

Abram Builds an Altar

Devotional Reading: Philippians 4:10-19
Background Scripture: Genesis 12–13

Genesis 13:8-18

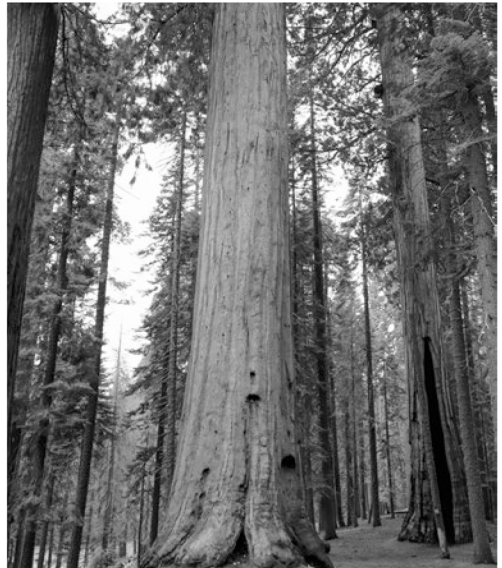
⁸ So Abram said to Lot, “Let’s not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are close relatives. ⁹ Is not the whole land before you? Let’s part company. If you go to the left, I’ll go to the right; if you go to the right, I’ll go to the left.”

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.

¹⁴ 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 off-

spring could be counted. ¹⁷ Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.”

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.



Key Text

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. —Genesis 13:18

Introduction

A. Sacred Spaces

With our signatures on the contract and an offer accepted, the deal was done. We had sold our house. It was only a small condo on a quiet cul-de-sac, but we had been there for over ten years. While saying goodbye, we realized how the space had become more than four walls and a roof to our family; it had become our home.

Sure, the place had its problems when we arrived. My spouse and I had primed and painted over the worn trim; we had fixed the ceiling crack in the kitchen, and—the proudest project of all—we spent a summer tiling a bathroom. That was one of those projects we would never have started had we known the time and effort required.

But when we stepped back and looked around the place, every corner held some special significance and a memory to replay. We thought of our kids who learned to crawl across the carpet. We thought of the family dance parties that woke the neighbors. We thought of our friends who shared griefs and joys around our table. If the walls could talk, they had a decade of stories to tell.

In the narrative of Genesis 13, Abram begins to call a new land his home. He probably had projects on his mind and things he wanted to improve. But he took the time to thank God and claim a space as sacred, meaning set apart for God's purpose. For generation after generation, the descendants of Abram (renamed Abraham in Genesis 17:5) would tell his stories and would refer to this place.

B. Lesson Context

Since the day Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden, the fact of humanity's sinfulness has been nothing new in any era. It was and is a persistent problem. Thus, it was left up to God to restore creation.

The divine restoration plan started in Genesis through a series of covenants and promises made to 75-year-old Abram and his wife (Genesis 12). Their descendants—the nation of Israel—would be the instrument through which God would send the Messiah into the world to inaugurate the new creation. Jesus fulfilled God's cosmic design. Through

Worship in the Covenant Community

Unit 1: Leaders Set Worship Example

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Outline the events that led to Abram's building an altar.
2. Explain the significance of Abram's actions.
3. Create a physical reminder of a time when God worked in his or her life.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Sacred Spaces
- B. Lesson Context

I. Abram's Offer (Genesis 13:8-9)

- A. To Avoid Arguing (v. 8)
- B. To Avoid Crowding (v. 9)
Wisdom or Experience?

II. Lot's Choice (Genesis 13:10-13)

- A. His Inspection (v. 10)
- B. His Selection (v. 11)
- C. His Destination (v. 12)
- D. His Environment (v. 13)

A Cautionary Tale

III. God's Promises (Genesis 13:14-16)

- A. Of Land (vv. 14-15)
- B. Of Progeny (v. 16)

IV. Abram's Tour (Genesis 13:17-18)

- A. Receives the Directive (v. 17)
- B. Responds by Building (v. 18)

Conclusion

- A. That Was Then
- B. This Is Now
- C. Prayer
- D. Thought to Remember

Jesus, a person can become a child of Abraham, joining the family of God by faith rather than physical birth (Galatians 3:7; compare Romans 4:16).

Abraham—known as Abram in today’s lesson—is a hero of faith (Hebrews 11:8-12). He is described that way not because he was perfect or sinless, but because by faith, he left his home when called to do so by God (Genesis 12:1). God’s covenant with Abram included promises of land, progeny, and blessing. It took centuries for all this to become a reality. The conversations between God and Abram that begin in Genesis 12 are instrumental in revealing the development of a personal relationship between the two.

But the text under consideration for today deals with a distraction detailed in Genesis 13:1-7. Abram had decided to take his nephew Lot on the journey to Canaan (Genesis 12:5), a decision that resulted in problem after problem. One such problem is the immediate context of today’s lesson:

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, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. And quarreling arose between Abram’s herders and Lot’s.

—Genesis 13:5-7

I. Abram’s Offer

(Genesis 13:8-9)

A. To Avoid Arguing (v. 8)

8. So Abram said to Lot, “Let’s not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herders and mine, for we are close relatives.”

To be a nomadic herdsman was a common occupation in the ancient Near East. The success of this lifestyle depended upon the land’s ability to provide. The territory of Canaan and the Jordan River valley was quite suitable for such an occupation; the Old Testament describes this land about 20 times as flowing “with milk and honey” (examples: Exodus 3:8; Numbers 13:23-27).

The problem here was what might be called “too much of a good thing.” Despite the land’s abundance, Abram and Lot had too much livestock for the area to support (see Lesson Context; compare Genesis 26:19-22). Thus their respec-

tive herds came into competition for a fixed set of resources. To prevent *any quarreling* that could have endangered their herds, Abram suggested a resolution predicated on their shared kinship.

This instance is not the first time in Genesis that competition between close relatives presents itself (consider Cain and Abel in Genesis 4). Nor is it the last (consider Esau and Jacob in Genesis 26–28, Laban and Jacob in Genesis 29–31, etc.).

What Do You Think?

How should believers deal with conflict and quarrels that arise with family members?

Digging Deeper

How might Matthew 18:15-17; Ephesians 4:25-32; and Colossians 3:12-15 inform how you deal with conflict?

B. To Avoid Crowding (v. 9)

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.”

The location where Abram made this offer was “between Bethel and Ai” (Genesis 13:3). At an elevation of 2,900 feet, Bethel is one of the highest places in the region. Taking the square root of that number and multiplying the result by 1.22459 yields approximately 66—that is the distance in miles that Abram and Lot can see before the horizon makes things no longer visible. Therefore, it’s easy for us to imagine the two men standing on a high vista as Abram makes this offer to Lot.

The offer assures that they will separate, but Abram risks a great deal by allowing Lot his choice. The text says nothing of God’s direction in the affair, but Lot’s self-interest will lead to his unraveling after his departure from the land of Canaan.

We may wonder if Lot is counted as part of Abram’s “father’s household” (Genesis 12:1) and thus shares the promise of Genesis 12:2-3. The text merely says, “Lot went with him” as Abram departed for Canaan (12:4). Thus, we do not know whether Lot accompanied Abram by invitation to do so or if he merely was a tag-along party crasher.

See God's promises
ahead of you and believe.

Hebrews 11:8

II. Lot's Choice

(Genesis 13:10-13)

A. His Inspection (v. 10)

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.)

Much like the present day, access to water was a requirement for survival in ancient times. No water means no livestock. Moreover, in ancient times, all wells had to be dug by hand (compare Genesis 26:12-22, 32-33). An abundance of watering springs was part of God's original creation (2:6), which is what the verse means by the phrase *the garden of the Lord*. The Jordan River valley is compared to *the land of Egypt*, where annual flooding of the Nile River makes the land fertile.

The town of *Zoar* is about 64 miles from where Lot and Abram were standing. The town played an important role for Lot and his family when *the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah* (see Genesis 19:18-30). Furthermore, the reference to the destruction of these cities suggests that this event was widely known among the original audience of Genesis. The placement of this reminder in the text likely prompted the original audience to recall that, although Lot initially seemed to have chosen the most favorable land for selfish reasons, it did not ultimately lead to a positive outcome for him.

B. His Selection (v. 11)

11. So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company:

As *Lot* stood next to his uncle, he undoubtedly thought he had the better deal regarding the choice of land. But as events of Genesis 18–19 unfold, he may have come to realize how poor his choice was! Lot's selected territory means that he will be moving *east*, given the reference point in Genesis 13:3. In the Genesis narrative, traveling to the east has been associated with moves away from God. First, Adam and Eve were driven eastward from the garden (Genesis 3:24). Next, Cain moved east to the land of Nod, "out from

Wisdom or Experience?

The animal kingdom is often harsh and unforgiving to its younger generations. For example, spotted hyenas are highly aggressive to their cubs, often killing all but the strongest soon after their birth. Cubs continue to compete with one another and adult members of the pack so that only the strongest survive to adulthood. Then, the clan runs off any young males, who must find a new pack or create one of their own when they reach maturity.

You would expect emperor penguins to be a gentler species, right? They're so cute on TV! The parents cooperate as they swap tending and hunting roles while their expected offspring develops inside its single egg in the winter. But once the chick is old enough to survive without help, the parents abandon it to fend for itself along with other young penguins.

Hyenas and penguins are just two examples from nature. Humans don't have to act like animals, though. Abraham is an example of how the older generation can teach someone of a younger generation by offering choices that result in the older person's making sacrifices. It's been said that there are two ways to learn things: through wisdom and through experience. *Wisdom* is when you learn from the mistakes of others; *experience* is when you learn from your own mistakes. Lot's choice eventually resulted in the latter. What can you do to switch from learning by experience to learning by wisdom? —A. W.

the Lord's presence" (4:16). Finally, the builders of the city of Babel are reported to have an eastward orientation or destination (11:2).

C. His Destination (v. 12)

12. Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom.

Lot's departure to *the cities of the plain* identifies his new home as being just barely inside *the land of Canaan*, according to the boundary designations in Genesis 10:19. The phrase *pitched his tents* points to a nomadic lifestyle (Isaiah 13:20). The Hebrew preposition of the verse at hand describes this action as being *near Sodom*. Soon, however, the preposition changes: in Genesis 14:12, he is described as living "in Sodom." In 19:1, he is described as sitting at the city gates, a place of importance. These verses depict Lot's transition from being a nomad to becoming a permanent foreign resident, as evidenced by his living in a house (19:2).

D. His Environment (v. 13)

13. Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD.

In selecting where to live, Lot had apparently not considered the moral climate, only the availability of water (Genesis 13:10, above). Specific information regarding the nature and depravity of *the people of Sodom* is found in Genesis 19:4-5 and Ezekiel 16:49-50.

What Do You Think?

How can believers safeguard themselves from sinful behavior while living or working in an environment hostile to God and righteousness?

Digging Deeper

How can believers be a humble and godly influence in such an environment? How might Matthew 5:3-16 and 1 Peter 3:15-16 inform your response?

A Cautionary Tale

The talent of Whitney Houston (1963–2012) was evident from when she was a small child. From

an early age, she was an energetic choir member and soloist who raised the roof of her church with a powerful voice and confident stage presence.

She was discovered by a music executive and signed her first record deal in 1983 at 20 years old. She went on to become one of the most popular stars of the 1980s and 1990s. She sold over 200 million records, won numerous awards, and starred in various films.

Unfortunately, superstardom also had its dark side, and it eventually engulfed Whitney. She struggled with addiction and a troubled marriage that brought negative publicity and kept her in a downward spiral. Tragically, she passed away at age 48 when she drowned in a bathtub; heart disease and cocaine were determined to be contributing factors.

The experience of stardom for a young person can lead to overwhelming pressure as various voices attempt to speak into his or her life. We can't know whether or not Whitney's downward spiral came about because of questionable influences. Regardless, it is true that poor choices can lead to disastrous outcomes.

Lot's decision to live near Sodom was one such poor choice; it opened the door to destructive people and influences. The apostle Paul, quoting the Greek poet Menander (342–292 BC), reminds us, "Do not be misled: 'Bad company corrupts good character'" (1 Corinthians 15:33). What kind of company do you keep? Do Paul's directives in 1 Corinthians 5:9-10 offer clarity? —A. W.

III. God's Promises

(Genesis 13:14-16)

A. Of Land (vv. 14-15)

14-15. The LORD said to Abram after Lot had

How to Say It

| | |
|----------|---------------------|
| Canaan | <i>Kay-nun.</i> |
| Esau | <i>Ee-saw.</i> |
| GomorraH | <i>Guh-more-uh.</i> |
| Laban | <i>Lay-bun.</i> |
| Mamre | <i>Mam-reh.</i> |
| Sodom | <i>Sod-um.</i> |
| Zoar | <i>Zo-er.</i> |

parted from him, “Look around from where you are, to the north and south, to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.

With *Abram* alone, God makes a more expansive promise of territory in the land of Canaan (compare Genesis 12:7). If we assume the same location as in Genesis 13:3, then the visibility computations of 13:9 above still apply. Thus, when God invites Abram to look *to the north and south, to the east and west*, that man can see as far as 66 miles in any direction. If we imagine Abram standing in the middle of a circle with a visibility radius of 66 miles, the result is Abram’s potentially being able to view about 13,700 square miles. That’s about one-third the size of the state of Tennessee.

We also note the second mention of Abram’s *offspring* (compare Genesis 12:7). The word *offspring* is often used as a collective singular noun to refer to a line of descendants, but it can also be used of an individual; Isaac will become this “offspring” to Abram, the child of promise from God (21:12). Centuries later, the apostle Paul will note the difference between the singular and plural uses of this word regarding Abraham’s descendants (see Galatians 3:16).

B. Of Progeny (v. 16)

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.

Here the word *offspring* is used as a collective noun, standing for the enormous number of Abram’s future family. The verse contains a complex hyperbole: if *the dust of the earth* could be counted (and it can’t), then Abram’s future descendants could be counted as well (and they can’t either; compare Genesis 15:5). We should keep in mind that at this point childless Abram is 75 years old (12:4).

IV. Abram’s Tour

(Genesis 13:17-18)

A. Receives the Directive (v. 17)

17. “Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.”

In the ancient world, walking the length and breadth of a land was equivalent to claiming ownership of it. Therefore, in accordance with legal tradition, God instructed Abram to survey the land by walking through it. We note that the boundaries with which Abram was familiar in Genesis 10:19 have mismatches with the borders described in Numbers 34:1-12. We keep two things in mind as we compare and contrast those differences. First, God promised in Genesis 17:8 to give “the whole land” of Canaan to Abram and his descendants. What God gave to the Israelites in Numbers 34 probably reflected the Israelites’ track record of rebellion at the time (compare and contrast Ezekiel 47:13-23). They could have had the “whole” land of Canaan had they obeyed fully. But they didn’t (Judges 1:27-35).

Second, several centuries elapse between the time of Genesis 13 and Numbers 34. Boundaries can change in location and name, given the rise and fall of cities and various other currents of history.

What Do You Think?

What steps can you take to ensure that the material blessings God gives you will be used to serve him and love others?

Digging Deeper

How might you use non-material blessings (such as wisdom, time, or expertise) to serve God and others?

B. Responds by Building (v. 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.

Abram responded to the directive and chose to live about 30 miles south-southwest of his location of Bethel stated in Genesis 13:3. The elevation of *Hebron* allows viewing of Sodom, Gomorrah, and Zoar. Perhaps Abram chose this location to keep an eye on Lot (see Genesis 14). The importance of Hebron is reflected in its being mentioned by name more than 60 times in the Old Testament.

An additional reference is the nearby *the great*

trees of Mamre. (Older versions of the Bible may include the word *plain*.) In gratitude for God's provision and attention, Abram constructed *an altar* to offer sacrifices in worship. Stone altars were common to ancient Near Eastern religions, and Abram would have been familiar with their use. They also serve as monuments and places of memory (compare and contrast Joshua 22:26-28). They remind the observer of commitment and significance. Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were buried in a cave near their home in Mamre (Genesis 23:17-20; 25:7-10).

What Do You Think?

How can you create a "monument" or another reminder to help you remember God's provision and attention?

Digging Deeper

Who will you recruit to help you plan and establish such a "monument"?

Conclusion

A. That Was Then

God's first words to Abraham (as Abram) were a directive to leave home (Genesis 12:1). He left his extended family behind as he journeyed toward and within the land God had designated. God deliberately separated him from his past to create a new nation from him—a nation to usher in the Messiah. We may wonder how homesick Abraham became from time to time. We may also wonder if Abraham ever wished he hadn't taken Lot along!

The importance of Abraham (lived about 2000 BC) in salvation-history should not be overlooked. His names "Abram" and "Abraham" appear on the pages of the Old and New Testament nearly 300 times, with about 28 percent of those occurring in the New Testament. In Hebrews 11, Abraham is enshrined in "Faith's Hall of Fame." His example has much to teach us yet today.

B. This Is Now

In a sense, Abraham's story is ours as well. God wants us to know the Messiah he has sent.

But for that to happen, sometimes God has to separate us from relationships, events, jobs, etc., that stand in the way (Mark 10:28-31; Luke 5:27-28). Those separations may come either *in order that* we may know Jesus or *as a result of* knowing Him.

Those who have experienced such severances may have an inkling of Abraham's faith. His willingness to place faith in God before all else makes him stand apart, a hero of faith (Hebrews 11:8-10; compare Galatians 3:9). God expects similar faith even today. When we believe we are called to a different situation, God may not reveal all the details of how to do so and why. If he did, then there would be no room for faith!

We should not be surprised if our journey involves taking a "Lot" along. In the Genesis narrative, that man was nothing but trouble for his uncle. More importantly, it's vital that we not *be* a "Lot"!

What Do You Think?

How will today's Scripture text inform your response when you experience a difficult situation on your faith journey?

Digging Deeper

Who is a "Lot" that God might be asking you to take along on your faith journey?

C. Prayer

Father God, send us into the troubled world as your ambassadors so that we may make disciples as we remind others of what you have done for us. Give us eyes like Abraham to perceive the nature of faith. May we not be a short-sighted "Lot"! We ask this in the name of Jesus. Amen.

D. Thought to Remember

Be ready to exercise a faith like Abraham's.

Visuals FOR THESE LESSONS

The visual pictured in each lesson (example: page 12) is a small reproduction of a large, full-color poster included in the *Adult Resources* packet for the Fall Quarter. Order No. 9780784739136 from your supplier.