



Part 33 – Tents and Altars

Genesis 13:1-18

By God's grace, after some pretty embarrassing failures to trust God, Abram comes back to the Land God gave him. Lot, Abram's nephew, had accompanied him to Egypt and has now followed him out. We see in verse 2 that Abram is a man of great wealth helped along no doubt by Pharaoh's largesse which was prompted, ironically, by the lie

that Abram had told. As he returned to the Land he eventually arrived at Bethel where he had started, signaling that he had returned to the life of faith in which he had begun his sojourn in Canaan.

1. Two marks of a believer's life

Vv. 1-7; 18

- Certainly there are many things that "mark" the life of the believer. But in this chapter there are references to things which are of particular significance in understanding Abraham's life and the lives of those who share his faith. These two marks point to the believer's understanding of himself and of God. They point to the believer's confidence in God and his faithfulness to do all that he has promised.

a) Tents

- After entering and possessing the Promised Land, Abraham continued to live in tents: "By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise." (Hebrews 11:9). Though he came into possession of the land God had promised him for an inheritance Abraham knew that it was temporal. The land pointed beyond itself to a land which was eternal. "For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (Hebrews 11:10).
- The longer we walk with Christ, the more apparent it becomes that we live in a world to which we do not belong. We must therefore guard our hearts from seeking to be too at home in this fallen world. Abraham lived as a pilgrim even in the Promised Land. The Apostle Peter appeals to his readers: "Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul" (1 Peter 2:11). Or in Hebrews we read, "These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth" (11:13).

b) Altars

- As we saw in chapter 12, once Abram surveyed the land of Canaan, the land God had promised to give him, he noticed that it was dotted with pagan shrines and holy places. He saw that the land was overrun with pagan peoples whose violence and immorality seemed to know no bounds. To this day, the detestable acts of the Canaanites are remembered. What could Abraham do to possess such a land? How could one man come into possession of a land so filled with hostile enemies? To such questions it is almost certain that Abraham would not have had answers. But what he did have was the promise of God. And in light of that promise Abram did something rather audacious. He built an altar to the Lord at a pagan holy site (12:6-7).
- And what is the first thing Abram did after leaving Egypt and journeying back to the land God gave him? "And he journeyed on from the Negeb as far as Bethel to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of the LORD" (13:3-4).
- Following his wrong-headed sojourn to Egypt and his failure to trust the Lord which resulted in lies and the dishonoring of his wife, Abram returned to the altar he built when he first entered the land. What happens at an altar to the LORD? Is it not sacrifice for sins? What a beautiful picture of hope we have here. When we fail there is a sacrifice to which we can return; a sacrifice which has been made already by Abraham's greatest Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The place for Christians is at the cross where our sins have been atoned.

2. Two competitors in a believer's heart

Vv. 8-13

a) Fear

- In the second half of chapter 12 it is fear that drives Abram to seek safety outside the land of God's promise. Famine struck the land God had given to Abram so out of fear he fled to a region that offered more immediate comfort. While we want to sympathize with Abram, we must keep in mind that God had promised Canaan to Abram. He promised to bless him there. So his flight to Egypt was an act of defiant unbelief.

b) Materialism

- In Romans 10 we're told that faith comes by hearing the word of Christ (vs. 17). In 2 Corinthians we're told that we must lean on faith and not sight: "So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight" (6-7). To walk by faith and not by sight is the opposite of materialism which beckons us to believe only what we can see or touch. And this is at the heart of Lot's problem. He was driven not by faith but by materialism, what he could see.

And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other" (13:10-11).

- Lot chose to live among the wicked in the cities of the plain because it "was like the land of Egypt" well-watered and fertile. Of course in doing this he also failed to honor his elder Abram. Living by sight will tend to make us self-serving. It will also lead to compromise as Lot will find out when he settles among the wicked inhabitants of Sodom (vv. 12-13). Lot's eyes were fixed on the economy rather than on God. And because of this Lot experienced devastating losses. He lost his moral backbone (19:8). He lost his family. Believers tend to distrust appearances and live instead on God's promises.

3. One comfort for a believer's future

Vv. 14-18

- Abram has come full circle. His failure in Egypt has been answered by God's grace. And now we see not the fearful man of chapter 12 but a man who has learned to rest secure in the promise of God. Because Abraham has chosen faith over sight, the Lord calls him to "lift up your eyes from the place where you are northward and southward and eastward and westward..." (vs. 14). Everything he sees, the Lord tells him, is his. Not only that, the Lord promises him descendants too numerous to count (vs. 16). This is a reference to the multitudes from all nations that will come to believe in the Messiah, the Savior of God's people.
- The "Oaks of Mamre," is a reference to a location in Hebron some 20 miles south of Bethlehem. Hebron is the highest town in Palestine, located on the ridge between Jerusalem and Beersheba to the south. That location became the center of Abraham's movements. Once again Abram builds an altar here; a place of worship and atonement for sins. And once again we see Abram's heart. His only comfort is found in the mercy of God.
- It is also the site where he would later buy his only property in the promised land where he, Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Leah were all buried. The most permanent place for Abraham in this life was the place where he was buried. That may seem morbid to some but it signals the believer's confidence that true and lasting comfort will be known in the life to come.

Q. What is your only comfort in life and death?

A. That I am not my own, but belong with body and soul, both in life and in death, to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from all the power of the devil. He also preserves me in such a way that without the will of my heavenly Father not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, all things must work together for my salvation. Therefore, by His Holy Spirit He also assures me of eternal life and makes me heartily willing and ready from now on to live for Him. (*Heidelberg Catechism*, 1).