



BACK TO THE BIBLE SERIES: A Vibrant Faith: Genesis 12-25 wk. 1

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“At first, I saw God as my observer, my judge, keeping track of things I did wrong, so as to know whether I'm merited Heaven or hell when I die. He was out there sort of like the president. I recognized his picture when I saw it, but I really didn't know him. But later on, when I met Christ, it seemed as though life were rather like a bike ride, but it was a tandem bike and I noticed that Christ was in the back helping me pedal. I don't know just when it was that he suggested we change places, but life has not been the same since.

When I had control, I knew the distance between two points. When he took the lead, he took delightful long cuts. It was all I could do just to hang on. Even though it looked like madness and he would just say pedal, I worried and was anxious and asked, where are you taking me? He laughed and didn't answer, and I started to learn to trust. I forgot my boring life and entered into an adventure. And when I'd say I'm scared, he just leaned back and touched my hand. He took me to people with gifts of healing and acceptance and joy. They gave me gifts to take on my journey, my Lord and mine, and we were off again. He said, give the gifts away, they're extra baggage, too much weight. So, I did to the people we met and I found that in giving, I received and still our burden was light.

I did not trust him at first in control of my life. I thought he'd wreck it, but he knows bike secrets. He knows how to make it bend and to take sharp corners, knows how to jump to clear high rocks, knows how to fly to shorten scary passages. I am learning to shut up and pedal in the strangest places and I'm beginning to enjoy the view and the cool breeze on my face with my constant companion, Jesus Christ. And when I just can't go anymore, he just smiles and says pedal.”

I've used that story before, but I think it captures so well this struggle that we all feel when we desire to be a people of faith.

I think it's important to point out that whichever case it is, whether it's you steering or whether it's God's steering, I think the destination that we desire is the same. What people want is a life of happiness and joy and meaning and purpose, a life to love and to be loved and acceptance and belonging and all those things that we would say makes life worth living. That's what people want. It's, it's the destination we're all, we're all riding toward. The difference lies in what we believe about the best way to get there.

This competition between beliefs and values is wonderfully fleshed out for us in Genesis chapter 13 in the story of Abram and his nephew Lot.

Turn with me to Genesis chapter 13 verse one. *"So, Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev. He and his wife and all that belonged to him and Lot was with him. Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver*

and in gold, and he went on his journey from the Negev as far as Bethel to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place of the altar which he had made there formerly and there Abram called on the name of the Lord."

You remember from chapter 12 that Abram had entered the land of promise by faith, but in a crisis of belief because of a famine, he decided to take matters into his own hands. So, he did, and they fled down into Egypt. In the process of that, he went from one bad choice to another and he ended up having his wife lie about being his wife and say that she was his sister so that he wouldn't be put to death on account of her. And he basically sold her out to the Pharaoh for him to do with her whatever he pleased. But God intervenes. And Abram gets back his wife and he's traveling back up into the land of promise. And what we find in chapter 13 is that Abram didn't just enter the land, but rather he backtracked all the way back to those significant places where he had been before, places where God had made promises and he had believed those promises by faith. And he had established markers as a way of saying, I believe that God's going to be faithful.

I think that's worth noting, because from time to time, for whatever reason, we have our crisis of faith and we take our trip into Egypt and then we begin that journey back. There's always those people, there's always those groups. There's those places that we just don't want to face. We just don't want to face. We're embarrassed, we're ashamed for whatever reason. We just don't want to go back. And our tendency is to avoid those places and just kind of hope it all works out. And I think what we're being reminded of in this story is if we're going to take the journey back and really restore and reconcile and get back on the right track, it's very important to go back to those people, to go back to those places, to reconcile, to make those things right. And really to get back on a positive track by faith. And that's exactly what Abram is doing.

You also notice in verse two that we're told that Abram was very rich. As a matter of fact, much wealthier than when he left the land of Canaan. Now, I suppose we could look at that and say, you know, it seems to me that Abram came out of this thing pretty good. I mean, he escaped the famine. He ended up getting his wife back. He comes back to the land of promise. He has far more wealth than when he left. It seems to me he got out of this pretty good. Well, one thing you have to remember is had God not intervened, Abram was, was in big trouble in Egypt, but God in His grace continued to bless him. But I think it's also worth noting that there will be residual effects from Abram's trip to Egypt that would plague his life the rest of his life.

One of those residual effects would be the effect that he had on his nephew Lot. When we read the story in the latter part of chapter 12 we can forget that Lot was even on this journey because he was kind of a non-player through that whole episode there in Egypt. But he was there every step of the way. And what we find out is that Lot was dramatically affected by what happened.

Stop and think about what uncle Abram taught his nephew Lot. First of all, he taught him that in a crisis, God can't be trusted. In a crisis make sure you take the handlebars and steer your own bike. And then as he continued to make those kinds of decisions all the way along, he basically taught Lot that whenever there's a crisis, make sure you save your own skin because God can't be trusted.

Then once they got into Egypt, Lot was exposed to the value system of the Egyptians, a value system of pleasure and materialism and wealth and that became Lot's value. And that's what he bought into. And in many ways, Lot would never get back out of that value system. And that's where we pick up the story.

Verse five, *"Now Lot who went with Abram also had flocks and herds and tents, and the land could not sustain them while dwelling together for their possessions were so great that they were not able to remain together. And there the strife between the herdsman of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling then in the land."* We're told that Abram had so much wealth in terms of his livestock and Lot had so much wealth in terms of their, uh, livestock that they just simply couldn't co-exist anymore. In addition to that, there were some real enemies that they had to contend with. They didn't need to be fighting among themselves as family.

But what was really happening is that there was a clash of values systems. Lot's value system had now become very different from Abram's value system and the more they experienced this wealth, the more those value systems became incompatible with one another.

I do think it's interesting to notice that the reason that this conflict arose was a result of the blessing of God. Now I happen to think that God was blessing Abram and Lot so that these two value systems could be exposed so that they would be separated so God could go back to pouring his blessing out on Abram who was choosing to walk by faith.

I think it's interesting how often God's blessings expose what's in our hearts. God's blessings often expose our value system.

Sometimes when we don't have much, it's hard to tell how materialistic we are. As God blesses us with success and some of the things of this world, suddenly it becomes obvious, we're very selfish. We're very materialistic. It starts to show. The value system is starting to be exposed. Sometimes people experience success in the marketplace, all of the sudden they become very prideful. The blessing of God is starting to expose what was there in their heart all along.

If that's true, then there must be many, many times when God longs to bless us and He can't because we can't handle it. He knows what's in our hearts and He knows what would happen if he blessed us and for our sake and the sake of those people around us, He just chooses not to because it would only intensify what's already there in some way in our hearts. Well, I think that's what's happening here. It creates this conflict to which Abram responds.

Verse eight, *"Then Abram said to Lot, please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsman and your herdsman for we are brothers (or it could be we are family). Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me, if to the left, then I will go to the right, or to the right, then I will go to the left."*

This is the first-time dialogue has come out of Abram's mouth, recorded in the text since his crisis of faith in chapter 12. In chapter 12 he opened his mouth and out came incredibly selfish words. To the extent that he was willing to sell out his own wife to save his own skin. That's the last thing that had come out of Abram's mouth that we know about until we get all the way into this story in chapter 13. Now what comes out of his mouth is a completely selfless statement. He couldn't have changed more radically.

Abram was the elder. Abram was the uncle. He had all the rights. Beyond that, Abram was also the one to whom the land was promised. He had every right to say, Lot, this is all mine. You're going to have to go find some land, but instead of doing that, he said, just the opposite. He said, Lot, we don't need to act like this. You look around and you take whatever you want, and I'll take whatever's left.

Because Abram had learned what it means to trust God by faith, Abram had learned that when he takes control of the bicycle and he steers it, it just leads to trouble. So, he's made a decision to let God have control. They have the front seat to steer the bicycle and Abram's reflection of that is simply saying Lot you can have whatever you want because I know that God will take care of me. He's gone from complete selfishness to selflessness because he learned his lesson from his, from his trip to Egypt.

How does Lot respond? Verse 10, *" And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan that it was well watered everywhere. This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah - like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar. So, Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus, they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan while Lot settled in the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord."*

If Lot had any integrity at all, when Abram made that offer, he would have said, you know, you're the elder. It's your land. You take what you want, and I'll live on the rest. But he didn't. Because he had bought into a completely different value system. He had learned in Egypt that you look out for number one, that you grab whatever is there for the taking, and that's exactly what he did. As a matter of fact, the writer's careful to say it looked a lot like Egypt because that's where his value system was. And he looked around and said, that looks like the absolute best there. I want that.

You see that's an accurate reflection of what happens when we take hold of the handlebars, when we're going to steer that bike. When we are in control of our, our own happiness and experiencing everything that we think we need in life to be happy. We become very selfish and we control, and we manipulate, and we scheme, and we maneuver, and we do whatever's necessary to get our way to get whatever we can get because that's, that's a reflection of our value system. That's, that's how we live when we're in control.

The reality is when we choose to take the handlebars and steer our own bike, we are a selfish people. We maneuver, we manipulate, we scheme. We figure out how to do it out in the marketplace, in our marriages, with our children, basically wherever we're at in order to get our own way because we're convinced in our value system that if we don't get it, if we don't control it, that it won't happen.

Think how our lives would be revolutionized if we had the faith of Abram, if we were able to just let go and say, God, I don't have to selfishly try to make all these things happen. I can just trust you. You'll do what's in my best interest and I'll just let you do that. Think how radically that would change our marriages if instead of trying to have our own way and kind of subtly control and scheme, we just, we let go and we just trusted God. Think how it would radically change our relationships with our friends, how you operate out in the marketplace, how it would just radically change our lives in every way. As a matter of fact, it would set us free. That's what Abram did.

How did God respond? Verse 14, *"And the Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward for all the land which you see. I will give it to you and to your descendants forever and I will make your descendants as dust of the earth so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth than your descendants can also be numbered. Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth for I will give it to you. Then Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the Oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron and there he built an altar to the Lord."*

It's interesting that the writer is careful to say that Lot had gone his way, that the Lord once again, returned to Abram and he spoke to him and he basically just renewed the promise he had given to him. Abram, I'm going to give you everything that you want. I'm going to reward your faith. I'm going to fulfill my promise.

It's interesting too to notice in verse 10 the writer says, "*And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw the valley of the Jordan*" and then that's contrasted in verse 14 after Lot had separated, the Lord said to him, "Now lift up your eyes and look", that's a reflection of the two value systems. Lot was on his own. He was doing it himself. In Abram's case, it was the Lord that said lift up your eyes. This is what I'm doing. This is what I'm giving you. It's now yours. Everything that Lot wanted, Abram would be given, but Lot would never get there, Lot would never experience the life that he wanted. When he took control of those handlebars, it would go to Abram.

It's interesting that the writer makes such a point that, that Lot was setting up his tent down by Sodom because that's where he was headed. That is where his bicycle would end up and we'll have to pick that story up in later chapters.

The reality is you will either identify with Lot or you will identify with Abram. You have to make that choice, but I can assure you of this, it's only when God is in the front seat steering the bicycle that you will ever get where you want to go.

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Arnie: So, Bryan, your thing about the bike, you challenge us to be like Abraham and trust God rather than to worry, manipulate and try to grab the handlebars of the bike. And I don't know if it's because I'm a guy or what, but making that change is not only hard, it is sometimes almost unnatural because as guys, and maybe women too, we like to be in charge. We like to be controlling. So, your bike analogy on the one hand is, is very, it hits home. But on the other hand, it's like, oh, come on Bryan, nobody can do that. You're crazy.

Cara: I would say as a woman; I just want to interject.

Arnie: Oh, here we go.

Cara: Yes. And say I don't necessarily grab the handlebars, but I sure like to tell the person who's driving, uh, how to do it better.

Arnie: Yes, I like that.

Bryan: Well, I, I think part of it is, I think often we don't realize we're controlling. We are, but we just don't see it. I think sometimes that's the challenge. But as far as like worry, anxiety, these are conversations, Patti and I have all the time. If you can't change anything by dwelling on it and worrying about it, then it's just wasted energy. What is the point now that makes sense to me? Makes no sense to her. So, part of it is just like your own wiring, but some practical things is your, you're not going to trust God if you don't know God. So, if you go back and think about these great stories, the process was to know God and the more they knew God and worshiped God then the more they trusted Him. So that has to be a significant part of the journey. You have to know Him if you're going to trust Him.

Bryan: I also think it really helps to think of this in terms of everyday, ordinary circumstances. So what would it mean to trust God today? What would it mean for God to be faithful today? I mentioned this before, but again, with these narratives, 400 miles from Haran to Canaan and we don't know anything about that. Really in the life of Abraham, all we see are these highlight moments and we forget, there were all these days in between where they just had to trust God for protection, for provision, for health issues, whatever they were facing. So sometimes I think we make it too complicated. We get overwhelmed by everything and it's like, what would that look like today? What would it look like tomorrow? And kind of take it a day at a time. And then I think you make deliberate choices. Nobody is so spiritual it comes naturally. I think you have to actually think about it. I think you have to make deliberate choices and always remember where there is no risk there is no faith. There's no way to make this easy. That's why it's faith.

Cara: I actually put on my phone because I deal with fear to the point - I want to enjoy my life. The Lord is for me. I will not fear what can man do for me. And I put it on my phone, and it is just a daily reminder. I pick up my phone, I can just go, I'm going to enjoy myself. Everyday I have to say I'm going to get the most out of it.

Bryan: Yeah, great reminders. We talked before about the Ebenezer's. That's kind of an Ebenezer. You, you got to put markers and the reminders and then you make your choices.

Arnie: This brings me back to my hippie days. Anyways this flashes me back to a conversation with my parents about having faith in God. And I would just go berserk because, of course you have faith. You have a dental practice, you're wealthy. You know, they didn't live wealthy, but I knew they had money. Do you have all of this? So, when you talk about stepping out in faith, you don't even know what you're talking about and it just, it's a really kind of a double edged sword, especially in America, isn't it?

Bryan: I think it kind of is, it's helpful to remember though, that everybody steps out in faith is just what is the object of your faith or who is the object is [Arnie: it's all relative]. So everybody's trusting in something. You and your hippie days were trusting something. It may have been different than what your parents were trusting in.

Arnie: Did you know my dad?

Bryan: I didn't, but I also think the evidence of history would be people that have suffered the most are people who have come through at the most courageous faith.

Arnie: Yeah. No, that's very true.