

Abraham and the Life of Faith

“The Saint”

While we are being perfected in the life of faith, none of us will be perfect. In those moments we take our eyes off God; stop up our ears or fail to seek His face, it is easy for us to slip into devices of our own fallen nature. Thankfully, God demonstrates grace when the life of faith fails.

*“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.
Genesis 12:10*

Sunday, May 3rd
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There's an episode of the now cancelled show *Everybody Loves Raymond* entitled "Lateness", where the plot revolves around the repercussions of Raymond doing a husband thing. Promised by Debra, his wife, that they would be in the car ready to leave for an important engagement at 6:30pm, Ray gets noticeably uptight as the 6:30 deadline comes near, and then finally, unaware that Debra is struggling with a hair mishap, makes the fateful decision to do what he had threatened earlier—he left. The look of shock and disbelief on the faces of the other characters itself is worth the watch. Even his adorably obnoxious father opined: I would never leave without the wife; that's just suicide." Raymond, we ask, "What were you thinking?" However, if you are a husband, you've probably said or done the wrong thing. It's inevitable. Just listen to this short collection of husband wisdom.

Josh@iwearaonesie writes: My wife said I need to grow up. I was speechless. It's hard to say anything when you have 45 gummy bears in your mouth

A marriage therapist was told by one wife that she couldn't go on much longer because of her husbands' constant Star Wars puns, to which her husband replied: "Ummm, divorce is strong with this one."

Rodney writes: My wife probably tells me that I never listen to her.

Troy says, "Marriage is mostly about knowing which hand towels you can use and which ones are for the better people who visit your wife's home."

Then there's the poor husband, out for an enjoyable evening with friends in a upscale restaurant and who had intended to compliment his wife when someone commented on the attractiveness of the waitress. The setting triggered a playful metaphor, and in his head, he wanted to say "Grade A New York Strip Loin", or "Prime Rib", but he instead blurted: why settle for hamburger when you have the whole cow at home.

However, the topper of all wrong-headed things for a husband not named Raymond to do, and we'll see him do a few husband-headed things, is accomplished by our paragon of faith – Abram. Perhaps this is one of those times in Abrams life that led Soren Kierkegaard to write: "...though Abraham arouses my admiration, he at the same time appals me...He who has explained this riddle has explained my life." Abram commits this *faux pas* twice, but our focus today will be on the first time with passing reference to the later event, found in Genesis 20. The occasion that brought on his mental lapse was, as it often is, circumstances beyond his control—a testing of his faith. We are fortunate that when we act faith-less, God is always faith-full.

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.*

There is plenty of evidence from inscriptions, tablets, and even tomb paintings, attesting to the reality of refugees heading to Egypt during times of famine and drought. The presence of the Nile River all but guaranteed there would always be water. One wonders at the wisdom of God in placing His chosen nation, through which He will bless the world, in an environment given to unreliable rains. Why not plant them in Egypt? Or, why call Abram *out* of Ur? Why not just leave him there, it was fertile enough.

However, God knew that without the faith of his family being strengthened and deepened, they would easily wander, piercing themselves with a thousand griefs. So He placed them in a location where they would learn to turn to Him, and learn that he could be relied upon. Abram had to learn a valuable lesson in trust. He had followed the directions given by this God so far, but would he continue to do so? Would he trust even when things were difficult? The prophet Habakkuk models for us a good response to times of famine:

Though the fig tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines,
though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are
no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I
will be joyful in God my Savior.

Habakkuk 3:17

We will all face times of famine in our lives – perhaps not a literal shortage of food, but famine can come in other ways. During famine one experiences a lack of something, whether it be companionship, finances, health, clarity...the list is almost endless. There will come times of famine in our journey of faith, times when our faith will be tested. Rather than fret about these times or question God's love, James tells us to: "Consider it pure joy... whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance."^a

A Facebook friend, Cornelius Oludeyi posted this past week: "Trial is the gym where your faith exercises." Just as one needs to exercise the body to increase its health, vitality and strength, one needs to work out one's faith, and that comes often in the form of trials. God doesn't necessarily send the trial, but He can certainly use the trial. We too, can use the trial. You don't become an expert sailor by parking your boat in the marina. No, it is out in open water, in the midst of the wind and the waves that one hones his skills and confidence. In the words of the Hillsong selection Oceans:

You call me out upon the waters
The great unknown where feet may fail
And there I find You in the mystery
In oceans deep my faith will stand¹

There was a famine in the land and Abram had a decision to make. Do I call upon the name of my God? Do I build myself an altar and await his direction? That would have been the 'faithful' thing to do, the wise thing – to look at the famine as an opportunity to lean on God, the one who had brought him to this land. But that is not what he did. And often, it is not what we do. We look for the escape hatch, the emergency exit. We worry, fret, stew, and then begin to come up with a strategy apart from God. We perhaps look at those not undergoing testing and we think, "I should just do what they are doing, it all seems to be working out for them." That's what Abram did. He looked to see what his neighbors were doing, and headed for Egypt. But our solutions to problems lead to more problems.

^a James 1:2-3

¹¹ As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I know what a beautiful woman you are. ¹² When the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me but will let you live. 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.”

Abram sensed, for some reason, that going to Egypt would not be quite as easy as coming to Canaan. In Scripture, Egypt is often used as a cipher for worldliness. Having not called on the Name of the God to whom he had built altars and previously called upon in worship, Abram now experienced something new. I think it notable that when following God’s leading to come to Canaan he doesn’t appear at all fearful. Actually, he acts quite boldly in building his altars in places frequented by the local populace. Declaring openly that he was not one of them – that he worshiped a God they did not know. But not now. Now he relying upon himself, and Abram feels fear. Even though Lot goes to Egypt with him, Abram appears alone—not even “all the possessions and the people they had acquired in Haran” are mentioned.

Abram is now fearing for his life. You see, Sarai, he fears, might be found irresistibly attractive to the Egyptians and so they may think to dispose of him so as to take her. We find out in Gen 20 that this fear arises again. And that Abram there would fall back on a strategy he had developed with Sarai before they left Ur. He claims to Abimelech that saying he was her brother was how Sarai could show her love for him. Yeah, that does sound crazy. He even rationalized that she really was his sister—or at least—half-sister. The real reason all this happened though was Abram suffered moments of faithlessness. And so, when push comes to shove, he falls back upon an old habit—he lies. Abram made the decision to rely on his own guile, rather than his God. As a result, now he ends up in fear, scheming and rationalizing.

King Asa started out so well. Attacked by a more numerous foe he rallied his people and called upon God for assistance, admitting that without Him, they were doomed. However, many years later, when attacked by Baasha, the king of Israel, Asa forgot the lesson of the past and instead put in motion a strategy employed by other kings, he sought out powerful ally—a king who had a bigger army than the one threatening him. He did not call upon the Lord. Asa forgot that he as not to be like other kings, because other kings did not have the Lord God Almighty on their side. The prophet scolded and then reminded Asa, *“the eyes of the LORD range throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.”*^b

There are various theories as to why Abram pursued this path of deceit, placing Sarai and the promise of God in jeopardy. Some suggest that as a brother to Sarai he would have held an honored position, and therefore could have stalled any interested suitors, much as Laban and the family would attempt to employ with Rebekah.^c However, as is often the case, when we rely on ourselves and our carefully spun strategies, things began to spiral out of control. Charles Swindoll notes that we all have ‘default’ mechanisms when faced with trials. We all have our ‘Egypt’s’ when the going gets tough— that place or strategy to which we flee or rely upon. Some practice avoidance – they just try not to think about it. Others may simply freeze out of fear. Some lash out

^b 2 Chronicles 16:9

^c Genesis 24:55

or flee, thinking they can outrun the trial. Do you know what yours are? When the pressure begins to rise and the air is filled with uncertainty—to where or to what do you turn. Do you recognize your Egypt? Speaking of Egypt...

14 When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman. 15 And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. 16 He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels.

It turns out his fears were not so unfounded, but it gets worse. Word gets to the Pharaoh of this beautiful woman that has just arrived in his country and Sarai is taken. At this time Sarai would have been around 65 years old. Some joke about the thought of a 65-year-old being described as 'a very beautiful woman' questioning the eyesight or taste of the Egyptian court. John Calvin went as far to suggest that she is able to maintain her beauty because women that do not have children hold on to their beauty longer (I couldn't find any reference to what his wife, Idelette, thought). Just let me say, as the husband of a woman who has just entered her prime and who is more beautiful today than the day I first laid my eyes upon in high-school, I have no difficulty in taking scripture literally here (did you hear that love?). It's interesting though that in Genesis 20, which takes place some 25 years later, no mention is made of Sarai's beauty – apparently, she didn't age well after 65.

While Abram appears to make out like a bandit, Sarai ends up like a bond-servant. Not surprisingly, during this episode and the latter one, Sarai has no voice. The lack of faith on Abram's part causes events to swirl around her and she is caught up in circumstances beyond her control. The unfaithfulness of Abram results in her being taken from her people, from her family, from her home. Her situation now is an echo of Abram's call, only this time the call did not come from a loving Friend, but from a lascivious Pharaoh. Where the Lord who had plans to prosper her, to Pharaoh she was just another possession. Abram does not call on the name of the Lord while in Egypt, but I'm sure while in Egypt Sarai called Abram quite a few names.

Listen, don't think that those around you will not be impacted by your stumbles. No one sins in isolation. You can be sure that those whom you love will suffer in some way. Events and circumstances will rob them of their voices—perhaps almost rob them of personhood. They will be left to deal with the fallout of your folly. Scripture is rife with examples of innocents placed in peril through the sins of others. The family of Achor would pay for his inability to overcome greed^d; the families of those whose pride lead them to rebel against Moses^e would perish—and we place our loved ones in peril when we give in to our fears because we have not called upon the Name of the Lord.

You may be in the midst of a famine right now, but you are not alone. Reach out to a brother or sister in the Lord and let them help you find strength, just as a Jonathan came alongside David.^f Let's be sympathetic to one another, guarding our own hearts and minds so that others might feel comfortable in coming to us for help in the famine.

^d Joshua 7:24

^e Numbers 16:27

^f 1 Samuel 23:16

Scripture is mute on the thoughts of Abram during the time Sarai was taken from his protection (as it is with the plight of Sarai in the palace). Oh, the heartache Abram could have been spared his family if only he hadn't taken his eyes off of God in Canaan. Likewise, we too can save ourselves, our families and our churches a great deal of heartache by looking to God in the famine. It is noted that: "The narrative speaks not one word of Abram's faith in God or lack thereof; it centers on the way he handles a problem in daily life, with all of its complexities and ambiguities."² However, even if Abram proved at this time to be faith-less, God proved Himself to be faithful.

17 But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. 18 So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? 19 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!" 20 Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.

We aren't told what ailment befell the house of Pharaoh, or how he came to believe it was due to Sarai, nevertheless, Abram is summoned to his presence. The demand of Pharaoh here to Abram is the same as that of God to Eve: "What have you done...?"

Abram was supposed to be a blessing to the world, but in his lack of faith he has become a curse. His faith was to have been a beacon to others, that others might come to know their Creator, but now he stands before one of the others with out defense. Notice that Abram here has no response. How could he respond? He was guilty as charged. He had done to Pharaoh what should not be done. Now, while I don't want to let Abram off, the hypocrisy of Pharaoh is amusing, is it not? I mean, he wasn't all that innocent himself – and we could say the same of Abimelech later. They both act offended because they had been deceived – yet neither of them had any hesitation in 'taking' Sarai in the first place.

But the question of Pharaoh and Abimelech should haunt us. "What have you done?" You see, the actions of Abram had not only endangered himself and his family, but had also endangered outsiders. He was supposed to have been a blessing to outsiders. The early church grew up and developed faith in the midst of famine, surrounded by an Empire hostile to their presence. And yet Paul urged Titus: "In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us."⁹

In his first recorded encounter with the world to whom he was to be a blessing, Abram failed. And it began because when the test came and he took his eyes off of God, he didn't call upon the One who had given him a glorious promise. And it begs the questions of us: are we a blessing to the world? Have we taken our eyes off of God? Is there anything about us that we can be accused of to which we have no answer? How sad that the church, through which God is reaching out to the world, can at times be justly accused by the world – What have you done? There is much that is wrong with the world around us, and it can be tempting to simply go along, doing as the world; or

⁹ Titus 2:7-8

becoming a finger-pointing judge and jury, condemning the world and in the process all the innocents caught up in circumstances beyond their control. Paul didn't command Titus to tell them, but to show them. Live a life worthy of your calling.

Conclusion

It's not just Raymond Barone and husbands who do dumb things, who in a moment of unguarded and unsupervised panic, react according to nature. If we could step out of ourselves in those moment's we might ask ourselves, "What were you thinking?" If you are a follower of Jesus Christ and are attempting to live a life of faith, there will be times when you stumble. Times when you react according to your nature, and without calling on the Name. That's not an excuse, that's just reality. The Bible reminds us that we all have "sinful desires that war against [our] souls."^h They may win the occasional skirmish, but praise God, through the aid of the Holy Spirit we win the war. So, don't get down on yourself when you stumble. Remember that God is faithful. If we confess our sins and call on His name we are already forgiven. And hopefully as we go through the various trials that exercise our faith, in those moments of stumbling we will stand strong in the Lord.

We should also not be hard on others when they stumble. Just as Abram put Sarai at risk, exposing her to harm, there are times when the stumble of others will have an impact on our lives. However, those occasions give us an opportunity to not only grow in our faith, but also to extend and demonstrate the grace that has been poured into our lives.

Abram learns an important lesson here that will shape his decisions when he arrives back in the land of promise. He has learned that God is faithful – that God will not give up on those He has called. God will not give up on you, so don't give up on yourself, or others. I pray that as you continue to reflect on this episode in the life of Abram that it will bring encouragement to your life of faith.

Next week we will see the fruit of Abrams journey to Egypt. I hope you'll join us as we continue to explore the life of faith.

^h 1 Peter 2:11

Study Notes:

- Gentiles suffered because of the dishonesty of Abram
 - two instances when Abraham was merely mortal
 - Shechem had long history as a cultic site (located between two mountains – Gerizim and Ebal)
 - Oak of Moreh can be rendered ‘tree of teaching’ (Swindoll, 16) A large tree was a picture of fertility, therefore became a location of pagan worship
 - Abram had not yet learned to trust God in everything, therefore he takes matters into his own hands when scarcity arises
 - God didn’t send the famine, however He can use the famine (famines come in our lives in various forms)
 - We all have that ‘default’ setting – that practice we lean towards when things don’t go as wanted or expected
-
- Abram’s story is messy. It’s begins in a mess, is lived in a mess, and knowing the rest of the story of this family, continues to be a mess. It is a story just like ours. Messy.
 - “a ‘famine’ of local character would be quickly caused by the failure of Palestine rains...”³
 - In the second incident (when Sarai will be 85) there is no statement regarding her beauty

Edersheim

- Famine in the land – what to do?
- Abe like us with strengths and weaknesses
- Deception provided protection for Sarai
- Would be received as the chief of a clan, not a rival. Sarai then potential treaty material, which would be an extended process
- Monuments in Egypt attest to other such arrivals
- [God does not revoke the promise because of Abrahams lack of faith]
- Possibly Sarai let the cat out of the bag
- As for the rebuke of Pharaoh, “Their justice the patriarch acknowledged by his silence.”⁴

Thomas Mann

- Soren Kierkegaard: “...though Abraham arouses my admiration, he at the same time appals me...He who has explained this riddle has explained my life.” (31)
- Abram is at once the one who responds to the divine charge with trust and obedience, and the one who immediately loses his integrity in the face of difficulties, both real and imagined. (33)

Terence E. Fretheim, NIB, Vol 1

- Egyptian sources verify that Canaan to Egypt journeys were no uncommon during times of famine
- 20:12 informs us that Sarai is Abrams half-sister (common father)

- The parallels to the David stories (2 Sam 11:27) "...as well as the time that passes, make it likely that the marriage is consummated (to deny this seems a case of special pleading)." (428)
- Abram may have thought that as a brother he could forestall any marriage
- He expects the worse from outside his family circle
- "In his very first contact with outsiders, Abram fails in his response to the call of God." (428)
- Abram and Sarai expelled in much the same fashion as Adam and Eve from the garden
- Text presupposes that adultery is outside the norm
- Abram's desire for self-preservation causes pain to those around him – notably Sarai and then too, Pharaoh and his household.
- Parallels also to the Exodus: famine, sojourning, being taken, conflict with Pharaoh, plagues, enrichment, expulsion
- Egyptians not portrayed negatively, in fact, they appear to act with greater integrity
- Sarai, though not given a voice, is still central to the story
- "The narrative speaks not one word of Abram's faith in God or lack thereof; it centers on the way he handles a problem in daily life, with all of its complexities and ambiguities." (431)
- Never told the form of the 'plague' or disease, or how Pharaoh came to know it was connected with Sarai
- Story may cause us to question the fairness of all that takes place

20:1-18

- Story built around three dialogues (Abram to Sarai, God to Abimelech, Abimelech to Abram)
- God speaks outside the community of faith
- One outside the community of faith can lecture one inside the community in regards to what is right and wrong
- An outsider demonstrates more grace than Abram
- Abram once again a source of curse rather than a source of blessing

Swindoll

- When the going gets tough we all have our Egypt
- God doesn't send the famine, but He can use it for us to see the depth of our trust
- "...ancient marriage rituals included a waiting period long enough to ensure that a bride wasn't already pregnant." (21)
- Five lessons (23-25)
 - Everyone faces famines
 - Every escape contains a lie
 - Every Abram struggles with a weakness
 - "if Abram could fall, soon after building two altars, believe me, you can stumble into a moral tumble as well." (25)
 - Every compromise jeopardizes a Sarai
 - Every Egypt has a Pharaoh

Kaiser, et al.

- Popular among academics to see these three stories as one that is retold at different times by different authors to address different circumstances
- In each case the blessing of God is carried in the womb of a woman who is placed in jeopardy by a man who is flirting with disaster because of his weakness
- There was a form of Hurrian marriage where a husband would legally adopt his wife as a sister to strengthen the bonds between them, though this is not in mind in Genesis (119, so too Hamilton, 381)
- Brothers had the power to delay a marriage (120)

Isaiah 31:1, "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help,
 who rely on horses,
 who trust in the multitude of their chariots
 and in the great strength of their horsemen,
 but do not look to the Holy One of Israel,
 or seek help from the LORD.

Blackaby

- "God shapes the ones He chooses by often allowing dire or serious circumstances to enter life's pilgrimage." (85)
- "...in disobedience we never know what could have been." (86)
- The protection of Sarai and the rewards from Pharaoh opened the eyes of Abram as to God's influence on others
- "Be sure to guard your heart when you are on the mountaintop." (90) You don't fall in the valley, but from the mountaintop.

Meyer

- The renewal of the promise prepared Abram for the famine
- Peter was prayed for by Jesus before the events of that fateful night when the faith of Peter was sorely tried
- Times of want and testing will come regardless of whether we are near to or far from God
- "Purity, truth, gentleness, devotion have no equivalent in the ore drawn from the mines of Peru, nor in the pearls of the sea." (35)
- "in the figurative language of Scripture, Egypt stands for alliance with the world." (36)
- Better to look at our problems through God, rather than at God through our problems.
- "He acted simply on his own judgement. He looked at his difficulties. He became paralyzed with fear. He grasped at the first means of deliverance which suggested itself, much as a drowning man will catch a straw. And thus, he went down to Egypt." (36)

Hamilton

- Cites a painting in the tomb of an Egyptian ruler from 1897-1878 B.C. that portrays the arrival of a group of Asiatics (men, women and children) to Egypt; the story of an Egyptian official who journey reflected that of Abram, and an Egyptian text referencing Bedouin tribes being permitted to enter Egypt to water their cattle (380)

- References an interpretation of Islamic law that permits a temporary divorce (382)
- Discusses the disagreement among historians as to whether or not domesticated camels (v16) would then have existed (383-384)
- The Egyptian emerges rather saintly, but Abram, the one in whom the Egyptians and other nations are blessed, appears rather sinister. (385)
- Westermann, *Genesis*, 2:166 – “The reason Abram emerges unpunished is solely that the Pharaoh has experienced the power behind him.” (385) Noting that later Hebrew kings would kill so that he could take what he wanted (David, Ahab)
- The escort out of the country was to ensure no harm came to Abram
- In Genesis it is the Egyptians who suffer oppression at the hands of Hebrews (see 16:6)

Wenham

- Discusses different aspects of how Sarai could be considered ‘beautiful’ even at the age of 65 (hopefully his wife doesn’t read his material)
- Notes that Calvin thought childless females held on to their attractiveness longer than mothers (288)
- “...his silence following the Pharaoh’s rebuke shows that all parties recognized that he was at fault. (288)
- Oriental views on adultery “much sterner than ours” (288)
- “That plagues were sent seems to indicate that Pharaoh did actually commit adultery.” 289)
- The Egyptians ‘seeing’ Sarai’s beauty echoes Eve ‘seeing’ the fruit
- “The justice of the royal anger is underlined by the way Pharaoh asks the same question after the offense that the Lord asked Adam.” (291)
- Notes how others interpret the meaning behind this story: (291)
 - fulfilment of promise despite man’s weakness (Von Rad)
 - demonstrates the frailty of God’s elect (Zimmerli)
 - even in apparently hopeless situations God can deliver (Westermann)
- “The story shows that [Abram] could not attain security by his own intelligence: only God can save in such circumstances.” (291)

Endnotes

¹ “*Oceans (Where Feet May Fail)*”, Joel Houston, *et al*, © 2012 Hillsong Music Publishing Australia (Admin. by Capitol CMG Publishing)

² Terrance E. Fretheim in *The New Interpreters Bible, Volume I.*, edited by Leander E. Keck, *et al* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 431.

³ Davidson, Rev. Professor F., ed. *The New Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1953), 88..

⁴ Alfred Edersheim, *Bible History: Old Testament* (Genteel Books. Kindle Edition).