



WALKING AWAY

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 13:5-18

Fourth Message

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With Thanksgiving behind us we are now entering the season of Advent. This is a time that should be characterized by profound worship. But sadly, though we yearn for worship, we often find ourselves caught up in family contention and strife over material things. Instead of engaging in times of solitude and adoration we are driven by the frenzy to meet everyone's expectations. This can be a stressful time also for some whose faith requires them to stand alone among their extended family. And it can be an extremely lonely season for those whose faith has caused a loved one to separate from them. In our text today we find our father, Abram, in a similar situation. We will see how his response to this severe test deepens his capacity to worship God — the essential part of what it means to be fully human.

This is the second of three tests that Abram must face concerning the promises of God. In the first test, he could not support his family because the land was undergoing a severe drought, so he abandoned the land and fled for the security of Egypt. In the process of seeking security the world's way he became very rich, but almost lost his true wealth — his wife and his future. The Lord intervened in no uncertain terms, rebuking him through a pagan king. Humbled, Abram and his family returned to the place where they last worshipped the Lord, and there he was restored.

In the second test, Abram is back in the land, but once again it is unable to support his family.

I. Abram's Gift to Lot (13:5-13)

A. Strife in the Land (13:5-7)

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 dwell together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were then dwelling then in the land. (NASB)

Abram is back on track, worshipping the God of promise, with his newly revitalized faith. However, arriving back in the land, filled with the hope of settling down in peace, he is overtaken with new problems of rival claims to the pasture. This time the strife arises from within his own family, in the person of his beloved nephew Lot. Those who think that being the recipients of divine promises brings a life of quiet and repose are in for a surprise. Sarna sums it up well: "The hopes generated by the divine assurance of nationhood and national territory seem to be in perpetual danger of miscarrying. Reality always falls short of the promise. Yet the purposes of God cannot be frustrated, and the hand of Providence is ever present, de-

livering the chosen ones."¹

Once more, Abram must face the issue of whether he can trust God to provide for him in the land. This time, however, the bone of contention is not lack of wealth, but the abundance of it. Quick riches often become a source of conflict within families. With all their newly acquired flocks and herds from Egypt, Abram's and Lot's shepherds find there is not enough pasture land to sustain them. Twice the narrator records they were unable to "dwell together"² (literally: "as one"). This gives rise to strife and contention among the shepherds. The narrator adds a background note about the threatening presence of the Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelling in the land. This may suggest that with the land already well occupied, resulting in precious little open space left to go around, these "two immigrants from Mesopotamia...can scarcely afford such divisiveness when they are surrounded by potential enemies."³

With this background in mind we are ready to hear the second speech of Abram recorded in Scripture.

B. Abram's Solution (13:8-9)

Then Abram said to Lot, "Please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. Is not the whole land before you? Kindly separate from me: if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left."

The experience of Egypt has matured Abram. While fear and compromise dominated his first speech, here we "get a very different image of Abram as the reasonable peacemaker and as a man conscious of family bonds in alien surroundings. The language in which he addresses Lot is clear, firm and polite."⁴ The difference, perhaps, is that Abram's previous failure has honed his spiritual senses. Rather than flogging himself with guilt, he presses forward, armed with a greater awareness of who he is and how God can provide. His new wealth, though acquired through his lack of faith, has freed him from grasping for riches. Now his every word breathes the spirit of faith, exemplifying what the supreme activity of peacemaking is all about.⁵

First, Abram takes the initiative to settle the dispute. He does not wait for his nephew to feel the uncomfortable weight that conflict brings. Second, he addresses Lot with dignity and grace ("Please"). Third, he does not allow the dispute to become tangled in a web of intermediaries (the "herdsmen"). Rather, he gets right to the source, explaining that, ultimately, this is a matter between him and Lot ("let there be no strife between *you* and *me*"). If they are at peace now, there will be no strife further down the line. Abram gives the motives for his actions: "for men (and) brothers we are." This is a very unusual construction. It seems to imply that "men should not quarrel, let alone

brothers.”⁶ This issue of brotherhood becomes the dominating motivating force for peace throughout Scripture. It dispenses with title and rank, and raises each party to the level of two equals intimately bound together.

Once that atmosphere of dignity among equals has been established, Abram is ready to propose the only solution possible. It is a painful one. He states it firmly, yet politely: “Please separate from me.” To remove the sting from his words, he sandwiches them between his infinite generosity, placing the entire horizon within Lot’s view (“Is not the whole land before you?” and “You pick first, I’ll take second”). Lot must have felt an adrenaline rush at this point. Whatever disappointment he might feel at the prospect of leaving his uncle disappears in his new freedom to choose his own destiny. What a rare opportunity this is. It would like telling a recent college graduate to write his own job description, together with salary, benefits and location. Faced with contention over his inheritance, the man of faith lets go even of what is rightfully his.

With this offer from Abram, Lot takes in the entire view.

C. Lot’s Choice (13:10-13)

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. (13:10)

The narrator puts us in Lot’s shoes and we see everything from his perspective. Lifting up his eyes, he observes the well irrigated Jordan valley, a region abundant with powerful springs that create oasis-like conditions in places like Jericho and Engedi. Looking at the rays of the sun reflecting on the watery blue, his vision expands, and so does his hyperbole. He envisions a new Eden so plentiful with water that it will grant him the financial security of Egypt. But the narrator slips in one phrase to jolt our senses. Between the phrases “well-watered” and “like the garden of God,” he parenthetically places the terrifying words, “before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.”

The preposition “before” casts everything in its true light. And it plays on its previous usage. The first time it was used it carried a spatial sense of endless possibilities: “all the land is before you.” Now the same phrase becomes temporal: “before the LORD destroyed.” This gives the sense that, because Lot chooses by what he “sees,” his choice will be disastrously shortsighted. This is but the first of many ominous clues that Lot is headed for ruin.

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. (13:11-13)

Lot chooses for himself. This is reminiscent of the builders of the disastrous tower, who attempted to make a name for themselves. And Lot chooses the best of all he can see (“all the valley of the Jordan). The pride and greed driving his selection are almost palpable. Taking advantage of his uncle, he runs right over him. Second, the direction of his travel is completely wrong. It is eastward, “to the edge of Canaan, if not beyond it...Though offered a

share of Canaan, he is here depicted turning his back on it.”⁷ In essence, Lot’s choice shows him walking away from God. Third, while Abram settles down in the land of Canaan, Lot settles in the *cities of the valley*, and moves his tent as far as Sodom. This gives the sense that Lot is moving dangerously close to abandoning his identification with the Lord (*tent*) and acquiring new identity papers in the shadow of Sodom. Finally, we learn where all of this is leading: “The men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the LORD.” This is the same language which “described the generation of the flood (6:5; 8:21) who were blotted out.”⁸ The seriousness of Sodom’s evil will provoke extreme action by the Lord.

This hindsight is inserted by the narrator to help us feel the poignancy of Lot’s departure. So he departs, wrapped in his mantle of dreams and naïve hopes of happiness, only to plunge into a depraved darkness from which only angels operating under divine mandate can save him. “Lot, when he fancied he was living in paradise, was nearly plunged into the depth of hell.”⁹ In this manner, Lot separates from Abram. One man *walked away* from conflict, the other *walked away* from the Lord. One man is left upon “the heights, the other down in the sunken plain.”¹⁰

As his beloved nephew enters the valley and departs over the horizon, Abram feels the weight of being alone, bereft of his final family tie. Even in the church, separation, although painful, is a continual process that is necessary for our faith to grow. This is what John says in his letter: “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us” (1 John 2:19).

But before Abram has time to even contemplate his sorrow, God breaks in and speaks to him.

II. The Lord’s Gift to Abram (13:14-18)

A. The Promise of Land Reiterated and Amplified (13:14-15)

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 give it to you and to your descendants forever.

There is “a strong break in the narrative sequence, marking the new beginning here.”¹¹ The timing of God’s appearance is instructive. The Lord speaks to Abram immediately after he exercises faith in what he cannot see, and allows Lot to choose what he can see. In choosing by faith alone, Abram’s soul is now enlarged for a greater capacity to worship God. “Seeing” follows believing, not the other way around. This is consistent message all through the Scripture (John 6:30). Just as Abram was generous with Lot, so now the Lord will be generous with Abram, and infinitely so. As Lot lifted up his eyes, so now Abram is told to lift up his eyes from that place and take in the spectacular view.

God tells Abram to look not only to the right or to the left, but to all four points of the compass. God gives him a new “lens” with which to view everything. All the land that his eyes can see will be a gift not only to him but also to his children. God even adds that impressive term, “forever.” So we learn that when Abram walks away from

conflict and refuses to grasp even what is rightfully his, he loses nothing. Even when his rival chooses “all” the best for himself, Abram receives “all.” Far from being limited by the control of others, his life is enlarged and expanded beyond measure. This is true freedom. In God’s kingdom one can give everything away one hundred times and still not lose it. As Dods says, “There is room in God’s plan for every man to follow his most generous impulses.”¹² This is what the Lord reassured Peter about when his disciple suggested they had given up everything to follow him: “Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel’s sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30).

God adds that all this land will be a gift not only to Abram but also to his seed. With this mention of “seed,” God now builds on the second half of his promise.

B. The Promise of Seed Reiterated and Amplified (13:16)

“And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered.”

Earlier, God promised that Abram’s seed would become a nation, but there was no specific mention of size. (Nations in the ancient world could be relatively small.) Here God tells Abram that if anyone is *able* to number the dust of the earth, then his seed can also be numbered. (Alter notes that when comparisons are made in Hebrew, usually the reality is presented first, then the simile. Here it is the reverse, which may indicate “the high didactic solemnity of the moment of promise.”¹³) In the opening scene, the land could not support both Abram and Lot so that they were *not able* to dwell as one (v 6). In the future, the seed of Abram will be so numerous, *no one will be able* to count them. This is the first time that this verb (*count* or *measure*) is used in the Bible. This makes it very significant. If you want to count something significant in life, try and count Abram’s seed. God is seeking to expand Abram’s imagination past the breaking point. John, with his poetic imagination, attempts to accomplish the same for us when he writes, “Behold, a great multitude, which *no one could count*, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, and palm branches were in their hands; and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb’” (Rev 7:9-10; see also Eph 3:17-19).

Once God has confirmed and strengthened his promises to Abram, he instructs him to take his second journey through the breadth of the land to symbolically appropriate what is already his. So now the place of “*letting go*” becomes the place of *revelation*, and the starting point for *holy pilgrimage*.

C. The Land Appropriated by Faith (3:17-18)

“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.

So Abram makes a second journey to preview everything that is his. The man who walked away from conflict is now to walk *step by step* into the vastness of the eternal, and have his heart enlarged by it. Pulling up his stakes at Bethel, he travels south and arrives by the oaks of Mamre, near Hebron. The wandering Jew has finally found a place to settle and put down his roots — and he has done so in peace. There by the oaks of Mamre he builds an altar and worships the Lord.

Why all the repetition? What is so different about this journey from the first one? From one standpoint, nothing has changed since Abram entered the land; he is still childless and landless. The Canaanites still populate the land; idolatry is still thriving, and business still goes on as usual. The only time Abram ever made national “news” was when he had the shameful notoriety of being the only Bedouin ever to be escorted out of Egypt by an armed escort. The only pieces of evidence revealing that this wandering Jew has even been in the land are several piles of rocks located near a couple of freeways. So on the one hand, nothing appears to have changed. But, on the other hand, everything has changed for Abram. Embracing his shame in Egypt has enlarged his faith. With his newly revitalized faith he is able to walk away from conflict, and with that God gives him a new “lens” with which to see. From now on, with every walking step God is more real and tangible. His promises are more concrete, firm and all-encompassing. And ultimately, Abram’s new faith takes his worship into new depths, where present and future kiss and time stands still.

Each time Abram builds a pile of insignificant stones to memorialize those occasions, these anonymous places become sacred and shape the fabric of history. Abram finds a place to settle down, and no one even notices. But these insignificant tent stakes and altars of stones become anchor points for all that follows. Not far from this altar Abram will purchase his first plot of land in Canaan. It will serve as a graveyard for Sarai and all the patriarchs. Centuries later, Hebron will be conquered by Joshua (Josh 10:37). Several hundred years later, Hebron will become the center where David establishes his monarchy. One thousand years after David’s monarchy, Messiah will come to earth. But Abram doesn’t have to wait to see all of this. He enjoys it in his own day through faith and an imagination shaped by God’s promises. At that insignificant rock pile he sees it and enjoys it before its time. As Jesus said of him, “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (John 8:56).

That is the ultimate expression of what worship does to the human soul. Worship makes our world enlarge not only geographically but eternally, too. Memory of the past kisses the imagination of the future, and the present becomes holy. In brief, nothing has changed, but to him who has eyes to see, everything has changed. This is how we are meant to worship.

There is a small town in Romania, called Simeria. Many from our church have fallen in love with the believers who live there. They are few in number, they have no money, and they live outside of the circles of influence. While many in Romania seized the opportunity to build their own kingdoms with money from the West, these humble saints simply “walked away.” They don’t possess a “house” of worship. Some of them don’t even have homes

to call their own. But out of their simple wells they draw some of the purest waters of holy love in the nation. Nestled high above the village lies an obscure cornfield, from which the surrounding countryside can be viewed. Several years ago, I was sleeping in a tiny home by that field. When I awoke on Sunday morning, I noticed my friend James heading off into the cornfield, carrying his guitar. "Where are you going?" I asked him. He said, "Let's have church!" So I gathered our hostess, some friends and several of the children. We were a small circle of twelve, armed with only our voices and one guitar to worship in a cornfield. Suddenly, it seemed as if heaven descended and drenched us in a sea of love. Time stood still as we sang and wept. When we returned to breakfast, I noticed the time was 11:30 a.m. We had been in the field for about two hours. No one could talk and no one wanted to eat. We had just had a feast. Later, I related the incident to my friend Ionatan. He smiled, and said it didn't surprise him at all. He explained that was the field where, after he had proposed to his wife, his father-in-law had prayed over them and anointed them for marriage. He added that this home was the place where the Lord's Army held secret meetings for Bible Study and prayer during the cruel days of communism. He said angels would often come out from the cornfield to protect them from the secret police, the Securitate. "You just walked into the field of angels," he said.

Several of us have made pilgrimages back to that cornfield. One especially moving time for me was to have my daughter with me and to once again enjoy holy song. An ordinary field of corn has done more to shape our worship than the most influential church buildings in Romania.

Not much has changed since the days of Abram. Again, we find our capacity for worship is enlarged at the very place where we "walk away" from conflict and refuse to grasp even what is rightfully ours. Will you "walk away"?

*A Field of Corn
when time stood still*

Let's have church you say to me
and ascend upon that hill
with lone guitar and *Talitha koum*
we sing as time stood still.

Yes upon this furrowed ground
of sorrow's crop sown in years of pain
descends our heavenly song
joyous tears, let it rain, let it rain.

And there we stand upon the sod
a small circle lost in time embraced
for there it was in a field of corn
that Noah's heaven flooded our space.

It was heaven, heaven
when time stood sacred still
It was heaven heaven, upon a holy hill
and we were there to feel its chill
and in the memory of her face I see it still
heaven, heaven, upon that holy holy hill.

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music by James Garcia

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1. Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 104.
2. David picks up this phrase and uses it as the joyous theme for Psalm 133, "Behold how good it is when brothers dwell even as one." Perhaps his mention that it is like *oil* drenching the entire body prefigures the gift of the Spirit that makes us one.
3. Robert Alter, *Genesis, Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 54.
4. Alter, *Genesis*, 54.
5. Such peacemaking is praised throughout Scripture. See Lev 19:17-18; Pss 122, 133; Prov 3:17, 29-34; Heb 12:14; Jas 3:17-18.
6. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15* (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word, 1987), 297.
7. Wenham, *Genesis*, 297.
8. Wenham, *Genesis*, 298.
9. Calvin, quoted by Wenham, *Genesis*, 298.
10. Alter, *Genesis*.
11. Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988), 288.
12. Quoted by Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 288.
13. Alter, *Genesis*, 57.