

Genesis 13 What are your priorities?

Introduction

What is most important in your life? What are your priorities? If we who are parents had to ask our children to write down the top handful of priorities in our homes (as they grew up for those who are no longer at home), what do you expect they would write down? Over the years many parents have seen children reject the things they believe and stand for and have wondered why this is the case. It is not just what we say is important that they notice; much more important are the values that we live out in daily life. One of Napoleon's biographers was thrilled to find his chequebook and declared that he would now be able to discern the heart of the man by observing the financial priorities he held. Are money or material possessions the top priority for any of us? If it is then everything else will be aligned to that priority; other people will take a lesser place and ethical standards that might hinder the acquisition of money will be modified. Jesus said: *where your treasure is there your heart will be also* (Matthew 6:21). Is academic success at school or promotions at work and career advancement the top priority? These questions are about good things in which we can celebrate success when appropriately obtained. Yet if we tell our children that their identity is shaped by the grades they obtain at the end of high school where does that leave the many whose attainment levels are different to what had been expected? Particularly for us men (but not exclusively so) if our total identity is associated with our work where does that leave us when we face unemployment or retirement? If you were given the challenge of describing yourself for sixty seconds – how would you get on in performing this task if you were not allowed to mention your work /career? For other people their social life or leisure pursuits or holidays are the axes around which their life revolves. Who am I? why am I here? what is the purpose of my life? These are fundamental questions that many people avoid answering because deep down they are afraid of where such a journey might lead. For the Christian the first question of the old seventeenth century catechisms addresses this issue and it gives the following answer: 'Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.' Eric Liddell, arguably Scotland's greatest athlete of the twentieth century, memorably ran to glorify God and bring pleasure to Him. Many people drift through life without ordering their priorities and as a result can miss the purpose for which they were created. This chapter, Genesis 13, reflects on the issue of priorities of two individuals and the consequences of their choices. It can act as a mirror for us and provide an opportunity to consider how the choices we make align themselves with God's purposes for the lives of His children.

1. Conflicting values (Genesis 13:1-7)

(a) The restoration of worship (Genesis 13:1-4) *So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. ² Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold. ³ From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier ⁴ and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the Lord.* Abram, we need to remember, had spent time in a place where God had not intended him to live. He had left Egypt in disgrace (Genesis 12:20). The Pharaoh was disgusted that this man could compromise his wife's honour to save any risk to his own life. It was a negative witness of the most unacceptable kind. We might say that weaving recklessly at high speed through traffic, while prominently displaying a bumper stick that invited readers to consider whether they are ready to meet Jesus, would invite a similar moral dilemma. Abram has got away with what he did and has now returned to the land of Canaan. Genesis 13 begins by reported that the family had returned home. Yet it adds an additional piece of information. *Abram had become very wealthy*

in livestock and in silver and gold (Genesis 13:2). Although it is not mentioned here at this point, it is likely that a similar point could be made about Lot. Almost certainly he too was also richer than he had thought possible when the family had fled to Egypt. Had you and I been living in Canaan and observed this extended family returning to Bethel then we might have been tempted to think that they were much better off having been in Egypt. This is how we as a society often judge people today by the kind of homes they live in or cars they drive; or what kinds of clothes and accessories they purchase for their children. Yet the outward trappings of success are no guide to the kind of person or family that displays them. Abram and his nephew Lot would soon see their relationship break down and never recover its former strength. Yet there is a sign here that Abram wants to get his life back on track. Genesis 13:3-4 stated: *From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier ⁴ and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the Lord.* I take this statement to mean that Abram had backslidden from worshipping God in Egypt, keeping a low profile and not standing out from the crowd. Yet now a little older and wiser he recognised his need to put God in the centre of his life and decision-making. Do you need to do that at the present time? Has God been in your life, but on the periphery rather than in the central place? We have the wonderful assurance in I John 1:9 that when we seek to be restored to full fellowship with God that He hears us and forgives us all our sins. *If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* Abram had chosen to live in a place where he could have good fellowship with God. One of the most crucial tests for a Christian thinking about moving home or location for a new job, for example, is this: is there a good Evangelical Church close by for me (and my family) to attend? If you would not think of moving house without thinking about the choice of schools for school-age children surely as a Christian the highest priority of all is to ask what spiritual provision would there be in that location? Abram had regained a sense of spiritual perspective here by being in the place where God wanted him to be where he could most easily worship the Lord and serve Him. For those of us with children when these kinds of decisions are being made it may be appropriate to explain to them how as a Christian parent we endeavour to make right choices in our lives. This would allow them to have a framework on which to build when they become of age to make those choices for themselves.

(b) **The mixed blessings of prosperity** (Genesis 13:5-7) *Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. ⁶ But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. ⁷ And quarrelling arose between Abram's herders and Lot's. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time.* There is no indication here that Lot was joining in the worship of God at Bethel. We must be careful not to read something into Scripture, but it is possible that this young man liked the thought of adventures with uncle Abram, without following the faith of his relative. There is no indication in the biblical text that prior to their time in Egypt there had been any problems between the two men and their employees. Why was there a problem now? Genesis 13:6 has the answer: *The land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together.* In the Middle East fertile ground for livestock was at a premium; in the past with more modest possessions they had no problem living in the same location. Greater wealth does not automatically bring greater happiness. A high proportion of lottery winners wish they had never won the huge cheque that came their way because they could not handle, amongst other things, all the changed expectations of the people around them that came with it. In a materialistic culture adverts are continually shouting out –buy this, get that and the quality of your life will greatly increase! Most of the time the adverts are for things we had never heard of, lived happily without and would make at best make a marginal difference to our lives. Abram, we are

reminded in Genesis 12: 16 had gained the following possessions in Egypt: *sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels*. Genesis 13 covers the consequences of the majority of these listed items; Genesis 16 will address the remaining one. Paul, in his first letter to Timothy passed on a prophetic warning about holding a wrong sense of priorities concerning money and material things. *For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs* (I Timothy 6:10). May God help us to not only articulate, but also model an attachment to God-honouring values in our daily lives.

2. Contrasting visions (Genesis 13:8-13)

(a) **The freedom of walking by faith** (Genesis 13:8-9) ⁸ *So Abram said to Lot, “Let’s not have any quarrelling between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are close relatives. ⁹ 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.”* Abram was quick to spot the trouble brewing over the horizon and sought to deal with it promptly. We can at this point take a step back and think about the first readers of this narrative. Moses is usually credited as editing the text of Genesis and ensuring the material was presented to a wider audience of people than would have been the case prior to the creation of the nation of Israel. The Jewish people would certainly have heard these stories read to them during their wilderness wanderings. Literally in verse 8 Abram says to Lot *Let’s not have any quarrelling (**meribah**) between you and me*. This would have struck a chord with the Israelites in the desert as it connected to the story recorded in Exodus 17:1-7: *The whole Israelite community set out from the Desert of Sin, travelling from place to place as the Lord commanded. They camped at Rephidim, but there was no water for the people to drink. ² So they quarrelled with Moses and said, “Give us water to drink.” Moses replied, “Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the Lord to the test?”³ But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?”⁴ Then Moses cried out to the Lord, “What am I to do with these people? They are almost ready to stone me.”⁵ The Lord answered Moses, “Go out in front of the people. Take with you some of the elders of Israel and take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile, and go. ⁶ I will stand there before you by the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it for the people to drink.” So Moses did this in the sight of the elders of Israel. ⁷ And he called the place Massah (testing) and Meribah (quarrelling) because the Israelites quarrelled and because they tested the Lord saying, “Is the Lord among us or not?”* The context of those verses from Exodus 17 related to water shortages for the large Israelite population. It was too large for the arid desert lands to provide for their needs. There were too many people and too many animals to sustain without the modern methods and technology of agriculture and horticulture that really only became a feature of life in Israel since the return of the Jewish people in the last hundred years. Egypt had been a place of plenty –in material terms- but the price to pay, slavery, was too high. Moses was reminding the people that there can be significant hardship to experience on the way to the Promised Land, to the place where God wants His people to be. As they heard, or a handful of them read, Genesis 13 they would quickly recognise that Abram and Lot and the people with them were experiencing, on a smaller scale, exactly the same difficulties they were struggling with. They would naturally sympathise with this plight and wonder how did they cope with this crisis? Did they pick up the link between Abram’s unexpected prosperity and the problems that would not otherwise have arisen? I suspect not! Human nature causes us to filter out the things we would rather not see or acknowledge! In the same way in our own generation we can be tempted to think, speak or do things that will be to our apparent advantage, but at a cost to our own wellbeing or of that of our family. For example, a promotion accepted at work might bring in more money, but is the extra time and pressure really worth it? I have known a few men over the

years who have rushed into taking new jobs in other parts of the country, but who did not think through the implications for their families. It was a kind of tunnel vision. The choices each of us makes affect not only ourselves but also the people closest to us. Getting what we want doesn't necessarily provide the greater happiness or fulfilment we had been seeking. Psalm 106:15 in the New King James version reads: *He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul.* In the context the Psalmist was referring back to Numbers 11 verses 18-20 and 33-34 where the Israelites in the desert had been complaining about the inadequate food and their continual ingratitude angered God. He allowed them to have what they sought, an act of amazing grace, but then allowed them to face judgement as a consequence. The reason why God does not answer some of our prayers in the way we wish is because He can see down the line unforeseen consequences if our wishes were to be granted. Things that if we had known them would have led to us changing our prayer requests. Human parents on many occasions ask their children to trust them (and rightly so) while declining some of their pleas! In the same way our heavenly father wants the best for His children and we need to trust Him to bring that to pass in His time. Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount expressed it this way: *If you, then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him!* (Matthew 7:11).

In Egypt Abram had been prepared to sacrifice his wife's reputation to look after himself, when it was to his advantage. Culturally that might have been acceptable in that day to the vast majority of people, but it was not to God or those individuals who claimed to follow His standards. Here instead of asserting his right to choose where to divide the land Abram allows the younger man to make the choice. It could have resulted in his material loss, but he was sufficiently confident that God would keep His promise to him concerning the land that he allowed Lot to make the decision. In many situations in life this is so hard. Yet how many law suits between Christians take place that ought never to have happened (see I Corinthians 6:1-8). By contrast Abram was modelling here the mindset of Jesus which Paul sets out so memorably in Philippians 2:1-5: *If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.⁵ Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.* Humility and consideration of the needs of other people begins in the small things of life with common courtesies. It is unlikely someone would take a big step like Abram did here were they not normally thoughtful and considerate in smaller things. However, living this way as Abram did here is an eloquent statement of our trust in God that our needs will be met and that we do not need to trample on others in order to get what we want; Notions such as the 'survival of the fittest' are totally alien to the follower of Jesus. (b) **The folly of walking by sight** (Genesis 13:10-13) ¹⁰ *Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan toward Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.)* ¹¹ *So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company:* ¹² *Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom.* ¹³ *Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord.* Abram may have learned his lesson, but unfortunately his nephew was only thinking of how he might get even more rich and prosperous. It was a pattern of spiritual decline that was salutary. If ever there was a powerful warning about the consequences of sin it is found in this story. Abram had repented of his sin and returned to fellowship with God, but Lot whom he had influenced into going away from God's plans for his life now continued on that downwards trajectory. Your witness and mine can be seriously undermined by a momentary act of folly or some seriously

unhelpful words that despite later repentance have inevitable consequences. It doesn't have to be as serious as David's sin with Bathsheba and Uriah and its disastrous impact on his son's lives. Notice what happened here with Lot: (i) *Lot looked up and saw...*(Genesis 13:10) (ii) *Lot pitched his tent near Sodom* (Genesis 13:12) then (iii) *Lot was living in Sodom* (Genesis 14:12); and finally (iv) *Lot was sitting in the gateway of [Sodom]* (Genesis 19:1) that is, he had been recognised as a civic leader in Sodom. It would take years for this regression to take effect, but the sad story of Lot's compromise is salutary and a warning to us. It began with looking at inappropriate (for him) images; the sight of the plains of Jordan was good in itself, but the way Lot viewed it was unwholesome; in our culture the viewing of pornographic images on the internet or periodicals can so easily be a gateway to serious moral failure. What we regularly view on the internet, TV or the cinema shapes our thought patterns – sometimes we need to stop and ask are my choices appropriate? To begin with Lot would not have countenanced the thought of living in Sodom he could gain the material advantages of living in the plain of Jordan, without getting involved in the ethically questionable culture of that city. We warn our children about playing with fire in case they get burned. As adults we are equally vulnerable if we do not keep watch over our life choices. Sometime later Lot rationalised compromise with other people's sin, it's their choice, I cannot live their lives for them and moved his family into the city. Did he not think about the young people his daughters would play with, socialise with, and their values? It appears not to be the case. Fast forward a few years and Lot has been made an elder of Sodom involved in the decision-making processes of that place. Was social reformation, Wilberforce-style taking place? No! On the contrary he was completely silent and thereby associated with the wrongdoing of that place. Psalm 1 could have been written as a meditation on this story, with the figures of the righteous man (Abram) and the wicked man (Lot) and the long-term consequences of their lifestyles. Reflect on it carefully when tempted to compromise your principles. On the surface many people who look out only for number one appear to prosper. Asaph the writer of Psalm 73 for a time struggled deeply with that issue. He admitted how he had been seeing things: *But as for me, my feet had almost slipped; I had nearly lost my foothold.* ³ *For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.* ⁴*They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong.* ⁵ *They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills* (Psalm 73:2-3). Sometimes because we only see a part of what is happening in other people's lives we can miss the cost of compromises. Asaph came to recognise the folly of going away from God's standards and renewed his trust in God. May we do the same when we are tempted to water down our principles and risking undermining our witness for the Lord.

3. Confirmation of the promise (Genesis 13:14-18)

(a) The reassurance from God (Genesis 13:14-17) *The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. ¹⁵ All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you."* Lot's envious looks at the material prosperity of the people in the plains of Jordan would lead to his spiritual shipwreck; he had also chosen to live outside the Promised Land and so would forfeit any share in the promises of the land to Abram and his descendants. He would never be a potential heir of Abram. His actions actually confirmed God's promise in Genesis 12:7 that a biological descendant of Abram would inherit the Promised Land. Lot's life choices would go in time from an unwise but legitimate one, later to bad and then to utterly foolish choices, a little misstep at first leading to potentially much more serious problems; so can our envying of other people's homes, cars, careers, clothes or whatever it may be. Abram had appeared to

have learned his lesson on this issue. Was he to be the loser because he had been humble and allowed God to provide for His needs? No! Notice what God said in verse 14: *Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west.* It was only after Lot had got his way and left that God gave this assurance to him. In the same way for us today one door may have to close before another is opened for us by God. Actually what God said to Abram was stronger than rendered in the NIV. God uses a small Hebrew particle **na** (*Please*) in verse 14. *Please look around...* On only four occasions in the whole Old Testament does God speak to humans in this way; in each case God asks someone to do something that appears most unlikely to happen. Here God is saying Abram you have given away any rights to the best land, but your honouring of Me in this situation will lead to the guaranteeing of this whole Promised Land to your descendants –take a good look at it! The second example is in Genesis 15:5 *Please look up at the heaven...* you will have a son in your old age; the third in Genesis 22:2 *Please take your son, your only son Isaac...* and sacrifice him; the final one in Exodus 11:2 where Moses was told to ask fellow Israelites to ask for parting gifts from the Egyptians prior to their departure from Egypt. Abram you have put Me first I will vindicate you, in time, and honour you for making this right choice. This is exactly the same in each generation of the covenant between God and His people. The way He may honour you and me will be different –we are not personally promised a geographical territory in the Middle East! But the principle is exactly the same. Be encouraged to keep faithful to God’s priorities for your life –he will vindicate you too.

(b) **The resolution of Abram** (Genesis 13:18) ¹⁸ *So Abram went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he pitched his tents. There he built an altar to the Lord.* The simple step Abram took demonstrated that he had trusted God to fulfil His promises in the future. Years would pass before Abram saw any visible evidence that God had kept His Word. Patience is a real problem in our culture. ‘Lord give me patience –and give me it NOW!’ We know how true this is, and trusting in God for our future is so counter-cultural. Abram had reached a cross-roads in his life. Would he trust God completely with his future or not? He faith had seriously wobbled and he had gone off to Egypt, but in this passage he is back on track. Will you reaffirm your confidence in God to take care of your future? I hope each one of us will do that, knowing that God honours those that honour Him, Amen.