

“BY FAITH, NOT BY SIGHT”

In last week’s sermon, we saw how Abram’s faithless actions in Egypt put the promises that God had just given him in jeopardy. Though God had spoken to him and even appeared to him, Abram’s response to his first major trial in the land of Canaan was one of fear instead of faith. Nevertheless, God remained faithful to Abram, delivering him from the mess that he had gotten himself into in Egypt. And now, as Abram returns to Canaan, we see him walking by faith once again. And his faith is made all the more clear to us in this passage, because of how it is set against the choices made by his nephew Lot. Abram walks by faith, but Lot walks by sight.

Our passage begins with Abram leaving Egypt, the place where his faith had failed, and returning to Canaan, the place where he had worshipped and served the Lord. It is picture of renewed faith and obedience. When Abram left the land of promise to go to Egypt, there was almost a sense in which he seemed to have left the Lord as well. His actions among the Egyptians were faithless, selfish, and disgraceful. He was supposed to be the one through whom the nations would be blessed, but his deception about Sarai caused the Lord to send down plagues upon the Egyptians. He had failed in his calling. Surely the words spoken to him by Pharaoh - “What is this you have done?” - would have stung deeply.

I think that we all have some sense of how Abram must have felt after such a failure. There are many times in our lives when we allow our fears to dictate our actions, times when we give in to temptation, times when we fail to trust in the Lord, times when our

failures have a negative effect upon others. Abram would have felt shame over what he had done in Egypt. But notice how he responded to his shame. He did not fall into a state of despair. He did not try to make excuses. He did not try to bury his shame. Instead, he responded by turning back to the Lord. He came back to the altar that he had built between Bethel and Ai, and he worshipped the Lord once again. And it was not as though he was able to simply leave all the memories of his disgraceful actions behind him. Sarai and Lot certainly knew what he had done in Egypt, and they were still with him. Going back to Canaan involved admitting that his actions in Egypt were wrong. It would not have been an easy thing to do. It would have dealt a heavy blow to his pride, and that is something that is always difficult for us. It is hard to repent. Such was the observation of Robinson Crusoe in Daniel Defoe's classic novel, where he said that many people "are not ashamed to sin, and yet they are ashamed to repent; not ashamed of Action for which they ought justly to be esteemed Fools, but are ashamed of the returning, which only can make them be esteem'd wise Men." [*Robinson Crusoe*, 15]

Abram had sinned in Egypt, but he was not too ashamed to repent and return to the Lord. And thus he proved himself to be a wise man.

By this time, Abram had become a very wealthy man. And his nephew Lot, who was with him, had also accumulated many flocks and herds. For this reason, when they arrived back in Canaan, the land was not big enough for the two of them. There was not enough food to support all of their animals, and this caused tension between Abram's and Lot's herdsmen. This was now the second time since the Lord brought Abram to Canaan

that the land proved unable to support him. The first time, it was due to famine; this time, it was due to the fact that Abram had accumulated such a large flock. Even though this was a sign of God's blessing, it was also a problem, because the Canaanites and Perizzites were already living in the land. They would have taken up residence in the better parts of the land, so that Abram and Lot would have been forced to eek out an existence on what was left over.

Do you see what is going on here? Abram was facing the very same trial that he faced in the previous passage. Yes, the details were a bit different, but the basic trial was the same. Once again, the land to which God had called him seemed to be inadequate to meet his needs. And it was no coincidence that this kept on happening. God was testing Abram's faith. He failed the first test, responding in fear instead of faith. Now the Lord brought the same trial upon him again.

There is a valuable lesson for us in this. It is a lesson that will save us a great deal of heartache and pain. And the lesson is this. When God brings a trial into the lives of his children, he is determined to accomplish his purposes through that trial. It is true that we do not have perfect insight into all of the specifics of what God intends to accomplish through the trials that we face. But the Bible does give us a general understanding of God's purposes in our trials. James tells us that it is God's will that the testing of our faith should produce steadfastness, so that we might be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing. [Jas. 1:3-4] In other words, God uses our trials to sanctify us. He uses them to perfect and strengthen our faith. Therefore, if we respond to our trials the way Abram

responded when he went to Egypt, if we respond in fear instead of faith, then we have every reason to expect that the Lord will continue to afflict us with similar trials until our faith is strengthened, just as he did with Abram.

As I said, this is now the second time that the land of Canaan has proved to be inadequate for Abram. We know how he responded the first time. What will he do now? I am sure that the temptation would have been very real for him to just give up, to give up on what God had promised him. You can imagine the thoughts that might have passed through his mind. ‘What am I doing coming back to this miserable place? How in the world am I going to survive? Why don’t I just go back to the land that I came from? I never had these kinds of problems there.’ I know that if I were in Abram’s place those are the kinds of questions that would be running through my mind. But whether or not he struggled with such thoughts, Abram did not act on them. This time, he clung to God’s promise. He believed God, and he acted in faith. Abram was far from perfect, but he was a man of faith, and we see that faith very clearly in this passage. This is why the New Testament makes so much of Abram’s faith. He believed what God had said to him, and he demonstrated his faith by resolving to remain in the land.

Abram’s faith enabled him to make a generous offer to Lot, giving Lot the first choice of the land. He did not have to do that. He was the one to whom God had promised the land. He could have taken the best part for himself and forced Lot to make due with what was left over. But he didn’t do that. He was able to be generous because he was trusting in what God had promised him. He was entrusting himself to God.

Lot's response to Abram's offer stands in sharp contrast to Abram's actions in this passage. We can even see an allusion to Adam and Eve's sin in Eden in the way Lot's choice is described. Lot looked at the land and saw that it was good, just as Eve looked at the fruit and saw that it was good. Lot chose what appeared to be good in his own eyes, but in the end his choice proved ill, as we will see in the chapters that follow. As is so often the case, things were not as good as they looked. Lot saw the lushness of the land, but he failed to see the wickedness that was in the hearts of the people who lived there. This is why, as Calvin puts it, "our eyes are not to be trusted."

It is also significant that Lot's choice placed him at the very edge of, and perhaps even outside, the boundaries of the promised land. This is further emphasized by the fact that he travelled east, because going east in the book of Genesis often signifies moving away from the presence of God. This was the case with Adam and Eve when they were cast out of the garden, as it was with Cain when he was driven to the east of Eden. Lot's earthlimindedness caused him to turn his back on the promised land and settle in a land that was so wicked that God's judgment was about to be unleashed against it. What a warning this is for us. It shows us the danger of living by sight instead of living by faith. The problem with living by sight is that we cannot see well enough. When we live by sight, we will always choose that which cannot last over that which cannot fade away.

It must have been disappointing for Abram to see Lot make such a selfish and foolish choice. But the Lord comforted him after Lot's departure, reaffirming his promise to give the land to him and to his offspring forever. And on top of that, at a time when Abram

must have felt very alone, God reiterated the promise of offspring as well, saying that they would be as many as the dust of the earth, far too numerous to count. Have you noticed how many times the Lord repeated his promises to Abraham? And the same could be said of how he repeats all of his promises throughout the Bible. Why does God do this? Because he knows that our faith is weak. He knows that we need constant reassurance and ongoing renewal as we walk as pilgrims in this world.

God then told Abram to walk throughout the borders of the promised land, symbolically taking possession of it. God would eventually make good on his promise to give the land to Abram's descendants. But for now, Abram still had to live in tents in that land. He was still a pilgrim. The land was indeed his, because God's Word cannot fail. However, it was his by faith, not by sight. Like us, Abram had to walk by faith, trusting in what he could not see, because the promise of entering into his inheritance still remained to be fulfilled.

The choice that Abram put before Lot is a choice that is put before each one of us as well. It is the choice between looking for an earthly city and looking for the city whose architect and builder is God. It is the difference between being earthly-minded and being heavenly-minded. It is something that confronts us every day, in all of the little choices that we have to make. What will I do with this extra hour of time? Will I make this purchase? How will I treat this person? How will I respond to this trial? How will I respond to this temptation? Such things reveal where our truest hope lies. Will we live as those who have an inheritance being kept for us in heaven, or will we live as those

whose only hope is in this world? Will we walk by faith, or will we walk by sight? We need to remember that earthly-mindedness is a real temptation for every Christian. Being a Christian does not make you immune to earthlimindedness. As hard as it is for us to believe, Lot was a believer. Peter tells us as much in his second letter, where he says that Lot was a righteous man. [2 Pet. 2:7] Yet almost everything that we know about Lot indicates that he was an earthly-minded man. And in this text, he allowed his earthlimindedness to lead him to settle among the wicked people of Sodom. Lot did not find what he was looking for, because he was looking in the wrong place. He found out the hard way that there is in the end no such thing as earthly contentment, because there is nothing in this world that lasts forever. As Samuel Rutherford put it, "If contentment were here, heaven were not heaven." [*Letters*, 129] Or, in the words that we frequently sing:

Fading is the worldling's pleasure,

All his boasted pomp and show;

Solid joys and lasting treasure

None but Zion's children know.