

First Things – Genesis

Genesis 13:1-4

“Back to Bethel”

1. WHAT ABRAM CAME FROM

- A. A time of personal failure
- B. A time of providential favor

2. WHERE ABRAM CAME TO

- A. The place he should have remained
- B. The practice he should have maintained

3. WHO ABRAM CAME FOR

- A. The God he could call on
- B. The God he could count on

1. In 2003, hall of fame basketball coach, Roy Williams, had to decide whether or not to leave the University of Kansas, where he had coached for 15 years, in order to return to his Alma Mater, and the place where his coaching career had begun, the University of North Carolina.

2. In his 2009 biography entitled, *Hard Work*, Williams talks about what an agonizing decision it was for him to make. He had been successful at Kansas, but North Carolina was his first love.

3. He made the decision to return to North Carolina, and in the book he writes about his emotions after telling his Kansas team about his choice.

4. Williams said, “I wanted so badly to run back in there and say, ‘I can’t do it, I’m staying here.’ But I had made the decision. I felt like it was the right decision, but that didn’t change how bad I felt about myself right then.”ⁱ

5. In Genesis 13, we find the patriarch Abraham (then called Abram) going back to Bethel. Verse 3 describes it as, “...*the place where his tent had been at the beginning...*”

6. For Abram, going back to Bethel was not a difficult decision, it was a necessary one. In reality, it was the place he should have been all along.

7. Abram’s story at the close of chapter 12 and the beginning of chapter 13 is a reminder that at times God’s people get off track.

8. It is also a reminder that when we find ourselves away from the Lord and in a place we should have never been, what we need is to get back to where we belong.

9. The good news is that we *can* go back. Even when we are not faithful to Him, the Lord Jesus is faithful to us, and offers forgiveness and restoration to all who come back when they have gone astray.

10. Let's follow Abram's story in this text, and see what he can teach us about getting back to *our* Bethel, the place we were before we went astray. Looking at this text, notice with me firstly:

I. WHAT ABRAM CAME FROM

1. Chapter 13 opens with the statement, "*And Abram went up out of Egypt...*" That phrase contains more than just a geographical detail.
2. In leaving Egypt, Abram was leaving behind not just a place, but an experience that had taught him some lessons about himself and his God.
3. Egypt had been an unfaithful detour in Abram's journey of following the call of God, and it speaks to us about the wrong turns we sometimes take in our lives as followers of Jesus.
4. Consider with me Abram's experience in Egypt, and what he came from when he started back to Bethel. First of all, Abram was coming from:

A. A time of personal failure

1. At the close of Genesis 12, we saw how Abram responded to a famine in the land of Canaan by heading down to Egypt in search of food.
2. Rather than believing the promise of God's blessing, and rather than seeking the direction of God, Abram followed his own wisdom, and went to a place God had not told him to go.
3. While he was in Egypt, Abram not only acted outside the will of God, but he also acted opposite of the character of God, and lied about his relationship to Sarai, his wife.
4. One writer describes the whole experience in Egypt as a "fiasco"ⁱⁱ. It was a sad scene in the life of a man who was called "the Friend of God" (James 2:23).
5. While Abram's failure in Egypt is sad to see, it is nonetheless important for us to study. It reminds us of how even the greatest of God's people are "prone to wander."
6. Howard Hendricks said, "As Christians we wave our visionary banners proclaiming, 'Victory in Christ,' refusing often...to admit that the path to ultimate victory may include intermediate bloody noses."ⁱⁱⁱ
7. Abram's experience in Egypt reminds all of us that salvation in Christ does not mean sinless in life. Even those who have faith in Jesus will still have failures in their lives.

8. As we see Abram slink out of Egypt, his head down in shame having been rebuked by Pharaoh, we are reminded of the times when we too have failed the Lord, and done something contrary to His call upon our lives.

9. The opening of this chapter shows Abram coming from a time of personal failure. Notice further, it shows Abram coming from:

B. A time of providential favor

1. Understanding Abram's failure in Egypt, we are a bit surprised when we read the second verse of this chapter. It says, "*And Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold.*"

2. From a monetary and material standpoint, Egypt had not been all that bad for Abram. Pharaoh had given him many gifts in exchange for Sarai, who he thought was his sister.

3. The reality is, however, all these blessings were nothing but the grace of God upon Abram, in spite of the fact that he had gone astray.

4. Abram understood this, and that is why he headed back to Bethel. Abram knew he did not deserve these blessings, and moreover, he knew that the blessings meant nothing if he could not be in the presence of God.

5. In chapter 12, when the famine arose, Abram left Canaan. I said then that our troubles should cause us to turn to the Lord, not from Him.

6. It is interesting, that the same word that was used to describe the "grievous" famine in chapter 12, is the same word used to describe Abram's wealth in chapter 13. The word means "heavy".

6. In chapter 13, Abram's experience teaches us that just as when the trial is heavy, so also when the blessings are heavy, we should turn to the Lord.

7. Unfortunately, very often people who are blessed with things in this world are more concerned with the blessings than with the God who gave them.

8. But just as problems should drive us to the feet of our Lord, so also should prosperity! Our blessings are reasons to seek God just as much as our burdens are.

9. When Abram headed back to Bethel, he was coming from a time of failure and, by God's grace, a time of favor. Both of those experiences reminded him of his need for God.

10. As we look further at this text, consider not only *what Abram came from*, but consider also:

II. WHERE ABRAM CAME TO

1. Back in Genesis 12, verse 9, we read, "*And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south.*" My friend, Pastor Ronnie Brown, preached on that text and titled his sermon, "Going Too Far South."

2. That is exactly what Abram had done. He had gone too far south of where he was supposed to be, and he ended up in Egypt, out of the will of God.

3. Once his lie had been exposed, and he was forced to leave Egypt, where would Abram go? Certainly not back to Ur. He had left that place forever.

4. Verse 3 of chapter 13 says, "*And he went on his journeys from the south even to Bethel, unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Hai.*"

5. Abram came *from* Egypt, from the place of failure, and he came *to* Bethel, the place he had been before.

6. Bethel was significant in the life of Abram, and it points us to where we must go when we, like Abram, have gone too far south.

7. Consider the where Abram came to when he left Egypt. First of all, he came:

A. To the place he should have remained

1. Look again at verse 3. It says that Abram came back to Bethel, "*...unto the place where his tent had been at the beginning...*"

2. When Abram first came into the land of Canaan, he spent a little time in Shechem, and there the Lord had promised to give that land to his descendents.

3. The Bible says that he eventually set up his tent on a mountain just east of Bethel. There, Abram built an altar, and called on the name of the Lord.

4. Abram had followed God out of Ur, on the promise that God would show him where he was supposed to go. In Canaan God had appeared to Abram and told him that *this* was the land – *this* was his place.

5. God said nothing about Egypt. In going there, Abram left the place God had put him, and the place where he should have remained.

6. In his little letter near the close of the New Testament, the Apostle Jude makes a very interesting statement. In verse 21, he says, *"Keep yourselves in the love of God..."*

7. When we are saved, Jesus calls us to Himself, and we live in His love and in love with Him. While His love for us never changes, there are times that we leave that first love, that place of beginning, as Bethel was for Abram.

8. In the book of Revelation, Jesus dictated letters to seven churches. The first of those was the church at Ephesus. Jesus said to them in Revelation 2:4, *"...thou hast left thy first love."*

9. He then gave them these instructions, *"Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works..."*

10. It is better if we just keep ourselves in the love of God, and remain in the place where He puts us.

11. However, when like Abram we get off track, we must remember where we came from, and we must go back to the place we never should have left.

12. Abram came back to the place where he was in the beginning, and the place he should have remained. Notice further that Abram also came:

B. To the practice he should have maintained

1. Look again at the text. Verse 3 says that Abram returned to Bethel. Verse 4 says, *"Unto the place of the altar, which he had made there at the first..."*

2. When Abram first came to Bethel, he built an altar and called on the name of the Lord. He worshipped and communed with his God in the midst of a land filled with idolaters and pagans.

3. However, when Abram went down into Egypt, he built no altars there. He made no mention of the Lord in that land.

4. In going back to Bethel, Abram was going back to the place where he had been with God. He returned to his altar and to the worship he should have continued all along.

5. One of the ways you can tell whether or not you have gotten off track is by whether or not you are still in fellowship and communion with God.

6. Are you still spending time in prayer? Are you still kneeling before the Lord and seeking His face? If not, you need to go back to the place in your life where that is your daily practice.

7. Recently, I was preaching a revival, and during the invitation they sang a song I haven't heard in years, but remembered very well. The song asks:

*How long has it been,
Since you talked with the Lord?
And told Him your heart's hidden secrets,
How long since you prayed?
How long since you stayed,
On your knees till the light shone through?
How long has it been,
Since you knew that He cared for you?*

8. If you fear that you might have taken a wrong turn somewhere in your Christian life, then ask yourself, how long has it been since you were in the practice of worshipping, communing, and talking with the Lord?

9. Abram left Egypt behind, and went to the place where he should have been all along, and to an altar that he never should have left.

10. With that being said, notice in this text not only *what Abram came from*, and *where Abram came to*, but notice also lastly:

III. WHO ABRAM CAME FOR

1. Not only did Abram return to Bethel, and to the altar he had built there before, but verse 4 says, "*...and there Abram called on the name of the LORD.*"

2. In going back to Bethel, Abram was looking not so much for *something* as he was for *someone*. Bethel and the altar he had built there were only the means to get back in touch with the God he had known there.

3. In much the same way, when we have gone astray and gotten off track, what is most important is that we seek the Lord.

4. Yes, those who have strayed into sin need to leave it behind. Yes, those who are out of church need to come back.

5. However, those steps are only the means to the real end, which is restoring fellowship with the God from whom you've walked away.

6. Notice who it was that Abram came back to in Bethel. Firstly, it was:

A. The God he could call on

1. Again, verse 4 says that having arrived back in Bethel and at the altar he had built there, Abram then, "...called on the name of the LORD."
2. What made the Lord God Jehovah so different from the idols of Ur was that this God spoke. Abram could talk with Him and call on Him.
3. In going back to Bethel, Abram knew that his God could hear when he called.
4. We serve the same God that Abram did. Through His Son Jesus, we can call on Him, and we are assured that He will answer us when we call.
5. If you have been away from Him, what you need is to get back to the place where you can call upon Him. When you do, believe what He said in Jeremiah 33:3, "*Call unto me, and I will answer thee...*"
6. Isaiah 59:1 says, "*Behold, the LORD'S hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear.*"
7. James Stuart was the former Secretary of State for the country of Scotland. He was finishing a long and boring speech one day when someone from the gallery yelled out, "Speak up!" Stuart responded, "I'm sorry...I did not think anyone was listening."
8. If you have been away from the Lord, but like Abram, you set your heart to seek Him, you can rest assured that He is always listening.
9. In coming back to Bethel, Abram was coming to the God he could call on. Consider also that in coming back, Abram was coming to:

B. The God he could count on

1. Look again at that closing phrase in verse 4. It says, "...there Abram called on the name of the LORD."
2. This is the third time that this particular phrase is used in the Bible. The first time is in Genesis 4, in reference to the descendents of Seth.
3. The second time is in chapter 12, when Abram first came to Bethel. Now, back in Bethel, Abram calls on the name of the Lord again.

4. What does this mean, to call on the name of the Lord? What is the name of the Lord in this context?
5. The word translated "Lord" in this verse is the Hebrew name for God that we pronounce as Jehovah.
6. Jehovah is the covenant name of God. It is the name by which He reveals Himself and His promises to His people.
7. In calling on the name of the Lord, Abram was calling out to the God who had covenanted with Him and promised to bless him and use him.
8. Imagine Abram kneeling down in the dirt in front of that rock altar he had built the first time he came to Bethel.
9. Tears stream down his face as he looks up toward heaven and says, "Lord, I know I have not been faithful to You, and I am sorry. But I still believe that You are the one, true, God, and I call on your faithfulness in spite of mine!"
10. In going back to Bethel, Abram reminds us that we can count on the faithfulness of our God even when our faithfulness has failed.
11. Our Lord Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. We can call on Him and count on Him no matter what we have done or how we have failed.

1. One of my favorite hymns is *Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing*. It was written in 1757 by a man named Robert Robinson.

2. Earlier in this message I quoted a phrase from the last stanza of that song. The verse says:

*Prone to wander, Lord I feel it,
Prone to leave the God I love*

3. Late in Robinson's life, it is said that he began to veer from sound doctrine and wavered in his convictions regarding Christianity.

4. The story is told of a day in which Robinson shared a stagecoach with a woman who was humming the tune to his most famous hymn, *Come Thou Fount*.

5. She asked Robinson about the tune she was humming, and whether or not he had ever heard it. Robinson is said to have responded, "Madam, I am the poor unhappy man

who wrote that hymn many years ago, and I would give a thousand worlds, if I had them, to enjoy the feelings I had then.”

6. Abram’s experience in Egypt reminds us that we are all prone to wander. In our journey of following the Lord Jesus, we sometimes get off track, and leave the place where we should have remained.

7. In Genesis 13, Abram reminds us that we do not need a thousand worlds to be restored to the place of peace and fellowship with God.

8. All we need is to leave our wanderings behind, and go back to the place where we can meet with God, and there call upon His name again.

9. The gospel that we first believed proclaims that there is enough forgiveness and grace in Jesus and His death on the cross to forgive us, not just the first time we come to Him, but when we come back to Him as well.

ⁱ Williams, Roy, Hard Work: A Life On and Off the Court, (Algonquin Books, Chapel Hill, NC, 2009) *Amazon Kindle Edition*

ⁱⁱ Hughes, R. Kent, Genesis: Beginning and Blessing, (Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL, 2004), p. 197

ⁱⁱⁱ Lutzer, Erwin, Failure: The Back Door to Success, (Moody Press, Chicago, 1975), p. 9