

Desires, Decisions & Destinies

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Good. Well, let's turn to God's Word, shall we? And we are in the book of Genesis. Willie is continuing his series. We have plenty of Bibles.

If you don't have one with you, there are Bibles just at the side, at the back. Please do help yourself to one of the church visitor Bibles. And we are in Genesis and chapter 13.

Genesis 13. And we are reading there from verse 2. So we've seen in chapter 12, Abraham's call, his response of faith, but also his stumbles of fear.

And we read on here in chapter 13, verse 2. Now, Abraham was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold.

And he journeyed on from the Negev 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.

[1 : 08] And there, Abraham called upon the name of the Lord. And Lot, who went with Abraham, also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together.

For their possessions were so great, they could not dwell together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abraham's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock.

At that time, the Canaanites and the Perizzites were dwelling in the land. Then Abraham said to Lot, Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen.

Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. 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. 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.

[2 : 29] Thus, they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tents as far as Sodom.

Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord. 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. 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. Amen. May God bless to us his word this morning. Well, do turn with me, if you would, to Genesis chapter 13.

[3 : 56] Let me begin with a question. If God is sovereign, that is, if He really is God, if He's the creator, the controller of world history, of our personal history, if that's so, then do the decisions that we make in life, large or small, do they have any real consequence at all?

That kind of question has given rise to much debate over the years, many large theological tomes as well. And I think sometimes a degree of anxiety and perplexity to some Christians.

But let me encourage you, if that is a problem to you, then God has answered that question and many others in the pages of Scripture in ways that are quite plain to all of us without the need of a PhD in theology or philosophy or any such thing.

And Genesis 13 shows us all that we need to know about how our decisions, our desires, will in fact shape our destiny in God's eternal kingdom.

Now we've seen already in the story of Abraham very clearly that it was no initiative of man, but it was the sheer sovereign intervention of God that transformed this pagan Abraham into the patriarch of the family of God.

[5 : 28] We saw that in chapter 12, verses 1 to 3. God lays hold on Abraham. And yet, as we follow Abraham's story through, right through to chapter 25, where it ends, it's equally plain that this sovereign God leads Abraham through a lifetime of trials and of testing of his faith and obedience.

And that the decisions that Abraham makes do have momentous consequences. Because God is a sovereign God, we are therefore responsible to obey him and to trust him always.

And so when we face challenges and obstacles to our faith and our obedience, the decisions that we take and the responses that we make really do matter. Because they reveal our heart's desires. That's what they really are in relation to God and to his kingdom. And since that's true, then they will inevitably shape our destiny in the plan and in the purpose of God.

A God who has sovereignly declared that the way of trust and obedience in his word alone is the way of ultimate blessing. So let's look at this chapter then, which is all about the desires and the destinies revealed by the decisions that God's people make.

[6 : 56] Those who God has already declared righteous in his sight. Now the passage falls into four scenes and we're going to look at them in turn. First of all, verses two to four, they describe Abraham's return to the altar.

The message of this section is to show to us the restored consecration of true faith. Verse three, Abraham journeyed on as far as Bethel to the place his tent was at the beginning.

Verse four, to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there, Abraham called on the name of the Lord. Could I really be clearer, could it? The wanderer has returned.

And once again, he's a true worshiper. All through the last story, there was no mention of altars.

There was no mention of prayer to God. There was just folly and stumblings from Abraham.

But now, after God's sovereign intervention to rescue him from his own disastrous escapades, well, Abraham's back on track. And he knows that he just cannot do without communion with the true God.

[8 : 03] Because he's a man of faith, he has confidence to draw near to the throne of grace, to receive mercy and grace in his time of need. It's a wonderful truth, isn't it?

That there is restoration from our sin, from our folly as believers. There is a way back to God from the dark parts of sin. There's a fresh start, even after disastrous mistakes.

Even from the times when we've been rescued by the skin of our teeth, from disasters of our own making. The sheer sovereign grace and mercy of God is wonderful.

And I think Moses was very concerned to encourage his people, the first readers of this, the Israelites, on the brink of the land of Canaan, and to encourage them that restored consecration is possible, even for them.

Beginning of Deuteronomy, Moses reminds them of their disastrous rebellions in the past, how they turned away from God, how they refused to enter the land when the spies came back.

[9 : 08] Do you remember? And said, oh, it's full of giants. And the result? Well, a whole generation, 40 years, lost, wandering in the desert. And yet he goes on to say, but God has brought you back here.

Here you are, on the brink of the land. There's a fresh start of true commitment and true consecration. And that's God's purpose for you, and it is possible.

But of course, they too must be like Abraham. Not because Abraham is a model of perfection, but because he is a model of real penitence, real faith, in response to the rebuke into the admonition of God's word.

And that's a mark of a true believer, whether it's in Moses' day or in our day. They faithfully obey God's commands, and yet they recognize so clearly there are many failings, and so they come again to God's altar to receive forgiveness and to find that renewed fellowship through God's grace. And Moses' encouragement to his people surely is a great encouragement to us as well, because there is a way back from wandering to true worship, to true consecration.

[10 : 26] Because we too, as Hebrews chapter 13 tells us, we too have an altar like Abraham's. No longer with the blood of animals, but as the apostle says, where the sanctifying blood of Jesus

brings us the confidence and the restoration through communion with God.

We come to him in the temple that is his body. And as the apostle John tells us, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from all sin. From all sin.

Maybe that's a word for someone here this morning. You've been a wanderer. You've stumbled like Abraham. But God's been pricking your heart. And you've come back to be a true worshiper.

Well, there is a way back to true consecration. It begins like Abraham at the altar. At Calvary's cross is where it begins when you come as a sinner to Jesus.

And God promises that all who call on his name there as Abraham did will find that grace and that restoration from him. So be encouraged if that's you this morning.

[11 : 41] But at the same time, don't be confused because that fresh start is only the beginning of God's restoring work. It's not the end. It's not the goal. The real restoration is inseparable from renewed obedience to God's plan and to God's purpose for his life.

Just as it is for our lives as people of faith. God wants spiritual adults. He doesn't want immature infants. obedience. The Lord Jesus himself learned obedience through what he suffered.

That is, he was tried and tested in his faithfulness. And so it is with all God's children. And we learn the meaning of real obedience only through the trials and the testing of our faith that God puts before us.

We tend to complain, don't we, about these obstacles. But in fact, as William Stowe puts it, our obstacles are our opportunities.

They may determine our advancement in faith. If we avoid them, those same obstacles may be lost opportunities resulting in our remaining infantile forever. You see, God doesn't want that of his chosen ones.

[12 : 49] So we shouldn't be at all surprised at what the next verses here present to us. Verses 5 to 7, ostensibly, it's all about the herdsman's rift over animals.

But again, the message is very clear. It speaks of the repeated challenges to true faith. That there will always be just because we are called to be wholly loyal to one sovereign God, the God of all the earth.

Now essentially, Abraham is faced here with another famine in verse 6. It's another direct threat to the sufficiency of the land that God has commanded him to occupy.

And this time, the problem is actually presented by his wealth. God has blessed him with so much that it becomes a burden to them. And sometimes that can be the way.

Sometimes God's blessings can be the biggest tests for us. It's often the case that somebody's greatest gifts can also potentially be their greatest hindrance in life.

[13 : 56] And that's certainly so in terms of wealth because the more you have, the more you have to lose. And the harder it is to be rightly ordered and you're thinking about these things. Now it's easy to see the relevance again for Moses' first hearers.

They left Egypt, didn't they, with wealth supplied by God. But maybe that wealth was a big factor in warping their memories about the realities of Egypt because remember, quite soon they started talking as though actually life was better there and they wanted to go back.

And it's just as relevant for us today because material blessing from God can become a real snare for our lives. That's why Paul says to Timothy, as for the rich in this present age, charge them not to set their hearts on the uncertainty of riches but set them on God.

So you see, if God is going to give you money and substance, then he is also going to put tests in your path to test your true loyalty, to test your heart's desires.

And the decisions you take and the responses you make to those tests, they really do matter. That's what's going on here, you see, because both Abraham and Lot are being tested by God's largesse.

[15 : 21] And it's the same question as before when the famine came in chapter 12. It's a repeat challenge to faith and to obedience. How is Abraham going to react to the challenge of famine, of strife, and perhaps the real danger that God has brought him to face in this land?

That seems to be the point of verse 7, doesn't it? The Canaanites, the Perizzites, these enemies were there in the land. No doubt, they were very ready to exploit any sense of division between these new nomadic people, Abraham and Lot.

See, just getting into the land itself isn't the end of the story, it's just the very beginning. And Moses wanted his hearers to understand that as well, because it would be the same for them.

Life with the Lord as God's people will always be a challenge to faith and obedience, a challenge to trust and obey in the face of many dangers and many toils and many snares as they journey on with God.

And of course, the New Testament makes it just as plain that it's no different for us. That's so important for us to grasp, especially if you're a new Christian. Don't fall for any ideas that people might say to you that, well, if you could just receive this special spiritual experience or if you undergo some special consecration or some blessing or some renewal, then all your struggles are going to be over in the Christian life.

[16:54] No, that is the opposite of the truth of God. No sooner had Abraham consecrated himself here than a fresh and even greater challenge was thrust at him.

Just as no sooner the Lord Jesus had the experience, that wonderful experience at his baptism of the heaven opening and the Spirit descending on him.

What happened? He was led by the Spirit into the desert to face temptation by the devil. See, that is genuine faith. That's genuine discipleship. It's a life of repeated challenges to faith and trust right to the very end.

That's why the Apostle James begins his letter this way. Listen, count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness and let steadfastness have its full effect so that you may be perfect and complete and lacking nothing.

See what he's saying? There is no other way to maturity as a Christian believer. Well, I wonder if that's the way we do think about challenges and tests that we face.

[18:13] How do we react to the challenges to obedience that God places before us in our lives? And we need to be clear, don't we? Because our decisions, our responses to these critical challenges really do matter.

They reveal our true desires, you see. And so also they will inevitably shape our destiny. And that's what becomes very clear as the next scene here unfolds.

What we see in verses 8 to 13 well, two kinsmen reviewing their atlas. At first sight it does seem to be just something of a geography lesson. But of course the reality here is far, far deeper.

These verses speak eloquently of the revealing choices of truly committed faith or of a faith that is really quite different in character.

The decisions we make in facing the challenges that come our way, they reveal the true desires of our deepest hearts. If you look carefully you'll see how the structure of the writing reveals that verses 10 to 13 are actually the very heart of this whole story.

[19:29] See in verses 8 to 9 Abraham speaks and he offers land with great generosity to Lot. And then in verses 14 to 17 God speaks and God offers land with great generosity to Abraham.

And in between these two sections right there is verses 10 to 13. And it records this parting of the way between Abraham and Lot. In fact verses 10 to 13 also has something of a symmetrical pattern.

You see it begins in verse 10 and ends in verse 13 with a description of the place Sodom. And then verse 11 and the second part of verse 12 tell us twice Lot chose the Jordan Valley.

Lot settled in the cities of the valley. And then right at the heart you see the epicenter of the whole story is that first line of verse 12.

What important words especially after chapter 12. Abraham settled in the land of Canaan. Despite famine despite strife despite potential danger from hostile inhabitants Abraham shows decisive obedience here do you see?

[20:48] Faith in God's command he determines not to waver again. Think for a bit about Abraham's great decision here. See this passage is all about contrasting decisions.

The first great contrast we see here is with the Abraham of chapter 12. It's a contrast here between Abraham now and Abraham's lapse. See there in the end of chapter 12 he was outside the land. Remember he was living in palaces. Yes he had great prosperity in worldly terms and yet he was fearful. He was alienated from God. He was being unfaithful.

He was far from God's purpose for his life. But here where is he now? Well he's back living in tents and we're told that his wealth is very much under threat.

But he's in the land of God's blessing and he's being faithful to God's call and he is not at all fearful now is he about the future? And his whole approach to this challenge and the generosity and the

grace that he extends reveals now the clear desire of his heart which is to believe God and to trust God and obey God's command no matter what it costs in material terms.

[22 : 12] So verses 8 to 9 they describe great generosity. You take what you want he says to Lot. I'm not going to fight over things over possessions. I'm quite content to make do.

And you see that's the attitude isn't it that speaks of mature faith. It speaks about lessons that have been learned about what really matters in life. it's the mark of a man who's not looking just at the visible things but at the invisible things.

It's the mark of somebody who has discovered that the greatest gain in life is godliness with contentment as Paul puts it to Timothy. See Abraham is saying here as long as I'm in this land that's all that matters now.

I'm happy to let God choose the rest for me. I'll take whatever path he wants in terms of where I live or what I do or how much I have in material terms. He's learned about God's unceasing faithfulness and he's learned from his own failures to trust the promise of the gospel to believe that promise God gave him in verses 1-3 of chapter 12 that he would protect him wherever he was that he would provide for him in all the way he takes.

And so now he's glad isn't he to obey the gospel command to live in the land of God's choosing. Well he waits patiently for the internal inheritance for the heavenly city that God has promised him whose architect and builder is God.

[23 : 49] That's why Abraham is liberated here to be so generous to be so gracious with Lot. He graciously gives up his right as the patriarch to choose his place first.

And he generously says to Lot you take your pick I'm trusting God for myself. That's true isn't it? You see a generous spirit a gracious spirit like that is a truly liberated spirit.

It's evidence of God's grace abundantly discovered at work in the heart really yielding fruit in trusting faith. It's evidence that his true heart's desire is for God God himself and for God's reward not for this world and this world's rewards.

See if you are a tight fisted believer if you're a mean Christian then you're a cold hearted Christian. Christian that's a real truth about your heart that's revealed isn't it?

Tells us you haven't been liberated from the things of this world. The only cure for that you know is to start systematically giving away a lot of what you've got.

[25 : 06] Keep doing it until you come to enjoy doing it. That might take a long time so you need to be persistent. Go home and read Mark chapter 10 if that's a challenge to you.

Jesus said those things to that rich young man just for you. It's just the same you see if you're a self promoting person if you're a self protecting person you're always determined to have your rights and your privileges ahead of others.

What that reveals is you're just insecure you're defensive you haven't yet found all your true identity only in the Lord Jesus Christ and in his kingdom and not at all in this world's validation of what it can give you.

But you see now Abraham had and that's why he was generous that's why he was gracious that's why he was open-hearted and actually he's urging his Nephi lot to see the same priorities and to seek the same things isn't it?

To seek that same inheritance see what he says in verse nine the whole land is before you the whole land of promise what he's saying is there's plenty of room for both of us in this land of God's choosing I'll do all I can he's saying to lot to allow you to flourish with me in this place that God has chosen for us to be the place of blessing under God's hand but unless it wasn't to be was it because verse 10 says lot lifted up his eyes but lot's eyes were drawn by very different considerations to Abraham's when Abraham lifted up his eyes in verse 14 at God's command what is it to do?

[26 : 57] It's to gaze solely on God's chosen spiritual inheritance that he'd been called to look at the land God had set before him but that's not so with lot you see and that's the second great contrast in this passage the contrast between Abraham and lot between Abraham who sees the invisible the glory of God's call and his purpose on his life and lot you see who we see so clearly here is only seeing the visible he's seeing the most favorable option for his stocks for his shares I suppose for his wealth for his family for his business for his career now don't misunderstand lot I don't think we're to see lot at fault here in being especially selfish or especially greedy far less are we to see that lot was somehow attracted to the wickedness of the cities of the valley and of

Sodom the New Testament tells us very plenty that was not so Peter unambiguously calls him righteous lot he says he was tormented in his soul by the wickedness that he would encounter later in Sodom so lot is a believer lot is counted righteous by God's grace just as Abraham was and yet there's still a great contrast between them isn't there because they have very different horizons in their outlook on life different desires deep down in their hearts and when push came to shove the things that really shaped their crucial decisions in life were very different see Abraham is revealed here truly as a man of the word no matter what the earthly loss the material loss was he obeyed God and he sought God's reward but the truth about lot is that really he was being shaped by the things of this world

I guess just like many of us because you see the appetites of this world are so strong aren't they and they overcome they easily suppress the appetites and the desires that we have for the invisible world it's just natural lot just did what is natural to all of us he put the need for a good house for a decent career for a better salary for a good school for his kids all sorts of totally reasonable things but he put those things first not his spiritual destiny not the spiritual destiny of his family and that's just what many believers still do perhaps most believers and many decades later as we read on in the story we find he lived to regret having lost out immeasurably just as many believers find these things in years to come because they've lost out for example on having the fellowship of a living church to nurture their faith even as they've gained a better salary and a better house or whatever it might be or perhaps they've lost that sphere of christian service that they had to give up in order to gain these other things that at the time seemed so much more important and there'd be plenty of time for that later see verse 11 really sums the whole thing up lot chose for himself and what he chose in the end was to distance himself and his family from the place of god's blessing he chose to live in these cities that were either right on the border of the promised land or most likely actually outside it altogether because verse 12 contrasts his place with abraham's place in the land of canaan and that was a decision that was fraught with destiny and we'll see that in the chapters to come and it's clear that moises leaves us in no doubt of that even right here you see verse 10 and verse 13 mentions edict egypt and sodom and just to mention those places is so ominous the israelites would clearly get the picture this is going to end in tears and it did and it always does when anyone even believers think as lot thought here that he could find for himself a place like the garden of the lord a place of of lasting prosperity anywhere other than the kingdom that god has called us to and that's lot you see a righteous man says the apostle but not a man like abraham was for whom the promise had gripped him so completely as to totally shape his life to shape his heart's desires and that was manifest in the decisions of his life and those decisions shaped his destiny lot is probably the great example of what paul describes in first corinthians 3 15 or jude describes in jude verse 23 a man who is saved but only as if snatched out of the fire well let's briefly look at the last scene here in verses 14 to 18 where we see the lord's response and his announcement to abraham's decision because these are wonderful verses and they speak of the rich consequences of true faith see god responds

to and god richly rewards the responses of faith of his chosen ones and he does so bountifully the abraham has risen here to the challenge of his faith he's obeyed god a great personal cost no doubt separating from from his nephew remember nephew lot was like the son that abraham didn't have and he finds only solitude in a foreign land he's he's vulnerable he's uncertain but you see god is the rewarder of those who seek him says the apostle there's some things that god can't reveal to his loved ones until they reach that place of of contentment and trust and submission in his hand there's an intimacy with the god that can only be born out of that deep obedience that great cost jesus says in john 14 doesn't he that whoever keeps his word and obeys him he says i will love him and manifest myself to him and that's what we see here god manifests himself to abraham in a new way in a deeper way gives him a new assurance of of the future in this land for future blessing but also verse 15 for his own personal blessing all this land i will give to you personally and to your offspring and he gives him more revelation of the extent of the promise of the seed they'll be like the dust of the earth he says and abraham experiences himself in verse 17 the possession of that land he literally walks himself through it into a greater knowledge and experience of what god has promised him by his grace see the reward for the desire of more of god's purpose for your life is the experience of more of god's purpose for your life obedience through challenges to faith leads on to more obedience and to more faith that's gospel arithmetic that's what jesus says to the one who has more will be given and he will have an abundance the poor lot but lot wanted to have the best of both worlds but he ended up with neither but abraham sought first the kingdom of god and he

discovered what jesus said that all these other things were added to him in abundance because god is no person's debtor not ever he is the abundant rewarder of those who seek him remember the famous story of eric little the film chariots of fire who refused to run that race because he wanted to be loyal to the lord and he went into that different race instead that wasn't his event at all and somebody ran onto the track and put a bit of paper in his hand on the starting blocks and he opened it and it was that verse that said them that honor me i will honor and he famously went on to win gold do our decisions matter in the small challenges we face and in the crucial tests of faith in our christian pilgrimage yes they do matter abundantly because they reveal the desires of our deepest hearts and that inevitably shapes our destiny in the sovereign plan and purpose of god and this passage friends is a real challenge to us and it's a real encouragement the challenge is surely this it asks us all the question doesn't it are you living as a man or woman of the word or do do the decisive factors in your decisions reveal that the desires and the apitites of this world are actually choking the desires of the kingdom and the demands of the kingdom choking them in your life i can't tell you that but you know and we need to remember paul's words don't we we reap what we sow that was true in genesis it was true in galatia when paul was writing to them still true today be warned and let's be faithful to one another and warn one another because that's what real christian fellowship is all about isn't it we are our brother and sister's keepers we have a responsibility to one another it's a real challenge but listen there is also real encouragement not to fear the trials and the tests that we will face and that we must face in our christian walk because god sets these challenges before us for our blessing not to trip us up but for our blessing he sets before us opportunities and he says to us choose life he wants to bless us he doesn't want to harm us and he does it because it's his purpose that we should be conformed to the likeness of one far greater than abraham conformed to the likeness of our lord jesus christ he humbled himself he chose the way of obedience he gave up all earthly gain and walked away of the cross but the rich consequences of his faith was that god has highly exalted him to surpassing glory as king and lord as well as savior of the world and see god wants us to see that and he wants us to see that glory in this world and glory in his kingdom don't mix they cannot coexist jesus says you cannot serve two masters god and the things of this world and if you try to like lot you will become enslaved to the world's mastery and ruined by it but if you'll see with a healthy eye of faith that sees the invisible glory of christ's kingdom and desire that inheritance above all earthly powers then you will be truly liberated you'll be liberated even now in this world to be gracious to be generous to be magnanimous in your life on earth as a christian not coveting other people's places or other people's calling but secure content with the calling that god has given you not clinging to material things but being bold in your giving of your time and your talents and your money because you trust god and you believe god when he says whoever sows bountifully will reap bountifully from the god of all grace who loves a cheerful giver because it shows a heart that is set not not on the cities of the valley the things of this world but on the city that is to come the home of righteousness i'm sure that's the kind of believer we all want to be isn't it surely how can we be like that how can we be like abraham of course the answer isn't follow abraham but the answer is [41 : 06] follow abraham's example and trust in the promise of abraham's god build an altar to him alone right at the heart of your life and your family's life and all the way along your journey in life call upon the name of his god our lord the lord jesus christ see if you're a believer if you're an heir of abraham's faith then you are in christ and he is in you to help you the spirit of the one who trusted and obeyed his father in all things who turned his back on all that rightly belonged to him in this world for the glory of his eternal home for his eternal father his spirit lives in you his spirit walks with you and will do all the days of your life and to trust him to obey him as abraham did walking in step with him that's the only way to life eternal and it's also the only way to liberation to joy to real contentment now in your earthly life day by day it's the only way to the life of of generosity the life of grace the life of faithfulness that will make you into an abraham as a believer and not a lot a challenge and a real encouragement to walk his way let's pray lord may all our decisions in life reveal hearts that truly do desire you and your kingdom above all other things and so be shaping us in your sovereign hands for a destiny in the glory of that eternal kingdom help us lord to trust and obey today and to trust and obey every day and all our days for we ask it for the sake of our lord jesus christ amen