation of prosperity pulled Dr. Thomas away from a life lived by faith in God. The work of God was seemingly hindered, but William Carey went on to be mightily used of God. (PROJECTOR OFF)

William Carey's motto was: "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God. The significant decisions that we make in life reveal a lot about our expectations from God. They reveal the extent of our faith in Him. They reveal our real motivation and purpose in life.

These significant decisions are never made in a vacuum. They are products of hundreds of seemingly insignificant decisions. They are the result of daily decisions that we make about what we do with our lives. What am I going to read? Am I going to read my Bible this morning? With whom am I going to spend time? What am I going to watch on TV? How will I spend my money? How will I respond to this person who makes me angry?

The answers to these questions determine the character that we will develop. They determine the faith that we will have in God, or the lack thereof. They determine our response to the important decisions of life.

Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God.