

THE OUTLOOK OF FAITH

GENESIS 13:14

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Last week we talked about the final harvest of souls that will come at the end of the world. It's the harvest that God has been working for since the fall of man when every soul that has been saved by the blood of Jesus Christ will be presented before the throne of heaven. That harvest will represent God's final victory over the forces of evil. It will bring glory to God. Last week I mentioned that we must make working for that harvest the inspiration behind every good thing that we do.

When I give a challenge like that, I am perfectly aware that I am asking us all to do something that requires faith. There is no way that I can scientifically prove to you that there will be a final harvest at the end of this age. There is no way I can prove to you that this present world in which we live is not going to become a better place to live in the future. And, even though educated people all agree that that our world will come to an end someday, many people still think that event is so far in the future that it is impractical for us to even talk about it today.

So, the whole idea of a final harvest of souls and the fact that the world as we know it could end at any moment and the fact that between now and the time when the world as we know it comes to an end the moral condition of things will not improve—all these things cannot be scientifically proven. If we are going to believe that they are true, then we must do so because they are written in the Bible. To believe in these things requires faith.

Today I am going to use an example from the Old Testament to help us better understand the outlook of faith needed to live a victorious Christian life. And, when I say "victorious Christian life," I'm talking about a life that persists to the end in doing good by contributing to the harvest. Faith is needed to live such a life. The example I will use comes from the life of Abraham as it is recorded in GENESIS. Let's begin the example by focusing our attention on one verse. Please look at GENESIS 13:14. "The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west."

There are several things I learn from this story that help me to understand the outlook of faith needed to live a victorious Christian life. The first thing the story does is to help me understand how faith begins. It helps me to see that faith begins with revelation from God.

Notice the contrast between verse 10 and verse 14 of GENESIS 13. Verse 10 says, "Lot looked up and saw

that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar." Lot did not need faith to verify what he saw. He saw it with his own eyes. The valley was well watered. There was no doubt about it. And what he saw with his own eyes inspired him. It became his vision for the future. But, his vision did not require faith.

In contrast to Lot who lifted up his eyes and chose for himself what he saw (which is also what he desired), Abraham was told by God to lift up his eyes and look. When God spoke those words, Abraham was standing in a place that historians say was probably called Luz at the time and later became known as Bethel. It was a barren, rocky place. There was nothing in that place that was particularly attractive for him to see. But God said, 'From this point, I want you to look north and south and east and west.' When Abram looked north, his vision would not go far, because there were mountains directly in front of him. He would have to use his imagination to see beyond the mountains. When he looked south he could probably see father, and he knew Egypt lay beyond what he could see. When he looked east, he would be looking in the direction that Lot had traveled. And to the west he would see the remainder of the land, rather barren looking, stretching all the way to the Great Sea, which we now know as the Mediterranean Sea.

That is what Abraham saw with his physical eyes. But God was not calling Abraham to look at things from a scientific perspective. He was not even calling Abraham to look at things from a historical perspective. When God told Abram to lift up his eyes and look, his looking would have stirred up some memories from the past. Abram had his own history that he had to deal with. He had originally come from the east. Looking back at the east would have produced memories of his experience in Ur of Chaldees. It was there that he had become discontented with the splendor and comfort of a rich land. He had discovered the hollowness and emptiness offered by a life of material comfort. It was there, in the east, that he heard the voice of God calling him to leave his life of comfort and travel a long distance across desert lands to a strip of land we now call Palestine. There he pitched a tent and built an altar. When God told Abram to look toward the east, he would have remembered his past. His nephew's decision to go east would have been fresh in his memory. Lot, chose the east. He chose to return to the very kind of comfortable lifestyle from which he and Abraham had originally come.

And when Abram looked to the south, he would also have to deal with some memories from the past. After he had arrived to the place God had called him to go, a famine came to the land and Abram became fearful. He traveled south to Egypt. Abram's memories of Egypt were not all positive. When he looked south, he probably felt embarrassed as he recalled how he resorted to deception to save his own life.

And even though Abram, at the time, had not traveled extensively to the north and west, he most likely knew a little about the history of the people living in those places. He knew that those places were occupied by very strong, warlike tribes of people.

If Abraham had to figure out where he was supposed to go and what he was supposed to do based on what he saw with his physical eyes and what he knew from his memory and other research he had done—if his decisions had to be based on scientific and well-researched information—then the subsequent story would have been entirely different. It would not have been a story of faith, and I would not use this story as an example to help us understand the meaning of faith.

The thing that makes this story so unique is that God spoke and told Abram something that he could not have possibly concluded on his own. God spoke to Abram and said, "All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever." "Abram, your mission is not restricted to one place. It covers the north and the south and the east and the west. And the work I am calling you to do is the work of one who possesses the land."

Faith begins when we receive revelation from God that differs from what things appear to be on the surface. One Bible teacher put it this way, "When faith looks, things are seen to be not what they seem to be." Many people who claim to be scientists have trouble accepting anything other than what things seem to be like. Fortunately there are also many scientists who are willing to admit that there are realities that exist beyond what can be seen with the naked eye and what can be known through history. And the only way we can connect with those realities is via revelation from God.

But, how do we know if what we are hearing is revelation from God? How do we know it is not just something we ourselves or someone else has imagined? How did Abraham know? Did he hear an audible voice? Perhaps, and if so, that would have been at least somewhat convincing. And how do we know? We have not heard the audible voice, but we do have the Bible. Why are we convinced that what is written in the Bible is revelation straight from God? We can sight the many references in the Bible claiming that everything written in the Bible is revelation from God. We call this internal evidence. We can also sight many examples of Biblical

prophesies that have been fulfilled. We can also produce countless testimonies of people (first-hand witnesses) who verify the historical facts that are recorded in the Bible. Not one fact recorded has ever been proven wrong. We can also point to the testimonies of wise men throughout the ages who affirm that all the moral teachings of the Bible stand the test of time. We call all this external evidence. But in the end, it must be God's Spirit giving testimony to our spirits that what is recorded in the Bible is revelation straight from God. It is good to have the internal and external evidence, but in the end, it must be the Holy Spirit Himself who does the convincing.

Those of us who are convinced that the Bible is revelation from God should also be aware that much of what the Bible calls us to embrace as vision differs a great deal from what things seem to be like on the surface. On the surface it would seem that there is no reason for people to concern themselves with the possibility of the world ending this generation or even the next. But, the Bible tells us to live as if Jesus were going to return and the world as we know it were coming to an end at any time. Even though we don't know when it will happen, we are supposed to live as though it would happen at any moment.

So faith begins with revelation from God. And faith then continues when we act upon the revelation we receive even when it seems to contradict what we see with our physical eyes. This is the second thing about faith that we learn from this story.

The first thing Abram did after receiving the revelation was to go and walk though the length and breadth of the land promised to him. For the rest of his life, Abraham would be a traveler. He took a tent and an altar. The tent became a symbol of his readiness to obey the Divine command to remain or to move. The altar became a symbol of his relationship with God through sacrifice and Divine grace. Wherever he traveled, Abraham was led on with a purpose. He traveled down to Hebron and had to pass by a place we now know as Jerusalem. Even though Jerusalem was not there at the time, the fortress of Jebus probably was. He walked to Hebron, passing that fortress and other strongholds. Everything he saw shouted out to him that he did not possess the land. But, God told him that he did, so he acted like he did. In GENESIS 14 we read that news came to Abram about opposing kings who had taken Lot captive with all his possessions, and had carried him and his possessions away to the far north. Based on the revelation he had received from God, Abram felt responsible for the land he possessed, so he went forth to restore the land. He struggled with the opposing kings, met them in battle, mastered them, and brought Lot back. He traveled over 150 miles in pursuit of those kings. He also restored to another man the things that God had given him. When he had finished his work, the king of Sodom offered to give Abram presents, but he declined. He would receive

nothing from any other than the One who had given him the land to possess.

Abram's faith began when he received revelation from God, and it grew when he acted upon the revelation even though it seemed to contradict reality. And then there is one more lesson about faith that I learn from this story. It is the fact that Abraham died before the promise God made to him became a reality that could be seen with the naked eye.

Listen as I read a few verses from HEBREWS 11. "By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.⁹ By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise...¹³ All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth."

The fact that we may die before we see the final results of our efforts is probably the most challenging thing about faith that there is. Why do we work so hard to obey? Why do we struggle to act upon Biblical revelation even when it seems to contradict what we see? Is it because we believe we will see the final result of what we are working for with our own eyes before we die? If so, then we do not understand Biblical faith. Biblical faith is content with the honor and joy of cooperating with God. It expects a final victory and a final realization. But, it does not have to see it. It is content knowing that it has contributed, even in a small way, to the final outcome.

There may be others to follow who have to build upon the work we have done. It is an honor and a joy to get things ready for them. When our journey is over, God will take the little things we have done and link them up with all the other little things others have done until the final goal is reached and the ultimate victory is obtained. It is an honor to be a part of it all. That is the outlook of faith.

Can you understand how what I am talking about today is so very challenging? None of it can be proved scientifically. The things we claim as revelation from God were never meant to be proven scientifically. When we act upon the revelation we receive, we look like fools to many people. And we cannot even expect to see concrete results before we die. To live by faith is an extremely challenging task for the average human being. It requires looking at things from an entirely different perspective. It requires using different standards to measure success and influence.

Take, for instance, the example of Lot. Lot chose to dwell in the city. Eventually he was raised to a position of prominence. He became chief magistrate, for that is the meaning of the Hebrew phrase, "sitting in the gate of the city." From all outward appearances, Lot's influence in that city was great.

But, the moral and spiritual influence he had was zero. In the day of Divine wrath not even ten souls could be found that he had influenced. But, far away was the man who had pitched his tent and built his altar and walked a lonely path. Abram was content to be in cooperation with God even though it seemed he had little influence. In reality, his influence on Sodom was far greater than Lot's influence even though he did not dwell in the city. He nearly saved Sodom by his prayer, and would have, if Lot had created just one spiritual foothold from which God could move.

Faith sees farther than man's sight can perceive. It takes hold of the revelation from God and acts upon it even if the final outcome is not realized on this side of the grave.

Do you like poetry? My guess is that most of you don't care for poetry. The old poems are difficult to read and difficult to understand. For this reason I rarely use them in a sermon. But today I will be different and read to you an old poem. The author is *John Greenleaf Whittier* (1807-1892). I believe the words of this poem relate to the message you have just heard.

Others shall sing the song,
Others shall right the wrong,—
Finish what I begin
And all I fail to win.

What matter, I or they,
Mine or another's day,
So the right word be said,
And life the sweeter made?

Hail to the Coming Singers!
Hail to the brave light-bringers!
Forward I reach and share
All that they sing and dare.

Ring, bells in unrealed steeples,
The joy of unborn peoples!
Sound, trumpets far off blown,
Your triumph is my own!

I feel the earth move sunward,
I join the great march onward,
And take, by faith, while living,
My freehold of thanksgiving.