

Choose Wisely

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- [0 : 0 0] There should be an outline as well if you're interested to follow along. And as Annette has said, we are going back to Genesis chapter 13.
- I'm sure you realize it, but we all live in a world where choices are endless, aren't they? I mean, every time we need to buy something, there's always a choice.
- Just think about it. Can you name one product, any product, where you actually don't get a choice? Anyone? Not even a choice between two brands?
- Did someone say something? No? A what? That's not a product we can buy, is it? But I'm talking about purchasing something.
- Postage? Postage? Yep, maybe. But even then, you get to choose whether you want the stamp with the queen's face on it or whatever. And they keep coming. So it's hard, isn't it?
- [1 : 1 0] Because we live in a world where it's the thing. Everything needs to have a choice. And sometimes there's just so many choices that it's actually overwhelming and stressful.
- Just take this one simple example. It's not stressful for me, but just take this one simple product, for example. Batteries. Why do we need so many choices? I mean, let's not even consider that there are two brands, Ever Ready and Duracell.
- Let's just look at the Ever Ready brand. Do you know how many Ever Ready batteries there are? So we've got one up there. Can anyone name others? There's the heavy-duty range.
- Energizer. Yeah, we'll get to that. Well, there's the super heavy-duty range. Yep. There's the gold range. Yep. Then there's the...
- We'll get to the Energizer now. But then there's more than one Energizer. There's the Energizer Max. Oh, I don't know how that one fell off, but it doesn't matter. That's Energizer Advanced.
- [2 : 2 0] And then we get to Energizer Lithium. And I've even managed to find two different types of lithium batteries. The Advanced and the Ultimate.
- Not to mention the rechargeables. And, you know, all I needed was to change the battery in my clock. Which one do I choose? Now, I mean, this is a trivial example, of course.
- And in the end, it doesn't really matter. I hope it doesn't matter what battery you choose. But other choices are not so trivial, are they? Like choosing which uni course to do, or where to buy your first home, how much to spend, who you are to marry.
- And these can be daunting choices, because once you decide, it's actually hard to change them. They become commitments. So, I guess the question we have tonight is, how do we make good choices?
- Particularly if we want to obey God, and we want to please Him. Well, the Bible actually has a lot to say about these things. And if you look at Proverbs, you'll find a lot of principles about it. But the Bible also gives us stories.

[3 : 27] Real-life examples to show us how people make choices, and the consequences of those choices. And in our passage tonight, we have two such examples. So, last week we had one man taking two journeys.

Well, this week we have two people, Abraham and Lot. And Abraham chooses by faith, while Lot chooses by sight. If you were here last week, you know that this wasn't how Abraham was all the time.

He too made choices by sight when he went down to Egypt during the famine, and he acted out of fear. And he lied about Sarai, his wife. But Abraham learned from his mistakes.

And so, at the start of this chapter, chapter 13, we find Abraham returning to Canaan from Egypt. Now, if you look at the first couple of verses, we find that the Bible says that he actually didn't head straight back to the heart of Canaan.

He goes to the Negev, which is the south, that triangular bit below modern Israel. And the Negev is mainly desert, where Mount Sinai is located.

[4 : 32] And interestingly, hundreds of years later, Israel too would spend some time wandering there. Well, in verse 3, we read that from the Negev, Abraham goes from place to place until he came to Bethel.

And it looks rather aimless, really. And this is just a guess, but perhaps it was his period of soul-searching, pondering his mistakes in Egypt. And the verses also tell us that Abraham was very wealthy in livestock, silver, and gold.

And so he was actually very well off, leading quite a comfortable life. And I suppose in situations like that, it would actually have been quite easy just to forget about God.

Just to say, why bother, really? Why do I need to just come back and humble myself before God? Because life actually was fine without him. Well, thankfully, Abraham doesn't do that.

Instead, he does return under God's rule, and he lives by faith again. So in verse 4, he returns to Bethel. So this is at the exact place, the Bible says, where he pitched his tent earlier, where he built his altar.

[5 : 39] And there we read that Abraham called on the name of the Lord again. So Abraham returns to where he should have been in the first place, living under God's rule.

And as we now see, this faith is then reflected in the choices he makes. So in verse 5, we read something's arisen. A lot who was moving about with Abraham also had flocks and herds and tents, but the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together.

And quarreling arose between their respective herdsmen. And we're not sure quite what it is, the Bible doesn't say, but probably it's over the use of the wells or who would graze where, where the resources were limited.

And the two groups found themselves in competition with each other. Now of the two, Abraham and Lot, Abraham is the more senior. So by right, Lot should have deferred to him.

Besides, I think most of Lot's wealth would have come from Abraham, as in due to him, due to his reputation. Instead, Abraham lets Lot choose.

[6 : 51] It's a very generous act on his part, particularly in that culture. And so in verse 8, Abraham says to Lot, let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are close relatives.

He's very gracious as well, isn't he? It doesn't quite say in this version, but actually, he refers to Lot as his brother.

And so Lot was being treated as his equal, and not as a junior, as nephews are generally. He goes on to say, it's not the whole land before you, let's part company.

If you go to the left, I'll go to the right. If you go to the right, I'll go to the left. Well, Abraham's actions tell us about his values, doesn't it?

And that's our second point there, that he valued relationships before material advantage. He was willing to put others before himself. And the result of that is that he actually risked personal loss to himself.

[7 : 56] Now, what makes Abraham willing to do this? Because what could have happened was that he could have ended up on land without water or pasture.

And if that's the case, and you endanger your livestock, you actually endanger your family's well-being as well, because that was their source of food. So Lot was riding on this. But Abraham was able to be generous because he trusted God to provide.

In other words, he was living by faith and relying on God's promises to bless him. And so he's learned something, hasn't he, from the last chapter. He's no longer afraid like he was back then when there was a famine.

So that's Abraham. Well, let's now turn to the other person in the drama, Lot. Now, he too is faced with choices, and this is what he did. Verse 10, Lot looked around and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan towards Zoar was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt.

This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out towards the east. The two men parted company. Abraham lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom.

[9 : 15] Now, I want you to notice the two places that the plain of Jordan is compared to. First, it's like the garden of the Lord, the garden of Eden. And what the writer is doing here is that he's comparing Lot with Eve.

Remember what she did? She too saw the fruit that was good to eat, was pleasing to the eye, and she chose it and ate it. And Lot's doing the same thing here with the land.

He looks up, he sees the plain, he likes it, it's pleasing to the eyes, well watered, and he chooses it. The second reference that the plain of Jordan is being compared to is to Egypt, which is where Lot just came from with Abraham, where actually he's seen firsthand what happened to Abraham when he went there.

And yet, it's almost like Lot was hankering to go back to Egypt, even though he knew the consequences it had for Abraham. And then there is also another reference, and that reference is to the setting out towards the east, near the end, or in the middle of that passage.

And again, the writer does this because there are precedents. Because up to now in Genesis, every time people head east, it was often a bad sign. So when Adam and Eve were banished from the garden, they headed east.

[10 : 38] So they came after killing Abel. And the people who built the Tower of Babel, they were moving east when they did that. So each time there's a reference to moving east, it implies moving away from God's blessing towards judgment.

And so even though the plain of Jordan looked good, there are all these signs to indicate that it's not, God's blessing isn't to be found there. What Lot was doing was living by sight.

He looked up and saw. And his choice was based solely on what he saw because it satisfied his immediate needs. He saw and he knew immediately what he could get out of it.

And thinking about us, that's quite easy for us to do too, isn't it? Because when we look up from wherever we are, we're bombarded with images, aren't we?

Of things that look good. Whether it's on the TV or on the internet, whether it's going to school or to work and seeing what others get up to. We see what the world says is good.

[11 : 49] And then more and more the media tells us that as Christians, we stick to what the Bible says, we are losers. That our values belong to the past and the world is quickly leaving us behind.

And so I guess if you're not aware of these subliminal messages or even overt messages, what they do is to play on our fears and to entice us away from God and away from His promises.

They make us think only of self-preservation and looking to our own desires. Did you notice that phrase in the passage, Lot chose for Himself.

It was all about Him, what He wanted, how He would satisfy His immediate needs. And as a result, he lost sight of God. He forgot God's promises to bless Abraham, that God would bless those who blessed Him.

Abraham, that is. And so once Lot pushed God out of the picture, my second point under Lot, He also became blind to the moral dangers.

[12 : 56] If I could put it this way, His immediate desires were so filled with His vision of what He wanted that He walked right into sin without realizing it.

Three times in the story, Sodom is mentioned. And then finally, in verse 13, we read what Sodom is really like. Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord.

It's quite a stark statement. They weren't just sinning, they were sinning greatly. Now did Lot see any of this? Obviously not.

Or maybe He did and He didn't even think it was worth worrying about. And what an irony, isn't it? He lived by sight and yet He failed to see the one vital thing.

He was blind to the sin of Sodom. And that's what our sinful desires do. They blind us to moral dangers. We're so focused on the well-watered plains that we don't see the Sodoms lurking behind in the background.

[14 : 05] So is it always right to accept a promotion at work just because the company offers it to you? Or if a job offers more money, do we always take it? Well, not necessarily.

Not if the job becomes all-consuming. Not if the temptation to compromise our faith is great. And it's not just work, is it? It's all sorts of choices we need to make.

What kind of friends we choose to hang out, what kind of relationships we enter into, or the things we will do to gain the approval of others. Now the sad thing with Lot is this, that this single decision which looked good at first, actually turns out to be a disaster for him.

Because by chapter 19, if you've read ahead, we find Lot not just pitching his tent near Sodom, he was actually in Sodom itself. And worse, his daughters had been betrothed to men of Sodom and they were nearly raped when the angels came.

And even though God is gracious to him and he rescues him when Sodom is destroyed, he flees the city with nothing but his wife and two daughters. Even his sons-in-laws didn't want to come.

[15 : 20] And in fact, he doesn't even have his wife at the end, did he? Because she looked back and turned into a pillar of salt. And where does Lot flee to? He flees to a cave in the mountains.

What a far cry, isn't it? From the time he left Abraham where he had too many livestock and herdsmen to be able to support the land, for the land to support them.

And that's where things can end up if we choose to live by sight. Not the well-watered plains we hope for, but a lonely cave in the mountains. But by contrast, God rewards Abraham for his faith and he does that once Lord had departed.

So we're down onto the last point, God, a reward of faith. So in verse 14, God finally speaks. And tradition has it that Abraham is actually on a mountain about five miles northeast of Bethel.

It's a high point in central Israel, about 3,000 feet in altitude. So it's possible, I think, on that point to be able to see to the Mediterranean Sea to the west, the River Jordan to the east, and Mount Hebron to the north, or Mount Hermon, and the hills of Hebron to the south.

[16 : 31] So he's got pretty much the whole of Israel in his size. And this is the vista that Abraham sees as God says to him, Look around from where you are to the north and south, to the east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.

I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you.

You notice the parallel with Lot? Abraham too is asked by God to look, look around him. More literal versions actually have lift up your eyes.

But what Abraham has to do is to see by faith, see with the eyes of faith. Because as he looks out, there's nothing before him really, nothing to indicate that the land was his.

It's just dust. All he had to go by was, as I said last week, God's word, God's promise. But as he looks on the dust, God tells him to see his offspring instead.

[17 : 34] As numerous as the dust of the earth. Too numerous to count in effect. So this is now the third time that God comes to Abraham with a promise. It's the same promise but first it was Genesis chapter 12 verse 1 to 13 and then chapter 12 and verse 7.

They're all part of the same big promise but each time, and this is the third time now, God adds a little more detail. This time, Abraham discovers that he will have the land forever and this land will extend to as far north, south, east and west as he can see and that the number of his offspring will be numerous.

So bit by bit, Abraham sees more and more of this promise. It's almost as if like a blurred vision coming into focus. Abraham is seeing God's promises come into focus and it's the reward for his faith.

God doesn't reveal everything at once but slowly and surely every time he takes another step of faith, God shows him a little more. And so the writer of Hebrews puts it like that in our second reading tonight in verse 6 of chapter 11.

Without faith is it impossible to please God because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. God rewards those who put their faith in him.

[18 : 54] I wonder whether that's something we ever consider as we make choices in life, that we factor into our choices because that's a key aspect of choosing wisely.

To choose wisely is to live by faith, not by sight. Why? Because God rewards faith. Now as I said last week, we're different to Abraham so God's promises to Abraham are not ours.

So I'm not saying that just because we trust God we can have anything we want, become rich like Abraham or have lots of land and lots of children. But remember also last week the verse that I had from Corinthians that God's promises to us are yes in Christ Jesus.

And so what God rewards is our faith in the promises he's made in Christ Jesus. The promise of forgiveness, the promise of the Spirit, the promise of the fruit of the Spirit our rich inheritance in Christ, our hope of an eternal life and much much more.

But what he has promised in Christ and part of choosing wisely is to have faith in these promises. To make choices that do not compromise on these promises.

[20 : 06] So if our choices expose us to greater temptation then we reject them because we don't want to grieve the Holy Spirit. If our weekly routine how we choose to live our life takes us away from time from God and God's people then we reorder our priorities because we want to benefit and be blessed by those promises.

Now I know that often there are actually you know this is not the only thing we need there are many other factors to consider. I'm not saying for example that we don't never take a job that involves interstate travel for example.

And there is a sense in which no matter what you do you always have temptation right? It's not choose this and you wouldn't have temptation no. But we need to start making choices that show that we trust in God that we have faith in God.

That ought to be a key factor in our decision making. And I suppose I can ask the question when was the last time you made a choice that required you to trust in God?

Because if it's always sight over faith if it's always to satisfy immediate desires instead of waiting on God's promises then how can God reward our faith?

[21 : 25] There is none is there? And all of us many of us chose wisely when we first put our faith in Jesus when we asked him into our lives and God rewarded that faith didn't he?

Because then we have a relationship with him and we are forgiven in Christ. But that's not the end of the matter is it? That's just the start because the rest of our lives then is filled with more of the same little steps of faith which God is waiting to reward showing us more and more the reality of his promises.

It's just like a toddler learning to walk. Have you seen how their mom is there or dad is there just out of reach? Arms open beckoning urging them to take the next step and ever ready to catch them when they fall but they're always just out of reach and what the toddler needs to do is keep walking step by step by faith.

So that's what we need to do. That's what our life of faith is about how we make choices. So let me conclude by asking you what is that next step of faith God is asking you to take?

Is it perhaps to publicly profess your faith in Jesus for the first time? Perhaps in baptism? Come and talk to me if that's you or is the step of faith to reorganize your priorities so that you can serve God more even though it may be costly to you?

[22 : 56] Is it to consider training for ministry to go on a mission? Something to stretch your faith? Or is it deeper than all of these? Is it simply that you need to entrust your life fully to Him?

Start living His agenda rather than your own. Start letting go of your desires. Often that's the crux isn't it? That's our deepest fear because we don't want to lose autonomy over our lives.

We want to keep calling the shots. We want to follow God on our terms and not on His. But friends, we mustn't forget that all our promises are yes in Christ.

God gave His Son for us and if He did not spare even the one He loves, then would He not have our best interests at heart when He calls us to trust in Him, even if that means hardship or costliness?

God stands ready to reward our faith. He did that with Christ and He'll do it for us in Christ Jesus. So let's take Him up on that offer at each turn in our lives and all the way to the end.

[24 : 08] I don't know where each of you may be with God at what stage you are. I'm sure we're all at different stages. But we all have this one thing in common that we are to walk by faith, not by sight.

I was saying that hymn last week, I think, by faith. And not to be spooked by what the world is saying. What others are telling us we should or shouldn't do. Don't be tempted by the well-watered plain in front of us.

Keep coming back to God's word. And what it says is this, God rewards those who earnestly seek Him. And without faith, it is impossible to please God.

God bless us. Let's pray. Father, we ask that you help us to remember your word and to live by it.

Even though we can't see everything right now, help us to know that bit by bit as we follow in faith, you will show us the way and you will bring us to a land of great blessing, a land of great promise.

[25 : 20] Help us not to be afraid. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.