

Two Case Studies of Faith

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- [0 : 0 0] My name is Ali, I'm the minister here. Great to be with you this morning. Great to look through this passage together. We began a new series last week looking at the life of Abraham in the book of Genesis.
- We're continuing that this week. It is, as you've just seen, quite a long section that we're looking through. It's got those two distinct parts to it in the two different chapters. But I hope as we get into this, you'll see how all of these fit together and that these two chapters teach us one coherent message.
- And really at the heart of that message is this, the call to live by faith in the promises of God. The call to live by faith in the promises of God.
- And really that's, I suppose, the headline for this whole series looking at the life of Abraham, living by faith in the promises of God. And as we think about that, as we think about that this week, as we think about that every week, it's really important that we constantly remember what we saw last week, which is that God's promises come first.
- We began last week with God's gracious initiative, with God's gracious promises. So we're going to be looking through the life of Abraham, but God is the main character.
- [1 : 1 8] It's God who called Abraham despite his unlikely background. It's God who made promises to Abraham, promises that weren't deserved, promises that couldn't be earned, but which were graciously given through God's kindness.
- Those promises, again, we saw last week that God would bless Abraham and through him incredibly bless all the nations, bless the whole world. And this week we're seeing then what it looks like to live by faith in those promises, faith in the God who made those promises.
- Two main sections are said in these chapters. The first in chapter 13 to do with kind of separating land because of tension between shepherders. The second, chapter 14, pursuing kings to rescue a nephew.
- Now, I completely understand if both those things feel slightly far removed from your current worries or issues that you're facing and dealing with in day-to-day life.
- That's okay because the heart of the matter, underneath the surface, really the question is this. When times of pressure, when times of pressure, when times of uncertainty come, when there are major decisions to be made, and also, as we said last week, when there are just those day-to-day kind of instantaneous decisions to make, the kind we make a hundred of every day, the question we're seeing here, whatever choices we make, are we willing to be guided by faith at those moments?
- [2 : 5 3] Are we willing to live by faith in the promises of God? This passage, these chapters help us see that's not always the easiest or the most simple way forward, but that it is always the best way to live and the best choices that we can make, and also something that we can do with real confidence, because it's a confidence in a God who keeps his promises.

So then, two case studies in living by faith. A bit of a confession to begin. I read an article on these chapters last year in preparation for this series. It called these two episodes, By Faith and Not By Sight, and By Faith and Not By Might, and I haven't been able to get those kind of rhyming titles out of my head.

I've certainly not been able to come up with anything better myself, so I'm borrowing those for this morning. If you think they're clever, that's because I didn't think of them. But thanks very much to someone who did.

So first up, case study number one, Genesis chapter 13, By Faith and Not By Sight. So what's the situation here in this chapter?

Well, there is this pressure that arises, because Abraham and his nephew Lot have so many possessions, in terms of livestock, people, tents.

[4 : 11] They can't all fit in the same area. There's lots of people kind of treading on each other's toes. Verse 6, their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together. And so verse 7, there was strife between the herdsmen of Abraham's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock.

You might know this feeling. If you had a lot of people visiting over Christmas, you can kind of identify with this issue here. And it is worth noting straight away, last week, at the end of chapter 12, there was this pressure that came, this decision that had to be made due to a famine in the land, due to a case of lack.

There was that choice, would Abraham act in faith? And actually, he failed there. We saw he went down into Egypt. Straight away, in chapter 13, there was another pressure point.

There was another decision to be made. Again, will Abraham act in faith? But notice this time, the issue that is between him and his nephew Lot is that God has blessed them so much.

They have so many good things. And that is what has caused this decision to have to be made. I think it is good just to highlight that, the need to respond in faith, to make decisions guided by faith, is a constant need.

[5 : 31] It's not just for when things go wrong. It's not just for when things are hard. But it's just as much in the good times, that ongoing call to trust in God's promises, to live by faith, even when things are going well, and we have plenty.

And so will that happen here, in Genesis chapter 13? Well, the way this is set up is that we're given a real contrast between Abraham and Lot as these two different ways of responding.

Because unlike last week, where Abraham took matters into his own hands, he went down into Egypt, he kind of behaved badly. We saw that. God remained faithful. But here we do see Abraham responding in faith.

In this whole chapter, we're seeing Abraham as a worshipper of God. It starts in verse 4, where Abraham goes to the altar he has made. It says, And there Abraham called upon the name of the Lord.

Now we see it again at the end of chapter 13, verse 18. Abraham moves his tents to the oaks at Mamre. And again, there he built an altar to the Lord, a place of worship.

[6 : 42] So here is Abraham beginning and end, calling out to, depending on, giving worship to the God who has revealed himself to him and who has made these promises to bless him.

And that faith, Abraham's faith in God's promises then, shapes his response as he looks to sort out this issue with Lot. Let there be no strife between you and me.

He says, verse 8, verse 9, If you take the left hand, I will go to the right. Or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left. Abraham lets Lot choose where he wants to go.

Because Abraham has that faith that no choice that someone else makes is able to get in the way of or undo God's promises. So Abraham here responds in faith.

And then we're shown really that Lot is the antithesis to that. Lot makes his choice in verses 10 and 11. And there are lots of little markers there that this is not choosing by faith.

[7 : 50] Just have a look down at those verses 10 and 11. It's all about Lot chooses according to what he can see. Lot chooses for himself. Lot chooses a place which is like Egypt.

That has kind of negative connotations already in the Bible. Lot goes east. So far in Genesis, moving east has been related to moving away from God.

Perhaps most clearly of all, Lot goes to Sodom, where we read verse 13, The men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord. And in fact, even the fact that Lot accepts Abraham's offer to choose, this is a culture where the younger should defer to the older.

Abraham had every right to choose first. And yet Lot grabs this chance with both hands when he thinks he can kind of get the prime land, the best kind of real estate, as quickly as he can and do what is best for him.

So Abraham acts in faith. Lot chooses by sight for himself. And as we said, the challenge for us then is to ask, well, what governs our response when decisions are to be made?

[9 : 01] Decisions when things are tough? Or again, as we said, decisions when things are going well. The point isn't that the right decision is always the one that will look worst.

No, we're called to use wisdom in our decisions. The Bible is really clear on that. But what we do learn here, the point is that faith is to be our ultimate guide.

Faith in God's promises is to be our ultimate priority and directive. So for us, in some examples, that will be really black and white, won't it?

The Bible says A, and yet it feels a little bit more comfortable, easier to do B. Well, to trust in God's promises, to act out of faith, means doing what God has said, regardless of the cost.

You know, should I lie a little bit or cover up the truth to increase the chance of me getting the thing or the outcome I want? Or should I be honest and risk losing that thing?

[10 : 02] You know, there's no denying those kind of decisions can be tough. But actually, in some ways, it is simple. It is black and white. When we trust God, we put aside the idea that the end justifies the means.

And instead, we embrace the fact that God controls the end. God is in control of the result and he will do what is right and so we can trust him and follow his will.

So sometimes that's really clear. There's A and there's B. God says A, not B. What's probably more common, but I think a lot more complex, is the gray areas of life, isn't it?

And I think that's what we've got here with Lot. There is nothing banned about the land that he goes to. It's not completely off limits.

It's not somewhere they've been told to stick away from. And yet, as we said, it is settling down among the wicked, making his home there. It is moving to the very borders, possibly outside of the borders that the land God promises or will promise to Abraham.

[11 : 10] When we look at Lot making the decision, there's no mention of God. It's very much, you know, what's in it for me? How is this going to affect my comfort? How is this going to shape my prosperity?

Those are very clearly first and foremost in Lot's mind. What looks good to me? And thinking of God's will is a kind of a distant question, if that's ever asked at all.

I don't think it is. The passage doesn't mention it. You know, when we're making our decisions, how should I spend my money? Where should I invest my time? How should I respond to this particular situation or to this person?

Often these things, you know for well, don't you? They are not black and white. There's a kind of a range of acceptable answers. And yet those are the questions to help us act out of faith.

What is my goal in this choice? Really what is directing me? What is the foundation for this decision? Is it my comfort? Is it what looks good to me?

[12 : 14] Is it just what everyone else in the world around us would do? Is it what gives me the best prospects in the future? Or have I considered God's purposes in this?

And what does that mean to do that? I think three really kind of practical steps. You know, have I really prayed about this? You know, have I really brought this decision before God and said, not my will but yours be done because I trust that that is what's best.

Number two, have I spoken to other Christians about this? God puts us in a church family to help one another. Have I spoken to people who actually might challenge me on my thoughts?

Because all of us are very good at kind of conning ourselves or convincing ourselves that God just happens to want the very thing that we also would like. Number three, am I willing to hold whatever this is lightly, whatever this outcome might be?

Most of all, wanting God's will to be done. And trusting that is the best thing, even if our human eyes or our human desires are pulling us in another direction.

[13 : 21] I think for so many of us, this is a huge mind shift because we are surrounded by, we are products of a world of individualism, a world that says, my desire is king.

But to really bring God into these decisions in life, to bring him into the big things and the small things, not just that he would bless the decisions we've already made, but that he would be our starting point and that we'd be willing to submit to him in those things.

That can be a really challenging thing. And I'm aware of that. It's a really difficult ask for all of us to live by faith and not by sight. And we don't want to play down the challenge of that.

But it's also, in this chapter, it shows us the positives of that as well. That this is also the best possible way of making a decision. That it's not just about kind of gritting our teeth and bearing it, but actually this is something we can rejoice in.

Where do we see that here? Well, I think first and foremost, we see it simply in the freedom that Abraham has. Put yourself into his situation, or certainly if I put myself into Abraham's situation here, I would have been up all night, kind of studying the maps, where is the best land, trying to get hold of some soil samples or something.

[14 : 44] How can I maneuver myself into the best position? How could I convince Lot that some sort of dusty area over there would be a good choice as kids could play in the sand or whatever?

That kind of concern. What if I end up here with a bad deal? I'm sure we've all had decisions, haven't we, where we've been stressing over them. We've lost sleep over them as we've tried to either manipulate them into the course that we want them to take, or we've just been overwhelmed by the size, the scale of the magnitude of the difference this decision and the outcome will make.

And so I love that the freedom that Abraham has here, you go left, I'll go right, you go right, I'll go left. That is the confidence of faith. That is the rest that faith brings.

And again, it doesn't mean we don't think about things, it doesn't mean we don't use our brains or the wisdom God has given us, but it means ultimately in every decision we can be confident that God's will will be done and that he will be working things out for his purposes.

A few examples of that, there have been so many times in our life as a church where we've had to make decisions about things and they will continue to be so. Those times we've prayed about them, we've thought hard about them, we've asked perhaps people's advice on them, sometimes things have happened as we've expected and sometimes they haven't.

[16:18] And yet it is the fact that God has promised to build his church and has said that nothing will get in the way of that that means after all this work and thinking and prayer that we can go to bed and sleep at night because ultimately we are dependent on God.

And that's the same in all of our lives. Faith doesn't make things simple, faith doesn't take away the challenges or the big decisions but faith puts our situation in God's hands, God's hands which are far bigger and stronger than ours and God who will keep his promises.

And that's exactly what happens, isn't it, at the end of chapter 13. God reaffirms his promise to Abraham. God has promised a land he will give Abraham in chapter 12 and here in verse 14 he shows him that.

He says, look up, you know, north, south, east, west, all of this land I will give to you and your descendants. It's this affirmation that Abraham has made exactly the right choice by acting in, by deciding through faith and not by sight because God will do what he has promised to do.

And we read again this Abraham story as New Testament Christians with our faith in the same God, the God of Abraham, the faithful God, that God who has now fulfilled his promise to bless us, to bless the nations.

[17:52] He's done that through Jesus Christ, the great descendant of Abraham through which the whole world is blessed. We have a place assured to us in the land that God has promised which is not a geographical place but rather the full reality that this promise is pointing to is that of a new creation, the perfect restoration of all things when Jesus returns.

And so to live by faith and not by sight does not mean blind faith but rather the Bible elsewhere says this that faith is the assurance of things hopeful, the conviction of things not seen, making decisions, bold decisions, maybe costly decisions, maybe surprising decisions but making decisions based on faith is the most secure we can be because God keeps his promises.

He has shown us that in Jesus and so we can know he will never let us down. He will always be with us working for our good and for his glory. So there's Genesis chapter 13 by faith and not by sight, case study number one.

The second case study that we're going to look at is chapter 14 by faith and not by might. This is where things as you kind of read through them and it all looks a bit complicated. There's a lot of things going on here.

There's a lot of names that I can't pronounce and James did a far better job of that than I would have. Let me give you my very quick kind of summary and overview. There are five kings including the king of Sodom where Lot has set up home.

[19:37] These five kings are under the rule of four other kings. The five kind of rebel. I don't want this anymore. The four come in and kind of crush that rebellion. They win a battle and then they take all the plunder, the possessions, the provisions from these five kings and head off back towards their homes again.

That's my kind of edited version of verses 1 to 11. What on earth has that got to do with this story? Well, we see that in verse 12. They also took Lot, the son of Abraham's brother who was dwelling in Sodom and his possessions and went on their way.

Lot, Abraham's nephew, is captured. Abraham is then told this. He leads out his men. He catches up with and defeats these kings.

He rescues Lot as well as all the other things that these kings had taken as the plunder from this battle. So there's kind of the gist of things.

Notice actually how it feels quite different but it's the same pattern as chapter 13 we've just looked at. There is this issue involving Lot, whether that's kind of tension about land or whether that's Lot being kidnapped.

[20 : 48] An issue involving Lot. Abraham responds to that in faith and then as you'll see Abraham is blessed as a result or rather God's blessing to Abraham is restated vindicating his faith.

Now we're going to look mainly at that last section and that blessing but I do want us to think first quickly just about what we see here about responding in faith by faith and not by might as we've said.

It gives us again a picture of what that looks like which I think is really practical for us in our own lives. Abraham's response of faith in chapter 13 we could describe that as a passive response.

Abraham willing to let Lot choose where to go. Choose the land he wants trusting that God will work out his purposes. but here in chapter 40 in Abraham's response of faith is much more active isn't it?

He gets his men together he leads them he pursues the enemy he divides his forces he uses tactics attacking at night and so to have faith then is not simply to say oh I'll just kind of sit back and see what happens it's not just to let go and let God just to assume that God will drop everything into our lap.

[22 : 08] here in Abraham we see a really proactive response and yet still this is a response of faith as Abraham has this far smaller force and yet is relying on God's might and not his own.

So I think these two chapters together give us this really well rounded picture of what it means to respond by faith. That can be a really proactive thing as it is here in chapter 14.

Faith gives us that real boldness boldness to do to attempt things and yet whether it's taking that step forward or whether it's being willing to take that step back it's doing so dependent on God's strength and seeing his purposes and not our own.

So difficult situation Abraham responds in faith but I think really the focus the most significant part of chapter 14 is down in verse 17 onwards as we see the response to this.

Abraham is met by two kings and we're going to see here as was the case in verse 13 the reaffirming of God's promised blessing. First king to deal with the king of Sodom comes to meet Abraham.

[23 : 22] Verse 21 it's quite blunt give me the persons but take the goods for yourself. he's offering Abraham a reward no less than Abraham deserved or would have been due because Abraham has recaptured his stuff and rescued his people.

But look at Abraham's response in verse 22 Abraham said to the king of Sodom I have lifted up my hand to the Lord God most high possessor of heaven and earth that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours lest you should say I have made Abraham rich.

Again a great picture a great example isn't it of the response of faith not being one that just kind of grabs everything possible gets everything it can and rather is willing to turn down this lucrative reward why does Abraham say that?

Well again it's because Abraham trusts that God will do what he has promised God will make him this great nation as he has said he will and when that happens and when Abraham stands at the head of this great nation he doesn't want the king of Sodom or anyone else saying oh yeah I made that guy everything that he is today you know I really got him started this is down to me no he wants everyone to know that it is God the God of the Bible and he alone who instigated this and who fulfilled his promises the response of faith wants God's name to be praised above everything else above our own comfort and ease and above our own reputation or the reputation of anyone else the response of faith declares that we are not strong we are not self-reliant we have not earned it and yet it rejoices in those truths so that God and God alone might have the glory so we see the king of Sodom

Abraham rejecting his offer but finally we see this second king Melchizedek king of Salem verse 18 he comes out with great generosity bringing bread and wine he comes as a representative of God priest of God most high it says and he restates that blessing God has promised remember that pattern in both these chapters tension response of faith blessing blessed be Abraham by God most high possessor of heaven and earth and blessed be God most high who has delivered your enemies into your hands again this is God's might and God who will bless Abraham and in response Abraham gives a tenth of everything he's won in recognition and honour to this slightly mysterious figure of Melchizedek so who is this Melchizedek king of Salem priest of God most high there's a whole lot that could be said about that but let me try and summarise that as we finish really the

[26 : 35] New Testament tells us that Melchizedek is a pointer to Jesus Melchizedek is here right near the beginning of the first book of the Bible as a type a shadow pointing us a signpost toward Jesus Jesus the true king Jesus the ultimate priest and that as Melchizedek blesses Abraham or we should say as Melchizedek passes on God's blessing to Abraham for his faithfulness so Jesus is the one through whom we receive God's ultimate blessing of forgiveness forgiveness of salvation of being his people of eternity with him when we respond in faith to his promises let's never forget that God has made great promises to us as his people God has promised he will never leave us but will always be with us God has promised that he will build his church and nothing will ever get in the way of that

God has promised that he will care for us as a mother cares for her child God has promised that he is strong where we are weak God has promised that whatever cost we pay for following him that he will honour that cost that we will never regret that God has promised most of all forgiveness and relationship when we turn to Jesus in faith we are called to make our decisions in good times and in hard times in the big things and the small things to make our decisions grounded in faith in these promises by faith and not by sight by faith and not by our might and we can do that confident because we know God keeps his promises we've seen that in Jesus he has paid the highest cost imaginable to do that for us at the cross and so with that certainty and with that promised reward there is no greater way to live than by faith

Corrie Ten Boone who along with her family risked everything to rescue to shelter and hide Jews from the holocaust in the second world war as an outworking of her Christian faith she ended up herself in a labour camp but she wrote after the war she wrote this never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God in Jesus we know God and we know he keeps his promises and so we can and perhaps this might be for the first time for you this morning today we can learn to live more and more by faith in him faith in him first and foremost for our salvation our forgiveness knowing that we are not good enough and yet Christ has come has lived that perfect life that we failed to live and died in our place that we can be forgiven restored into the family of

God and from there faith in him in every decision as his people from that point on as we walk as his followers as we make decisions in boldness as we make decisions with hard work as we make decisions seeking to use wisdom and the gifts that God has given us but above all those things as we make decisions in faith with great security knowing that God has made promises he will keep those promises and he will never let us down let's pray together heavenly father we thank you that out of your grace out of your perfect kindness to us that you have made promises to us that we could never earn that we could never deserve and we thank you for that promise first and foremost that you would bless us with forgiveness and through adopting us into your family as your children and we thank you that you have kept that promise through

Jesus Christ if our trust is in him thank you that you promise us that as your children that you will always be with us that you will give us what is for our good even if that's not easy that you will be at work in us making us more like Jesus and the fulfillment of that promise that one day you will welcome us as your people into our perfect and eternal home with you now Lord these promises that you have made us are incredible promises they are far superior to anything that our world could offer us and they are certain because we have seen you act to keep those promises in Jesus his life his death his resurrection that we might receive all those promises that you have made all those blessings that you have set aside that we receive them in him now Lord please help us as we've been thinking about this morning to live by faith in those promises

[32 : 06] Lord that is not easy that is not natural in some ways for us to do we pray that you would help us though to live by faith and not by sight to live by faith and not by our own might but rather trusting in you seeking your will desiring your glory knowing that as our perfect father you will never let us down we pray that these monumental truths from you the God who made all things would shape our lives and our choices day by day that we would look to you that we would look to help one another as together we live by faith in the God who deserves our complete trust and who remains ever faithful and we pray all these things in the precious name of Jesus Christ Amen