

Today we begin a new 9-week series we are calling ‘Family Tree,’ and what we will be doing during the next two months is looking at the lives of a number of Bible characters often referred to as ‘Heroes of the Faith,’ Bible characters who are all members of our ‘Spiritual Family Tree;’ Old Testament characters like Isaac and Rachel and New Testament characters like Peter and Lydia. But our intention isn’t to simply talk about the heroic actions of these people... no, we’re going to be specifically looking at life changing moments in these people’s lives... moments when they came face-to-face with unexpected circumstances and then had to decide whether they trusted that God would lead them through the difficult moments of transition or not. Our hope is that you will be encouraged by all that we discover throughout this series... in fact, our greatest desire is that this summer might be a transitional time for each of us individually and for us as a community... that together we will go into the fall with a deeper trust in our God and a greater confidence that He loves us beyond measure.

And we begin our ‘Family Tree’ series today talking about the father of the Jewish nation and by extension the father of all people of God: Abraham. Abraham is one of the best known of all the people we find in the Bible. Why, we could spend all summer just talking about what the book of Genesis tells us about him... and, boy, does Genesis tell us a lot about him! Twelve and a half of the 50 chapters in Genesis are dedicated to the story of Abraham’s relationship with God... and while we could talk today about all sorts of moments in Abraham’s life I want to look at what I believe was a highly transitional moment for Abraham... now, it isn’t a hugely dramatic moment... though there were a number of very dramatic moments in Abraham’s life... and it isn’t a miraculous moment, though, yes, Abraham did experience some miraculous moments. No, today we’ll be talking about a moment when Abraham’s faith and trust in God was tested in a very practical, down-to-earth way... and I believe that you’ll soon see that the way Abraham’s trust was tested, over 4000 years ago, mind you, still has great resonance with us today. So, let’s get started! You’ll find today’s story in Genesis 13; that’s page 11 in the house Bible. Welcome

Now, our house Bible titles this story, ‘Abram and Lot Separate.’ And yes, that’s a true description of what literally happens; Abraham and Lot do separate; but if I were naming this story I’d call it, ‘Self-absorbed Lot Takes Advantage of His Uncle Abraham’s Generosity.’ And I think you’ll soon understand why I would give it this name. But first, some context and background. Abraham, (and I know that at this point in the story Abraham and his wife, Sarah’s names have not yet been changed from Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah, but it’s almost impossible for me to refer to him as Abram... so please forgive me when I call him Abraham). At this point in the overall story of Abraham’s life, we’ve been told two very important things about him. And the first is this: when Abraham heard from God he obeyed God, even when what God called him to do was both difficult and unexpected. Well, here, listen to what we find right at the beginning of Abraham’s story in Genesis 12:1-2. *The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family, and go to the land that I will show you. ²I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you and make you famous, and you will be a blessing to others.* Leaving one’s country, one’s relatives and one’s family, would have been an unimaginable ask then. People just didn’t leave their country and their families. Most people never traveled more than 5 miles in any direction from their birthplace... ever! So, Abraham being commanded to leave his country and his family for good was essentially like being given a death sentence; in fact, in the ancient world being forcibly banished from your native country and your family was considered a worse punishment than being put to death. And yet God had commanded Abraham to do just this and verse 4 tells us *So, Abram departed as the LORD had*

*instructed, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he left Haran. ⁵ He took his wife, Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all his wealth—his livestock and all the people he had taken into his household at Haran—and headed for the land of Canaan. A journey of about 600 miles, by the way... traveling at no more than around 10 miles a day! But once in Canaan, God again visited Abraham and told him this, ‘I will give **this** land to your descendants.’ And there are two important things about God giving Abraham this promise: first, the way ancient people thought about the gods (and almost everyone believed there were a ton of gods out there) was that each different god ruled over a specific space of land. Gods didn’t move around, they stayed still, and as people moved from one god’s territory to another they needed to honor the god that the local people had come to believe ruled over their land. But what Abraham had learned was that this God, the one that had told him to travel 600 miles to this new land, this God was a God who traveled with him and wasn’t limited by territorial boundaries; this God was present everywhere and **this** was something new, mind-blowing, remarkable and I’m certain, reassuring. And the second thing that would have been important to Abraham upon hearing that God was going to give this land to his descendants was that Abraham didn’t have any descendants! Genesis 11 verse 10 tells us that ‘Sarah was unable to become pregnant and had no children’ and she was 65-years old at this point in the story. Abraham probably wondered, ‘How is this going to happen?’ And one last thing, right before we get to today’s passage we learn that due to a famine in Canaan, Abraham had packed up his entire family and all his possessions and traveled 200 more miles to find refuge in Egypt. And right before they had entered Egyptian territory Abraham had said this to Sarah, ‘When the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife. Let’s kill him; then we can have her!’ ¹³ So please tell them you are my sister. Then they will spare my life and treat me well because of their interest in you.’ ¹⁴ And sure enough, when Abram arrived in Egypt, everyone noticed Sarai’s beauty. ¹⁵ When the palace officials saw her, they sang her praises to Pharaoh, their king, and Sarai was taken into his palace. ¹⁶ Then Pharaoh gave Abram many gifts because of her—sheep, goats, cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels. Genesis 12:12-16. Now, we don’t have time to talk about this, so I’ll just tell you that God intervened and Pharaoh, upon learning the truth, angrily sent Abraham on his way back to Canaan. So, what we’ve now learned about Abraham is that he can be an obedient follower of God **and** he can also be a save-my-own-skin-in-any-way-I-can liar. Abraham may be a towering figure on our spiritual family tree, but by the end of the first couple of chapters that tell us about Abraham’s life we all know he is a regular person... one moment he trusts that God will lead him and care for him and then in the next he’ll turn around and plan a terrible deception to save himself. Bottom line, he’s just a regular guy.*

And then we read this in our passage for today, Genesis 13 verse 1: *So, Abram left Egypt and traveled north into the Negev, along with his wife and Lot and all that they owned. (Lot was Abraham’s nephew. Lot’s father, Abraham’s brother, had died some time ago and Abraham had taken Lot under his wing) ² Abram was very rich in livestock, as well as in silver, and gold. (The term livestock here is a general term that can mean any type of herding animal: sheep, goats, cattle, even camels; and the gold and silver was probably given to him by Pharaoh to get him to leave Egypt quickly! ³ From the Negev, they continued traveling by stages toward Bethel, and they pitched their tents between Bethel and Ai, where they had camped before. ⁴ This was the same place where Abram had built the altar. Abraham had built this altar when he first arrived in Canaan as a sign that he was going to worship God alone. And there he worshiped the LORD again. ⁵ Lot, who was traveling with Abram, had also become very wealthy with flocks of sheep and goats, herds of cattle, and many tents. (To say ‘many tents’ meant Lot had many*

workers taking care of his livestock and such... honestly though, they were most likely slaves) ⁶ *But the land could not support both Abram and Lot with all their flocks and herds living so close together.* ⁷ *So disputes broke out between the herdsmen of Abram and Lot. At that time Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land...* What all of this means is that Abraham and Lot weren't the only people vying for the use of the land in that area and they had to keep moving their huge flocks around to find enough space to graze their livestock without upsetting the locals... and this much open grazing land was really difficult to find, and it led to disputes between their herdsmen. ⁸ *Finally Abram said to Lot, "Let's not allow this conflict to come between us or our herdsmen. After all, we are close relatives!"* ⁹ *The whole countryside is open to you. Take your choice of any section of the land you want, and we will separate. If you want the land to the left, then I'll take the land on the right. If you prefer the land on the right, then I'll go to the left."* Now, this was a very generous offer on Abraham's part. He was under no obligation to do this for Lot since Abraham was the leader of their tribe. But this offer was Abraham's way of trying to be a peacemaker. ¹⁰ *Lot took a long look at the fertile plains of the Jordan Valley in the direction of Zoar.* An interesting aside, when it says 'Lot **took a long look** at the fertile plains' this is exactly the same language used to tell us that Eve 'took a long look at the forbidden fruit on the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil' right before she ate it. It's a phrase we often find in the Bible that always tells us, 'Something bad is coming!' And here is what Lot saw as he took his long look: *The whole area was well watered everywhere, like the garden of the LORD* (think the Garden of Eden) *or the beautiful land of Egypt.* Egypt was considered the breadbasket of the world then. What Lot saw looked like paradise! Then verse 11 tells us that *Lot chose for himself the whole Jordan Valley to the east of them. He went there with his flocks and servants and parted company with his uncle Abram.* We don't get the slightest hint that Lot showed any deference toward his uncle. There isn't a suggestion that he thought of compromising or dividing the good land... we don't even hear a 'Thank you for your kindness in this, uncle.' No, all we read is that Lot chose to take everything that reminded him of the Garden of Eden... and all I can say is, 'What a jerk.' Verse 12 says, *'So Abram settled in the land of Canaan, and Lot moved his tents to a place near Sodom and settled among the cities of the plain.'* (Then we get this editorial aside) ¹³ *But the people of this area were extremely wicked and constantly sinned against the LORD.* Now, what we aren't told about directly in this story is how much of a betrayal this choice by Lot would have been. Lot took all that was Garden-of-Eden like and left his uncle Abraham with what was then called 'The Wilderness.' It wasn't desert... it could support flocks, but you had to keep moving around all the time to find enough grass for your animals and you certainly couldn't truly settle down and plant any crops in the wilderness! And let's be honest here, Lot certainly knew all of this and yet he chose to take all that was good for himself and leave his uncle with nothing really but a difficult future... and remember, his uncle was the man who had taken him in when his father died, his uncle was the man who had protected him over the decades and the one who had made it possible for Lot to become a rich man in his own right... this was the man he turned his back on! There is no other way to describe this moment other than one of total betrayal. ¹⁴ *After Lot had gone, the LORD said to Abram, "Look as far as you can see in every direction—north and south, east and west. ¹⁵ I am giving all this land, as far as you can see, to you and your descendants as a permanent possession. ¹⁶ And I will give you so many descendants that, like the dust of the earth, they cannot be counted! ¹⁷ Go and walk through the land in every direction, for I am giving it to you."* Once again, God tells Abraham to take a journey... this time throughout **All** of the land God was promising him... and now Abraham had a decision to make. I'm sure that Abram wasn't feeling like traveling in this

moment. He'd just seen Lot leave to take the best land. He had no children. He was getting older, and he was living in the wilderness 600 miles from his homeland. I'm betting he was wondering if it was all worth it. But God had said, literally, 'Get up, arise and go'. There is almost a sense of God taking him by the hand and pulling him out of his seat in these words. And just think of how easy it would have been for Abraham to become bitter and skeptical and angry and lose all trust in everyone... including God! I can hear him thinking, 'God is going to bless me here in the wilderness... sure! God is going to give me so many descendants that they can't be counted. Give me a break!' But we don't get this... we're just left with God's command to go and see what He was promising to someday give Abraham.

Now, Genesis doesn't tell us anything about Abraham traveling throughout the land and seeing all that God had promised to give him... but the way the next sentence is written we get the feeling that he took that journey and when it was over he chose well, or as verse 18 tells us... *Abram moved his camp to Hebron and settled near the oak grove belonging to Mamre.* This oak grove was the location of Abraham's first altar to God. Going back there to 'settle' meant he wanted to be near the spot where he'd first come to fully trust God. And then we read, '*There he built another altar to the LORD.*' Building this second altar was a sign that Abraham, even after experiencing his great moment of betrayal, was going to continue to trust God... and not only trust him but worship him with renewed conviction and passion... he wasn't going to allow Lot's selfishness and duplicity turn him away from the future hope that God had given him... the hope of a new homeland and a new family.

We often speak of Abraham as one of the heroes of the faith... but rarely do we talk about this moment as being heroic. And yet there is something deeply heroic to me in Abraham's choice to stand in a place of profound trust in the face of such a stab-in-the-back. And I am so thankful that the Bible tells us that one of our spiritual ancestors experienced a moment of betrayal like this... because I know all too well what it is to align yourself with someone, to give them favor, to be generous with them and trust them and then have them turn on you, take advantage of your generosity and in their self-absorption, do some unimaginable things to you. In fact, this has happened twice to me in ways that honestly altered the direction of my life: once with a business associate and once with a friend who was overseeing aspects of our financial life. I don't want to go into the details at all today, but I think I know what it must have been like for Abraham to suddenly realize that all his assumptions about the kind of relationship he'd had with his nephew Lot were terribly mistaken. I know what it is to have to rethink years of relationship and then feel like a fool for ever having been so profoundly naïve. I can't say that in those moments of realizing how deeply I'd been betrayed that I 'built a second altar to God' to show that I was going to remain fully faithful, but I did hear a voice in my spirit saying that I shouldn't kick back with all the force my soul wanted to use in those moments. In the end I chose to let them wander off to their own 'Sodom,' if you will, and I simply stop caring about whatever it was that might happen to them there. These things happened years ago... one of those situations has never been remedied in any fashion what-so-ever and I have to be really careful about thinking about that time. But the other situation has been completely redeemed... with full restitution and genuine forgiveness, but it took years for God to work that one out... and to be honest, it only worked out due to God's direct intervention. It didn't happen because I was such a saint. And as I have thought through this story of Abraham's betrayal, I've concluded that Abraham built that second altar because he'd come to realize that even though it felt like he was alone in the wilderness, he wasn't... God was still with him. I'm also sure that he came to realize that God was aware of what had happened to him and that Lot's abandonment of him wasn't a

sign that God had abandoned him as well... God was still present everywhere, in every land, all of the time! And it must have also become clear to Abraham that God hadn't forgotten any of his promises to him... in fact, if you look carefully at the promises God gave to Abraham **after** Lot's betrayal you'll see that they were more robust and unimaginable than those he'd given Abraham earlier. And I have to admit that as I look back at things in my own life with a long view, even in the midst of being terribly betrayed, I can see that I wasn't alone; God clearly showed me that he was aware of what was happening, He was present and as I trusted him, even in my anger and disbelief at what had happened, he protected me and eventually brought about unexpected restitution and gave me peace.

And I am confident that many of you have had these same sorts of moments in your lives... and I'm not here to tell you that it's going to all work out fine. But I **am** here to tell you that what God did for Abraham, one of the members of your spiritual family tree, what God did in the midst of Abraham's great disappointment is no different than what he will do for you in yours. He will stay present... and he is both aware of the details of your life and I'm certain taking much offense at your having been betrayed. He will not leave you alone... his spirit will be present and, as I found many times, he will also be present in those that stand beside you in your difficult moments. What I fully believe is that what God wants to do is show you that even in the face of any sort of circumstance, you can still trust him, and I am confident that eventually he will bring peace to your heart... maybe not as quickly as you would like, but he will bring you peace. Abraham, our spiritual ancestor, a member of our family tree, chose to live as close as he could to the place where God had spoken directly to him. I think he made this decision to settle where he chose to settle so he'd never forget those moments when God had given him great hope... even at a time when his nearest of kin had turned his back on him! This makes sense to me.

I want to close with some words of Jesus... this is a well-known passage, but it has new meaning for me as I have contemplated what Abraham must have gone through when his nephew turned on him. Here is what I've been thinking: when Jesus first spoke these words the great crowd that had gathered that day, almost all of whom were direct descendants of Abraham, by the way, Jesus, as he spoke couldn't help but think of Lot's disloyalty to his generous uncle Abraham and he knew that these people had also been betrayed and they needed reassurance of God's love for them. And so, I read these words to you to give you hope in whatever it is you may have experienced; these are eternal words of promise... words that are a part of our spiritual family's heritage: *Jesus said, God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs. God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted. God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth. God blesses those who hunger and thirst for justice, for they will be satisfied. God blesses those who are merciful, for they will be shown mercy. God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God. God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God. God blesses those who are persecuted for doing right, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.* These words are Jesus' promises to us... it may seem like there is no chance that we will be comforted or satisfied or shown mercy or inherit the whole earth, but that is what he's promised us and at least for me, I want to settle in a place of trust until that day when God ultimately keeps his word to us and blesses us with what today may seem truly unimaginable: seeing him face-to-face in his Kingdom and worshipping Him alongside all those who share our same family tree!