

*“Open-handed Faith”
Genesis 13
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READ Chapter 13

Many years ago I had made a number of bad decisions in purchasing things I could not afford. I had gotten us into debt with credit cards and couldn't pay them off at the end of the month and so had to make monthly payments on the balance. So large was the monthly payment that, on paper, I couldn't see how I could make the payment unless I took the money from somewhere else. The easiest place from which to take the money was from our weekly giving to the church. I rationalized that it was wrong for me to be giving money away when I owed people money. And so for several months, over my wife's objections, I didn't give anything to the church for the work of God's kingdom. Surprisingly, it didn't seem to make any difference in the debt – We didn't get ahead.

During this time I was wrestling with whether to trust God. I had been taught and others were even then saying that if we obeyed God in our giving, He would provide the finances. That didn't make sense to me – it wasn't logical. There were only so many dollars coming in and if you added up the obligations there was none left to give away. I thought it was presumptuous to expect some miracle to provide more money.

Finally, at my wife's cautious prompting, I made the decision to trust God and to give even though “I couldn't afford it.” It doesn't take great imagination to guess what happened. When I trusted God with the finances, I also became more disciplined and we were not only able to give but we were able to meet our financial obligations.

Faith and obedience came before the solution. When I stopped focusing on protecting and started focusing on giving the situation resolved itself. An open-handedness with our money is a faith issue – do we trust God to provide what we need if we are obedient? An open-handedness with our lives – a willingness to let God direct us as he sees fit is a faith issue – do we trust God? It seems easier, for

many of us, to trust God to forgive our sins and take us to heaven when we die, than to trust him to meet our financial needs here and now or to trust him with our careers and friends and lives here on earth.

Abram, the principle character in the OT incident about which we read earlier, was a man who was learning about faith – he was growing in his trust of God. In the early part of chapter 12, where we first see Abram in action, we witness a man who takes a bold step of faith. He leaves the security of his country and his extended family and sets out in the direction the Lord tells him to go. But when we come to the end of chapter 12, Abram's faith failed. When he felt threatened in Egypt, he lost faith in God's provision and took matters into his own hands and nearly lost everything in the process. It was a good lesson learned in a hard way – and God sovereignly intervened in spite of Abram's failure. When Abram safely returned to Canaan he went to Bethel and there he worshipped the Lord. But it wasn't too much later when Abram's faith was again tested.

Abram had come out of Egypt a very wealthy man. How wealthy was he? In the next chapter when Abram puts together a rescue party to find his nephew Lot, the text says he had 318 trained men who had been born in his own household. Abram had many servants. Apparently both he and Lot had large herds of cattle that required all these people to tend. I get the picture of hundreds if not thousands of head of cattle spread out over the pastureland like Herefords in South Park, Colorado. Keeping the cattle appropriately separated, watered and fed would be a major task requiring scores of hired hands.

Our text tells us that the herds were so large that conflict broke out between Lot's cowboys and Abram's. An acre of grazing land can support only so many cows and any more than that and there just isn't enough grass to sustain them all. Likewise, water was precious and some watering holes just couldn't provide enough water for that many cattle.

Not only were Abram's and Lot's large herds vying for grazing land in the area but there were also Canaanites and Perizzites in the land. I've watched enough old western shows on television to have some

sense of what this conflict may have looked like. It was like the Cartwrights versus the Parkers. A range war was shaping up.

At that point, Abram had a decision to make. Back in chapter 12:1 God had said to Abram – I want you to go to a land I will show you. In chapter 12:7 after Abram first arrived in Canaan, God said, “To your offspring, I will give this land.” The promise of God regarding the land was to Abram and his children not to Lot. Abram had every right to protect what was his. Self-preservation, self-protection was the mode he operated in while in Egypt. And once again Abram is threatened and it is time to act.

What does he do? Does he call Lot in for a meeting and let him know that it was time for Lot to go and find his own land? Does he remind Lot that God’s promise was to Abram and his children and therefore Lot would need to round up his cattle and move along? And if Abram was wise about it, he would have alerted his men to the potential of a showdown and advised them to position themselves and arm themselves so if Lot resisted they would be ready to drive him and his herds from the area. You don’t take this kind of action without preparing for, anticipating, every move Lot will make. No, that’s not what he does. Abram’s thoughts and conduct are very different than when he was in Egypt. Something has happened to Abram’s trust in God.

What Moses, the author of Genesis, does in this account is set up quite a contrast between Abram and Lot in the way they think and act. Like some weekly dramatic television programs, this passage in Genesis 13 has more than one plot developing at the same time. It seems that Moses is doing at least two things by recounting this incident in Abram and Lot’s lives. 1. He is showing us the development of Abram’s faith – contrary to his experience in Egypt, Abram’s faith is growing stronger. It doesn’t mean he won’t fail again but clearly he has learned something about trusting God. 2. Secondly, Moses is showing us something of the character of Lot and the beginning of a slide toward the disintegration of his family and his life. Look at the contrast with me.

Abram took the initiative to settle the dispute. In 13:8 we read, “Let’s not have any quarrelling between you and me, or between your

herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers.” Where was Lot? Would he have allowed the quarreling to become open warfare – eventually involving Abram and Lot themselves – relative against relative? Abram took the initiative for peace, not Lot.

Abram generously offered Lot his choice of the land. In 13:9 we read, “Is 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.” Where was Lot? Wouldn’t you expect him to immediately say, “No, uncle Abram – this land was promised to you and it is your place to choose first and even to choose it all. I will stay or leave as you see fit.” Abram made the offer of generosity, not Lot.

I think verse 9 is the highpoint of the story. We see a man do the unexpected. Here’s a man who chose peace and generosity over financial security. Someone might say, “Abram could afford to be generous look how wealthy he was.” Abram was no fool. Abram could see the same things Lot saw. The text says, 13:10 “Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt...” The Jordan River watered the area – like the Platt River flowing through Nebraska. Abram had heard the stories of the Garden of Eden with its four rivers and plentiful crops. Abram had been in Egypt to see how the river Nile made for great farmland. He could see the Jordan River area. He would know that just as a famine had driven them into Egypt earlier, the same thing could happen again. Abram’s livelihood, his cattle, and all the people he was responsible for were dependent on Abram making wise choices. But in spite of the financial advantage that should have been his, Abram does the unexpected – he offered Lot the choice of the land.

Why did he do that? Was he a softhearted fool? Was he a naive businessman? Did he lack a necessary shrewdness? No, he was learning to trust God! He didn’t have to demand his rights, protect his possessions, tight-fistedly hang on to what was his. He was learning to hold all possessions loosely in his hand – an open-handedness with everything he had. Abram chose peace over financial security because he trusted God.

When my father reached retirement age he decided to sell his business to a much younger Christian friend. The only way the Christian friend could purchase it was if my father allowed him to make payments. Those payments were the bulk of my father's retirement income. It wasn't long before the Christian friend was slow in making his payments and then he would miss payments altogether. And at the same time the Christian friend was buying expensive toys and taking expensive vacations. The friend came and wanted to negotiate with my father for a lower interest rate on the loan and lower payments – my father consented. But the payments still were late or not made at all. The recommendation from a few, who knew what was going on, was that my father sue him and take the business back – after all, his and my mother's livelihood were at stake. But my father chose peace over financial security. His words were like Abram's "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me or between your herdsmen and mine for we are brothers." My father could do that because he trusted God. If he didn't trust God for his financial security he would have been logically forced to sue for settlement.

Abram was learning to trust God. God had said Abram's future and for that matter the future of the world was in Canaan – not in a land close by. Abram had already left the land once – not again – he would stay in the land of promise. As good as the area, Lot chose, looked – Abram would trust God. God had said that Abram's future was in a nation that God would give him not one made by integrating with the godless nations around them.

A little later in the text we are told that not only did Lot choose the watered plains of the Jordan River valley but he chose the cities that were there as well. 13:12 "...Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom."

Abram too had grown up in the great city of Ur – the New York of his day. He had lived for many years at a crossroads of the Orient – the city of Haran. Do you think those cities were appealing to Abram as well as to Lot? Were the immediate advantages apparent? Of course they were. But Abram was trusting God to provide. The author of the book of Hebrews says of Abram – 11:9-10 "By faith he (Abram) made his home in a foreign country; he lived in tents... For

he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” As good as those cities of the plains looked, as secure as they must have seemed, Abram would trust God.

After Lot left, God came to Abram to encourage his faith. In context, I think the emphasis of God’s words to Abram were this: “Abram, you trusted me by choosing peace and generosity instead of trusting yourself to provide financial security. “I want you to look around you, as far as you can see, and know that someday this land will belong to your family. “And I want you to know that your family will be greater in number than the dust of the ground.

Abram could choose peace instead of war with Lot because Abram trusted God for his financial security. Abram chose generosity instead of selfishness because he trusted God with his future.

The difference between Lot and Abram is instructive:

*Lot’s motive for separating was prosperity.
Abram’s motive was peace.*

*Lot looked around with eyes of greed.
Abram looked around with eyes of faith.*

*Lot saw the well-watered plains of the Jordan River.
Abram believed in a promise.*

*Lot located himself in the company of evil – The city of Sodom.
Abram located himself in the place of worship – the altar at Hebron.*

*And the difference in their actions was who they most trusted.
Lot trusted only what he could see and his own efforts.
Abram trusted in God’s promise even when he couldn’t see it.*

People of faith dare to be open-handed. They can give away what they have because their confidence is not in what they have but in God.

People of faith are not only open-handed but they also have a different perspective on the future.

Lot, apparently could see no further into the future than the herds of cattle he owned, the wealth he enjoyed, and the ways to protect it all – so he selfishly chose the well-watered land. Abram, could see a future beyond his own years. His perspective included a future that didn't include him personally. When God told Abram that all the land he could see would be his and his offspring would be greater in number than the dust of the earth – Abram knew that would be fully accomplished long after Abram was dead. Because of his faith – Abram could live his life for that future. He was no longer living life for himself – he was ready to give himself for the future God had in mind. Therefore everything Abram had, including his time and energy, were disposable – they were available for God's use. His open-handedness in his dealing with Lot was because he trusted God with the present and he believed God for the future.

Do we trust God for the present?

Do we trust him for the future?

Do we dare to be open-handed with our money, our time, our energies – giving them away for the sake of the Kingdom of God?