

Genesis 13:1-18 // Faithfulness in a faithless world

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Preacher: Jonathan Middleton

[0:00] Our Bible reading this evening is Genesis chapter 13, which is found on the Church Bible page 14.

! So Genesis chapter 13. So Abraham went up from Egypt to Nagai with his wife and everything he had.

! And Lot went with him. Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold. From Nagav he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier and where he had first built an altar.

There, Abram called on the name of the Lord. Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also has flocks and herds and tents.

But the land could not support them while they stayed together. For their possessions were far too great that they were not able to stay together. And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and Lot.

[1: 12] The Canaanites and Parasites were also living in the land at the time. So Abram said to Lot, Let's not have any quarreling between you and me or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are close relatives.

[illegible]

The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, Look around from where you are, from the north and south, to the east and west.

All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you. So Abram went to live near the great trees of Moran, near Hebron, where he purchased tents.

[2:59] There he built an altar to the Lord. Well, thank you very much, Joanne, for reading.

And let me add my very warm welcome to you all. If your Bible has fallen short, then please keep it open at Genesis chapter 13. That would be a brilliant help to me and a great help to you as well.

Let's join together in prayer and ask God for His help as we come to study and think about His Word. Heavenly Father, You know us.

You know each of us here this evening. You know our baggage. You know our situations. You know our anxieties. You know the things that we are dealing with in our lives at the moment.

You know the decisions that we may face in the days ahead. And so we pray that you would send your Holy Spirit to speak into each of our lives.

[4:01] Address us in power, we pray. Transform our thinking. Transform our desires. Shape and mold us by your Word. And give us, living God, eyes to see our lives as You see them.

And hearts that are ready to respond to what You have to say to us. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I received a WhatsApp message from my wife this week.

Now, this happens from time to time. It usually means that she wants me to buy something that she's seen often of the cute sort of four-legged variety.

But this time the message was, wait for it, I think I found us our dream home. And so this time curiosity got the better of me and I clicked through and opened the link.

And there it is. Dream big, as they say. Six bedrooms. Views over the Clyde Estuary. 22 acres period.

[5:16] Features. Basically everything you'd want. And then some. And the price? More or less the same as a three-bedroom house in the west end of Glasgow.

So obviously I started seriously considering it. There were admittedly one or two minor logistical questions.

22 acres is quite a lot of garden. Especially when you struggle to manage to tame what is a fraction of that in our present place.

And it is described as a remote peninsula. Estate agents speak for basically you're on your own. Now never mind that Alice doesn't even drive.

Still, I thought it could work. It would be great for hospitality. On brand with our vision this year at St. Silas to be a place to belong.

[6:13] Although getting everyone back for Sunday lunch might be slightly ambitious. And roots on a Wednesday night? Well apparently it's a one hour 47 minute cycle from St. Silas.

Yes, I checked. And yes, that probably would finish me off. So perhaps there are a few drawbacks. But it did get me thinking.

What actually makes somewhere a good place to live? Because we make decisions like this all the time. Where to live. What to study.

What job to take. Who to marry. Who to be friends with. What to prioritize with our time. And there are so many opportunities. Where on the surface we can look at them and think.

What's not to like? But perhaps the more important question is. What else is there to see? Because sometimes the things that look most attractive to us.

[7:17] Are not necessarily what are best for us. And sometimes we make decisions based on what our eyes can see. Without ever stopping to think about what God might have to say about it.

Well that's exactly the situation we come to in Genesis chapter 13. Deal it with me at verse 5. We'll pick up the story there. Now Lot who was moving about with Abram.

Also had flocks and herds and tents. But the land could not support them while they stayed together. So this is the context upon which the rest of the drama unfolds.

Abram and his nephew Lot had become incredibly wealthy. And their households have basically outgrown each other. Abram generously gives Lot the first choice.

And what's striking is how deliberately this passage invites us to compare them. To compare Abram and Lot. So verse 10. Lot looked around and saw.

[8:21] Then in verse 14 after Lot has gone. God says to Abram. Look around from where you are. Both men survey the land.

Lot is invited to choose. Abram is given a promise. And Genesis wants us to ask. What is the difference between these two men? What's the difference?

What do they see? What do they value? What do they trust? Because Genesis 13 gives us a tale of two outlooks. Lot sees with the eyes of the world.

And Abram learns to see with the eyes of faith. So firstly then. Lot is presented with a very significant choice.

Look at verse 8. So Abram said to Lot. Let's not have any quarrels between you and me. For we are close relatives. And then Abram says. Is not the whole land before you?

[9:22] 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. What a crazy generous offer. Abram is the older man. He's the more senior of the two.

The one to whom God has promised all this land. And yet he gives Lot first choice. So what is Lot going to do with this offer? Verse 10.

Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered. Like the garden of the Lord. So you can imagine Lot looking out over the valley from his elevated position there.

Taking it all in. Soaking it all in. It is lush. It is fertile. There's agricultural potential. His people will definitely prosper and flourish there.

It's like finding that dream property online and thinking this is it. What's not to like? The land in fact looks so beautiful and so abundant that it reminds them of the Garden of Eden.

[10 : 26] This is paradise on earth as far as Lot is concerned. And you can imagine him thinking quick make the decision. Get it signed. This offer seems too good to refuse.

Quick before Abram has a chance to change his mind. But as we follow Lot's gaze. We begin to notice and detect some warning alarms.

The first is in verse 10 itself. The land is described as being well watered like the land of Egypt.

Now why mention Egypt? Especially since as we saw last week they both all just come from Egypt. That didn't go particularly well for any of them. But I think this is very interesting.

Because in Deuteronomy chapter 11. Moses contrasts the land of Egypt with the land God is bringing his people to. Specifically he contrasts their water supplies.

[11 : 32] Egypt was irrigated from the Nile by human effort. It still is today. But the promised land was different. It depended on rain from heaven.

In other words. Egypt represents a kind of security that could be engineered and managed by human beings. Human autonomy essentially. The promised land on the other hand depends on the Lord's provision.

So when Lot looks at the Jordan Valley and sees something like Egypt. He sees a place where life just seems to work. Where there's prosper and flourishing and security.

Who wouldn't want to go there? Who wouldn't be attracted by that? There's nothing inherently wrong with wanting those things either. But there is a danger.

When we think the good life is simply securing enough of those things for ourselves. Enough money. Enough comfort. Enough luxury.

[12 : 38] Enough in the bank. Enough security. Enough that we no longer really need to depend on God. We can basically write him out of the picture. We become self-made.

Self-sufficient. Self-reliant. That is a very appealing way to live, isn't it? You leave home. Maybe you go to university.

You get a job. Earn money. Buy your house. Build up savings on an investment portfolio. Without necessarily saying it out loud. You begin to think, I've got this. I can manage life on my own.

Thank you very much. I don't really need God to be involved much at all. That is one of the great temptations in this world. To build a life that is increasingly secure as we become increasingly independent of the God who gives us everything in the first place.

Lot is looking at a land that seems to offer precisely that sort of a life. But there's another warning alarm. Verse 11.

[13 : 49] So Lot chose for himself a whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. Now he went east. So what? Well in Genesis, east doesn't really just mean east.

Movement east often signals movement away from the Lord. Let's just think about it. Adam and Eve are sent east out of the garden. Away from the Lord.

Cain heads east after murdering his brother. Away from the Lord. The builders of the Tower of Babel journey, you guessed it, east as they pursue their own independence and glory.

It's not that east is somehow objectively a bad direction. So if you're here tonight and you're from the east end of Glasgow.

Or perish the thought from Edinburgh. Don't worry. You've made it to the west. No. It's not that east is objectively bad.

[14 : 56] But within Genesis, east is the place where you go if you're heading away from the Lord. Another clue that Lot is heading down the wrong path. Then comes the biggest warning alarm of all.

Eh, eh, eh. Lot heads out towards Zohar, eventually pitching his tent near Sodom. Verse 13 warns us. Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord.

Now let's notice the way the story works. Verse 10 tells us the land looked like the garden of the Lord. Verse 13 tells us what the people living there were like.

Lot sees the fertility of the land. The narrator wants us to see the wickedness of the people. Lot sees a promising place to build his future.

The narrator wants us to see the danger and the moral landscape. And just in case we miss the warning, verse 10 reminds us in the brackets.

[16:01] This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. Presumably by the time it's written it was no longer the lush and fertile place after God's judgment. In other words, as we read this story, we know what Lot does not know.

And what looks like a brilliant decision for Lot in the moment is going to have a devastating outcome on his life. Yes, the land really is attractive.

Yes, it really does look like paradise. But the problem is that Lot only sees part of the picture. And that matters. He sees what he can gain.

But that doesn't reckon with the eternal consequences of the matter. It doesn't reckon with what living there will do to him. He just sees immediate benefits.

That is a very real danger for us too. The world around us is constantly advertising a version of the good life. A better home, a better car, better holidays, better sex, more money, more comfort, more adventure, more opportunities.

[17:10] Those things aren't necessarily bad. But we can become so preoccupied with building paradise here on earth that we lose sight of the world to come.

And Jesus makes a similar point in Luke chapter 14. He tells the story about a great banquet. The master sends out invitations but the invited guests begin making excuses.

And what's striking about it is that none of these excuses are inherently wicked. They are ordinary aspects of life.

Work, possessions, marriage, good things even. But they've become so important that the invitation to the banquet is pushed aside.

We can become so obsessed or absorbed in building a good life here on earth that we miss the life God is offering us. So let me put this plainly.

[18:09] Beware of trying to build paradise here. Beware of trying to build your life too much in this world. Beware of allowing the world to tell you where fulfillment is found.

Beware of making your decisions simply by asking, what looks attractive? What's going to make me more comfortable? What's going to make my life easier?

What will give me the biggest opportunities? Those are not necessarily bad questions. But they're not enough on their own.

We also need to ask, what else is true about this decision? What will this do to my relationship with Jesus and his people?

What kind of a person might have become if I choose this path? What am I failing to see because I'm so attracted by the thing that's right in front of me?

[19:13] Think about decisions that you are making at the moment. And for some of you that may mean how you start the term at college or school, the courses you choose, the friends you make, how you spend your time, what place church will have in your life, which church to belong to.

And making decisions for yourself may be new territory for you. That's part of what it means to be growing up. But will you make those decisions with God in view?

Will you seek his will and be shaped by his perspective? Or will you use your new freedom to build a life in which you no longer really need him?

And for others of us here, those decisions will concern our work, our relationships, where to live, how to use our time and money. Perhaps an opportunity offers a better salary or a more attractive lifestyle.

Or a relationship that seems to promise the life that you've always wanted. But are you looking only at what the opportunity offers you?

[20:25] Or are you also asking what it will do for your life with God? Because our decisions are not simply about where we end up. They're about the kind of people that we become on the way.

And that's what makes Lot's story so sobering. He sees an attractive opportunity. He makes a decision that seems to make sense.

He can certainly rationalize it. And then step by step, he finds himself going nearer and nearer Sodom. And all that represents.

And when we reach Genesis chapter 19, we'll see ourselves, the tragic consequences. The world he chose has a grip on him, a stranglehold on him. He's comfortable there.

He's reluctant to leave. His children don't leave. And the decision that seemed so promising in this chapter has taken him somewhere he never presumably intended to go.

[21:27] And that is a warning for us. What looks like a small decision today can shape the kind of people that we become. Let me give you a personal example.

When I was 17, I chose to go out with a girl. And there were plenty of things about her that I could point to that were very attractive to me back then.

But at the level that mattered most, there was something I should have cared about more. She didn't share my faith in the Lord Jesus. And at the time, it seemed like a small, innocuous decision. Just a date. Just another date. But it became a serious relationship and set me off on a path away from the Lord.

Theologically east, you could say. Now, I can't always see where a decision will lead. But what we choose really matters.

[22:33] The things we allow into our lives shape our love, shape our priorities, our habits and direction. And sometimes what looks most attractive in the moment can take us somewhere we never intended to go.

So what are we to do? We cannot avoid making decisions. But we need to learn to make them differently. We can learn not simply to look at what our eyes can see, but to look at the world in light of God's promises.

And that brings us to Abram. Because Abram is standing in the same place as Lot. Standing in the same world as Lot. He sees the same land. He faces the same opportunities. He has the same responsibilities and problems to shoulder.

But Abram is learning to live by faith. And that, friends, makes all the difference. So secondly, and more briefly.

So far, we have seen Lot choosing by sight and losing sight of God. What about Abram? What does it look like to make decisions with the eyes of faith?

[23:48] Well, let's go back to verse 9. Abram says to Lot, 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. Now remember, Abram is the one to whom God has promised all this land.

He has every reason to insist on his rights. But instead, he has chosen peace. He's humble. He's generous. He's willing to put the relationship ahead of personal advantage.

This is not simply because Abram is somehow a more holy kind of a guy. And we saw last week that Abram is capable, perfectly capable of some very serious failures indeed.

The difference here is that Abram is learning to live in light of God's promises. Learning to trust God's promises. And God has promised him land.

God's promised him offspring and blessing. And Abram is learning to believe that God will fulfill God's promises in God's time. That changes the way he looks at the present.

[24:59] Now Abram is not blind. He can see everything Lot can see. He can see the fertile land. He sees the opportunities. He sees what Lot is choosing.

He sees why Lot is choosing it. But Abram sees something else as well. He sees the unseen reality of God's promises.

He knows that the future does not finally depend on grabbing or grasping at the best looking opportunity in front of him. That means he can afford to be open handed.

He can afford to be generous. He can afford to lose even. He can afford to be humble. He can afford to put peace ahead of gain. And faith frees us to surrender present advantage.

Faith frees us to surrender present advantage because we know that what we surrender for the sake of God is never ultimately lost.

[26:02] That is not just a principle for dramatic, heroic decisions. It shapes ordinary decisions too. Think of friends from a previous church.

She's from Bearsdown, one of the fancier parts of Glasgow. But they moved their family into Easter House because they saw a gospel opportunity there.

Her husband, in fact, had been training for ministry in a church. But during a placement in a church in Easter House, he saw the need there of the broken families of that part of Glasgow and the need for positive role models, male role models for the children there.

So he changed direction. He stopped his training for full-time ministry and retrained as a primary school teacher where he now seeks to be a light for the gospel.

And they were willing to make decisions that might seem very strange indeed to the lots of the world around them. Because they were asking a different question.

[27:07] Not simply, what will make our lives most comfortable? But how may we honor the Lord where the Lord is calling us?

Sometimes it's much smaller than that. For us, it's meant allowing our son to go to rugby training on a Monday evening. But choosing to not let him play in matches on a Sunday.

Because that would mean that he misses out on KidZone and church. Now that may seem like we've lost the plot to some of the guys at Campus Lang Rugby Club. They see the world through the eyes of sport and achievement.

But if we believe that knowing Christ and belonging to his people matter eternally, then those decisions begin to look very different.

And the eyes of faith help us to see this life in the light of the life that is coming. That's exactly where the passage takes us. In verse 14, So Lot looked around and chose for himself.

[28:28] Now the Lord tells Abram to look around and reaffirms his promise. So Abram may have allowed Lot to choose first. But notice he has not lost out.

The Lord will indeed give him the land. Not only a portion of it, but all of it. Not merely for a temporary period, but forever. And the promise is bigger than Abram could yet see.

And as the Bible unfolds, we discover that God's promise to Abram reaches beyond a plot of land in Canaan. Romans 4 speaks of Abraham as heir of the world.

A whole renewed creation in which God will dwell with his people. That is the future Abram is learning to live for. And that, friends, is the future that we are invited to live for as well.

So the question is not simply, what can I gain now? The question is, what has God promised?

[29:34] What will still matter when this present world has passed away? What am I willing to surrender now? Because I know that God is preparing something better than a six-bedroom mansion in a remote peninsula in Dumbartonshire.

And the Apostle Paul puts it like this in Philippians chapter 3. Paul had learned to see the whole of life differently.

Once looked like gain, he could now count as loss. Not because those things had no value in themselves. But because knowing Jesus is of infinitely greater worth.

And you can see the same way of looking at the world in the life of Eric Liddell. The film Chariots of Fire tells the story of the Scottish Olympic runner who declined to compete in his strongest event because the race was scheduled for a Sunday.

He believed that honoring God mattered more than winning Olympic glory. And he gave up the opportunity to win the race that he was most likely to win.

[31:03] So from the perspective of the world around him, that looked like an extraordinary loss. But Liddell was convinced that honoring God mattered more than the honor of the world.

So he entered another race instead. Not his proper event. And as he went to the starting block, somebody ran onto the track and placed a piece of paper in Liddell's hands.

On it were the words from 1 Samuel chapter 2. Those who honor me, I will honor.

Those who honor me, says the Lord, I will honor. And Liddell famously went on to win gold against all expectations.

Now that outcome is not the promise that God makes to us. Faith does not mean that every act of obedience automatically will lead to earthly recognition and reward.

[32:09] But the deeper principle is true. When we honor God, we are never ultimately the losers.

We honor God. God will honor us. We may lose comfort. We may lose status. We may lose dignity. We may lose opportunities. We may lose what the world counts as success.

But we will not lose the future that God has promised to those who belong to Christ. Lot looked at the world and chose what seemed best for him in the moment.

Abram looked at the world around him through the eyes of faith and trusted the promises of God.

Now, brothers and sisters, is the tale of two outlooks.

One man lived by what he could see. The other learned to live by what God says. So as we make decisions in the great choices of life and in the small ones, let us ask God to give us the eyes of faith.

[33:22] Eyes to see beyond the immediate. Eyes to see beyond the superficially attractive. Eyes to see beyond what the world counts as success. Eyes to see beyond the fact that we have to live. Eyes to see beyond the fact that we have to live.

Because when we trust him, we too are free to live lives that are humble, generous, and courageous. And we can know this.

Whatever we give up for the sake of Christ, we will never finally lose. Heavenly Father, we thank you that in Christ, we are never ultimately going to lose out.

Thank you that your promises are sure and that the future you have promised us is greater than anything this world can offer. Help us to trust your promises.

To have our perspective shaped by your word. Lord, we repent of the unwise and ungodly decisions that we've made in the past.

[34 : 27] We repent of the ways we've rebelled against you and your good and holy ways. And where there are decisions we are currently toying with or considering, give us wisdom.

Help us not simply to ask what looks attractive or what will make my life easier. But help us to ask what will honor you? What will help me to know and follow Jesus?

What kind of person will this make me? And so, living God, help us to hold lightly to the things of this world. To fix our eyes on the eternal life that we have in Christ.

And give us the courage to surrender what we need to surrender. The generosity to put others before ourselves. And the faith to trust you when obedience is costly.

And so, by your Holy Spirit, make us your faithful people. Generous, loving, and peacemaking. And a faithful witness to the lots of this world.

[35 : 38] May we live with our eyes fixed. Not on what we can see now. But on the promises of the God who keeps his word. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, we're going to respond now to God's word first by singing a song that gives expression to what we've been thinking about. That what we give up now is nothing compared with the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus.

Please stand. Please stand. Please stand. Please stand. Please stand.