

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord God, we pray for peace within our homes and at our places of work. We invite You to guide our thoughts, our deeds, our words and our feelings, and we ask that the Gospel message might come alive in our own day. Transform our lives today into a victory of love over the worldly temptations of evil, ever present all around us, and may we see Your Kingdom come! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

Today, stay quiet and make your words few before God; try spending more time listening than speaking. Rejoice in all that the Lord your God says to you.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for those involved in investment and the creation of wealth.** *This may be a difficult subject for some, but we must pray about it, for it is through entrepreneurs that work is created in a commercial world. Pray today for anyone you know who is involved with the creation of businesses and jobs*
- *Give thanks to God for the worship you have enjoyed over the last weekend. Look back over it and sing its songs again and says its prayers. What is good worship on one day is good for the next!*
- *Pray for all those who have been affected by civil unrest, in cities or in countries throughout the world. All of them feel the pain of having personal life disturbed and unsettled.*

Meditation

Speak to us in words of prophecy, Lord God
So we may discern the Your Word in the world

Speak to us in words of challenge and vision
So we may be willing to be tested to our limits

Speak to us in words of love and comfort
So we may be empowered by them for action

Speak to us in words of wisdom and revelation
So we may be fed by them, day and night

Speak to us in words of sound teaching and learning
So we may accept the truths of Your Word

Speak to us in words of faith, hope and love
So we may use them to bless our troubled world

Speak to us in words of change and transformation
So we may go heavenward in life, towards You.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Genesis 13: 2-18

² Abram was very rich in livestock, silver, and gold. ³ He journeyed, stage by stage, from the Negeb to Bethel, to the place where his tent was previously pitched between Bethel and Ai, ⁴ and where he had been the first to make an altar and called on the name of the LORD. ⁵ Lot, who was with Abram, also had flocks, herds and tents, ⁶ and the land could not support them

both; for their possessions were so great that they could not live together. ⁷ Then, arguments broke out between Abram's and Lot's cattle herders. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites lived in the land. ⁸ So Abram said to Lot,

'Let there be no strife between us or our herdsmen; for we are family. ⁹ Is not the whole land before you? Let us part ways. If you take the left, I will go to the right; or if you take the right, I will go to the left.'

¹⁰ Lot looked around and saw that the Jordan plain was well watered everywhere like the LORD's garden or Egypt, towards Zoar (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) ¹¹ Lot therefore chose all the plain of the Jordan for himself, and journeyed eastward. So they parted company.

¹² Abram then settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the Plain and moved his tent close to Sodom. ¹³ The people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD. ¹⁴ The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had parted company,

'Look all around you now, and look from where you are to the north, south, east, and west; ¹⁵ I will give all the land you see to you and your descendants forever. ¹⁶ I will make your descendants like the dust of the earth; so that if one could count it, your offspring could also be counted! ¹⁷ Go and walk about throughout the land, for I will give it to you.'

¹⁸ So Abram moved his tent, and came to settle by the oaks of Mamre at Hebron. He built an altar there to the LORD.

Review

Chastised by God's rescue of them from Egypt, Abram and Sarai travelled back to Canaan and managed to survive well enough, even though they had initially left the country after the threat of famine (12:10). They retraced their steps back to where they had previously pitched their tents near Bethel and Ai, and there, faced the next test of their relationship with God. Abram rose to the occasion and did what God wanted of him, which was to deal with the thorny issue of his strange extended family, so that God's work could be done exclusively through Abram and his descendants.

Famine had clearly not ravaged Abram and Lot, perhaps the threat of famine was just that, a threat, and did not eventually strike. But for whatever reason, both Abram and Lot managed to gather to themselves great wealth by the standards of their day. Basically, their wealth was measured in the sizes of their herds of cattle and flocks, and the size of these had reached the point where there was not enough land for the animals to feed. Things could not go on as they were, and Abram decided to act, if only for the sake of peace and family goodwill (13:6,7). This time, God did not intervene in the situation, He allowed Abram to take the initiative to set things right.

We cannot be sure, but it is possible that Abram perceived for himself that Lot stood in the way of God's call on his life. God had promised that Abram would be the father of a nation (12:2,3), but with Sarai barren, he had taken Lot with him as a possible heir if he died. It now took faith for Abram to separate from Lot. Abram's wealth was to be the seed-bed for his descendants who would be called 'God's people', and Lot would have no part in God's inheritance.

Abram therefore managed what we could call a 'peace process', by which the two parties were separated. We might think from the story that Abram was being magnanimous in offering Lot the richer pasture-lands of the Jordan Valley. It was the easier option for Lot, requiring little of him except to settle in the plains (13:10). Like an Old Testament prodigal son, Lot was content to have his share and head straight for the 'fleshpots' of sin near the notorious Sodom, right on the edge of what could loosely be called 'Canaan'. His choice would cause endless trouble (see chps. 14,18,19) and end in ignominious incest (19:30ff) in an attempt to keep his name alive. The Old Testament prodigal was unable to return to the Father!

Abram certainly did not suffer because of Lot's choice, for the place where the transaction was done is a place that has been identified by geographers of more recent times, and the range of countryside visible from this spot is extensive. Some claim that from this spot it is possible under some weather conditions to see virtually all Israel, northward towards Mount Hermon, south to the Negev, East across the Jordan plains to the hills beyond, and west over the mountain ranges occupying the centre of Israel, to the Mediterranean Sea. This was the 'Canaan', in which God intended to settle Abram and his descendants (13:12).

Once Abram and Lot parted company, God's purposes for Abram were advanced, and God then revealed Himself to Abram. The parting was crucial, and the text of this passage contains three emphatic references

to it, in verses 9,11, and 14. Abram had just failed his God in the episode in Egypt, but he passed this test; he had acted in a godly manner, and God was therefore able to reveal the next part of His promise. In a remarkable speech (13:14-17), God promised Abram that his descendants would possess this land 'forever' (13:15). We can at least say that this passage is therefore contentious to this very day, for the ownership of the land of Israel / Palestine remains a 'hot-potato' issue, both politically and religiously, to this very day.

The scene closes with a remarkable affirmation of Abram's call. God recognised Abram's renewed faith, and confirmed the promise He had given him earlier. In chapter 12, God had told Abram that he would give Canaan to his descendants (12:7). This time, however, He extended the promise (13:15,16). He now promised Abram firstly 'all' the land, secondly, that it would be the property of his descendants 'forever', and thirdly, He said that Abram's descendants would be like the 'dust of the earth' (13:16)! It is an incredulous claim, but important. We will find that these promises crop up later on.

Abram then responds to the extraordinary grace of God's promise by building another altar for worship. God was promising to do a work through him on a truly grand scale, like nothing ever seen before. But this is how God has always worked!

Going Deeper

As we look at the details of this story, it is a straightforward narrative which leads us step by step, with features that connect it with the wider story of Genesis. It is a crucial passage of Scripture for all Jewish people, for whom it contains the first description of the area of land which was later called the 'Promised Land'.

Moving on in Genesis

Today's passage has sections which point forward, and sections which points back. Looking forward, it mentions the sins of Sodom (vv10,12) and the promises of God for the future (v15ff); and looking back, it refers to the wealth of Abram gained in Egypt (v1 etc) and also goes back before Abraham's time with references to the Lord's Garden (v10; Eden?) and the wickedness against the Lord (v13; similar to that before the Flood). Apart from the obvious subject matter of Abram's separation from Lot, the whole story is contained by references to Abram's building of altars. He returned to where he had previously built an altar at Bethel (v3), to start again from where he had left off, and at the end of the story when he settled down in the southern region of Hebron, he built his third altar.

The other main feature of the story is the progress of Abram's changing from a nomadic lifestyle to that of a settled community. This was surely God's purpose in telling Abram to go to Canaan, and it was Abram's nomadic instincts that had taken him through the land to the disastrous episode in Egypt (12:10-20). As he returned to Canaan, he may have realised that Canaan was where God wanted him to settle down, and indeed the Hebrew word for 'settle down' or 'remain' ('yashav') features in several critical verses of the story; in verses 6, 12 and 18. The end result of the story is that Lot 'settles down' towards the city of Sodom, with all the implications of moving away from the Lord's blessing, and Abram ceases wandering like a nomadic tribesman and settles in Canaan, the land of promise.

The separation of Lot and Abram

It is not surprising that arguments broke out between the herdsmen of Lot and Abram. The hill country of Canaan was not as extensive as other regions, such as around the Jordan valley, and as we have already seen, other tribesmen, Canaanites and Perizzites occupied the land around Bethel and Ai. Scripture records other such disputes affecting the forefathers; Isaac's men had trouble with the Philistines over the use of land and resources (26:12-22), Jacob and Laban, his Father in Law and Uncle, also disputed property (30:30ff), and Jacob had to divide land with his brother Esau (36:6,7) in order to find personal peace. We can either follow the normal logic of these stories, or see them as part of the way that God kept the early family of Abram, Isaac and Jacob self contained. This was so that it would produce the results He wanted, a pure line of descent through to the people of Israel. Why should this be important? It was so that a clear difference could be seen between God's blessing and the normal consequences of human endeavour within the world. These two may be mixed in a complex way today, but unless God had demonstrated the difference within history and within scripture (and ultimately through Jesus), how would we know how to judge the difference now?

The principle Abram began with when discussing the future with Lot was the noble principle of Psalm 133 'how good it is when brothers dwell together in unity'. He and Lot were 'family', so surely there was no room for division? (v8) But this was merely the temporary starting point for Abram's arrangement of a separation. In most cases such a division as this would have required considerable skills of haggling on both sides, and yet Abram, after the lesson of his humiliation by God in Egypt, handed the whole initiative over to Lot. He gave away everything from the start, leaving himself with no bargaining chip for negotiation! Lot had the best

of choices as to where to go, and Abram, without talking of it, assumed Lot would take the 'half' he had managed under Abram's prior authority, which was his share (the other half going to his wife and 'sister', Sarai in the event of his death). What Abram did hold back was his knowledge that God had promised him Canaan, though it was obvious that Lot would choose the lush plains of the Jordan valley which looked like Egypt (v10) and was close to the settlement of Zoar, an outlying region of the city of Sodom. This was logical, for there would be plenty of land for growth and wealth in the watered lands of the valleys. Lot chose to go eastwards, back closer to the city life of human depravity from whence he had come, but Abram stayed in the hill country of Canaan, the land of promise and the land of blessing.

The Further Blessings of Abraham

Whether or not it is possible to locate a place near Bethel in which such a view of all Canaan is possible, the whole of Canaan now 'belonged' to Abram in the sense that he had elected to follow God's plan, having finally let go the last remaining impediment to the blessing. This was Lot, the last member of his family. It was right at the beginning of the call of Abram that God had told him to leave all of his family (12:1) and it had taken a long time for him to do so honourably.

In the same way that Abram had invited Lot to separate from him with the invitation to 'Look ...see' (v10), God now invited Abram to extend his vision of the extent of His promises. Abram surveyed an area of land area roughly equivalent to the later united nation of Israel in the days of David and Solomon, but tragically divided since (in a whole variety of ways). The land itself was really symbolic of and representative of the purposes of God for the whole of Creation; for just as God intended to bless all people through the descendants of Abram, He intended to bless the whole world through the land of Canaan. Abram, through this majestic view (v14), was therefore given not just a sight of a large area of land, but a vision of God's work through him as something far bigger than he could comprehend. Each addition that God made to the general blessing of Abram in verses 15 and 16 (see above) served precisely that same purpose. Then, to give Abram time and space to take in the extraordinary breadth of the vision, he was commanded to 'walk about throughout the land' (v17); Abram's last nomadic tour, not of occupation or of conquest, but of exploration of God's possibilities.

Verse 18 indicates that Abram did indeed tour Canaan ('Abram moved ... and came to settle' v18) before finally staying in the south of the country. The place he chose to settle was the third great site at which he built an altar. Each of these came to have a significant history in the later story of God's people; Shechem, Bethel and Hebron are names of places which crop up frequently in the rest of scripture. Hebron would later become famous as David's capital of Judah before he united the tribes of Israel and took Jerusalem as his capital (2 Samuel 5). Abram also became personally attached to Hebron, purchasing a field there for the burial of his wife Sarai which was also used for his own burial (Gen 23:2). The nomad had become a servant of God, settled in the land of Canaan.

Discipleship

Application

Abram had learned something from his last lengthy journey as a nomadic tribesman, and the Egyptian debacle (12:10-20) had taught him the wisdom of faith by which he yielded what he did more carefully to the Lord. In particular, he needed to keep close to God at those moments when the specific elements of his call required of him some action, as when dealing with his last family member, Lot. What Abram shows us in this story is the bold step of letting go of everything except his call. Although Abram would indeed continue to be wealthy and enjoy a large personal retinue, he offered Lot just about everything it was possible for him to give him. It was unlikely that Lot would choose to take the hill country, the land of Canaan promised him by God, but even in this, Abram was content to let go of everything and allow God to determine how the story would unfold. By so doing, he ensured that God's will was done, he was given an extended sight of his blessing, and he was given a great vision (v14).

There is no way we can enter into Abram's heart and try to imagine what it must have felt like to be the object of God's call in such a powerful way. However, the testimony of Abram is that the call of each and every Christian is no smaller. The call God places upon us all is to be some part of His massive plan for the redemption of humanity and of the whole world! There are times when we each need to look 'up' from the intricacies of our lives and see that God has placed us to perform a function within this incredibly large vision. It was JB Phillips who wrote a book entitled 'Your God is Too Small' which develops this same theme in a modern context. In every generation there is a need for God's people to realise that the call He places upon them is no smaller than that which He gave Abram.

Questions for groups

1. To what extent should we be attached to the idea of Canaan as God's 'Promised Land' today, in the light of the Gospel?
2. What other spiritual lessons can be learned from this story of Abraham and his faith?
3. How would you answer someone who said they had given God everything, but had little in exchange? Is this really Christian experience?

Discipleship challenges

- *Write down a list of the challenges Abram faced as he dealt with his nephew Lot. How many of these things are faced by people today? How many of these things are faced by you? Write down what you feel about the things God has asked you to do for Him, and make sure that you have considered all the difficulties.*
- *Pray for people all around you today who are lost in their sin, like the people of Sodom or Gomorrah. Ask yourself whether you are living with them or living amongst them, like either Abram or Lot.*

Final Prayer

Almighty Lord, help us to be aware of people around us; those who suffer, who cry out for help, who know bereavement, or who long for comfort for their souls. And as we become aware of those around us, put our faith into action. AMEN
