

## "God's Faithfulness For Our Pilgrimage"

I came across the story this week of a 17-year-old snow skier, Jacob Smith who is legally blind. He has extreme tunnel vision - and no depth perception on top of that. His vision acuity is 20/800. I read that is four times the level of legal blindness. Think of the big **E** on the eye chart. He would need it to be blown up four times in order to see it from 20 feet away. Yet he skis – and not just easy slopes. He skied a famous slope in Big Sky Montana called The Big Couloir. It is considered one of the toughest ski runs in North America. It can be intimidating to even the most experienced. How does he do it? Jacob has a two-way radio turned up high in his pocket. His dad is on the other end at the base, guiding him down. When Jacob was asked how much he trusted his father, he replied, *"I mean, enough to turn right when he tells me to."* That does not sound like anything I would ever call fun. To pull it off requires two things: the faith of Jacob and the faithfulness of his father. The life that we're called to live as children of God also requires two things; our faith and God the father's faithfulness.

We can be thankful that our life is only very rarely like an intense run down a steep mountain slope. The biblical expression for our journey is that of a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage suggests a more long term journey but definitely one in which difficulties and challenges are going to be encountered. And while we may all think that we can see clearly the scripture tells us that we really often don't see clearly at all. We need a voice that we can depend on. When God tells us to turn right we need to learn to turn. When God tells us that we can trust him, when he gives us a promise, we need to learn the faith that takes him at his word.

The Bible is very realistic about the many imperfections of its most famous characters. Abraham is no exception. We see him falter, and stray off the path God to which God has called him. He is faulty. God is faithful. That's why we can learn so much from him. Our vision is always limited. No matter how educated or experienced you cannot always see clearly what is best or right or good. You were made for a relationship with God in which his faithfulness is what makes your pilgrimage possible. There's a lot in this story in **Genesis 13**, but what ties it all together is way in which the faithfulness of God is the foundation for the story.

*The first lesson of Genesis 13 is one we all need to know. It is this:*

**I. BECAUSE GOD IS FAITHFUL, WHENEVER WE FALTER WE CAN START OVER.**

**Genesis 13** is a story about starting over. To appreciate it's meaning we need to remember the larger picture.

**A. In the Bible the story of Abraham is part of a larger story that is about God's faithfulness to offer grace to us all.**

***In Genesis 3 when Adam and Eve first fell away from God in disbelief and disobedience God promised grace.*** So much had been lost. Spiritual darkness, deception, and dysfunction fell on this planet. **Genesis 3** introduces the reality of a great evil enemy of God and of us, the devil, the serpent, Satan. In **Genesis 3** God also promised the ultimate defeat of that enemy through a hero who would one day come. He is called *the seed of the woman*, and God promises *he will crush the head of the serpent*. The language may be poetic but the reality is serious and crucial. There is more to this world than what our eyes can see. Humankind as a species has believed the lie of the serpent and suffered because of it but God promises a Savior, offers grace and remains faithful.

***In Genesis 12 God calls Abraham to become the father of the family from whom the promised Savior will come.*** The world had spiraled into sin, violence, suffering and darkness. There has been the fall, the flood and the tower of Babel. From the very beginning, the story of Abraham is not just a collection of moralistic tales about a virtuous patriarch. It's really about God working with imperfect people to demonstrate that he is going to sustain and fulfill his promise of grace in this world. His people will get off the path and have to be restored. In their pilgrimage as his people in this world, they will discover - you will discover - that the fulfillment of God's promises doesn't depend on our ingenuity but on God's fidelity. Because he's faithful, he restores us even when we wander off the path.

**B. Sometimes the only way to make progress is to start over.**

***Like Abram we often start well enough.*** Abram had been called by God and had left everything familiar to go to the land God was to show him. When he arrived he did well until hardship came. When famine came, he folded up his tent and went to Egypt. I sympathize with him but the way the Bible unfolds that part of the story shows us that this

was a failure of faith. He had been building altars and calling on the name of the Lord, but there's no mention of prayer and worship when he goes to Egypt. His decisions are based on fearful speculations instead of faith in God's promises. Abraham relies on deception. He selfishly endangers his wife. He has to bear the disgrace of being rebuked by a pagan king. He has no excuse to offer. In spite of it all, he and Sarai, his wife, are protected by God because God is faithful.

***Sometimes when you fall you can just get up, and go on but sometimes you need to start over.*** Notice the two phrases that begin with the word "where." **Verse 3** says *he journeyed from the Negeb as far as Bethel to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai.* **Verse 4** says, *to the place where he had made an altar at the first.* *And there Abram called upon the name of the LORD.* His story embodies a principle that is true for all of us. Sometimes, it's best to go back before we try to go forward.

***It's a good to ask God if there is some place you might start over.*** Did God call you to something and you started out in faith and obedience, but never expected the test that would come. When tested, your faith faltered. God is faithful so that's not the end but now you have a choice: you can be angry at yourself, or at God, or at life and drag your feet because you never expected it to be so hard, or you can go back and start over, this time knowing your faith *will* be tested, but choosing to trust in God anyway. For someone, it might mean going back to your wedding vows and renewing them with greater understanding, humility faith and love. For some of you, it might mean going back to some secret calling from God or a commitment you made to God that you never honored and reaffirming that commitment. Over the years, I've seen people trapped and spiritually stuck because they won't go back and offer an apology or attempt reconciliation and start over. Starting over is possible because God is faithful.

*But notice... sometimes starting over means starting it all over.*

## **II. BECAUSE GOD IS FAITHFUL, HE ALLOWS NEW CHALLENGES TO TEST OUR FAITH AND DEEPEN IT.**

Look at **verse 5**: *And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents.* This looks great. In spite of the debacle in Egypt and the former famine they are now rich. So now things will be cozy and comfortable right? **Verse 6** so that *the land could not support both of them dwelling together;* *for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together.*

## A. Even our blessings can bring testings.

**Verse 7** and there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. So prosperity doesn't bring peace. **Verse 7** continues, At that time, the Canaanites and the Perizzites were dwelling in the land. That last phrase suggests future threats were lurking in the background. What if life is just like this?

*The truth is...*

## B. Faith has to be stretched to go deeper and grow stronger.

It is good for us to know, accept and even to embrace that. Maybe you have seen the saying, *"Please be patient with me. God isn't through with me yet."* Sometimes the issue isn't others being patient with us so much as us being patient in the process. I had a funny thought the other morning. It came to me out of the blue. *I thought of course I still have a lot to learn, I've only been a Christian for a little over 50 years!* This experience of being turned from a clueless caterpillar into a slightly less clueless caterpillar is slow and challenging. I heard someone describe the life of faith as sort of like doing yoga in a room full of billy goats. You are doing some awkward stretching while enduring some painful bruising, and it's also bewildering. As children of God we can be thankful when things are easy. But we can't expect it will always be like that. We are called to faith so God can be glorified and we can grow. That doesn't happen through soft situations and constantly fulfilled expectations. To walk with God, is to be committed to the change that comes through challenges.

*Because God is faithful we can start over when we have wandered off the path and he allows new challenges to test our faith again. Now...*

## III. BECAUSE GOD IS FAITHFUL, WE CAN LIVE IN THE FREEDOM OF FEARLESS GENEROSITY

**Verses 8-9** 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.<sup>9</sup> 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, as the elder with higher status, would have the right – it would be expected – that he would make his choice, and his nephew Lot would get the leftovers. Abram does the unexpected and remarkably generous thing. He is trusting in God, who has demonstrated his faithfulness and has promised to bless him. He isn't fear-based. He is choosing to trust.

Look at **verses 10-11**: *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.)* <sup>11</sup> So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus, they separated from each other. There is a great depth of symbolism and meaning in this historical scene with Abram and Lot.

*Three things stand out.*

**A. First, faith can free us from the limitations of sight.**

I used to think when the Bible says *we walk by faith and not by sight*, that's not good that's just the way it *has to be* for now. There's another way to think of it: *we walk by faith because physical sight doesn't show us everything that matters*. Like Abraham we look at two options that stretch out before us, one looks well-watered, with greener grass, and the other looks dry and rocky. But what if one would be self-serving and fear based and the other one faith-based and generous. It might have to do with physical well-being or financial prosperity, but sometimes it might just be relational. This is the kind of fearless relational generosity Jesus taught in *The Sermon on the Mount*. Can I turn the other cheek and go the extra mile? Can I forgive without demanding fairness? Am I willing to risk being slighted, misunderstood, or hurt? If God is faithful – I can do that. In the spiritual realm, We are often functionally blind. Faith can free us from the limitations of sight.

**B. Second, faith can free us from the foolishness of trying to have the garden of the LORD while neglecting the LORD.**

Robert Alter is one of the most famous Jewish Scholars of the Bible today. He says the way the story is told, and the Hebrew is written here makes it clear that the Scripture is not just giving us the facts. It is trying to give us a feel for what is going on inside of Lot and what it represents. **Verse 10** says: Lot *“lifted up his eyes”* and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, *like the garden of the LORD....* That statement is not reflecting a comment from the book of Genesis but the perspective from the heart of Lot in that moment. The garden of the Lord is the garden of Eden. It represents the place where life is fulfilling and satisfying, and you have everything you need. The problem, as it develops in the rest of the story, is Lot is *not* thinking of the LORD. He just sees and desires what looks to him like the garden of the LORD. He looks only at what he can see physically (**verse 10**). When **verse 11** says, *“so Lot choose for himself,”* we can

take it literally. He is choosing selfishly. Lot reflects our tendency to want the garden of the Lord without the LORD. Too often, we want the good things that God can give us without the hassle of faith, obedience, and submission to the God of the garden. Whenever we think something can be the garden of the LORD for us, some person, some relationship, some job, or dream, or place, and in our thinking, the LORD Himself is not truly at the center of that thing, we have started down a path that will lead into heart-breaking disappointments.

### **C. Third, faith frees us from the tragic consequences that can follow from faithless choices.**

**Verses 12-13:** *Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom.*

<sup>13</sup> *Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD.*

In his book, *How to Read Genesis*, Tremper Longman writes;

For his part, Lot grabs the best land, or at least what appears to be the prime real estate of the day. He chooses that lush grazing area near the two exciting cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. Only a first reader who's never heard the Bible story before can fail to see the irony in that choice. <sup>1</sup>

*But the whole story ends on a note of promise. That's important.*

### **IV. BECAUSE GOD IS FAITHFUL, WE CAN LIVE WITH A PROFOUND ASSURANCE THAT HE WILL KEEP HIS PROMISES.**

Beginning in **verse 14**, the scene changes. *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, <sup>15</sup>for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you."* <sup>18</sup> *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.* Abraham entrusted himself and his cause to God, and he was given freedom and promised a future. Abraham experienced what Jesus later put in terms of a promise: In **Matthew 6:33** Jesus said: *But seek first his (God's) kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

**A. The key theme, in the Abrahamic narrative, is that God's**

**promises do not depend on human effort or ingenuity  
but on his faithfulness.**

Therefore, every challenge and every obstacle can be met with faith.

**B. This principle embedded in the story of Abraham will find its  
ultimate fulfillment in Jesus.**

He is the *the seed of the woman* from **Genesis 3**, who comes through the family of Abraham to bless the world.

Abraham's sacrificial example and the blessing that follows it actually becomes a picture of what Jesus himself will do. **Philippians 2** says that Jesus Christ did not insist on his rights and privileges. He entrusted Himself to God the Father and sacrificed Himself to die for our sins. He gave himself freely and fully, and God, in response, raised him up and exalted Him above every other name that is named. His sacrifice for our sins is the basis for our salvation by his grace. We don't earn it or deserve it. You turn to Christ as our Lord and trust in Him as our Savior, and he receives, redeems, and forgives you because he is faithful.

You could also say that you sacrifice, in the sense of letting go, your pride, your self-righteousness, and your independence. In order to entrust your salvation to Christ. He promises to save your soul and fulfill his promises in your life.

## **CONCLUSION**

We're going to see that Abraham's faith will falter again. That's the way it goes with us also. God trains us in faith and deepens our faith throughout our pilgrimage. Even though our faith is sometimes small and weak we can offer God a real and growing faith, and as we do faith grows and we experience a greater awareness of God's beautiful and generous faithfulness.

**Amen**

### A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Almighty God, Thank you for your unfailing faithfulness. You freely offer your gracious promises to people like me who turn to you in faith and repentance. I have lived more by self-will and sight than by surrender and faith. I realize, now, I need a Savior. I believe Jesus died to pay for my sins and rose again as Lord and Savior. I receive and rest on him alone for my salvation. Amen

### A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

O, Lord. I confess that the pilgrimage of faith is a challenging journey for me. It is my own fault. I, too often, prioritize my comforts over your callings. I too often act out of self-protective fearful impulses, as if I see all that matters clearly. But I don't. I earnestly need your grace to show me the best way forward. Help me to surrender to your will and to your plans, fully depending on your faithfulness as I walk with you. I ask this in the name of my powerful and gracious Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Tremper Longman III, *How to Read Genesis*, pages 130-131