

Genesis 12:10-20

Introduction

Abram has heard God speak to him, with a wonderful promise: **'I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'**

He had left his home in Ur of the Chaldeans and moved to Harran. But then, in obedience to God's command, and trusting this amazing promise, he'd left Harran and gone to the land God had shown him, the land of Canaan. He'd taken his wife and nephew, the people he had acquired in Harran, along with his flocks and all his possessions. And he'd walked the length of the land, from north to south, staking his claim by building altars along the way. But then a problem arises. Famine strikes. He's in a foreign land, with people and animals depending on him, and there's no food. What's he to do? This doesn't seem like the life of blessing that God had promised. So, now, faced with a problem, what will it mean for Abram to cling to God's word and trust his promises?

It's a question we will all face at one time or another. Responding to God's call doesn't exempt us from troubles and difficulties. Spiritual high points are often followed by times of trial and testing.

Perhaps last year you went to the Kent Men's Convention, that we've been hearing about this morning. Perhaps you went to the Southern Women's Convention or Bible by the Beach. You heard God speak to you in new and fresh ways. Perhaps on a Sunday morning, you've felt God's love for you as we've met with him in his word and sung of all that he's done for us at the cross. You've felt energised to live for Christ with renewed vigour. But then Monday comes. And Tuesday. The pressure's on at work. The kids get sick. The car stops working. And all the troubles of daily life threaten to take over.

At the beginning of his public ministry, when he was baptised in the River Jordan, Jesus heard these wonderful words come from heaven: **'You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.'** (Mark 1:11). Immediately afterwards, he was sent into the wilderness by the Spirit, where, for forty days, he was tested by Satan.

And so often, that pattern repeats itself in our own experience. Every move forward in faith is challenged or tested in some way. We mustn't misinterpret those times of testing. They're not a sign that something's wrong. They don't come because God's angry with us. They come because God wants us to learn to trust him more deeply. He develops our faith by stretching it. To use an old analogy, faith is like a muscle. The more we exercise it the stronger it grows. When Monday morning comes, and life's troubles threaten to take over, that's the very time to trust in God.

That's what we need to learn. It's the lesson that Abram needs to learn. But sadly, in our passage this morning, he learns it by making some terrible mistakes.

Our first heading is: the appeal of logic.

The appeal of logic

Please look down at verse 10.

Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.

That's all we're told.

There's no suggestion that Abram receives a word from God. God doesn't tell him what to do. He leaves it to Abram to seek a way forward himself based on the promise he's already received. That's normally how God deals with all of us as we navigate our way through life. He doesn't micro-manage our lives. He doesn't make our decisions for us at every turn. He lets us work out the way forward based on the knowledge we already have. He's given us his word, the Bible. If there aren't specific instructions to follow, there are certainly general principles that we can apply. We can work out the way forward based on what we already know. And, as we do so, God invites us to seek him in prayer.

But crucially, there's no indication that Abram pauses to enquire of God. There's no suggestion that he prays and asks for guidance. He appears simply to take matters into his *own* hands. Rather than clinging to God's promises, he seems to favour his own reasoning instead.

Perhaps he meets some travellers who tell him that food is plentiful in Egypt. Perhaps, he hears how the floodwaters of the Nile irrigate the land. And it's right there on the doorstep. Just a short journey away. Going to Egypt looks so sensible. Perhaps he tells himself that this must be God's provision. It sounds very familiar. As I read this, I can see myself doing the same thing.

Now, there's nothing wrong with reason and logic. And I certainly don't mean to imply that trusting God's promises means abandoning reason and logic. God has given us brains and he wants us to use them. But sound logic is to build your life on the promises of God. When we depend on our own reasoning rather than God's promises, that's when things go wrong. And it's where things start to go wrong for Abram.

Never mind that God had promised this land to his offspring. Never mind that was he standing in the land of promise at that very moment. He decides that the best thing to do is to move on from Canaan and head to the fertile fields of Egypt.

As one commentator puts it, to be standing in the land of promise, yet to leave so quickly when trouble looms, has all the appearance of abandoning faith in favour of logic.

And here's the thing. By putting his confidence in his own reasoning, Abram has lost the opportunity to learn something about God. He's lost the opportunity to learn that God can be trusted to provide. It's an opportunity missed. And I wonder how many missed opportunities we've had to learn the same thing.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus tells us to consider the birds of the air and not to worry about what we will eat. Our heavenly Father feeds the birds. And we are so much more valuable to him than birds, Jesus says. He tells us to consider the flowers of the field, which God clothes with splendour, but which only last for a short time. If God clothes *them*, then he will surely clothe *us*, Jesus says. And he says that if we will seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, then all these things will be given to us as well. (Matthew 6:33) He isn't speaking only about food and clothing. He's telling us that we can trust God to provide for all our needs in every circumstance. Yet when the opportunity comes to learn that lesson, I wonder how many times we miss it.

Our attitude can be like that of the person who prayed, 'Lord I know that my trials are an opportunity for me to grow and learn. And I want to learn... just not right now!'

My tendency is to flee from my trials. When my circumstances get difficult, then, like Abram, I start thinking of ways to change them. I start to rely on my own reasoning and logic and think that I can overcome the problem myself. That's to make the same mistake as Abram. Perhaps you can recognise something of that in yourself too. Perhaps, like him, when things get difficult, you conclude that it's time for a change. Time to 'move on' from these present circumstances, so to speak. Time for a new job. Or a new home in a new town. Or some other change. And we can so easily do that, convinced of our own logic, without first pausing to pray.

Of course, it *might* be God's will for us to have a change of circumstances. That is possible. But it might also be his will not for us to move on but for us to stay, and to learn that we can trust him where we are, in the circumstances in which we currently find ourselves. Even when that doesn't seem like the logical thing to do.

When we're faced with troubles and difficulties, before we do anything, we need to ask ourselves what it will mean to trust God's promises in our present circumstances and to pray.

That's what Abram *should* have done.

Well, if this story warns us against the appeal of logic, it also alerts us to the power of fear. And that's our next heading: the power of fear.

The power of fear

Look at verse 11.

As [Abram] was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, ‘I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, “This is his wife.” Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.’

This point in history was one of three high points of civilisation in ancient Egypt. It’s known as the Old Kingdom period or the Age of the Pyramids. The Pyramids of Giza and the Great Sphinx had been built long before Abram arrived. It was an amazing country, full of breathtaking architecture. As well as offering food, it would have held many attractions for a visitor. But not all visitors were welcome, and as he approached the border, Abram becomes fearful for his safety. Pharaohs ruled over the whole country and wielded great power. He’s aware that they were always keen to add beautiful women to their harem and were willing to pay well for the privilege. And he fears that some Egyptians might kill him in order to present Sarai to their king. So, with total disregard for Sarai’s safety, or for the sanctity of their marriage, he resorts to deceit.

Technically, Sarai is Abram’s half-sister as well as his wife. That sounds questionable to us today, but in ancient times the wife-sister relationship was often highly regarded. Nonetheless, Abram’s intention is clear. By asking Sarai to say she’s his sister, he wants it to appear as though that’s all she is, and that they’re not married at all. It’s a lie. His reasoning is totally self-centred. Verse 13: **Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.** He’s concerned only for *his own* safety without any thought for hers. In effect, he prostitutes his wife for his own wellbeing.

We might well ask where his faith is. God had promised to make Abram into a great nation. Would he really allow him to be killed first? He had promised that whoever blesses him would be blessed and whoever curses him will be cursed. Would he really allow Abram’s life to be threatened?

When we stop living by faith in God, fear so easily takes over. Faith trusts that God is in control, and that his good purpose for our lives will prevail. It trusts that he is with us wherever we are, whatever we’re doing. And that his promises are dependable. It’s when we let go of *those* promises that we open the door to fear and the mistakes it breeds.

As we read on, things work out just as Abram had planned. News of Sarai’s beauty comes to Pharaoh. She’s taken into his harem as one of his wives, and Abram is treated well because of it. He receives a handsome bride-price: **sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels.** He’s safe. And he has prospered materially. But you wonder how he could have lived with himself. And you wonder how he could ever look his wife in the eye again.

When fear is in the driving seat rather than faith, when we think only of ourselves and not others, when we lie and deceive to protect ourselves and prosper, it destroys our relationships with one another and with God. Abram has prospered materially but bankrupted himself spiritually.

But God is merciful. He has not given up on Abram yet. So, finally, we read of the triumph of grace.

That's our final heading.

The triumph of grace

Please look down at verses 17 to 20.

But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. So Pharaoh summoned Abram. 'What have you done to me?' he said. 'Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, "She is my sister," so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!' Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.

God is faithful. He intervenes to warn Pharaoh and to protect Sarai. Ironically, the man who was to be the source of blessing for the nations has become instead the cause of affliction. And it turns out that Pharaoh's ethics are higher than Abram had supposed. Abram's actions are unacceptable, even to the Egyptians. The man of faith is shamed by a pagan king. And he's sent away from Egypt, never to return.

What is clear from this story is that the Bible doesn't try to hide the failings of God's people. It's open about them. Abram has made a right mess of things. But that's why this story is so full of encouragement for us.

Abram believed God's promise and left his home in Harran. He stepped out in faith. But his life doesn't then follow a smooth upward trajectory of ever-increasing faith. It doesn't move forward without any setbacks. If it did... if his life was an unbroken record of success... we would find it very hard to relate to him. But, like us, he was a sinner who struggled with the challenges of life. Like ours, his faith grew through testing. And at times, like us, he learnt what it means to live by faith only by making mistakes.

Abram is so easy to relate to. At times, we too depend on our own logic rather than the promises of God. At times, our actions are determined by fear instead of faith. At times, to our great shame, our own behaviour falls far short even of the standards of the world around us.

But God is faithful. He's on our side. He graciously bears with us. And he can even use our mistakes to deepen our faith and make us the people he wants us to be.

Conclusion

Perhaps, just now, you're facing a difficult situation, and you don't know what to do. In your mind, you're going through all the possible options, working out what makes sense and what doesn't. It's good to do that. But take a moment. Stop. Open your Bible. And read it. What promises of God might you have forgotten? What might God want you to do in this situation? Pray to him and ask him to help you.

Perhaps, you're feeling fearful. You're going into a situation that makes you feel afraid. But before you decide what to do, take a moment. Remind yourself that God is with you. Remind yourself that he is in control and that his promises are dependable. Open your Bible and read those promises again. Write one of them on a Post-it note and stick it somewhere you'll see it... perhaps next to the kettle. And ask God to help you move forward in *faith* instead of fear.

Perhaps you've made a big mistake. You've done something that you're deeply ashamed of. Perhaps you're going to have to live with the consequences for a long time. But if you belong to Jesus, remember that God is on your side. He is faithful. Even your wrong moves can be used by him to make you the person he wants you to be.

If we belong to Jesus, we can trust these promises. God is with us. He is for us. And his good purpose for our lives will most certainly prevail. In that confidence, we can move forward in faith, one step at a time, whatever Monday might bring.

Let's pray.

Loving Father, please help us to approach times of testing with faith, trusting that you intend them for our good and strengthening. Please help to us to recall your promises and believe them. And please assure us of your love when we make mistakes and help us to learn from them. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.