

Part 14: Room for Growth

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How do we assess growth? It's important to know what it means to grow for your own heart because our digital world presents growth as it sees fit. LinkedIn promotes growth as new titles, roles, and salaries. On Instagram it's new places, new products and new followers. On our fitness apps it's more weight added to the bar, and less weight recorded on the scale.

These metrics are helpful, they are clear, and generally speaking they are desirable. But for anyone who lives in the real world, we know growth is rarely a straight line. We often find ourselves frustrated because we aren't meeting the standards of growth we'd want. Kids, maybe you've looked around and noticed your friends getting taller but you're not. Some of you might feel trapped at a dead end job, no room for advancement and wondering if you need to go somewhere else. Young adults are often burdened by watching others tick off the growth chart of adulthood—stable job, marriage, kids, home—and you wonder when you'll ever grow up into maturity.

Now take the Christian. We know that we've been saved by grace so that through faith we might be conformed to look more and more like Jesus. And yet, years go by, sin remains, we feel stuck, and we wonder if we've even grown at all. What kind of growth are we promised in Christ?

Well, Genesis 12 reminds us that Abram was promised growth, and growth abundantly. God would take him out of his old life, and lead him into a land of promise. There, God would bless him and protect him. There his barren wife would conceive and they'd be parents of a new nation. There, God would make Abram into a blessing to the whole world.

That's a good plan for growth. In Genesis 12, Abram made it to the place of promise, he was in the land. But then he left it because he doubted God's promise. He looked for growth elsewhere, and everything fell apart. Our passage today begins with Abram right back where he started, back in the land after his shameful and foolish choices. To the untrained eye, nothing has changed: the land still seems unable to provide for him, his wife is still barren, he still lives like a nomad, and the promise of God is not visible to the naked eye. But while the circumstances didn't change—Abram's growth is on display as he faces the same problems with a new perspective.

That's why the title of our sermon this morning is, "Room for Growth." When we learn to see where God puts our power for growth, we can find hope for change even when it seems nothing changes.

Our main point is this: **Christians grow by trusting the promises of God.** Growth is rarely a straight line but Christian growth is by grace through faith. And we will see this growth in three ways today. First, we will see **Growth in Repentance**, then **Growth in Generosity**, and lastly **Growth in Confidence**.

If you weren't with us last week, Abram took the slip-n-slide of sin and ended up shipwrecked in Egypt. He lost the land, lost his wife, and earned the wrath of Pharaoh. But the Lord who made the promise stepped in and through the mouth of Pharaoh sent Abram back to Canaan.

God saved Abram, and God saves all who are stuck in sin. But when God saves someone from their sin, it produces a result in the one who has been saved. It was the same God who called Abram to “go” into the Land of Promise who worked in Egypt to call Abram to get up and “go” out of sin and back to safety.

The promise of God always calls us into his mercy and out of our sinfulness. This is what Christians call repentance. And if you’ve ever wondered what that looks like, Abram’s actions and affections are an illustration of what godly repentance looks like: **Genesis 13:1-4**, “So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb. Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. And he journeyed on from the Negeb 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. And there Abram called upon the name of the Lord.”

God sent, and Abram went. God worked, Abram walked. God redeemed, Abram returned. It was not Abram’s return to the Promised Land that saved him, but Abram returned to the Promised Land because he was saved.

This is the first glimpse of Abram’s growth, and the most sustainable place of growth any Christian will experience. This is **Growth in Repentance**.

For most of us, we would do anything to avoid admitting we made a mistake. We are smart people, we think things through we want to go forward not backwards. But Moses wants us to make no mistake, that Abram made a mistake. Abram didn’t just go back to the Negeb, which is what he left to go to Egypt. He went back to where his tent was “at the beginning” (vs. 3), to the place he “made an altar at the first” (vs. 4). The author wants us to see that Abram is right back where he started.

For many of us, the last place we want to be after a mistake is the place we first were before the mistake. We only like the idea in science fiction. We use phrases like, “If I could do it over again,” as if we have a time machine that erased the reality of our sinful choices. But Abram didn’t have a time machine, he didn’t go back without the baggage of his mistakes—he went back with the reality of his mistakes.

We don’t like this reality because it feels like we’re going backwards. Maybe we are just frustrated with the time we wasted in our own hearts and we have to wrestle with our internal shame. Or maybe, Abram felt the keen eyes of his Canaanite neighbors who so quickly saw him return. “Back so soon,” they snicker from across the valley.

There’s a million reasons for why we wouldn’t want to be back at the start—and yet that’s exactly where Abram went. But it’s not just his physical location that we are drawn to—it’s the posture of his heart.

The first thing he did when he returned was to go to the altar he built at first, and called out in worship to the God whose promise he didn’t trust. He didn’t come back and begin trying to prove himself to God by making pledges of how he’d never make a mistake again. He didn’t deny himself food and sit in the hot sun in order to inflict a sort of self-punishment. He didn’t come back to the land and start living in hopes that God would see him and be pleased and they’d never have to have that awkward conversation about what went wrong.

He got back and he threw himself in worship towards the God who made the promise. That's true growth. This is how we would grow as Christians. Our most visible growth comes from the soil of godly repentance.

This means we return to the cross when we've wandered far from it. It means that when we arrive at the cross of Jesus we don't come with a list of self-inflicted punishments or desperate pledges. We come with a heart humbled by our failings and filled with worship at the God who never fails us. Repentance doesn't trust in our ability to return, but it trusts in the promise we return to. And there's no promise better than Jesus.

All of us will make mistakes. Some of our mistakes come with a penalty. If you don't return your library book—you receive a fine. If you get caught speeding, you pay a ticket. If you murder someone, you go to prison. The Bible has a word for those mistakes, and it's called sin. And our sin comes with penalties too—but it's penalties you can't work your way out of. It's a penalty against the God who we've all rejected but it's a penalty that his Son came to bear on the cross for all who hope in him, and all who return, and return, and return again to him.

Those who refuse to admit their mistakes will never return to the cross. They'll never find relief. But the cross stands as a refuge. The promise of God is worth nothing to those who never left, but it's everything for those who always return.

How do you view that long road back to the Lord? Do you hate it? Do you feel the whole way back like the prodigal son did—constantly rehearsing the profession of sin and being willing to punish yourself in hopes that God will accept you? Do you refuse to repent? Are you consigned to a life of never admitting your wrong before others? Will you fight and scratch in order to do anything but repent or admit you were wrong? Will you avoid people, and avoid God in hopes that he might forget about it, or find some other soul to bless? Does going back in repentance feel like a step backwards?

Repentance is a step backwards in a very real sense. It's leaving and turning away from the very place we once thought we needed to be. C.S. Lewis says it this way, "Now repentance is no fun at all. It is something much harder than merely eating humble pie. It means unlearning all the self-conceit and self-will that we have been training ourselves into for thousands of years. It means killing part of yourself, undergoing a kind of death."

And yet, as he continues, it is the surest way forward, "We all want progress. But progress means getting nearer to the place where you want to be. And if you have taken a wrong turning, then to go forward does not get you any nearer. If you are on the wrong road, progress means doing and about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man."

Yes, you should want to sin less. But God has so chosen in his infinite wisdom to bring us the growth forward by first growing us backwards. The author of Hebrews reminds believers that the Lord knows your heart. He knew Abram's faithlessness before he even spoke to Sarai. He knows your sin and your weakness before you even make it back to Bethel. And because of that, and because of the work Jesus did to save us from our sin, this is what is afforded to us in repentance: **Hebrews 4:16**, "Let us with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."

Repentance is where we grow because repentance is a sign of growth. Why? Because repentance takes God at his word. That his kindness is meant to lead us to repentance. That it's through seeing our need and Jesus' power that we draw life and growth. I wonder how many of us are stunted in our growth in following Jesus, perhaps even stunted in our growth of seeing Jesus, because we refuse to grow in repentance? But growing Christians repent. We don't look for opportunities to sin. That's obvious. But we are always looking for opportunities to repent. For there God helps us and changes us through Jesus.

Growth in repentance means we always come back to the same place of grace, but we never come back the same. We've learned of our need for grace, and we've been strengthened by God's mercy to grant it in his promise.

We see this change most notably in Abram in what comes next: **Genesis 13:4-7**, "And Lot, who went with Abram, 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 that they could not dwell together, and there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were dwelling in the land.

In God's great kindness, Pharaoh sent Abram and his nephew Lot back to Canaan with more than they had when they arrived. But it was also this abundance which provided another opportunity for growth.

The Negeb, in the southern portion of Canaan, was a dry and arid place. What good farmland and watering holes were to be had, were occupied by the already settled Canaanites and Perizzites. The land was hard for one man's flocks—let alone two men with a growing amount of agricultural needs. The buffet wasn't big enough for the both of them.

But here, the trust in the promise that led Abram to worship is now a trust that allowed him to hold his worldly possessions loosely in order to cling to the promise of God. This is our second point: **Growth in Generosity**.

Here's what happened next: **Genesis 13:8-9**, "Then Abram 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.""

The fruitfulness of the land didn't change, but Abram's faith did. Abram once feared that the land wouldn't provide for him and he made a decision to leave it. Now, he's right back where he was, the land seemed limited and there was a pressing tension between him and Lot.

And someone who has been touched by grace, typically sees things differently. Abram no longer feared what wasn't there—but he saw rightly what was there: strife. He said, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsman and my herdsman, for we are kinsmen."

That Hebrew word of "kinsmen" is literally, "men brothers." Abram realized what they shared relationally was of greater importance than shared real estate. The problem wasn't the land, the problem was the strife. And here's how faith changes us.

Abram opened up the land. He gave Lot first dibs. Kids, do you know the horror that comes when you get to let your sibling pick the first cookie? Spouses know the subtle fear that sneaks over us when we say to our spouse, “Whatever you want sweetie.” We fear those moments because we are worried that they will take what we want. We either make empty offers, or we make no offers at all.

But if Abram’s selfishness is what got him into Egypt, he has realized that his selfishness is not going to be what keeps the spoils of Egypt. So he relinquishes the right to choose. When we realize we have the right to the promise of God by the grace of repentance—it gives us the ability to surrender our rights in other places.

Abram was the one who received the promise. Especially in this culture, Abram would have had first dibs. He had the right to the better land. But he surrendered it because he trusted the promise. Why? Because he knew Lot couldn’t take up more than what God had promised.

Lot, on the other hand, models the alternative. He lifted up his eyes and he saw a place that was as rich as the garden of Eden, just like Egypt they left. And Moses gives us a little aside that reveals his heart, “So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley.”

Lot could only see his own gain, which meant he could only look at life through his own eyes. He saw land that looked like Eden but forgot that not even Eden kept Adam and Eve from sinning. He saw fields more ripe with crop than Egypt, but he forgot that Egypt’s bounty was once his problem.

And if you were paying attention, Moses twice warned us in this passage that while the land looked ripe for crops—it was also near cities that were full of wickedness.

After Eden, after Egypt, Lot still saw the greatest barrier to growth as worldly needs. But to be close to sin is to be far from growth. As we will see, sin makes great billboards but it’s a terrible bunk-mate.

Lot’s eye drew him further to the edge of the land of promise and into the orbit of other nations because Lot trusted more in what his eyes saw than what the Lord said.

But Abram saw the promise and knew what he needed and it produced a unique generosity towards Lot. Before the promise produced the first crop in Canaan, it was already producing the fruit of generosity in Abram.

The riches of grace made Abram “magnanimous.” That’s the word I ran into all over in my commentary readings. To be magnanimous means to be “elevated in soul or sentiment; brave, noble, honorable, and unselfish.”

Abram wasn’t in himself any of these things—but the promise Abram hoped in, and the God who stood behind it, was all of these things.

Brothers and sisters, the most visible growth you’ll show in the gospel towards God is the humble road of repentance. But the most visible growth you’ll show others is the magnanimity that stems from a soul brimming over with grace—a soul that gives what it can’t keep on its own in order to enjoy what it cannot possess on its own. Those bound up in the promises of God are most loose with the possessions of man.

The nearer our walk with God, the nearer we are to what we need, and the further from us is a heart of stinginess for what we don't need. Abram had the promise of the Promised Land—and that led him to be generous even before he enjoyed the first crop of Canaan.

The Puritan William Secker once said, “The hope of living long on earth should not make you covetous, but the prospect of living long in heaven should make you [generous].”

When our eyes are set on all the promise that is for us in Jesus—we can give away for the sake of others all that isn't Jesus. We can lay down our rights, and our comforts. We can surrender our free time and our preferences because we've learned that where God is, there is the land of plenty. The promise of God gives us plenty of room for growth in generosity.

And yet, as we grow in repentance of the sins that we do have, and are generous to the point where we come to grips with what we don't have—we can find ourselves wondering what in the world we do have.

And yet as Lot looked up for himself on the riches of the world which will lead him into danger—the Lord sees the growth of Abram and directs his eyes once more to the promise. Here's our final point this morning: **Growth in Confidence.**

Read with me **Genesis 13:14-18**, “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.”

When we look with our own eyes—we are often led astray. But growth in the promise of God learns to look where God directs our eyes. If you remember, vision, seeing and sight are big themes in the book of Genesis. Genesis 1 began by showing us all that God saw as good, but from Genesis 3 onward all of that was lost when our eyes were drawn to what the serpent said was good.

So moments like this, where God directs our gaze, are important. Because while Lot saw a land as rich as Eden—Abram saw the promise even greater than Eden.

There will be times when, by faith in God's promise, we do look out at the nothingness that we still live in. We might be free of tension with Lot, and yet there's still a bunch of livestock who need water, there's still Canaanites at the wells, and despite the promise of a child, there's still no child for us.

But when the promise of God is far from us in its fulfillment—God often draws the nearest to us for our enjoyment. Here, God draws near again and speaks to Abram reminding him that though he might feel alone, though his regained trust in God's promise might look like he's back where he started—this was where he needed to be. I love how the Lord puts it in Isaiah 42:16, “These are the things I do, and I do not forsake them.”

When the promises of the world are far off the God of promise draws most near and reaffirms our hope.

He said, “Look around. Any direction. This is the land. This is the land I’ll give to your offspring. That child of promise—it will be his. And all who are in him will number multitude upon multitude, and they will enjoy this promise forever.”

And then the Lord told him to go, walk through the land. And Abram obeyed, and as he sojourned in a land that was occupied with problems—his heart was again occupied with worship.

Abram is right back where he started. And yet everything was different. He learned to trust God, and he learned that God is able to keep what he promised.

Now, remember, two men and their moderate sized families just seemed to exhaust the land.

But here, God says to Abram my promise land will be able to contain more people than dust on the earth. I did some AI research. If you estimated on the large end, one 12 ounce can of soda could fit 1.26 billion specks of dust. Kids, do you know how big that number is? If you want to know how long it takes to count to 1.26 billion—if you counted each number out loud it would take you over 100 years.

Next time you drink a can of soda I want you to think, “that’s a big promise.” Now how would it work to have a promise that big? How can so many people fit in it? Because Abram’s promise rested beyond the mere land of promise.

Remember how Paul put this in, **Galatians 3:7-9**, “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed.” So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”

Brothers and sisters, how do you know you’ve got a promise with room to grow? You’ve got the power of this very promise if you’ve been hidden in Christ. So come and grow. Abram was wise and gracious to send Lot away. But Jesus as our greater Abraham has a promise so big that he will not send any away.

Jesus shares with us himself, the very promise of God. For all who come to him, he will in no way cast out. Here is the land of plenty—in Jesus Christ. Here is the promise of mercy which leads us to repentance. Here are riches that we cannot out give. And here is a confidence that we are on the right track, even when it seems we are just back at the beginning.