

“Abram Builds an Altar”

Lesson Text: Genesis 13:8–18 **Background Scripture:** Genesis 12–13

Devotional Reading: Philippians 4:10–19

Genesis 13:8–18 (NIV)

⁸So 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. ⁹Is 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.” ¹⁰Lot 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.)

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

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

¹³Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord. ¹⁴The 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.

¹⁵All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. ¹⁶I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.

¹⁷Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.” ¹⁸So 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.

TODAY’S LESSON AIMS

- **Learning Facts:** To outline the events that led to Abram’s building an altar.
- **Biblical Principle:** To explain the significance of Abram’s actions.
- **Daily Application:** To create a physical reminder of a time when God worked in your life.

INTRODUCTION

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 parties, as well as 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.

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 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).

Abram’s Offer: Genesis 13:8-9

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 respective 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.).

1. What was Abram’s suggestion to his nephew Lot? (Genesis 13:8-9)

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?

The New Testament tells us that Lot was a just person and the righteous man (2 Peter 2:7, 8). So Abram’s appeal goes beyond their physical ties. He allows Lot to choose which part of the land he wants first.

The location where Abram made this offer was “between Bethel and Hai” (Genesis 13:3). At an elevation of 2,900 feet, Bethel is one of the highest places in the region. 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.

Lot's Choice: Genesis 13:10-13

2. What area of land did Lot choose? (Genesis 13:10-11)

Lot chose the well-watered plain of Jordan. 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). Lot's greed to live where there was good vegetation also exposed him to the wickedness of Sodom (vs. 12-13; 19:1-25).

2. What area of land did Lot choose? (Genesis 13:10-11)

As Lot stood next to his uncle, he undoubtedly thought he had the better deal regarding the choice of land. But as mentioned, and as the 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 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).

Lot chose land based on aspects that he saw. What are some things that we choose to do based solely on what we see rather than our godly wisdom?

God gives the best to those who leave the choice with Him! Abraham had every right to decide the issue and tell Lot what to do; but he gave Lot first choice. "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves" (Romans 12:10). The spiritual Christian does not insist on his or her own rights but gladly yields to others.

Meanwhile, Lot *lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom*. This was the first step downwards. 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. In 14:12-14, Lot had to be rescued by Abram.

3. What did Abram's second choice of land signify? What did Lot not consider? (Genesis 13:12-13)

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?

God's Promises: Genesis 13:14-16

After Lot separated himself from Abram, then God called Abram aside. Lot had *looked around and saw* what the world had to offer; now God invited Abraham to *look around* and see what heaven had to offer. He then received a reaffirmation of God's promise to give the land of Canaan to him and his seed forever!

We note the second mention of Abram's *offspring* (compare Genesis 12:7). So extensive a survey of the country, *to the north and south, to the east and west* (in all directions), can be obtained from no other point in the neighborhood; and those plains and hills, then lying desolate before the eyes of Abram, were to be peopled with a mighty nation "like the

dust of the earth” in number. We should keep in mind that at this point childless Abram is 75 years old (12:4). The prospects seen by faith are more rich and beautiful than those we see around us.

4. How did God bless Abram with more than he could imagine? (Genesis 13:14-16)

Abrams Tour: Genesis 13:17-18

“Lift up your eyes and look” was followed by “lift up your feet and walk” (see v. 17). 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. Claim your inheritance by faith! (Josh. 1:1-3; Deut. 11:24). It is your faith in God that determines how much of His blessing you will enjoy.

5. What did God instruct Abram to do after being reminded of his inheritance? (Genesis 13:17)

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?

Abram responded to the directive and chose to live about 30 miles south-southwest of his location of Bethel (stated in Genesis 13:3), in the plain of Mamre located in Hebron.

In gratitude for God’s provision and attention, Abram constructed an altar of witness and worship *to the Lord*. In ancient times stone altars were common. They served 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).

6. How did Abram respond to receiving God’s blessings? (Genesis 13:18)

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

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 (14:12-16)! Nevertheless, the importance of Abraham (lived about 2000 B.C.) 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 even today.

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 he brought trouble for his uncle. However, most importantly, it's vital that we be peacemakers and live by faith!

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.

THOUGHTS TO REMEMBER

1. Be ready to exercise a faith like Abraham's.
2. God will abundantly make up in spiritual peace, what we lose for preserving neighbourly peace.

ANTICIPATING THE NEXT LESSON

Next week's lesson is "Solomon Dedicates the Temple," where we will analyze the structure and movement of Solomon's prayer at the temple dedication. Study 1 Kings 8:22–53.