

“A Tale of Two Men” (Genesis 13:5-18)

Nearly 200 years ago there were two Scottish brothers named John and David Livingstone. John had set his mind on making money and becoming wealthy, and he did. But under his name in an old edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* John Livingstone is listed simply as “the brother of David Livingstone” (1813-1873). While John had dedicated himself to making money, David had invested his life as a missionary to Africa. He resolved, “I will place no value on anything I have or possess unless it is in relationship to the kingdom of God.” The inscription over his burial place in Westminster Abbey reads, “For thirty years his life was spent in an unwearied effort to evangelize.”¹ Two men...two brothers, yet, both lived very different lives.

In Genesis 13:5-18, we will look at the lives of two men, Abram and Lot, two family members that lived very different lives. Thirteen chapters in Genesis are devoted to the life and times of Abram; of these, five tell the story of Lot, his nephew. Unlike Abram’s story, Lot’s describes complete failure. Why is so much space devoted to telling us about Lot’s tragedy? His life offers a sharp contrast to Abram’s. Lot represents the walk of sight, while Abram’s represents the walk of faith. Lot looks for a city built with human hands; Abram looks for a city whose builder is God (Heb 11:10). Lot fails. Abram succeeds. In both lives we see critical lessons that relate to our struggles today.² This section brings out three principles that will help us walk by faith, and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7). The first principle is...

1. Handle your conflicts wisely and graciously (13:5-9). In 13:5-7a, Moses writes, “**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 remain together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock.**” Like Abram, Lot became rich in Egypt (cf. 13:2, 5). No doubt, Uncle Abe blessed Lot with some of the gifts he received from Pharaoh (cf. 12:16). Maybe this act of generosity alleviated some of his guilt for giving away his wife, Sarai, to Pharaoh (12:10-15). Regardless, both Abram and Lot were “living large.” In fact, their “**possessions**” had become so large that they could no longer dwell together.³ This point is repeated twice in 13:6-7 for emphasis. The wealth of Abram and Lot consisted of flocks and herds. As nomadic tribesmen they had to travel about looking continually for pasture for their sheep and cattle. Since the land was already inherited, there wasn’t a lot of pasture to choose from. Consequently, each man’s herdsmen sought water and the best pasture for the animals of their master. This competition inevitably led to conflict (cf. Jas 4:1-3). The result was a range war—the kind of western-movie scenario with which we’re so familiar. The only thing missing is Gene Autry’s background music—“Oh, give me a home where my shepherds can roam.”⁴

In these three verses, two biblical truths are apparent. **First, we may have riches if riches do not have us.**⁵ I know many wealthy Christians that live far below their means and use their wealth to help others and serve God’s kingdom. There is nothing wrong with being rich, as long as you do not hoard that which God has given you. **Second, wealth can be a blessing and a curse in a man’s life.** We can understand and appreciate the blessing of wealth but we often forget that more money equals more problems. One of the many reasons is money can divide families.

In 13:7b, there is a significant parenthetical phrase: “**Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling then in the land.**” This brief commentary suggests that the conflict between Abram and Lot was on full display before the unbelieving Canaanites and Perizzites.⁶ Whether you realize it or not, unbelievers are watching your life: how you treat your spouse and kids, how you conduct yourself—at work, on the road, when you’re under stress, when you think no one is watching. And what they see will

either draw them to Jesus Christ or repel them. Sadly, many people will never listen to what *any* believer *says* because of what *some* believers *are* (see 1 Pet 2:12; Phil 2:14-16).

Two Christian ladies had to share the same office. They fought like cats and dogs. One always wanted the window open; the other wanted it closed. “I feel I am going to suffocate in here!” said the one. “I’m going to die of a cold!” retorted the other. Finally, a co-worker came up with a suggestion. “Why don’t you keep the window closed until one of you dies of suffocation and then keep it open until the other dies of pneumonia. Then we’ll have some peace around here!”⁷

We laugh at this story, but it’s true to life. When Christians have disputes, it hurts the testimony of the Lord. On the eve of His death, Jesus prayed that His people might be one that the world might believe (John 17:20-23). When we exhibit unity in the body of Christ, the world is bound to be attracted to Christ and the church (John 13:34-35). When we don’t, the world is repelled.

In the face of this family feud, Abram speaks to Lot in 13:8-9: **“Please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers.”⁸ Is not the whole land before you? Please 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.**” In these two verses, we learn a great deal about how to appropriately handle conflict.

First, believers should seek to resolve conflict (see Matt 5:23-24). Abram took the initiative to resolve the conflict with Lot. Abram could have said, “Now, look here, Lot, this land belongs to me. God has promised it to me, not to you. You’ll simply have to move on.” Instead, he surrendered his personal rights and sacrificed his interests (Phil 2:1-11). Likewise, it is our responsibility to surrender our personal rights. The lazy, unbelieving way is to let the conflict drift and become steadily worse.⁹ Yet, the Bible is clear; when there is a conflict with a brother or sister we should take the initiative. The life of faith involves learning to live with brothers and sisters.

With that said, there are times when brothers and sisters must separate for the sake of peace (see Acts 15:39).¹⁰ This side of heaven, believers will not always see eye-to-eye. Therefore, there are occasions where a parting of ways is appropriate. For example, in a local church, if there are strong preferences or opinions that cannot be resolved, it can be appropriate for a member to depart for the sake of harmony. We must be “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:3).¹¹

Second, believers should exhibit tenderness. Abram’s words to Lot were explicitly tender. Twice Abram says, **“Please”** (lit. “I pray you.”). He then appealed to their kinship—**“for we are brothers.”** Unlike Cain, Abram believed he was his brother’s keeper (cf. 4:9). He diffused any anger or defensiveness that Lot may have had and he refused to argue. Now you cannot have a fight if one person refuses to be party to it. It takes two to tangle. I have always loved boxing and action movies. Thus, when I was growing up, I always wanted to box or wrestle with my younger brother, Tim. Unfortunately for me...and fortunately for him, he typically refused. I hated this! There is nothing more frustrating than wanting to have a good fight, only to discover that the other person is unwilling to fight. May we follow in the footsteps of Abram and Tim and refuse to fight or argue. Instead, may we exhibit tenderness with the goal of unity.¹²

Third, believers should wait on God. When confronted with worrying circumstances that seemed to be clamoring for his immediate action, Abram’s first reaction was to do nothing. He simply waited. He was confident that God would soon make His way clear.¹³ On this occasion, Abram refused to take matters into his own hands (cf. 12:10-20). Instead, he left his circumstances in God’s capable hands.

I sense that Abram had a great deal of confidence because he knew, by faith, that no matter what Lot chose, God would fulfill His covenant promises in his own life. I like that! Abram didn't get ahead in life by looking out for number one. No! It was God who exalted him because he placed the interests of others ahead of his own (see Phil 2:3-11).¹⁴ The world's way of getting ahead is to look out for number one. But God's way is to look up to number one and to be a blessing to others.

People who truly believe God's promises of provision can be generous with their possessions. You don't have to be worried about "losing" if others are blessed. So be generous! Help others succeed! God will see that kind of Christlike faith and you will be rewarded! When you face troubling circumstances like Abram, don't do anything rash. Just wait. Do nothing. Ride it out. In time, God will reveal the way to you.

[You and I are to handle our conflicts wisely and graciously. We are also to...]

2. View life from an eternal perspective (13:10-13). In the next four verses, we have a deliberate contrast between Abram and Lot. Moses writes, "**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 Egypt¹⁵ as you go to Zoar.¹⁶ So Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward.¹⁷** [Every movement away from God thus far in Genesis has been designated as toward the east, 3:24; 4:16; 11:2.] **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 tents as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked¹⁸ exceedingly and sinners against the LORD.**" As the father of three small children, I can appreciate what went into the look of Lot as he surveyed the land about them. Any of my children could work for the Bureau of Standards. Yesterday, my wife was cutting up homemade banana bread when one of my children (who will remain unnamed) said, "I want the biggest piece." Of course, another child echoed the same sentiment. No matter how small the differences, with a mere look my children know what slice, scoop, or cup is the largest.¹⁹ That same kind of look was evident in the eyes of Lot.²⁰ He saw that the valley of the Jordan was lush, green, growing, and well watered...just like the garden of the Lord and the land of Egypt. It was a modern real estate developer's dream! It was a place where Lot could add to his considerable wealth and status.

As Lot went his way, I believe he patted himself on the back for putting one over on old Abe. Abe must have been soft in the head to give such an advantage to Lot, and Lot was just sharp enough to cash in on it. Perhaps Lot thought, "Uncle Abe has more than I have anyway, this will just balance everything out." Or, "Old Uncle Abe is kind of naïve—he doesn't really care. After all, he gave me my choice." Or, regarding Sodom, Lot might have said to himself, "That wicked city really needs a strong witness for the Lord. After all, who's going to tell them about God?" Or perhaps he felt his family needed a little "broader exposure" to the world. After all, Uncle Abe was getting pretty religious, building altars all over the place and calling on the name of the Lord. Whatever his rationalizations or excuses, Lot's decision was based on his own selfish desires.²¹

Lot saw, he chose, and he acted. This reveals the downward spiral of sin (Jas 1:14-15). We can see this in Lot's three choices.²² **First, Lot chose himself ahead of others.** The text records these words: "**So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of Jordan**" (13:11a). What a revealing statement! Lot's primary concern wasn't the glory of God, the benefit of his family or Abram's, or even his own spiritual welfare. His primary concern was, "What's in it for me?" The simplest and fairest separation would have been to make the Jordan River the boundary between the two men. What would have been fairer than to have

chosen one side of the river to dwell in and to leave the other to Abram? But Lot chose all of the land for himself. Proverbs 14:12: “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” Lot “**settled in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom.**” At first, Lot simply pitched his tent *near* Sodom. But in 14:12, we discover that he had traded in his tent for a townhouse *in* Sodom. Then in 19:1, we find that he was *sitting in the gate* as a leader of these wicked and godless people! I’m sure Lot did not intend to actually live in the cities of the valley. At first, he simply set off in that general direction (cf. 13:11). But once our direction is set, our destination is also determined, for it is now only a matter of time. While Lot lived in his tents at first (13:2), before long he has traded in his tent for a townhouse in Sodom (19:2, 4, 6). He may have lived in the suburbs initially, but at last he lived in the city (19:1ff).²³ Some decisions may not seem very significant, but they set a particular course for our lives. The decision may not seem very important, but its final outcome can be terrifying and tragic. Material prosperity should never be sought at the cost of spiritual peril.²⁴

Second, Lot chose his occupation over his family. Lot had “flocks and herds and tents” (13:5) but he did not have an altar (cf. 13:4). As a result, he did not ask, “Is this a good place to raise children? He asked, “Is this a good place to raise cattle?” He did not ask what God had chosen for him. He did not consider the impact that living in sin city would have on his wife, his children, and himself. His choice was entirely determined by the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). When you are contemplating a move, one of the first questions you should ask is: Will this move draw me and my family closer to Christ? Unless God explicitly calls, do not move until you are confident that there is a strong Bible-believing church where you and your family will be able to worship and fellowship.²⁵ You owe it to yourself and your children to prioritize your relationship with the Lord.

Third, Lot chose the immediate over the future. Lot’s eyes became the windows of his soul. He chose the path of least resistance. It is not that Lot was evil; he simply seemed to be adrift without an anchor. He lived life on the edge, and like so many of us, he eventually lost his way. When faced with a hard decision, he acted selfishly.²⁶ Yet, as we will see in chapter 19, this would prove to be the biggest mistake of Lot’s life. As a result of this careless choice, his wife would turn to a pillar of salt, his girls would commit incest with him, and Lot, a righteous man (2 Pet 2:7-8), would live an unrighteous life.

There are two questions that come to a human soul: The first question is, “Heaven or hell?” Lot answered this question when he left Mesopotamia and followed Abram to Canaan (cf. 12:4). The second question is, “Heaven or earth?” Lot answered this second question when he chose Sodom.²⁷ What about you? If you have trusted in Christ, you have heaven instead of hell, but the question for you today may be: Do you have heaven or earth (Matt 6:19-20)?

[You and I are to handle our conflicts wisely and graciously and view life from an eternal perspective. Lastly, we are to...]

3. Express confidence in God’s promises (13:14-18). In 13:14-16, Moses writes, “**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 will give it to you and to your descendants forever. 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.’**” It is interesting to note that God did not speak to Abram until after Abram had made his decision to finally obey God’s initial command to separate from his father’s household (cf. 12:1). Humanly speaking, the only thing that stood in the way of divine blessing was human disobedience. God eventually removed that barrier by forcibly separating Abram and Lot. At that point, God once again speaks to Abram and reaffirms His promises. I believe that many of us have missed tremendous blessings

in life and the opportunity to be used of the Lord simply because we have refused to obey His Word. In most cases, we trade away the bounty of God for the scraps of the world.

Previously, Lot “lifted up his eyes” (13:10) and had seen the land before him with the eyes of one weighing financial promise. Here, Abram “**lifted up his eyes**” (cf. Deut 34:1-4) also and he saw the whole land as far as he could see in every direction. Abram was without an heir. However, the Lord appeared to Abram at this crucial time and reconfirmed the promise of land that He said He would give to Abram’s offspring (13:15). God repeated His promise to give him and his descendants all the land he saw. This promise was more specific than God’s previous promises regarding the seed and the land (12:2, 7). This was God’s third revelation to Abram. It contained three specifics.

First, God would give the land to Abram and his descendants *forever* (13:15). Second, Abram’s heir would be *his own seed* (offspring; 13:15-16). Third, Abram’s descendants would be *innumerable* (13:16). The figure of “**dust**” suggests physical seed (13:16; cf. 2:7).²⁸ The reference to the dust of the earth is a figurative expression for a number too large to be counted, since it would be impossible for the earth’s population to be as numerous as there are grains of dust in the earth.

These blessings are good news for Abram but far from the reality he saw. The land was under the control of the Canaanites and the Perizzites (cf. 13:7). The leftover grazing land belonging to Lot (cf. 13:11). He had no kid. Sarai, his wife, is beyond the age of bearing children. If I had been Abram, I would have negotiated the promise. “Lord, I know you’re going to give me the whole land but do you think that you could inform the Canaanites and Perizzites? In fact, I’d be happy with a couple of acres. Offspring like the dust of the earth? Lord, just one kid will do.” Yet, unlike me, Abram expressed confidence in God’s promises. Even though he could not see anything with his natural eyes, he chose to walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor 5:7).

After reaffirming these great promises, God said to Abram, “**Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you**” (13:17). The practice of walking through the land appears to have been a symbolic, legal practice related to the idea of staking a claim on a piece of real estate (cf. Josh 1:3; 24:3).²⁹ Abram would not take possession of the land (Heb 11:13-16); his descendants would (12:7; 15:17-21). For now he was not to possess it, but was simply to inspect it with the eye of faith (see Rom 4:20-22). Have you walked through the land that God has given you? We all live somewhere, whether it is a house or an apartment. Have you ever walked through your home and prayed? This is one way you can say, “Lord, all that You have given me, belongs to You.”

Genesis 13 closes with these telling words: “**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**” (13:18). Despite occasional failures, Abram was a man of faith. In the face of unbelievable odds, he builds an altar to the Lord. Do you know what he is saying by building that altar? “Lord, I don’t know how it is going to happen. I don’t know how You are going to do it. It sounds impossible. But if You said it, I’m going to build an altar and trust You for the impossible.”³⁰ Interestingly, this is the third altar that Abram has built: one in the north (Shechem, 12:7-8), one in the central (13:4), and now one in the south, Hebron. Abram was claiming the whole land of Canaan for God.³¹ The word “**Hebron**” means “**communion**.” It was in the region of Hebron that Abram made his home base (18:1) and was eventually buried (25:9). How appropriate, for Abraham’s life was characterized by “**communion**” and friendship with God (2 Chron 20:7; Isa 41:8; Jas 2:23).

In the end, Lot who sought this world lost it, and Abram who was willing to give up anything for the honor of God found it. Providentially, Abram had not lost a thing. The rolling grasslands greedily seized

by Lot were still his, every stick and stone. The promises of God were not thwarted by the unselfishness of Abram and the materialism of Lot. God's arithmetic is not like ours. According to us if we subtract one from one we have nothing. But, according to God, if we subtract one from one we still have everything. Jesus said, "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life" (Matt 19:29). That is God's arithmetic.³² Have faith in the sovereignty of God. He will be faithful to every one of His promises. In the meantime, look for every opportunity to humble yourself before God and others, and God Himself will exalt you in due time (Jas 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5b-6)!

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Notes

- ¹ Preaching Today Citation: Billy Graham in *Breakfast with Billy Graham. Christianity Today*, Vol. 41, no. 6.
- ² Ed Dobson, *Abraham: The Lord Will Provide* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1993), 33.
- ³ Sailhamer comments, “The narrative is governed by the theme of ‘struggle’ and shaped around the ‘separation’ (*parad* vv. 9, 11, 14) that results from the struggle. At its conclusion stands the second statement of the ‘promise’ (vv. 14-17). Just as the first statement of the ‘promise’ was preceded by Abraham’s separation from among the nations (*parad* 10:32) and his father’s house (12:1), so the second statement of the ‘promise’ is put in the context of Abraham’s separation (*parad*) from his closest kin, Lot (13:14). It is not without purpose that the final statement of the ‘promise’ to Abraham comes immediately after he has demonstrated his willingness to be separated from his only son and heir, Isaac” (22:15-18). John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis: EBC* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), Electronic ed.
- ⁴ R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning & Blessing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 199.
- ⁵ See W.H. Griffith Thomas, *The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1985), 42.
- ⁶ After Abram’s testimony faltered in Egypt (Gen 12:10-20), he likely determined that he could not allow this travesty to happen again. He went back to “saving souls.” (See sermon comments on Gen 12:5.)
- ⁷ John Phillips, *Exploring Genesis* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1992), 122.
- ⁸ Constable writes, “Lot would have been the most likely candidate for the role of Abram’s heir since Sarai was barren. He was a part of Abram’s household and a blood relative (nephew). Abram probably regarded Lot at this time as the heir through whom God would fulfill His promises.” Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on Genesis* (<http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/genesis.pdf>, 2004), 126.
- ⁹ Michael Eaton, *Preaching Through the Bible: Genesis 12-23* (Kent, England: Sovereign World, 1999), 39.
- ¹⁰ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 221.
- ¹¹ Leupold suggests, “Incompatibility is best dealt with by separation: let those that cannot agree get out of one another’s way. Of course, this course of action should only follow after considerable time has been spent in study of the matters in dispute in the light of the Word of God, and then only in Christian love. Different principles, however, do lead to different courses of action, and those who hold to different principles, if they are to be faithful to the light they believe they have, must inevitably travel different paths in the service of the Lord (cf. Mark 9:40; Matt 12:30).” Quoted by S. Lewis Johnson,
- ¹² Cf. Ps 133; Matt 5:5, 9; Rom 12:10; Phil 2:1-15; Heb 12:14.
- ¹³ Phillips, *Exploring Genesis*, 121.
- ¹⁴ Sailhamer writes, “Even the plans of the nations are shown to fit into the will of God for his people. Nothing can stand in the way of God’s promise to Abraham. The same viewpoint that is reflected in this narrative is found in the later prophetic literature. In Isaiah 45 the prophet describes the rise of the Persian king Cyrus as the work of God’s own hand. All of Cyrus’s plans and military campaigns had only one purpose, according to Isaiah. That purpose was that God’s people Israel might return and dwell safely in the Promised Land: ‘He will rebuild my city and set my exiles free’ (Isa 45:13).” Sailhamer, *Genesis: EBC*, Electronic ed.
- ¹⁵ Moses’ description of the Jordan valley as being similar to Egypt (Gen 13:10) should have warned the Israelite readers of Genesis against desiring to return to Egypt (cf. Exod 16:3; Num 11:5; 14:2-3). See Constable, *Notes on Genesis*, 127.
- ¹⁶ Sailhamer writes, “As the subsequent narrative will show, Zoar was the city where Lot had to flee for safety from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (19:22). Already in Lot’s choice of a land ‘to the east’ that was ‘like the garden of the LORD,’ we can see anticipated in the reference to ‘Zoar’ the final outcome of that choice.” Sailhamer, *Genesis: EBC*, Electronic ed.
- ¹⁷ This was the first of Lot’s seven downward steps (Gen 13:11, 12; 14:12; 19:1, 8, 14, 33)—steps that would lead to his spiritual destruction. Ronald F. Youngblood, *The Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), 154.
- ¹⁸ The use of “wicked” in the plural provides a link to the earlier account of the flood (6:5 and 8:21). The use of the plural confirms the point of both passages—the whole generation is corrupt. Moreover, in both places the corruption is wiped out (6:12-13 and 13:10) by a catastrophe (chaps. 7 and 19), and in both places one person and his family are saved. See Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002 [1988]), 287.
- ¹⁹ I usually pay my children \$1 when I use them in an illustration, however, due to their greed, they will not be paid on this occasion.☺
- ²⁰ The basic idea for this illustration is from Bob Deffinbaugh, *Genesis: From Paradise to Patriarchs*. “Lesson 14: Lot Looks Out for Number One: Genesis 13:5-18” (www.bible.org, 1997), 2.
- ²¹ Gene A. Getz, *Abraham: Trials and Triumphs* (Glendale, CA: Regal, 1976), 54-55.

²² Dobson, *Abraham: The Lord Will Provide*, 37-40.

²³ Scripture warns us repeatedly to beware of this slippery slope of compromise. Paul writes, “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character’” (1 Cor 15:33).

²⁴ Deffinbaugh, “Lot Looks Out for Number One,” 3.

²⁵ I recommend the following book: Joshua Harris, *Stop Dating the Church!: Fall in Love with the Family of God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2004).

²⁶ Bill T. Arnold, *Encountering the Book of Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 75.

²⁷ Phillips, *Exploring Genesis*, 123.

²⁸ The “stars” figure given later (Gen 15:5) suggests heavenly or spiritual seed, in addition to physical seed.

²⁹ In the ancient Near East victorious armies claimed defeated territory by marching through it.

³⁰ Dobson, *Abraham: The Lord Will Provide*, 36-37.

³¹ Eaton, *Genesis 12-23*, 43.

³² Phillips, *Exploring Genesis*, 124.