

Holding God's Promises with an Open Hand

Genesis 13:1 – 9

2 Peter 2:4 – 10

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church

April 17, 2016

Have you ever gone canoeing on a river? Typically, in a canoe on a river, you are traveling with the flow of the water, and you are looking out ahead. You see where and how quickly the river flows, noting if there are any rocks or obstacles in your path. You seek to see down the river, and steer a path that will see you safely to your goal. As you move downriver, you do not want to get wet, be tipped over, or swamped.

Sometimes on the river, you face challenges. The current grows swift. The rapids cannot be avoided. You bump an unseen obstacle just beneath the surface. Your canoe gets turned around. When trouble comes, you have to deal with it the best you can, given the realities of your circumstances.

Today we will look at the examples of two biblical characters and the challenge of living faithfully as we navigate the flow of life. We will look at Abram and Lot.

The challenge of living faithfully: the examples of Abram and Lot – Genesis 13:12

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.

Abram and Lot are often contrasted. Abram is described as the *'father'* of faith. He believed God's promises. And, believing, he acted upon those promises accordingly. He steps out on faith and leaves the land of his father. He travels in trusting faith, not knowing where God will ultimately lead. He believes that one day his wife, Sarai, will become pregnant and provide him with the son God has promised to him. In these things Abram is an example of faithful faith. The things God has promised are all unseen at first. Yet Abram steps out believingly in faith.

Lot is Abram's nephew. Lot follows Abram's example. He accompanies Abram on the journey from Haran to Canaan. Lot travels side by side with his uncle Abram. The two are fond of one another. And, they are both blessed by God with material wealth. The Bible does not speak of God leading and directing Lot with the same explicitness that God gives to Abram. But Lot too, like his uncle, is a man of faith.

Some may object to that last sentence. Often in Christian preaching Lot and Abram are contrasted. Abram is the man of faith. Lot is not seen as faithful. I confess that I have done so. I have suggested that Abram is the man of faith, whose example we should follow. And I have declared Lot to be a poor witness; a negative example.

An important principle of biblical interpretation that we affirm as Christians, as Protestants, as Presbyterians, is that we let scripture interpret scripture. There are some biblical questions that the Bible itself answers. In those cases, where the Bible is clear,

then we must listen clearly to the message it gives. The Bible clearly describes Lot as a man of faith. Listen to 2 Peter 2:7 – 10. ⁷[God] rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked ⁸ (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); ⁹ then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, ¹⁰ and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority. In my own understanding, I would not be inclined to describe Lot as *righteous*. But the Bible does describe him in this way. And that leads me to reevaluate my understanding of Lot's witness.

Let us see what lessons we can learn from Lot.

Lessons Learned from Lot

What are we to do with Lot? What are we to make of his story? I see four lessons to be learned from Lot. First, conflict in life is inevitable.

Conflict in life is inevitable - Genesis 13:6 - 7

⁶so 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.

From other stories in Genesis, we know that Abram was clearly fond of Lot. And, Lot reciprocated. It seems reasonable that Lot too believed in the promises given by God to Abram. Lot left his home town of Haran in order to accompany Abram in his call from God to travel to the land of Canaan. Both Abraham and Lot were good people. They were family. They wanted the best for each other.

And, they were both successful men. It was in their success that the conflict was born. They had both grown so wealthy that, as verse 6 tells us, so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together. Conflict is a reality of life. We have difficulty getting along with one another. And, much conflict in life is family conflict. Our families make up the most important relationships that we know in life: husbands, wives, parents, children, uncles, aunts, grandparents and cousins. Because our families are the ones closest to us, it is not surprising that families are often the place of the greatest conflict in our lives. Proximity alone means there will be disagreements: the land could not support both of them dwelling together. Abram proposes a reasonable solution to the conflict, and we will look at that in a moment.

For now, we note what seems like a good idea at the time, is not always so. That life is lived forward but understood and evaluated in retrospect.

"It seemed like a good idea at the time:" Life is lived forward but understood and evaluated in retrospect – Genesis 13:10 - 11

(This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.)

I began this message using the image of life as similar to traveling downriver in a canoe. Life is lived forward. The flow of life is before us. We seek to look downriver in order to prepare and adjust as best we can. But, we can only see so far downriver. Even the wise cannot see all things. Life is lived forward. We do not know what the future holds.

Abram and Lot see the reality of the conflict between their two clans. They search for a solution. Abram proposes that they must separate from one another. And, magnanimously, he gives Lot the right to choose first. As the eldest, Abram could have insisted on his primacy. He does not. And so the choice falls to Lot.

I have heard other pastors say and, I must confess, I have also said, that at this point in the story, Abram is an example of choosing by faith and Lot is an example of choosing by sight: the first being good, and the second being bad. But, I think that in saying such we are unfairly hard on Lot. What influences our lives? There are five arenas that determine the realities that we face in life. The first is what we say. The second: what we do. The third: what others say. Four: what others do. And fifthly, importantly, things that are completely outside of our control.

Abram acts gracefully and lets Lot choose first. Genesis next tells us, in verse 11 and 12: So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other. 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. Lot made the decision based on what seemed right at the time. Both Abram and Lot looked around at the land about them. Both are offered land upon which to settle. Both travel to their chosen portion to make their home. Lot chooses the area that looks to be the best, given what he knew at the time. Lot does not know what the future holds, what is around the corner: (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) The area chosen by Lot is desert today.

From Lot we note that conflict is inevitable in life, especially conflict among family members. We also see Lot, like us, choosing one path, but finding that it leads to a reality we did not anticipate and expect. This leads, to the next point: beware of the corrupting influence in your environment.

Beware of corrupting influences in your environment – Genesis 13:13

¹³ Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD.

You do not go to the beach without getting a tan. In Genesis 13:12 we are told that Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. He pitches his tent in the vicinity of Sodom. Later, in Genesis 19:3, we are told that Lot now resides in a house within the town of Sodom. It is hard to live in Sodom and not live like Sodom. We are attracted to the things we look at. What we look at is what we become. This is the impact Lot's decision has upon him and his family. They pitch their tents looking at Sodom. The years pass and it is natural that Lot is no longer looking just simply looking at Sodom, he is living in its walls. We are creatures of our environments. We influence

one another, for good or ill. We are influenced by the world about us. And for this reason we should take care to guard and control, insofar as we are able, the presence of destructive or corrupting forces in our lives. By the time we meet Lot again in Genesis 19 it is clear that his faith has been compromised. His thinking and values have been influenced, even degraded, by his entanglement with that wicked city.

It is at this point that I see Lot's story as being remarkably like our own day. I look at our wider world and I marvel at the willingness of our society to promote resentment, infidelity, sin, gender confusion, sexual violence, abortion, promiscuity, covetousness, and more. The world we live in specializes in celebrating and promoting spiritual confusion. It is a world that is spiritually adrift. It is a world that is lost. It is a world much like Sodom and we, much like Lot, find ourselves living within that world.

We did not choose it to be so. If we could change it, we would. But, this is the world that has been given to us. And, like Lot, we must live within it as best we can. It is at this point that the New Testament provides us with some guidance. We are to trust God through Christ in the midst of the trials we face in today's world.

Trust God through Christ in the midst of trials – 2 Peter 2:7 - 9

⁷and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked ⁸(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); ⁹then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials

Let us take the last phrase first: then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials. Like Lot, you and I are distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked in our world today. The encouragement is that God rescued Lot. And the promise of 2 Peter 2 is that God will also rescue us.

In order to answer the question as to how God rescues us, let us move on to the lessons learned from Abram.

Lessons learned from Abram

The first lesson we learn from Abram is to call on God.

Call on God – Genesis 13:3 – 4

³And 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, ⁴to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of the LORD.

One thing we notice in reading the book of Genesis is how often, and in how many different places, Abram calls on God. Pat Moreley, the author of our Thursday morning men's studies, likes to include in his studies what he calls "*take-a ways*" – practical suggestions from the study for day to day application. Here is a take a way from the example of Abram: *call on God*. Consider the challenges he faces. Abram has

left family and friends behind in Haran. He is nomadic, with no fixed address. He and his nephew care for one another, but they must part company in order to preserve peace. He travels between Canaan and Egypt. He leads men in battle. He worries that he and his wife remain childless. Abram has many concerns. And we see him repeatedly turning to God in faith.

His example teaches us to call on God. Do you worry about your job and the future? Call on God. Do your children cause you concern? Call on God. Are things strained at home? Lift your concerns to God's throne. Are you frustrated by the choices we are likely to be given in the coming primary and general elections in Pennsylvania and the United States? Express your frustrations to God. Have you recently had a breakthrough in some area of your life? Do what Abram does: build an altar to the Lord to mark the accomplishment and to express thanks. Do not face the challenges of life alone. Turn them over to God. Lift them to his throne. My dad loved to tell of the example of Thomas Edison. When Edison would hit a wall and grow frustrated because he was not moving forward in whatever challenge he was facing at the time: Edison would stop and he would pray, saying; "I lift this problem to the hands of almighty God." And then he would take a nap. We must learn to walk with God in the ordinary matters of life.

We all want to think we would rise to the opportunity of great challenge. We want to believe that in the face of great testing and difficulty that we would stand firm, be unwavering, and that we would do what is right, no matter what the personal cost. But do we really know how we might respond when facing a great and mighty challenge? No. We do not. Indeed, it is wise to pray that we would not be put to such a test. What we do know is how we are serving God today, in the ordinary matters of life. It is in the ordinary things of life my friend that the faith that is inside us is revealed. We live out our faith in the day to day, ordinary things of life.

Think about it: "Who is Abram?" Abram is not known to us because he was a king, or military leader, or artist, or an inventor, or any of the other reasons why famous men are remembered. Abram is an ordinary man. He heard God. He listened to God. He obeyed God. He believed God. And that was enough.

Next, relatedly, we see Abram holding God's promises with an open hand.

Hold God's promises with an open hand - Genesis 13:8 - 9

⁸Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. ⁹Is 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."

In this passage Abram provides a clear example of the value and importance of having a good theology. What people think and believe about God affects how they feel and act; what they think and what they do. Our theology influences our beliefs and actions. When Abram says to Lot that he is free to choose first, Abram is expressing his

continuing trust in the sovereignty of God. Abram knows that God is in control. He is sure of God's power and authority. For this reason, Abram does not have to insist that he take the first choice. He does not have to attempt to influence or guide his nephew in his choice. Abram holds the promise of God with an open hand. He is not grasping what God has promised him. He holds it, in the palm of his hand. He knows that God will watch over it. Abram trusts him to do so. Abram is able to do this because he knows that God is in control. Lot's choice, whatever it may be, will not thwart God's effort or intent. Abram's confidence in God's sovereignty frees him to be generous because he knows that God is in control. If God is in control, then he, Abram, does not have to be.

Our theology affects how we act. When I meet Christians who are stingy, or have a difficult time giving, or tithing to the work of the Lord, I know that their theology is flawed. They are unable to give because their theology is flawed. They think they have to be in control. They don't grasp the scope and sweep of God's sovereignty. They think it is all up to them. If they do not look out for themselves, no one else will. *Believing* in God and *trusting* in God are two different things. Many people claim to believe in God, but are unwilling or unable to trust in him. In chapter 13 we see Abram *trusting* in God as he gives Lot the first choice of the land. He is able to do so because he knows that God is in charge.

Abram teaches us to call on God. His example is to hold God's promises with an open hand. Next, practice your faith wherever you find yourself.

Practice your faith wherever you find yourself – Genesis 3:18

¹⁸ 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.

This is really a reiteration of our first point looking at Abram. Abram is an example for us in the fact that as he travels he does not leave his faith behind. He returns to the land of Canaan and he travels first to the place where he had built an altar before. He returns to his roots. He keeps God at the center of his walk of faith. Abram has built altars at several places, but it is here, near Hebron, where Abram will be remembered. He and the other patriarchs, and their wives, are buried here. The Tomb of the Patriarchs is a place of pilgrimage to this day, though in recent years it has become a place of political controversy as well.

The life of faith is often an unsettled life. We do not know what the future holds. We do not know what God is doing. We do not know what God intends. God promises Abram an heir. Then Abram waits twenty-five years before the promised heir arrives. Who would have expected that?

When I sometimes hear pastors preach a message that says, to the effect, '*Come to Jesus and he will solve all your problems for you*' I want to smack that preacher on the side of the head and ask, '*What are you preaching that for?*' Come to Jesus and he will give you a whole new set of problems. They are better problems. They are the problems we encounter on the path to eternal life. But they are problems

nonetheless. What Abram teaches us is to develop the habit of building an altar to the Lord, of turning to the Lord, wherever we may find ourselves in our lives. He reveals to us the practice of living our lives before God's face.

Abram walks by faith, holding the promises of God with an open hand. He is not perfect. He has his flaws. But wherever he walks and wanders, he does so continuing in his walk of faith. He does not leave his faith behind, instead it accompanies him each step of the way.

Close: Lot is blessed by his relationship to Abram: we are blessed by our relationship to Jesus Christ – 2 Peter 2:9

⁹ then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials,

We have looked briefly at the stories of Abram and Lot. Abram is a man of faith. The image of him is that of the Father of faith. And, we noted that the Bible teaches that Lot too is a man of faith, though how Lot is a man of faith is a bit more challenging for us to discern. In what way is Lot a man of faith? I would argue that the best way to understand Lot is that he is just like you and me. Lot is blessed by his relationship to Abram; just as you and I are blessed in our relationship to Jesus Christ. I believe that this is the best way to understand Lot. He is among the elect, as 2 Peter 2 makes clear. He is blessed because of his relationship to his uncle Abram, to whom the covenant was originally given. Lot is blessed by the covenant. He is repeatedly rescued and saved by his uncle Abram. In the end he is saved, Lot is saved because of his relationship to Abram.

The Bible does not want us to miss this point. In the story of Genesis, Lot is saved by Abram twice. The first time takes place in chapter thirteen. The king of Sodom is attacked and defeated by a coalition of other kings and part of the fallout of his defeat is that Lot and his family and wealth are captured and taken prisoner. When he hears this news, Abram leads a team to rescue Lot and his family and wealth. This is the first rescue of Lot.

The second comes later, in chapter 18. God has determined that he is fed up with the wickedness of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and he is going to destroy them utterly. God informs Abram, by this point he has been renamed, Abraham, of his intent to destroy these wicked cities. Boldly, Abraham begins a prayer of entreaty, negotiating that God not destroy the cities if there remains in them a righteous remnant. Lot's name is not mentioned, but it is clear that Abraham's prayer is motivated for the sake of his nephew residing in the city of Sodom. In answer to Abraham's prayer God sends his angels to warn Lot. And, incredibly, when the day of destruction arrives, Lot *lingers*. God's angels force Lot to flee the city before it is destroyed. Lot is saved, but by the skin of his teeth.

In the end, what mattered was that Abram had the promise. It is Abram's promise that is fulfilled and endures. In Genesis 12 we are told that Abram believed God. In Genesis 13 we see how Abram's belief in God is revealed in concrete and specific

actions that unveil his trust in God's sovereignty. Abram did not have to fight or conspire in order to lay claim to the promises, to the land God had given. He could hold it with an open hand. Abram knew that God was sovereign.

And, in the end, you and I are more like Lot than we are like Abram. Like Lot, we are saved not by who we are, but by who we know. Lot is rescued because of his relationship to Abram. It is his relationship to his uncle that makes all the difference. Lot is blessed by his relationship to Abram. Similarly, we are blessed by our relationship to Christ. It is Christ who rescues us. It is Christ who protects us. It is by our relationship to Jesus Christ that we find salvation.

As we close, I invite you to place your faith in Christ today. We like to think that we are independent, that we can be our own man or woman. We think that we can be self-made. What is needed is for us to recognize our own need. Turn to Christ. Believe in him, and be saved.

Say "Amen!" Somebody.

Genesis 13:2 – 13

² Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. ³ 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, ⁴ to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of the LORD. ⁵ And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, 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, 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.

⁸ 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. 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." ¹⁰ 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.) ¹¹ So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other. 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. ¹³ Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD.

2 Peter 2:4 – 10

⁴ For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment; ⁵ if he did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; ⁶ if by turning the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes he condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is going to happen to the ungodly; ⁷ and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked ⁸ (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); ⁹ then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment, ¹⁰ and especially those who indulge in the lust of defiling passion and despise authority.