

## **Genesis 12:10-20: “The Struggle to Walk by Faith”<sup>1</sup>**

**By Rev. Brian T. Cochran**

### **Introduction**

Well last week we saw how God is faithful to his promises to his people. We saw this in that he preserved Shem's line all the way down to Abram, the one who would be blessed by God and be a blessing to all the nations. In spite of the rebellion at Babel and the dispersion of the nations, God graciously chose to call Abram out of the world so that he might continue his redemptive plan to unite one people under his great name. And we saw how even though it was a simple call, it was a very difficult call for Abram. You'll remember that Abram was in his seventies, and God asked him to leave his country, his people, and his family and to go to an unknown land. But even though this would be a very difficult call to obey, God promised Abram: *“I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”* (Gen. 12:2-3). So Abram responded to these promise in faith and obeyed God's call. He went to the land of Canaan where he began to build altars to the LORD and worship him as a pilgrim in the land. And so, we were left last week with a picture of Abram's remarkable faith and obedience, one that challenged us to have faith in God's promises and to live thankful lives as well. But this week we get to see a different side of Abram. We get to see that as great as he was last week, he's not much different from you in me in that he struggles to continually walk by faith and trust God's promises. And so, notice with me our theme:

### **Theme: The Struggle to Walk by Faith**

- 1. Abram's Failure**
- 2. God's Faithfulness**

### **1. Abram's Failure**

Our story begins with v. 10 where we read: *Now there was a famine in the land.* So here is Abram and he has just arrived in the promised land and immediately his faith is put to the test. God promised him a land and a people. And not only is Sarai barren, but now the land is barren as well. No doubt this would have been a great test for Abram's faith. He has God's promises, and yet what he sees is a land that can't support him and his family. And so, what is he to do? Well he does the most natural thing one could do. He starts looking around for a place where HE can provide for his family. We go on to read in v. 10: *So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.* It's stressed that the famine is real. And so, it's not just that he's tired of eating the same old meal for dinner, it's that he and his family are really starting to go hungry. And the future is uncertain. But he sees that there is food in Egypt and so he figures Egypt is his only certainty of survival.

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But what is wrong with this picture? What is Abram forgetting? He's forgetting God's promises. It's not that it's such a bad idea to go to Egypt to get food for his family. Later in Genesis when there is a famine in the land, God will provide for Jacob and his family in Egypt through Joshua. But here, Abram is pictured as having no regard for God's promises as they aren't even mentioned. You see, he hasn't denied God, he's just forgotten about Him. It seems as though he has bought into the philosophy that "God helps those who help themselves." And often it's the case in the Old Testament that going down to Egypt is the alternative to trusting in the LORD, and we see that here. He doesn't call on the name of the LORD. Abram's not really walking by faith in God's promises here. Rather, he is walking by sight. He sees that the grass is greener in Egypt and so he turns his back on the promised land, at least temporarily, and heads south to Egypt. No doubt it was a natural choice, but not a wise one. Because immediately God's whole promise is placed in jeopardy. Remember, God promised him not only a land but also a people. And through his offspring all the nations would be blessed. But Abram put's these promises in jeopardy not only by leaving the land of promise but by his plan when he gets to Egypt.

Notice his plan in v. 11 and following: *"When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, 'I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.'"*

So Abram, is worried about being killed when he gets to Egypt because his wife is beautiful and surely the Egyptians will want her as a wife (i.e. his philosophy is "better defiled than dead"). Now, you may be wondering about Sarai's beauty because she is sixty five at this point in her life. And so, you may be thinking would the Egyptians really find her so attractive? But we have to remember at least two things here. First: the standards of beauty in the Ancient Near East are not necessarily the same standards that we have today. And secondly: remember that the patriarch's and their wives had a longer lifespan than we do today. Sarai lives to be 127 years old. And so, she may have been more like the equivalent of a thirty or forty year old woman today.

Either way, Abram is greatly worried about this. And so, his plan is to be deceptive by telling a half-truth about his wife. It was true that Sarai was Abram's half-sister as we find out later in Gen. 20:12, but he's not being completely honest here. But once again this seems to be the natural choice according to human wisdom. His fears are not completely unfounded as it was common in those days for men to take wives, especially evil rulers, even as we saw with the "sons of God" in Genesis 6. Later, even King David would commit such an evil act when he sinned with Bathsheba and disposed of her husband. And so, he has good reason to be afraid. And even though it appears that he is willing to give up his wife in order to save his own skin, it may just be that he sees it as a way to stall so that they both can escape later. Remember that Laban, who was the brother of Leah and Rachel, was pretty good at stalling when it came to giving his sisters in marriage, so that Jacob would end up working for him for 14 years. And so, it may be that he is totally selfish here, or that he has a plan for him and Sarai to escape later.

Either way, once again, Abram is forgetting that the God whom he served was greater than his problems. God didn't need Abram to help him fulfill his promises. God said: *"I WILL make of you a great nation, and I WILL bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I WILL bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I WILL curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* And then when Abram arrived at the promised land God said: *"To your offspring I WILL give this land."* So God never mentioned to Abram, "I'll do my part if you'll do yours." He simply said, "this is what I am going to do. Now, just trust me, and you'll see me do even the impossible for you, in order to keep my Word" because nothing is impossible with God and nothing can ultimately thwart his promises.

Now how does this relate to you and me today? Well, it's obvious isn't it? According to the New Testament those who have faith in Christ, are children of Abraham and are heirs according to the same promises (Galatians 3). Only we have even greater reason to trust God. Abram saw these promises in seed form but we have received the promises in full flower. We see the big picture of Christ's incarnation, his life, his death, his resurrection, his ascension and his future return. And so we rejoice in the following promises of God in Christ:

*Eph. 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,*

*Rom. 8:31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*

*1Pet. 1:3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, 5 who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.*

We have such sweet and precious promises in God's Word. In Jesus Christ, all of the promises of God are "Yes" and "Amen". And yet, like Abram, we so easily struggle to walk by faith, and we walk by sight instead. What is it in your life right now that is causing you to doubt or forget God's promises? Is it something at work that is troubling you, perhaps a co-worker that gets on your nerves, perhaps your computer crashed and you lost a bunch of files, perhaps your boss is always so negative. Or is it family drama? Perhaps your parents are domineering, perhaps your children are so rebellious, perhaps your brother or sister always teases you. Or is it that you are single and are struggling with loneliness? The list could go on and on. What is it right now that you are struggling with? We all go through trials in the Christian life. And when we go through trials like this it tests our faith. And we tend to go into survival mode (what am I going to do to get myself out of this mess?) before we cast all of our anxieties upon the Lord in prayer and trust in his promises by faith. But God allows us to go through trials for a good purpose. It's not that

we are to view these things as good circumstances in and of themselves, but that we are to trust that God has a *good purpose* behind all of our trials. This is what God's Word teaches us:

*James 1:2 Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

*Rom. 5:3 More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, 4 and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, 5 and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.*

You see trials mature us in the faith. They cause us to come to the end of ourselves and to trust God and to look to Him alone for grace. They wean us from putting our trust in idols, whether it be our own strength, money, sex, power, you name it. God brings us through trials so that we might give up on our idols, trust in him alone for joy and peace, and it increases our hope of heaven.

And so, in the midst of the trials of your life, you need to cling to God's promises by faith and cast all of your anxieties upon him because he cares for you. Jesus encourages us in Matthew 6 that God cares for us as a Father cares for his children. And so, we need not be anxious about our life ultimately. Paul tells us in Rom. 8: "28 *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. . .31 What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? 32 He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? . . .38 For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, 39 nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

Beloved, you can trust your heavenly Father, that behind a frowning providence, he hides a smiling face. That doesn't mean it's easy. In Psalm 66 the Psalmist records: *10 For you, O God, have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried. 11 You brought us into the net; you laid a crushing burden on our backs; 12 you let men ride over our heads; we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.* And so, trust that God is always with you in trials and is for you in Christ. He has brought you to a place of abundance in Christ and one day you will no longer walk by faith but will walk by sight in the new heavens and new earth. God is always faithful to his promises. And we see God's Faithfulness in our text:

## **2. God's Faithfulness**

Abram carries out his plan as we go on to read, but what happens is not what he had expected. He probably figured that just some joe schmoe Egyptian would want Sarai as a wife. But we read: "14 *When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. 15 And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was*

*taken into Pharaoh's house.*” WHOA! So Pharaoh ends up taking Sarai into his house to be a part of his harem. This is not what Abram had planned. No way can he expect to negotiate and stall with Pharaoh himself and later escape with Sarai. Sarai is now destined to live as one of Pharaoh's many wives and to be buried in Egypt as a mummy. Abram's plan was NOT A-Team caliber. He wouldn't be able to say like Hannibal, “I love it when a plan comes together.” Rather, this was a disaster. And Sarai is probably sitting in Pharaoh's palace thinking, “Great plan honey! Now what!”

However, besides this unexpected tragedy, he unexpectedly prospers. Because he just gave up his sister to the Pharaoh and the Pharaoh is so pleased, Abram becomes rich: “*16 And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.*” Now, female donkeys and camels might not seem all that great to us today, other than at the zoo, but as one commentator notes, “female donkeys were far more controllable and dependable for riding and therefore the ride of choice for the rich. . . the camels (note the plural) had just been introduced as domesticated animals and were a rarity. . . prestige symbols for show by the rich, not for utility.” And so, this commentator notes that, in modern terms it's as if he's given multiple BMW's in the female donkeys and multiple Ferrari's in the camels, and this on top of all the food and male and female servants!<sup>2</sup>

So in spite of Abram's lack of trust and deceitfulness he's inundated with these luxurious gifts, while Sarai is probably freaking out as she hangs out with Pharaoh's harem. And as great as these gifts were, they would only be a reminder to Abram of the loss of his wife and they would pale in comparison to the eternal blessings that God had promised him.

But the good news for Abram is that God wasn't about to let his promises go unfulfilled right after calling Abram. And so, he sovereignly and graciously intervenes to save Abram from his faithlessness and the mess that he has got himself into. We read in v. 17: “*But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.*” So much for being a blessing to the nations! Because of Abram's failure to trust God's promises he ends up bringing a plague on Pharaoh and his household (literally a skin disease).

Now at this point in the narrative you should start to notice that there are a lot of similarities here with Israel. Remember that later in Genesis it will be because of a famine that Jacob and his twelve sons and their family all end up in Egypt. And even though it's good at first, eventually they'll be stuck in Egypt, afflicted by the Egyptians. But God will plague the Egyptians with the 10 plagues. The Egyptians then let them go with great wealth and so they travel back to the land and eventually make it back and worship the LORD in the promised land. All of these things Abram goes through here. And not only does he go through it here, he's going to go through it again (Gen. 20) and Isaac his son will go through the same experience as well (Gen. 26). All of this foreshadows the Exodus account. In the Bible God's people are constantly learning to trust God and that God is faithful to his promises to save and preserve his people and his promised

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<sup>2</sup> R. Kent Hughes, *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 193.

land. And the Israelites would have received great comfort from these accounts of the patriarchs. They would have seen that God is faithful to His promises in every generation.

One difference however in this story is that unlike the Pharaoh that Moses faces, this Pharaoh quickly realizes what is going on and releases his captive after one plague. Abram doesn't even have to tell him, "Let my Sarai go!" God simply sends a plague and Pharaoh is ready to let her go immediately. In fact, he rebukes Abram: *"18 So Pharaoh called Abram and said, 'What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? 19 Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go.'*" Literally he says in four Hebrew words, "here. . .wife. . .take. . .go" (virtually the same words that the Pharaoh will say to Moses, Ex. 12:31-32). The abruptness expresses his anger and frustration. And Abram's silence in the matter indicates that he knows that he is guilty.

And so, we read in v. 20: *"Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had."* It's really remarkable that he didn't just kill Abram for wronging him. This would have easily been worthy of death in those days. But Pharaoh knows, that God is with Abram, and so in spite of Abram's lack of trust, in spite of his deceitfulness, in spite of him putting the whole plan of God in jeopardy, he is able to leave Egypt alive, with his wife and with a bounty of luxurious goods. In fact he goes from severe famine in Genesis 12:10 to severe riches in Genesis 13:2 (the same Hebrew word is used to describe each situation, highlighting the reversal of his circumstances).

Beloved, do you not see how AMAZING God's grace is to Abram? Is this not a perfect picture of 2 Tim. 2:13?: *"if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself."* Now that shouldn't lead us to test God and to have a sinful attitude that says, "well, I can do whatever I want, because God will bless me regardless." That's not the point of this story. In fact, it's worth noting that Abram's new found wealth will bring more drama to his life later. We'll see this first in the drama with Lot's herdsmen and then later with the Egyptian Hagar, whom he most likely acquired here. And so, we shouldn't test God and think it's ok then to just live however we want. Rather, it's his kindness that is meant to lead us to repentance and to a greater amount of trust in Him.

And doesn't the faithfulness of God in spite of your sins and failures comfort you? It comforts me to know that even when I screw up royally, God will not abandon his promises to me in Christ. I can continue to trust God and walk by faith. The only thing that causes us to worry and fear in this life is when we start to doubt or forget God's promises and to walk by sight. But beloved, NOTHING will ever separate you from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our LORD. Your God is a promise-keeping God. He made a promise in Genesis 3:15 that the seed of the woman would one day crush the serpents head. He made promises to Abram that he would bless him and give him a people and a land. And he made promises to you in Christ that he would never leave you nor forsake you. And he is always faithful to his promises.

And you can be sure of that because of Jesus. Jesus is the one who perfectly trusted his Father's will. He too went down to Egypt when Herod tried to kill him so that the prophesy would be fulfilled "our of Egypt I have called my Son" (Matt. 2:7-15). And he is the perfect servant of the LORD who always trusted his Father's will. When he was hungry for forty days in the wilderness, and Satan tempted him to forsake his Father's will and to take short cuts to glory, he resisted by trusting and obeying God's Word (Matt. 4:1-11). Instead of turning stones into bread he said, "*man does not live by bread alone but by every Word that proceeds from the mouth of God.*" Later he said, "*My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work*" (John 4:34). And yet, it wasn't easy for him. He didn't just face hunger. He faced rejection and ridicule, he faced sorrow and grief, he would be mocked and tortured and ultimately die on a cross as a criminal and suffer the wrath of God, even though he was innocent and without sin. But he continued to trust his Father through it all. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 2: "22 *He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.*"

And he did it, so that if you have faith in his person and work you might be forgiven for all the times that you and I have failed to trust God's promises and have gone ahead in sinful survival mode. And because of his life, death and resurrection, you are now viewed by God in Christ as one who has always trusted and obeyed. And therefore, he will never leave you nor forsake you. He forsook his only begotten Son on the cross and purchased you as his adopted child so that he will never forsake you. And just as he raised Christ from the dead, so too will he raise you and me on the last day when Christ returns in glory to deliver us from all of our trials and tribulations!

### **Conclusion**

What are we to do in the mean time? We are to look to Jesus and trust God's promises to us in Christ. We are to walk by faith and not by sight. We are to walk in hope. And we are to walk in love towards God and each other because of the love that he has shown us in Christ. We've gone from severe famine to severe riches in Christ. And so, expect trials to come your way in the Christian life. Don't be surprised! Rather trust God's promises to you in Christ and walk in faith, hope and love, because nothing will ever separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen!

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<sup>3</sup> This bibliography represents the regular works consulted throughout this series.