

Look for the City You Can't See

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[0 : 00] Now, say you're going to live in a new place, you're moving house. What's one of the first things you do?

You go and see it, don't you? Why wouldn't you go and see it? Students, when you were thinking about which uni you were going to go to, probably I imagine some of you track the length and the breadth of the country, looking at different cities, different unis.

Wanting to know if what the website offered was real. Was that how it really was? Why wouldn't you do that? Maybe the thought of house viewings gets some of your hearts pounding, as you think of the stress of going from flat to flat, house to house, trying to find the right place to settle.

And you want to move quickly, of course, but you want to know that it's the right place. You'd be silly not to go and see, wouldn't you? To have a viewing. Because when we're weighing up our future, we can only go by what our senses tell us, can't we?

We can only feel our way along with our hands. We can only view what's on offer with our eyes.

Can we see our senses? Or can our senses deceive us?

[1 : 23] Seeing it for ourselves gives us confidence to go for it. We trust in what we can touch with our own hands. But is seeing a thing where real confidence comes from? Can we really hang our lives, our futures, our destinies on what is right in front of us?

Or is there a firmer and more secure foundation on which we can build our lives and our futures?

That is the question that this chapter of Genesis wants us to wrestle with this morning.

Because here, two men, Abram and his nephew Lot, have to decide where they're going to build their lives. And they make that decision in two very different ways.

They base their confidence in two very different ways of seeing. One will look and see a city that looks brilliant from the outside, but inside is rotten to the core, and he will choose to live there.

The other will look for a city that he can't see from the outside, but that God promises to give to him and his family forever.

[2 : 41] Which would you choose? Which seems more secure to you? Who chose rightly? And how do we choose today where to build our lives, our families, our futures?

Well, Genesis will urge us today, friends, to look for the city you can't see. But before we get there, there's an important step we can't miss, and that is the reunion.

The reunion. Now, if you've ever fallen out with somebody, I'm sure you have, I have, friends, people in your family, you know that going back to how it was sometimes takes a difficult conversation.

And that is where Abram and God are at the start of this chapter. If you were here last Sunday, you remember the covenant got off to a very shaky start.

Now, it helps to define what that word means, covenant. A covenant is a relationship that God initiates with humanity by making a promise. And we've seen God made a promise to Abram to bless him, and through his family, to bring his blessing to every family in the world.

[4 : 02] Now, that word blessing has come to be a kind of container for whatever we want to stuff into it, hasn't it? When are you hashtag blessed? What does the blessed life look like to you?

There could be as many answers as there are people in this room. But the word blessing means something very specific in Genesis, because God's blessing is the opposite of his curse.

When people first sinned and rebelled against God, God cursed his creation. Human beings would live at a distance from him and know his anger for their rebellion.

Life would not be any longer. What God designed and created for it to be, people at one with their creator. And so when God promises his blessing, what is he doing?

He is giving us back the life that we lost through sin. That we would be welcomed by God back into his presence, know his pleasure with us again.

[5 : 08] And God promised that would be true of Abram, and it would be true of others through him and his family. And to cut the story short, the Bible tells us today, we can have that blessing.

The blessing of God through Abram's distant, promised, chosen family member, Jesus Christ.

Okay, that's in a nutshell what God is promising Abram.

That's the full flowering, if you like, of the seed that God sows in his covenant, the gospel of Jesus.

The point being that God's blessing wasn't then, and it isn't now, a thing or an idea or a lifestyle.

Okay, God's blessing wasn't being rich or famous or having lots of possessions and a comfy life.

The blessing was and is a relationship with God, being right again with our creator.

The point is, friends, we can't have the blessing apart from the relationship. The two come together, which is what makes what happened last time just so disastrous.

[6 : 27] Because Abram threw God's promises back in his face, didn't he? He left the land that God promised would be his. He gave up his wife, through whom God promised him a family.

He brought God's curse on a nation that God has promised to bless through him. Now, because God is gracious, he's true to his covenant, he saved Abram out of his sin, didn't he?

He put a stop to his rebellion. But relationships still need healing. And that's what Abram goes to see to at the start of this chapter.

See verse one. He comes back out of Egypt. He comes back through the Negev, verse three, until he came to a special place, Bethel, the place between Bethel and Ai, by where his tent had been earlier, where he'd first built an altar.

What's he doing? What's this travel plan? He's going back to where it all began. He's going back to the place where he knew God personally and closely.

[7 : 37] Why? Out of a desire to know God personally and closely once again. He goes back to call on God's name. Over again, verse four, there Abram called on the name of the Lord.

He wants to start over with God. Now, to be clear, Abram had not lost his relationship with God. God kept his promise.

God saved him. There's nothing that Abram could have done to change that. But as in any relationship, where trust is broken, it needs to be put back together.

His sorries need to be said. Forgiveness needs to be held out. The way we say this today is our relationship with Christ.

We can't lose our union with him. What Christ did for us on the cross can't be undone. We can't be separated from Christ.

[8 : 37] But our communion with him can grow cold. That's our sense of being close to him and in step with him. When we sin and we don't say sorry, when we stay at a distance from him, we don't draw near to him, our communion with him suffers.

And what we need then is a reunion. A reunion to come back to Christ, wanting things to be right again.

To come back to the place where we were close to him personally, desiring to be close with him once again. To say sorry. What we need to say sorry for.

To change what we need to change. so that we can walk closely with him again. To call on him personally. Of this desire for things to be back the way he created them to be between us.

Okay, Abram goes back to God for a reunion. And it is only out of that reunion that the choices and decisions that he goes on to make will flow.

[9 : 51] And perhaps some of us, that is where we need to start today. Okay, we can't, we can't make the choices and decisions that we need to make without being back with God.

So before we go on to think about our choices and decisions in life, perhaps first you need to turn to God and say, I'm sorry. I've been far from you.

I've strayed from you. I want to be close with you. Please forgive me. Restore me. If you need a reunion with the Lord this morning, go to him and call on him personally by name.

And don't skip over this. Because remember, his blessing is not something different from our relationship with God. It is that relationship he gives us with himself.

And it is that relationship that makes the difference between these two guys now, Abram and Lot, in the direction their lives begin to take. So that brings us to our second point, the rear view.

[11 : 03] The rear view. Now, Abram doesn't go back to God's place alone. Abram, if we have this mental picture of Abram as a kind of wandering vagabond, we've not kept up with the story because he comes back from Egypt, verse 2, very wealthy in livestock, silver and gold.

So you have to picture a whole massive camp, okay, tents, servants, animals, filling the landscape, and somewhere in the middle, a very glamorous family wearing lots of silver and gold.

And in that family, there's Abram, his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot, who's been traveling with them. And in fact, between them, Abram and Lot have become so wealthy, they have so many possessions, so many animals overflowing, that they can't both live in the land when they get back there.

Their shepherds start to have fights over the land because the land couldn't support them while they stayed together. And now what Abram does is a bold move.

See it, verse 8, Abram says to Lot, let's not have any quarreling between you and me, between your herdsmen and mine, for we're close relatives. It's not the whole land before you.

[12 : 25] Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go right. If you go to the right, I'll go left. What's he saying? You choose. You choose.

My life is in your hands. You take the land you want, nephew, and I'll take what's left. Now, it's bold because it sounds like he's just trying to patch things up with Lot, but he's actually working still on his relationship with God.

Why is that? Because remember, God promised him this land here. Now, he's offering Lot the choice between staying here or going somewhere else.

We can't both stay, he says. If you go left, I'll go right. If you go right, I'll go left. So, it's a big risk. He is risking, isn't he, Lot saying, I'll stay here, uncle, and you can find somewhere else.

And so, Abram is taking this risk, but with his faith now in God to give him what he has promised. He's not scheming and plotting anymore as he sees the difference.

[13 : 36] He's not trying to trick and lie to and deceive Lot in the way that he tried to trick and lie to and deceive Pharaoh. Now, he's resting his faith and his future on God.

I don't have to scheme to get the right outcome. I can let go of this decision, trust God to see to it that his will will be done.

So, Abram's operating on a totally different schema, isn't he, from the last time we saw him, the last crisis. Going away from God, he depended on his own ingenuity.

Coming back to God, he is depending on God to sort it out. Now, he's living by faith in God's promise. But the big thing Genesis wants us to pick up at this point is the very different way that Lot makes his choice.

What do we do when we're choosing a place to live? We go for a viewing. Now, glance down at verse 10. What does Lot do? Lot looked around and saw.

[14 : 49] It's all in the eyes, isn't it? Genesis is zooming right in on his eyes. Literally, it says he lifted up his eyes and saw. And what did he see?

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. Wow, what of you, he says.

Look at all of that. It's lush. It's green. It's full of life. What does it look like? His first impression is that it looks like the garden of the Lord.

Not just any garden. God's garden. Now, think, remember, what God's blessing is. Life in the way that God created it.

God's people back with God in God's place. So, Lot is looking at this valley and what he sees is where he thinks God's blessing must be.

[15 : 54] It looks like going back to the beginning, back to God's garden, he says. Only one problem. It's not where God showed and promised this family that his blessing would be, is it?

Here they are standing in the heart of the land of Canaan and Lot's looking way over there across the border somewhere else and he's saying that's where God's place is.

And so, in Lot's eyes, the land that God hasn't promised somehow looks much more promising. blessing. But what else does it look like?

Second impression, the land of the Lord. Now, the land of Egypt. So, weirdly, God's place of blessing also looks a lot like the place God has just rescued this family out of.

Now, that's important because remember those original hearers of this book of Genesis. Genesis. They, too, looked in the rearview mirror and saw behind them a better country than the one that

God had promised them, didn't they?

[17:09] You brought us out into the desert to die, they said. Back in Egypt, we had everything that we needed. We had cucumbers. That's their comparison.

Now, was that true? Is that really what they saw and touched and tasted back in the land of Egypt? Of course it wasn't. They were slaves and yet they decided that what they had seen, what they had touched in front of them was better, more secure, more trustworthy than something that God had promised them that they hadn't seen yet.

But they were so wrong and so was Lot. What he saw with his eyes looked to him like the place of God's blessing. But Genesis gives us a knowing look, doesn't it?

The end of verse 10, see, as if to say, but you know what's coming, don't you? This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, the cities of that valley.

Lot chose to live for what he could see in front of him, so he went and lived in the cities of that plain. He pitched his tents near Sodom and, reader, is that really such a good idea?

[18:28] Genesis tells us it wasn't even at the time, verse 13, now the people of Sodom were wicked and sinning greatly against the Lord. It looked brilliant from the outside, but inside it was rotten to the core.

Friends, we know what's coming in the story, don't we? Sodom and Gomorrah are cursed by God, wiped off the map for their sin, but Lot couldn't see anything there but beauty and blessing and life. That's where I'll build my life, he says. That's where I'll take my family. That's where I'll build my future in the city I can see.

And this morning, friends, Genesis is inviting us to see what Lot couldn't see, which is that choosing where to build your life based on only what you can see and touch is not safe.

The house that looks like your forever family home. It's got space for everyone. It's near an amazing school. It's in a beautiful location.

[19:41] But it's so far from church that getting there is going to be a real stretch on a Sunday. Really getting to know people. Really being part of the life of a church family.

A real struggle. The guy, the girl, he looks really cute. You get on really well.

There's chemistry. You feel like you're falling in love. He, she could be the one. But she's not a Christian. And Christ is not at the center of that relationship.

And to be honest, you are less and less of a Christian around her. That family, those kids, their clubs, their school, their house, the parents, they look like the perfect family.

What do I have to do to be like that, like that family, for my kids to be like those kids? Good job, good money, nice clothes, nice house, correct opinions.

[20:47] But all the while, the family, the kids, are learning what to love and to live for, what the rest of the world loves and lives for. Comfort, privacy, freedom.

freedom. Friends, where in our lives are we trusting our eyes to show us where God's blessing is? In what ways do we look around at our world today and say, the garden of the Lord, the garden of the Lord?

You said last time, this in some ways is the test for our faith. Because the Bible says the opposite of living by faith is not living by atheism, it's living by sight.

And I think that is a big challenge for Christians today. We live in a secular society far from God that seems to offer all that we could ever desire.

The internet is a vast shop window, isn't it, onto all that the world might offer us. What do we use it to look at? catch yourself daydreaming.

[22:00] What do we see in our mind's eye to fantasize about, to dream for our lives? Brothers and sisters, Lot lifted up his eyes and saw a lifestyle that was far from God and his promise.

But to him, it looked just like what he pictured the blessed life to be. But his eyes were lying to him, weren't they? Because it wasn't God's blessing he would find there, but God's curse.

Friends, knowing what we know, would you have made the same decision as Lot? Knowing that that world was shortly to be judged and to have actual hellfire and brimstone rain down upon it, would you still have chosen to live there?

I hope not. So then, why would we build our lives, plan our futures based on what we can see here and now in this world, which is soon to be judged, which will soon dissolve as the king approaches?

Why would we found our lives here and now rather than on what God has promised us forever?

Why would we move out of the center of God's will to have something that we know is not going to

last into eternity?

[23 : 23] Like the Israelites, we can find ourselves gazing into the rear view mirror, looking around, wondering what life would have been like if we'd stayed in the world, what choices would have been open to us, what life could have been like.

But brothers and sisters, Lot teaches us that we cannot trust our senses to lead us to real blessing. because inside the city we can see is a world of sin that is waiting for God's curse.

So how then does God want us to live, to choose, to plan our lives? This brings us to our final point this morning, the real view, the real view.

We live in a culture that's geared to vision. Everything is wanting to catch our eyes. But it was Martin Luther who said that the ears are the only organ of the Christian.

We live by not what we see in the world, but by what we hear in God's word. And that's how Abram chose. He left it up to God, remember.

[24 : 34] And now in verse 14, God tells him what he has gained for his faith. The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had parted from him, look around from where you are.

To the north, to the south, to the east, to the west. All the land that you see, I will give to you and to your offspring forever. Genesis is drawing a contrast.

You see it. God says, look around. Lift up your eyes. See. It's the same phrase we saw in verse 10. But this time, what's the difference?

The Lord is inviting Abram to lift up his eyes and see what? A land that is not yet his. In other words, a promised land.

A city that he could not yet see. Look, says God, at what I've promised to give you. And what's it like? What's it like?

[25 : 33] Tell me what it's like. We can't see it. It's amazing, isn't it? Contrast. The very thick description that we got of the land that Lot chose, we're told nothing about what this land that God has promised looks like, are we?

We can't see it. We're not given a viewing. But God has promised it. And so it is God's place of blessing. And yet, that was as unseeable there and then as God's promises in verse 16, I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, he says.

What could Abram see? He could see himself and his wife, an elderly couple unable to have children. And God was promising him that his children would fill the earth like the dust.

Abram counted this promise as more sure, more trustworthy than what his eyes told him. God invites him to view by faith what he has promised.

And so Abram does. And brothers and sisters, that is a far more firm basis to build our lives, our families, our futures on.

[26 : 53] Where God has promised his blessing, that is surely where we must build, even though right now we cannot see it yet in full. We have to be prepared when we wake up tomorrow, when you go into work and rub shoulders with your colleagues, or around the family dinner table, or with your friends, that that choice will seem absolutely ridiculous.

You're seeing as believing, isn't it? Why deny what you feel? But the Bible tells us that the choice that Abram and Lot had to make back then is the same choice that you and I have to make every day because it is a choice between this world and the next world, living for this fallen world here or now, or for a new creation that God has promised.

You read earlier in Hebrews 11 that Abram made his home in the promised land like a stranger living in a tent because he was looking to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God, chose to settle his hope in what he couldn't see, what he couldn't touch, what he couldn't taste because he considered God's promise more trustworthy, more real than what he could see and touch and taste.

And so he didn't look around and say, I see a blessing over there. He didn't look behind him and say, I missed the blessing where I came from. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, says Hebrews, they would have had the opportunity to go back.

But instead, they were looking for a better country, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

[28 : 54] He chose to live for a city, a home, a future, a destiny he could not yet see because he believed God's promise that that would be where God would give his blessing.

And brothers and sisters, we live by faith today in the very same thing. What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, what no human mind has conceived, the things God has prepared for those who love him.

Friends, does the promise of eternal life in a new heavens and a new earth mean more to us than anything that this world here and now could offer?

Is that what fills our vision for life? There was a pastor back in the 1600s called Richard Baxter, and he had a strange habit.

He would walk around a field for half an hour every day, picturing himself in heaven. He would turn over in his mind, in his heart, the promises of God for eternity, what that would mean for him.

[30 : 11] And I'm not saying we have to all be like that, okay? But I don't think we do anything like that nearly as much as we should. We think we risk being too heavenly minded, don't we?

But there has hardly been a time in history when Christians have been less heavenly minded than me and you are today. And as we close, I want you then to fix your eyes, fix your heart, fix your mind on the city you cannot see.

Fix your eyes on eternity. Build your life on Christ. He is the yes to all God's promises. And he is the heart of that promised land.

Though you have not seen him, says Peter, you love him. And even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

We fix our hope on him, don't we? Because one day we will see him. Now we see as in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. We sang about that day earlier, didn't we?

[31 : 21] What will we see on that day? The bride eyes not her garment, but her dear bridegroom's face. I will not gaze at glory, but on my king of grace, not on the crown he gives me, but on his pierced hand.

The lamb has all the glory in Emmanuel's land. Friends, that is the real view. That is the real view.

That is the view that we live for, the view that we long for. That is where we must build our lives today. Live for the city, live for the world, live for the king who lives forever.

Live for that which you cannot yet see because God has promised it will be yours forever. It will be yours if your hope is fixed immovably, unshakably on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray for that together now. Let's pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[32 : 39] Heavenly Father, we thank you that not one promise of your word has fallen to the ground. How we thank you for your faithfulness, for the firmness of your word, that you are trustworthy through and through.

Father, we want to ask your forgiveness and we are sorry for when we count the promise of this world as greater than the promise of your word.

Father, we pray that you would grant us faith to live for what we can't see. Lord Jesus, we thank you that you are a sympathetic high priest, that you know what it is to trust in a God that is unseen.

You know what it is to hold on to promises that are not yet. Lord Jesus, we thank you that by your spirit you strengthen our faith. We confess that we believe and pray you would help our unbelief.

Help us to press on, we pray, for we ask in your name. Amen.