

Genesis 13-14 'Troublesome Nephew'
18th March 2007, CCL, Steve Palframan

Introduction

I wonder if I could ask you what it would take to change your mind on something really serious?

What would it take to convince you to change the way you live and for you to seek a different way of living?

To be more Christian about it then what would persuade you that the best way to live your life is to live solely for God and his glory?

What would it take to convince you that you might be better off single than married to just anyone because in the light of the promises of Jesus living all out for him matters more than being married?

What would persuade you as a parent that the best thing for your child is not an expensive education, all the latest toys that they want but rather to be pointed to Jesus and encouraged to sacrifice things for him?

How could you be so moved in your heart to understand that in the light of Jesus' return and his promise of a heavenly kingdom it matters rather little how many times you get promoted but more how much you grow as a Christian?

As a young married couple very much in love is there anything which could convince you that to sell up in the UK and go to some far flung corner of the world to take the message of Jesus is not wasting your lives but spending them wisely?

What would it take?

Could you be persuaded?

PAUSE

Well I believe that all those questions are good questions because they reflect truth taught by the Bible – we find those propositions in the Bible which teach us those things.

Listen to a couple...

Jesus says in Mark 8:35

"For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it. What good is it for a man to gain the whole world yet forfeit his soul?"

So we hear it – straight from the mouth of the Son of God – don't gain the world and lose your soul.

Or listen to what...

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 7:32-35

32I would like you to be free from concern. An unmarried man is concerned about the Lord's affairs—how he can please the Lord. 33But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife— 34and his interests are divided. An unmarried woman or virgin is concerned about the Lord's affairs: Her aim is to be devoted to the Lord in both body and spirit. But a married woman is concerned about the affairs of this world—how she can please her husband. 35I am saying this for your own good, not to restrict you, but that you may live in a right way in undivided devotion to the Lord.

Well those are great statements and in some ways they should be enough for us.

But God is very gracious and also very wise.

And God is a preacher. The best of preachers.

He wants to move our wills and our hearts to love him and follow him, not just rewire the way we think.

And so in his mercy to us he's given us a Bible which contains both the statements of propositional truth and stories.

Stories which, by the Spirit of God, move our emotions and drag our hearts to believe the truth and live for it. How? By showing us what it looks like to follow Jesus and what it looks like to go cold on his promises.

And that's why Genesis 13-14 are in your Bible.

You see God is persuaded that viewing the life of Abraham will urge and convince you to live for him.

It's interesting isn't it that when Paul in the NT wants to teach his readers what faith in Jesus looks like he turns them to Abraham and shows them what it means to hope in Jesus.

Paul knew and hopefully this morning we'll find out, that the story of Abraham is both theologically rich and emotionally persuasive.

That if we understand what's going on in these chapters it has the potential to change the way we live our lives.

Well because that's true the main thing to understand when we come to Gen 13-14 is the story, so we're going to spend a good chunk of time getting the story straight in our minds before summing up at the end...

Re-telling the story...

Our children got given a whole box full of videos by some friends. There's everything in the box from Oliver, Sound of Music, Babe, James and the giant peach... even my particular favourite; Mickey Mouse sings country.

But I've discovered why someone invented the DVD... because videos are rubbish aren't they. Just an unstoppable tape which is impossible to navigate. So if you want to skip a bit of Mickey singing round the camp fire you have to watch him do it at double speed.

So to avoid that 'VHS impossible to navigate problem' with the story of Abraham and Lot we're going to divide the story into scenes rather like a DVD with the hope we'll be able to find our way round a bit better when we come back to it at the end...

So...

Scene 1... Abraham Returns...13:1-5

The story begins with Abraham's return from Egypt.

You'll remember how in Egypt he pretended that his wife was his sister and gained real wealth but was kicked out of the country when Pharaoh discovered his lie.

We learnt that although God had promised to give him prosperity he thought he might be able to get it himself through the beauty of his wife.

He swapped faith in the promises of God for the beauty of his aging wife.

And at one level it worked. He did get rich but not the kind of prosperity God was promising so he left Egypt in shame.

Now though things have changed.

The story starts with Abraham and his family travelling from the south of the country with the border of Egypt to Bethel. Bethel is in the north of the Promised Land.

More than that Abraham goes back to the altar he made in 12:8.

The writers point, God's point, is that after his slip up in Egypt Abraham is now back on track. Here is a man renewing his confidence and commitment to the promises of God.

Scene 2... Squabbling breaks out...13:6-7
But things don't go smoothly for long.

This time the problem is not that they don't have enough food – which is what drove them to Egypt last week – rather this time they have too much.

Too many cattle, too many sheep and too many tents. To compound the problem they're still sharing the Promised Land with the Canaanites and the Perizzites.

So Abraham's men and his nephew Lot's men start to fall out with one another.

Look at how he tells us that in v6-7 READ

These are the first signs of trouble which lead to the story which follows.

Scene 3... Abraham is a peacekeeper...13:8-9
In this scene Abraham steps in to solve the problem flaring up between Lot's men and his own.

Abraham's solution is to graciously let Lot choose where he would like to go and live.

Presumably they're still up near Bethel and from the height of the hills around Lot and Abraham would have a pretty good view of the surrounding land.

If you were making it into a film you'd be looking over their shoulders and panning round all the land...

Again the writer's showing that Abraham is so confident in the promises of God that he can share the land with Lot and be no worse off. He can give Lot whatever he wants and it won't thwart God's plan.

Scene 4... Lot chooses badly 13:10-13
At first glance it seems quite innocuous. Lot goes one way and Abraham goes the other.

But there's a subplot here which we need to see.

The writers dropping big hints here that not everything's right.

Look at v10-13

The writer uses several devices to show us that Lot's decision to go to the east in v11 is a stupid one.

Firstly there's the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah mentioned – as if the writer – who's obviously anticipating that we're going to read Genesis a number of times – wants us to remember that Sodom and Gomorrah are later destroyed for their wickedness by fire from heaven – a fact we find out in a few chapters time.

As if to underline his point the wickedness of Sodom is mentioned again in v13

Secondly though there's the direction of travel in v11. Going 'east' in Genesis is a picture of moving away from God – it's the way God sent Adam and Eve after throwing them out of the garden, it's the way the tower builders went and now it's the way Lot's going.

Symbolically in Genesis Lot is moving away from God.

Finally though and most damningly is v12.

Lot is choosing to leave the promised land of Canaan and instead pitch his tents near a wicked city.

It's not incredibly clear exactly where he ends up. He's probably pretty near the boundary of the Promised Land but the writer is clear that the distinguishing characteristic of where Abraham goes is that it's in the heart of the promised land. While where Lot goes is distinguished by its proximity to a wicked city.

If you were contemporising the story you'd make Lot into a Christian who chooses to move to a town where there's no decent church and work in the local strip club – while all the time thinking that there's going to be no impact on his Christian lives.

Well that's Lot. And we know because we've read the story that Lot is committing spiritual suicide.

Not because he's rejecting God outright – but rather because the promises of God are no longer shaping his decision making or his desires.

Scene 5... Abraham blessed AGAIN... 13:14-18
Well if scene 4 leaves us worried about Lot's future then scene 5 leaves us with no such concern for Abraham. He moves into the Promised Land and God re-affirms his promise to give and his descendents the land.

Well those first 5 scenes make up the first half of the story.

By itself the story doesn't say very much. I mean there's enough to suggest that Lot might have made a slightly unwise choice but there's not enough yet to see what comes of it.

Which is why part 2 is so important...

Scene 6... Lot gets nabbed... 14:1-12
Scene 6 shows us that our concerns at the end of scene 4 were only the tip of the iceberg.

Lot in his stupidity has not only moved to the edge of a wicked city but also into the middle of a turf war between local kings.

Power shifts around and various kings with unpronounceable names make allegiances with each other.

Illustration...

I don't know if you've ever watched a film with a friend who's always asking questions about what's going on?

I'm sure we all know someone a bit like that.

Well if this were a film and you were with that friend then this scene would be the one where the questions would be coming thick and fast...

What's his name? Who's side is he on?

But all we really need to know from all this carnage is that the King of Sodom and his cronies lose and so Lot gets taken hostage along with all his possessions – Look at 14:12.

This is the low point for Lot in the story – although in a few weeks time it does actually get worse.

Scene 7... Abraham to the rescue... 14:13-17

One lucky guy manages to escape the marauding armies and the tar pits and runs to Abraham to tell him the news.

Abraham immediately gathers his team of crack troops – 318 of them from his household who have trained for battle.

And he sends them in on a rescue mission.

They arrive at night and win a resounding victory.

But Abraham's troops are thorough. According to v14 they chase the fleeing army for what is probably a bit more than a 100miles until they were sure they'd won.

Then having wiped out the army they rescue Lot and retrieve all his possessions. But – as we find out later – Lot returns to live in Sodom.

Scene 8... Abraham the devout... 14:18-24

Scene 8 is the closing scene of the story and shows us just how much Abraham has changed.

First we've got this instance with Melchizedek who comes from Salem or Jerusalem and is a priest. Together they worship and acknowledge that God has won the victory and should get the glory. Melchizedek even makes up a little ditty to make the point in v19-20.

After which Abraham gives him a tenth of everything he has v19.

But then the King of Sodom – who appears to have stood and watched the King of Salem and Abraham worship God – now offers Abraham some of the spoils of war.

But – and here's the twist - unlike when he moved to Egypt and got rich on a lie this time Abraham wants none of the plunder of war. He wants no-one but God to make him rich!

Listen to what he says in v22-24 READ

PAUSE

The point of the story...

Well that's the story and I'm sure I've not re-told it that well but do you see what the writer is trying to do?

In the story you have 2 pictures.

One a picture of unwavering faith in God and his promises and the other a picture of a man who wants to play lose with the promises of God and flirt with the evil city.

And the pictures work so well together don't they. You see Abraham's faith so much more clearly because of the stupidity of Lot and you see Lot's stupidity so much clearer because of the faith of Abraham.

If it helps imagine you're in an art gallery and next to a very fine Constable painting someone's hung a scribbled sketch of a sunset like the ones you draw on your paper when you're bored in meetings or lectures.

Seeing the scribbled sketch on its own with all the messy notes around it you might have thought it ok. But now against the Constable it looks like it really is – a doodle.

Well the same here. Picture Lot against the wickedness of Sodom and as Peter points out in the NT – Lot was a righteous man. But picture his actions here against Abrahams and you realise that Lot is a fool who really knows very little of what it is to follow God faithfully.

And so it's these pictures or profiles together which are designed to persuade us to trust God and his promises.

PAUSE

Now obviously we're not Abraham.

The promises made to him found their fulfilment in Jesus. Their completion will be in the return of Jesus, when together we will receive the real Promised Land and the physical blessing of living in God's presence for ever.

We know too that this Melchizedek character is also a precursor of Jesus. A priest provided by God so that we might bring acceptable worship to Him.

They're similar not because Jesus makes up a song like Melchizedek did but because Jesus died on a cross to cleanse us and make us fit for lives of worship.

But even given those differences the story still speaks powerfully.

You see 4000 years ago wandering the hills and plains of what is modern day Israel, life was still best lived for God and his glory.

And that's true for us too.

So let's learn the lesson from Lot!

Lot's Lesson

The NT is swift to tell us that Lot is a righteous man. But he was also a fool.

He thinks here that he can move away from the promises and towards the sinful city without it interrupting his faith in God.

We stand with hindsight and want to scream to Lot to move west not east.

However opulent the land in the plains around Sodom it's a stupid place to be away from the promises of God.

But I do wonder if while we see Lot's stupidity we fail to see our own.

We fail to see the dramatic impact our small decisions have on our commitment to Jesus and our eagerness to live for him.

We very Lotishly think that our ambitions for material wealth and prosperity will have no impact on our commitment to God. After all it's not like we're denying God or abandoning faith completely.

We think our commitment at church matters very little compared to our commitment to work. So we would never dream of commuting a distance to work but think it won't matter much if we have to drive miles to get to church or homegroup.

We Lotishly think we can give our kids whatever they want and they'll still understand that Jesus commands they give up everything to follow him. But how would they know that.

We think we can marry anyone, even if they're really quite half hearted as a Christian, and it won't make an impression on us – after all it's their companionship you want not their encouragement to live Christianly.

What we don't see is exactly what Lot didn't see. That the things we flirt with will eventually take us hostage.

And that the danger for us is that we waste our lives and fail to let the promises of God – which shape the world – shape our lives.

And the hostage needs a dramatic rescue in order to keep them alive.

But there's another picture lesson here too...

Abraham's lesson

Abraham here has a kind of abandoned hope in the promises of God.

He's now so confident he offers the Promised Land to Lot and knows it will still be his.

He refuses the spoils of war and ends the story worse off materially than he was at the beginning having given away a 10th of all he had.

But still he's in better shape and in chapter 15 receives the final promise of the land.

You see Abraham shows us that to trust in Jesus and to live for him might not make us richer now – but it is wise.

Pick between the two lives on offer here and whose do you want? Abraham's obviously.

Abraham encourages you and me that it's not foolish to sell out for God to live for him and to put him first.

He encourages me that to give away my treasure, to hold lose to the world with confidence in God and pass on the opportunity to share ill gotten gains is not stupid. But wise!

That life is BEST lived for God and for his promises.

That to shape the goals of my life around the promises of the gospel is the only way to live in the world.

That to prioritise church, evangelism, and world mission over career, marriage, and wealth is actually quite a sensible thing to do.

That to teach my children to love their enemies, to hold back on their desires and live for Jesus is not to abuse them but rather to love them and to show them the best and only way to live in our world.

That in doing these things we don't miss out or spoil our fun we're simply doing the best thing in the light of what God has told us.

PAUSE

But there's one other thing here which we need to see before we finish.

You see I don't know about you but for me I see far more Lot tendencies in my life than Abraham ones.

So for me to see that the overriding theme of the whole story is the graciousness of God – is a great comfort.

You see it was only a page ago that Abraham was living like Lot in Egypt and now look at him.

Add to that the way that Abraham pursues and rescues his nephew is in a small way a shadow of what God does for Abraham and for us.

He finds him, defeats his enemies and releases him.

Abraham offers Lot the land – just like God did for him and just like God does for us in Christ.

The grace of God found in this story should reassure you that wherever you find yourself at the moment there is still hope.

Maybe you've made some bad decisions which you regret – well no matter – don't give up.

To use the pictures of the story – go back to scene 1 - return to the altar – not the one on the hill outside Bethel – but rather the cross outside Jerusalem where Jesus offered his life for yours.

Renew your confidence in him and drink in his forgiveness, then live life how he intended you to.

Like Abraham did.