

“WHEN FEAR REPLACES FAITH”

As we saw last week, the first nine verses of Genesis 12 comprise one of the most important passages in all of Scripture. They establish Abram as the father of the Jewish nation, as God called him out from a land of idolatry, entered into a binding relationship with him, and promised to richly bless him. For this reason, Abram could be said to be the key human figure of the entire Old Testament. God’s plan to raise up a Savior for the world through the nation of Israel had its beginning with the call of Abram. In this sense, Abram is the pioneer of our faith. But in the passage we have just read, the passage that directly follows Abram’s call, he is portrayed in a decidedly unheroic manner. In fact, the choices he makes in this passage put the blessings that God had promised him in jeopardy. How could Abram be made into a great nation if his wife Sarai married another man? How would Abram have offspring to inherit the land of Canaan if Sarai became the wife of the Pharaoh of Egypt? No sooner had God’s promise been made than it was in danger of being forfeited because of Abram’s lack of faith. But this passage shows us that the Lord is determined to uphold his promise to Abram, just as he is determined to uphold all of his promises. He will not allow anything to thwart his plan to use Abram as the instrument through whom he will pour out his redemptive blessings on all the families of the earth. Because of his grace, God intervenes and delivers Abram and Sarai from the mess that they have created for themselves.

This episode in Abram’s life was brought on by something that was beyond his control: a famine in the land of Canaan, something that takes place a number of times in

the book of Genesis. The same thing happened to Isaac in chapter 26, and it happened again to Jacob and his sons in the last main section of the book. The land of Canaan was especially susceptible to famine because it was dependent upon rainfall for the irrigation of its crops, and there were times when there just wasn't enough rain. Egypt, by way of contrast, was not as susceptible to famine, since the crops there were watered by the annual flooding of the Nile River. In Canaan, a famine would have been very difficult for Abram to endure. Because he was a foreigner there, he would be unlikely to receive much help from the people around him when food began to run short. This is why, when famine hit Canaan, Abram decided to go to Egypt.

It is important to remember that, while this lack of rain was beyond Abram's control, it was not beyond God's control. God rules over the weather. He could have prevented this famine if it had been his will to do so. God is the one who withheld the rain and caused the famine. And he did so even though he had just brought Abram into this new land. God had promised great blessings to Abram, but almost immediately after doing so, he put Abram's faith to the test. That was the reason for the famine, at least as far as Abram is concerned. As he does in the lives of all of his children, God is going to use these difficult circumstances to cause Abram to grow in his faith.

There is nothing in the text to suggest that it was inherently wrong for Abram to go to Egypt to seek relief from the famine. While it is true that God had promised to give the land of Canaan to his offspring, there is no reason to conclude that Abram intended to take up permanent residence in Egypt. In fact, there are a number of indications that he

intended to leave as soon as possible. One of these is the use of the verb “sojourn,” which describes staying in a land that is not your true home. This suggests that he had the intention of returning to Canaan. We will see another indication of this in a few moments. The point is, going to Egypt was not in itself a faithless act on Abram’s part. However, the overall picture that we get from this text is one of a man who is acting more out of fear than out of faith.

Abram’s response to his circumstances is very instructive for us. The trials that we face are occasions when our faith is being tested. When we struggle under a particular difficulty, we are often perplexed as we try to understand what the Lord is doing in all of this. And our perplexity can easily open the door to temptation. When our hopes and expectations are frustrated, when things are going all wrong, we can begin to entertain the notion that perhaps God has deceived us. Perhaps God isn’t going to follow through with what he promised. Perhaps God cannot be trusted. And when we open ourselves up to such thoughts, we will end up acting according to our own wisdom and acting according to our fears instead of acting by faith. And that is precisely what happened to Abram when he arrived in Egypt.

We begin to see Abram’s lack of trust in the Lord in verse 11. He was worried that Sarai’s beauty would attract too much attention and result in him being killed so that she could become another man’s wife. While understandable, this worry was a sign of unbelief. It was a sign of unbelief because God had promised Abram that he would have

offspring, something that would obviously not be possible if he died before Sarai could conceive a child.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with trying to preserve your life when you believe that you are in danger. But it is wrong to use sinful means in order to do so. This is something that the Bible makes very clear: the ends do not justify the means. God does not want his people to be pragmatic, at least not in the sense of using whatever means are necessary to obtain our goals. And this remains true even when the goals that we are pursuing are biblical goals. Abram was pursuing a biblical goal: he wanted to preserve his life so that God's promise to him could be fulfilled. But that did not make it right for him to lie.

And it was a lie to say that Sarai was his sister. It is true, as we learn later in Genesis, that Sarai was Abram's half-sister. But Abram knew what the Egyptians would think when he told them that she was his sister. He knew that they would conclude that she was a single woman. He was deceiving them.

One of the questions raised by this text has to do with the fact that Sarai is described as being so beautiful that men would be willing to kill for her, even though she would have been at least 65 years old at the time. Probably the best way to answer this question is to remember that at this point in Genesis the human life span, while not as long as it was earlier in the book, is still considerably longer than it is today. Abram lived to be 175 years old, and Sarai died at 127. God seems to have slowed down the aging process for them, which is why Abram is able to perform great military feats in chapter 14, even

though he is in his 80's. With this in mind, it seems likely that Sarai's appearance when she and Abram traveled to Egypt would have been like that of a woman in her 30's or 40's in our day.

Abram's fear about Sarai's attractiveness led him to act in unbelief, and his act of deception put Sarai's modesty in serious jeopardy. As it turned out, the very thing that Abram feared, or at least part of it, took place: Sarai was taken by another man, and not just any man, but the Pharaoh of Egypt. As bad as this was, we should not think that Abram intended to put Sarai in such a situation. Adultery was taken far more seriously in the ancient world than it is by most people today. It was an offense that was seen as deserving the death penalty. It is unlikely that Abram would have intentionally put his wife in danger of being taken by another man. Probably what he intended was to use his ruse to buy time. He figured that Sarai would catch the eyes of many men, and that some of those men might make an offer of marriage. He counted on having time to consider such offers, and even if he eventually promised her to someone, there were ways that he could delay the wedding until they were able to return to Canaan. We have an example of how drawn out marriage negotiations could be in the ancient world in the story of Jacob and Laban later in Genesis. I would imagine that Abram was thinking along similar lines. What he did not count on, however, was that Sarai would catch the eye of Pharaoh himself, who had enough power that he did not have to concern himself with asking Abram's permission.

Pharaoh did not act dishonorably, though. In fact, he comes off far better than Abram does in this passage. He sent Abram a generous bride-price for the hand of this woman that he believed to be Abram's sister. The mention of camels is especially significant, since they were not yet in as widespread use as they would be later in history. They would have been a rare and extravagant gift. Abram had become a rich man.

When Pharaoh took Sarai into his house, he was dishonoring Abram, even though he did so unknowingly. And the Lord was faithful to what he had promised Abram in verse 3 of this chapter: he sent his curse upon Pharaoh's household. Abram failed to act in faith, but God still kept his promise, intervening on Abram's behalf by sending plagues on Pharaoh and his house. Consider what an encouragement this is to us. How often do we fail to act in faith? How often do we allow our fears to cause us to respond to difficult circumstances in a manner that is not pleasing to God? What a comfort it is to know that God is faithful, even when our faith wavers.

When Pharaoh becomes aware of Sarai's true relation to Abram, he confronts Abram, saying, "What is this you have done?" We have heard those words before in Genesis. It is the same question the Lord asked Eve after she ate the fruit, and the same question he asked Cain after he murdered his brother. Pharaoh's question brings to mind these earlier accounts of human failure. Abram is being set alongside Adam and Eve and Cain. Even though he is the one through whom God will bless all the families of the earth, in this passage he is the cause of God sending plagues upon the house of Pharaoh. Abram is not

being a blessing here. Immediately after God establishes his covenant with him, Abram fails.

There is, however, one important difference between this passage and what happened when Adam and Eve and Cain sinned. God allowed Adam and Eve to eat the fruit. And he allowed Cain to kill his brother. But he does not allow Pharaoh to follow through with his intention of marrying Sarai. In this situation, God intervenes. This is the difference between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. In the covenant of works, God requires us to do what is right. And when we fail to do so, we bring down judgment upon ourselves. But in the covenant of grace, God intervenes and graciously provides a way of escape from the mess that we have gotten ourselves into.

Abram's carefully laid plans backfired. He tried to save his neck, but in doing so he almost lost his wife. It was only because of divine intervention that Abram and Sarai were delivered. Too often, we think of the saints of the Old Testament as heroes of the faith, men and women whose examples we should strive to follow. Now it is certainly true that there are many admirable qualities to be found in Abraham, and Moses, and Joshua, and David, and others. But to focus exclusively on their admirable qualities is to miss the bigger point. Abram may have been a man of faith, but he was also a sinful man, a man who made bad decisions, a man who allowed his fear, rather than his faith, to dictate what he ought to do. And the same sort of thing could be said about all of the other great men and women of the Bible. This is one of the things that makes the Bible so believable. And it shows us that the only real hero of the Old Testament, and of the

entire Bible, is God. Were it not for God, Sarai would have become another one of Pharaoh's wives. Were it not for God, there never would have been a Jewish people. Were it not for God, Jesus would never have been born as the Lion of the Tribe of Judah. God had to intervene in order to preserve his plan of redemption. The Bible makes this point again and again and again. The salvation that God promises his people is a salvation that he will have to accomplish by his own power. We are just not going to be able to help him out. In fact, the only thing that we do is get in the way. And that is the message of Genesis 12. In the first half of the chapter, God makes a glorious promise to Abram, and Abram responds to that promise in faith. But in the second half of the chapter, Abram fails miserably. God had to overcome Abram's sin and unbelief in order to uphold what he had promised. It is yet another reminder of the fact that we do not begin the Christian life by grace and then continue it in our own strength. We are saved by grace from start to finish, from beginning to end. And thanks be to God for that.