

Genesis 13-14
Psalm 110/112
Hebrews 7

“A Lot of Trouble”

May 24, 2009

Introduction:

When Jesus says “blessed are the peacemakers”

he could well have been thinking of Abraham.

Throughout our passage, Abraham has several opportunities to further his own “career.”

And indeed, it would have been very easy for Abram to have said,

“after all, God did promise me the land...”

so I’ll take the best part now!

or, I’ll take the plunder I deserve!

But Abram is a peacemaker.

He does not seek his own kingdom.

He waits patiently for the LORD.

He seeks a heavenly city.

This same theme runs throughout Psalm 112.

“Praise the LORD!

Blessed is the man who fears the LORD,
who greatly delights in his commandments!”

Truly it could be said of Abram:

“His offspring will be mighty in the land;
the generation of the upright will be blessed.

Wealth and riches are in his house, and his righteousness endures forever.”

As Genesis 13-14 demonstrates of Abram:

“He is not afraid of bad news; his heart is firm, trusting in the LORD.

His heart is steady;

he will not be afraid, until he looks in triumph on his adversaries.

He has distributed freely; he has given to the poor;

his righteousness endures forever; his horn is exalted in honor.”

When Psalm 112 pronounces a blessing on this sort of man,

it is pronouncing a blessing on a man who is like Abraham.

And of course, this blessed man is first and foremost the Seed of Abraham,

our Lord Jesus Christ,

and because this is true of Jesus,

it is also all to be true of those who have been united to Christ by faith,

and who now walk in obedience to his commands.

So let us sing Psalm 112, as those who trust in the Seed of Abraham,

and therefore have become Abraham’s seed in him!

[Read Hebrews 7]

1. The Departure of Lot

a. A Lot of Livestock (13:1-7)

We heard in chapter 12 that when Abram left Haran
he had a lot of possessions and people under his care.
At the end of chapter 12 we heard that Abram became even wealthier
during his time in Egypt as he plundered the Egyptians.
And of course, in the ancient world, to become wealthier
means to have even more livestock and people under your care.

And so when they return to Bethel, one of the places where Abram had built an altar,
there are simply too many of them to live together.

Their herdsmen start quarreling (no doubt over grazing land and water rights –
that is generally what herdsmen quarrel about!).

b. A Lot of Land (13:8-13)

And so, as the patriarch of the tribe, Abram takes the lead in resolving the dispute.
He urges Lot to separate from him so that they can spread out.
Normally as the elder of the two, Abram should have had the pick of the land,
but in humility he offers the choice to his nephew.

Let me paint you a picture:
you stand on a hilltop not far from Bethel in the hill country of Canaan.
The hill country is a rugged land,
criss-crossed with wadis – dry river beds –
and dotted with brush and scraggly trees;
here and there opening out into valleys with villages and towns.
As long as the rains come, the wadis bring sufficient water to the hill country,
but the Canaanites who live there
wouldn't let you stay when the famine hit last year.

But below you is a fertile river valley,
stretching out as far as the eye can see to the north and to the south.

It reminds you of Egypt,
where you went to survive the last famine.

Why?
Because there is a river!
Even if the rains do not come, at least the Jordan River will provide water.

Compared to the scrub brush of the hill country
it reminds you of the stories your fathers told of the “garden of the LORD”
that he planted in Eden when the world was young.

And so your uncle says,
“If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right,
or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left.”

Where will you go?

Will you take the rugged hill country or the garden of the LORD?

Of course, there's another way of putting it:

will you take the land of Promise or the land of Egypt?

For the hearers of Genesis who hear the Jordan Valley compared to Egypt,
they will say, "don't go to Egypt!"

A land that is compared to Egypt is a land where something bad is about to happen!

And sure enough, the author adds a rare editorial comment:

"This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah!"

And so Lot journeys east –

another hint of things to come –

since eastward was the direction that Adam and Eve went
when they were exiled from the Garden.

And you can hear the foreshadowing in the narrator's voice
when he adds,

"Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom.
Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD."

Psalm 1 offers a reflection on Lot's choice:

"Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night."

Lot chose to pitch his tent not just somewhere in the valley, but "as far as Sodom."
He sought a land that would *have* trees that would not wither.

But Psalm 1 says that the important thing is to *be* a tree that will not wither:

"He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither.
In all that he does he prospers."

c. The Renewal of the Promise (13:14-18)

In Genesis 13 that tree is Abram.

If Abram felt that Lot had been greedy and had taken the better part,
there is no hint of that in our text.

But certainly God speaks highly of his choice:

*The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him,
Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are,
northward and southward and eastward and westward,
for all the land that you see I will give to you
and to your offspring forever.*

*I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth,
so that if one can count the dust of the earth,
your offspring also can be counted.
Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land,
for I will give it to you.*

Lot has taken the better portion for the moment,
but Abram sees by faith that momentary benefits are not all that matter.

As you face decisions in your life,
do not judge by outward appearance.
Abram is to walk through the land – every place his feet go will be given to him
(to his offspring).

We saw Wednesday night that the promise that God gave Israel in Deut. 11:24,
that every place where the sole of your foot treads shall be yours,
has come to pass in Jesus Christ.
He is the one who has received the inheritance promised to Abraham.

Therefore as you are in Christ, you become Abraham's seed by faith.
And now, because you have been united to Christ by his Spirit,
therefore everywhere you go –
every place where the sole of your foot treads – belongs to Jesus.
And so as you walk through the length and breadth of the earth
you have confidence that this is part of Christ's kingdom.
All the earth belongs to him,
and so you are to be his witnesses throughout the earth.

Watch how Abram does this:

*So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre,
which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the LORD.*
Hebron is about 20 miles south of Jerusalem (perhaps 30 miles south of Bethel).

And in Hebron Abram builds his third altar to the LORD.

There are now three altars:
Shechem – twenty miles north of Bethel
Bethel – in the center of the land
Hebron – thirty miles south of Bethel

Abram builds each of these altars in faith,
believing God's promise that his children will inherit the land.

We've heard a fair amount about building in Genesis.
There are two sorts of building projects in Genesis:
There is the building of the city of man:

In chapter 4 we heard about Cain building a city to his son, Enoch.
In chapter 10 we heard about Nimrod building the city of Ninevah.
And in chapter 11 the verb “to build” is used three times
to refer to the Tower of Babel.

But there is also the building of the city of God –
although this building takes the form of building altars.
The city of God is built through worship!

In chapter 8 Noah built an altar to the LORD.
And in chapters 12-13 the verb “to build”
is used three times to refer to Abram’s altars.

But behind all this “building” is Genesis 2:22,
where the LORD “built” the woman from the side of the man.

And remember that Eve is described as a “helper suitable” to Adam.
What does Eve do to help?
She bears children.
Without Eve Adam is helpless.
Without Eve he cannot be fruitful and multiply.

Why is this important?
How does this connect to building altars?

Have you ever noticed that cities in the Bible are feminine?
Jerusalem is called “the daughter of Zion,” the wife of the LORD,
or the mother of God’s people.

Why is this?
This goes back to the creation, when God “built” a wife for Adam.

God’s purpose in history was to “build” a city for himself.
The city of God is the bride of God
with whom he bears fruit.

But what humanity has done – what the seed of the serpent has done –
is to seek to build a city for *ourselves*.
We build monuments to perpetuate our own names
(think of the Tower of Babel).

But in Genesis the faithful – the seed of the woman –
builds altars.

Why do they build altars?
Because they understand that the city of God is built upon worship.

When God built Eve out of the side of Adam,
he was showing us that *our* building projects are to begin with worship.

As you are building your family,
do you begin with worship?
As you are building your career,
do you begin with worship?

Are you trying to make a name for yourself?
Or are you seeking a city whose foundation will endure?

How can you tell the difference?
Compare Lot and Abram:

Lot has his eyes fixed on the things of this world.
He sees the material benefits of living in the Jordan Valley,
and is blind to the spiritual dangers of Sodom.
Abram has his eyes fixed on a city made without hands.
He is content with living in the hill country
because he sees where history is going:
he sees that everywhere his foot goes *will be* his in Jesus Christ.

What is the difference between Abram and us?
Abram sees that all things will be his in Jesus Christ.
But he lives his life by faith, not yet receiving the promise.
We see that all things will be ours in Jesus Christ.
And we live our lives by faith,
but we have already *begun* to receive the promise,
because we have received the promised Holy Spirit,
the downpayment of the inheritance!

We have something better than Abram had!
Therefore even as Abram began his life as a sojourner in the promised land
by building altars,
so also if you would live as an elect exile,
as a citizen of the heavenly city,
you must begin with worship.

Our worship on Sunday is supposed to be the foundation for your daily worship.
Our weekly confession of sin
is to shape the way in which we confess our sins daily to God
and to those whom we have offended.
Our weekly hearing of the Word of God
is to show us how we ought to read and understand the Word each day.
Our regular prayer life
should be enriched and strengthened through our corporate prayers.

Through our participation in the Lord's Supper,
our daily breaking of bread in our homes
becomes a reminder of the great Wedding Supper of the Lamb.
If all of life is worship,
then what we do on Sunday morning
should reorient us back to the true meaning of life.

But don't expect this to be easy.
Because as Genesis 14 shows us,
we live in the midst of a warzone.
There are spiritual forces of wickedness
that would draw us away from the worship of God.

2. The Rescue of Lot

a. A Lot of War (14:1-7)

At first, when you hear the opening verses of chapter 14,
you wonder, "what does this have to do with Abram or Lot?"

It takes a little while to get there.

First, we should note that this is the first war reported in the scriptures.
But second, the word *king* appears 28 times in this chapter.

It is a story about kings and kingdoms in this divided age,
since the fall of the Tower of Babel.

There are four powerful eastern kings:
Amraphel of Shinar – modern Iraq (where Babel had been built)
Arioch of Ellasar – probably in modern Turkey
Chedorlaomer of Elam – modern Iran
Tidal of Goiim – literally "of the Gentiles" (probably a band of barbarians)

While we do not know exactly who these kings are,
it does fit what we know about the early second millennium:
there was no dominant power and alliances were common.

But these four powerful eastern kings
made war against five weak kings from around the Dead Sea:

Bera of Sodom
Birsha of Gomorrah
Shinab of Admah
Shemeber of Zeboiim
And the unnamed king of Bela (Zoar).

Plainly the four eastern kings had larger kingdoms and were more powerful.
But the Dead Sea kings rebel against the eastern alliance,
and the response of the Eastern Alliance is devastating.

Verses 5-7 recount how Chedorlaomer and his allies

brought death and destruction to those who dared to rebel against him.
They swept through the transjordan region (the region east of the Jordan River)
and defeated all their enemies.

b. A Lot of Plunder (14:8-16)

Then the five Dead Sea kings went out to battle against the Eastern Alliance
in the Valley of Siddim (south of the Dead Sea).

It may have been four kings against five,
but the five kings were outgunned and outmanned,
and they and their armies fled,
and many fell into the tar pits in the region.

So the enemy took all the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions.
It was common practice in those days to plunder your enemy,
and the Eastern Alliance takes advantage of the absence of the men
and plunders the cities of the Dead Sea kings.

And finally in 14:12 we find out why this narrative is here.

Lot is captured.

Why?

Because, fool that he is,
he has not only chosen to live in the Jordan Valley (13:11),
and pitched his tents near Sodom (13:12),
but he has actually now settled *in* Sodom.

And only now do we find out what Abram is doing.

*Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew,
who was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite,
brother of Eshcol and of Aner.
These were allies of Abram.*

When Abram heard that his nephew was taken captive,
he immediately springs into action.

Note that all of the major players in this narrative are kings –
except Abram.

(Lot is not a player, but a pawn).

But while Abram is not a king,
he is greater than all the kings of the earth.

He leads forth 318 men –

a sizeable force for those days,
though by no means would that have been larger
than the armies of the Eastern Alliance.

He divided his forces against them by night and defeated them
and pursued them for many miles to the north.

And having rescued Lot (and taken back all the plunder from Sodom and Gomorrah)
he returned in triumph.

c. The Blessing of Melchizedek (14:17-24)

After Abram's military triumph over the Eastern Alliance,
two kings come to meet him:

the king of Sodom (Bera)
and the king of Salem (Melchizedek).

Who is this Melchizedek?

His name means "king of righteousness" (melchi-tsedek)
and king of Salem means "king of peace" (melech-shalem).

He had no part in the battle.

Indeed, he rather appears out of nowhere!

We know from Joshua that the king of Jerusalem at that time was called
"adoni-zedek" (lord of righteousness)
so it may be that the kings of Jerusalem all had this name
(like the "Pharaohs" of Egypt or the "Caesars" of Rome).

But this Melchizedek is especially curious because he is called a priest of God Most High,
and by his words and actions he demonstrates that he worships the true God.

This demonstrates to us that while the *covenant line* is found in the line of Shem,
and is narrowed to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,
this does not mean that *salvation* could only be found
in physical descent from them.

Melchizedek plainly believed in God Most High,
and even served as a priest.

The knowledge of God had not yet utterly faded from the earth –
and it is an open question as to how long that knowledge remained.

In the debates about what happens to people who have never heard the gospel,
some point to Melchizedek as an example of a "pagan saint."

But Melchizedek is not a pagan.
He worships the true God,
and is recognized by Abram as a faithful priest.

He brings bread and wine for a covenant meal with Abram,
and blesses Abram, saying,
Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth;
and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!

And so Abram gave to Melchizedek a tithe of the spoils.

This is a curious moment.

The King of Sodom has a better claim on the spoil than Melchizedek,
since the King of Sodom had been despoiled.

Abram has a better claim on the spoil,
because he is the triumphant warrior.

But Abram gives Melchizedek a tenth of everything.

Why?

Abram recognizes that Melchizedek is a priest of God Most High.

Abram recognizes that Melchizedek is greater than he is.

And to show honor to Melchizedek he gives him the tithe.

Hebrews will reflect on this in Hebrews 7,

commenting that this demonstrates that the priesthood of Melchizedek
is greater than the priesthood of Aaron and Levi,

because Levi was still in the loins of his great-grandfather
when Abram paid the tithe to Melchizedek.

Therefore the Levitical priesthood

is hereby acknowledging the superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood.

It may be that the king of Sodom saw all this and was a bit miffed.

Verse 21 suggests that the king of Sodom is not especially grateful.

It appears that he comes as a greedy and grasping ruler,
demanding that Abram return the people to him,
but permitting him to keep the plunder.

What is wrong with this picture?

Bera, the king of Sodom, was defeated by Chederlaomer.

He now comes to the victorious warrior and sets the terms for dividing the spoil!

But Abram replies:

*I have lifted my hand to Yahweh, 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 Abram rich*

*I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten,
and the share of the men who went with me.*

Let Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre take their share.

What is Abram saying?

He understands the wickedness of Sodom,
and he wants nothing to do with it.

As the victor he could have increased his wealth greatly,
but he did not go to war to increase his wealth.

He went to war to rescue his nephew.

There is a certain irony here.

He had accepted the plunder of Egypt,
but he will not accept the plunder of Sodom.

And to Israel this makes sense.

They know that Sodom is doomed to destruction.

God warned Israel not to take any plunder
from cities devoted to destruction.

Jericho would be a city devoted to destruction.

And Israel is commanded not to take anything from it.

Likewise Sodom will be devoted to destruction,
and Abram takes nothing from it.

He allows his Amorite companions to share in the spoil,
but he himself takes nothing.

Once again, you see Abram the peacemaker.

He shows honor to Melchizedek the priestly king.

He surrenders his rights to the plunder so as to appease the king of Sodom.

He speaks up on behalf of his Amorite friends to make sure they get their share.

He will be defrauded of all,
so long as others are satisfied.

Why?

Does Abram have a martyr complex?

Is he a doormat – easily run over?

Obviously not!

He just ran over four mighty kings and despoiled them of their plunder!

Abram is not concerned for himself and his own interests
because he believes God's promises.

He is seeking a heavenly city.

He understands that the only road to that glorious city
is the way of suffering –
the way of the pilgrim.

And he asks for no shortcuts.

Do you seek shortcuts?

Do you want the easy way to glory?

You will not find it!

Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote a short story called “the Celestial Railroad”

in which he discovers that someone has built a railroad

over the same route that John Bunyan describes in “Pilgrim's Progress”

But whereas Bunyan's pilgrims must walk a difficult path,

Hawthorne's railroad takes a shortcut

which avoids all the difficulties of the slow road –
technology has its benefits!
But in the end, Hawthorne finds that the Celestial Railroad
has a very different destination in view.

There is no shortcut to glory.
There is only the way of the cross.