

## “Ups and Downs” (Genesis 12:6-20)

In Genesis 12 we see Abraham finally making the third of the 3 separations that God called him to make:

- (1) From his country – it was a “*land of graven images*” (Jer. 50:38);
- (2) From his kindred – they had become idolaters (Josh. 24:2-3; Gen. 31:3); and
- (3) From his father’s house – this seemed to be the hardest of all.

Abraham entered Canaan at 75 years old and so for the next century until his death he lived as a pilgrim and by faith “*sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles*” (Heb. 11:9). We also read in Acts 7:5 that the Lord, “*gave him none inheritance in it, no, not so much as to set his foot on: yet He promised that He would give it to him for a possession and to his seed after him, when as yet he had no child.*”

This was a greater step of faith by Abram than many imagine as there was no natural probability of that promise being fulfilled for we are told “*the Canaanite was then in the land.*” This was ominous as these Canaanites included powerful kings and chieftains, with heavily fortified towns and cities such as Sodom, Salem, and Hebron. As each day passed and they consolidated their power and fortifications it made it more unlikely that they could ever be dispossessed by the descendants of a childless shepherd with a tiny band of servants. Despite these outward obstacles, Abraham obeyed by faith in the word of God.

A critical key to Abraham’s life of faith is the word “separation” and all his life he was separated from his home country and kinsfolk; separated from Lot and separated as a pilgrim and stranger from the people of the land. No doubt he faced opposition from his family and friends for such a radical step. Although there were lapses and failures along the way, we do not read that he never went back or even thought to go back to the comfort and materialism of Ur as we are told, “*And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned.*” (Heb. 11: 15.) As FB Meyer comments,

“He held himself aloof from the people of the land. He was among them, but not of them. He did not attend their tribal gatherings. He carefully guarded against inter-marriage with their children, sending to his own country to obtain a bride for his son. He would not take from the Canaanites a thread or a sandal-thong. He insisted on paying full market value for all he received. He did not stay in any permanent location, but was ever on the move. The tent which had no foundations; which could be erected and struck in half-an-hour - this was the apt symbol of his life.”

The entrance into Canaan represented the final severance for Abraham of his past life and represented major challenges to Abraham’s faith.

*And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land. And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him. And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, having Bethel on the west, and Hai on the east: and there he builded an altar unto the LORD, and called upon the name of the LORD (v6-8)*

We do not read of God speaking to Abraham throughout his stay in Haran but now that he is in obedience with the original call in Canaan, Jehovah appeared once more unto him. In the first call God called Abraham to go unto a land that He would show him, and now He rewards Abraham's growing faith and obedience by promising to give this land he is now in unto his seed.

The Lord now also reveals Himself to Abraham for communion, and the result is that we read of Abraham erecting an altar for the first time (we do not read of Abraham erecting an altar in Ur or Haran). It is evident that Abraham is learning in his pilgrim life of faith that it is only when there is obedience and real separation from the world that fellowship with God and true worship is possible.

Abraham's life will be one of a pilgrim and a worshipper all the way home to glory. The expression that he "*called upon the name of the LORD*" reveals that He publicly acknowledged his faith in Jehovah as his God. The Canaanites around him must have observed this foreigner's worship of Jehovah and wondered about his strict life of separation from their religious practices and values. This is a moment of spiritual triumph in the faith of Abraham.

*And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south. And there was a famine in the land: and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was grievous in the land. And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon: Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife: and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive. Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee. (v9-13)*

The life of every believer is characterised by spiritual highs and lows. Failure invades all of our lives at one time or another. Abraham was no exception to this. Rightly we admire his consistency and faith but we also must note the failures in his life. The Holy Spirit carefully and honestly records all of this for us to learn from. We will learn that the best of men are only men at the best. Save for the Lord Jesus Christ, all men have feet of clay.

When Abraham reached the southern part of Canaan, he encountered a severe famine in the land of promise. Suffering and trials have always been a part of God's curriculum in the school of faith (cf. James 1:2-4). A faith that cannot be tested cannot be trusted. These tests often come immediately after triumphs. God's plan for Abraham is to mold him into a man of great faith, and this requires circumstances where Abraham's faith is tested. It was daunting enough to enter Canaan with all of the physical and spiritual threats from the ungodly inhabitants, but now Abraham is faced with the threat of famine. He had just left Ur and Haran, which were both on the banks of the Euphrates River so drought was not a problem there. This was the first test of his new separation and as a stranger "*outside the camp*" he was unable to draw on assistance of supplies.

We should not be too quick to condemn him, as Abraham was a stranger surrounded by suspicious and hostile peoples and constrained with the responsibility of vast livestock and 300 persons in his household. In all likelihood his family and servants would have begun to murmur against the wisdom of going to Canaan amidst the physical threats they were now under. This would have placed even greater pressure on this new pilgrim as the spiritual leader.

What is clear from the narrative that at this first test, Abraham did not turn to God for help but leaned on his own understanding. Instead of trusting the Lord, he trusted in Egypt. Here was a man who had journeyed all the way from Chaldea to Canaan on the bare word of Jehovah and yet was now afraid to trust Him in the time of famine. Abraham was back in the

driving seat of Abraham's life. He concluded that he must leave the Promised Land, the place of blessing, and wait out the famine in Egypt. Going to Egypt seemed to be the logical solution from a human perspective, as it was less susceptible to famines with the great Nile river.

The text says that he went to "*sojourn there*," so Abraham probably reasoned that it would be just a temporary diversion. However, from comparing the incident in Genesis 26:1-3 it is clear that God wanted Abraham to trust Him and to remain in Canaan, where God had promised to prosper him. This action demonstrates that Abraham's faith in the sovereignty of God was not consistent as he ignored God's power and promises. God had promised to make his name great and his descendants great so Abraham should have trusted the same God to provide the means. It is interesting to note that there is no hint that Abraham built an altar in Egypt to seek the Lord.

In the Scriptures Egypt is figuratively used to describe an alliance with the world, and dependence on the arm of the flesh as, "*Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help; and stay on horses; and trust in chariots because they are many; and in horsemen because they are very strong; but they look not unto the Holy One of Israel, neither seek the Lord!*" (Isa. 31:1) How much better would it have been for Abraham to have thrown the responsibility back on God who had called him to Canaan and whose name is Jehovah-Jireh. God would later prove He could feed millions of Abraham's descendants in a wilderness with manna from heaven and water from a rock for 40 years.

*And it came to pass, that, when Abram was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair. The princes also of Pharaoh saw her, and commended her before Pharaoh: and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And he entreated Abram well for her sake: and he had sheep, and oxen, and he asses, and menservants, and maidservants, and she asses, and camels. (v14-16)*

This story gives a salutary illustration of the entangling web of sin. By nature Abraham was not superior to the men of the East that he sprang from, who did not hesitate to lie, in order to gain a point or to avert a disaster. Sadly, this vein of duplicity and deceit often re-appeared in his posterity. Egypt may entreat us well materially, but that will be a poor compensation for our losses. The devil argued with God in respect of Job that "*Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life.*" Satan was proved wrong over Job but he was right concerning Abraham.

One spiritual failure led to another one rapidly while down in Egypt. The path of sin is never static. Abraham could not trust God to take care of him in the famine in Canaan so he cannot trust God to take care of him in the immoral climate of Egypt. It was not wrong of him to consider the risks in such pagan people, but it was wrong to use the methods he did to try to limit those risks. Abraham practiced deception and effectively denied that Sarai is his wife; thus endangering the honour of the one who was to bear the promised seed and should have been dearest to him. Probably he reasoned this deceit would allow him the time to sojourn safely there before he would make his way back into Canaan. His ethics were situational. It seemed an ingenious plan.

Sarah must have been an extraordinary woman as she was 65 years old yet the Egyptians noted she was "*very fair.*" Abraham's fear that these fleshly people would desire her beauty was proven real, "*The princes also of Pharaoh saw her, and commended her before Pharaoh.*" Abraham pleaded with Sarah to go along with this deception as "*Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee.*" The devil will always think of good reasons why we should do wrong. The first part of his plan seemed to work very well as Abraham's life was spared and Pharaoh "*entreated Abram well for her sake.*" Pharaoh gave these things to Abram as a dowry. God allowed him to get what he claimed to want! Abraham may have told himself, "So

far, so good.” We should never be surprised if our deceptive plans seem to prosper initially. Sin brings plenty of short-term rewards (cf. Heb. 11:25). That does not mean that things will continue in that manner.

It is not long before Abraham’s artful plan backfires badly as Pharaoh takes Sarah into his harem of women. This was a direct result of his deceitful plan to pretend that his wife was unmarried. He is reaping a fleshly harvest from sowing a fleshly seed (cf. Num. 32:23; Gal. 6:7). Abraham was now faced with a scenario he had not anticipated or had a solution for. He likely reasoned that he could procrastinate with any advances by the nobles of Egypt for Sarah but he never guessed that Pharaoh would come in for her. The king was not a man that you could delay.

All of Abraham’s newly acquired gain must have felt empty as he noted the empty chair of his beloved wife. There would have been no peace in his soul to enjoy these treasures. He must have felt powerless and hopeless as he contemplated her fate. Sin looks good from the distance, but as Eve discovered, the forbidden fruit turns sour in your stomach. It is safer to be in the famine in God’s will than in the Pharaoh’s palace out of God’s will. The great promises of God through Abraham’s seed now seem to be at great risk. The only hope is if God intervenes. Man’s extremities are God’s opportunities.

*And the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai Abram’s wife. And Pharaoh called Abram and said, What is this that thou hast done unto me? why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife? Why saidst thou, She is my sister? so I might have taken her to me to wife: now therefore behold thy wife, take her, and go thy way. And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him: and they sent him away, and his wife, and all that he had. (v17-20)*

God’s covenantal promises depend on God and not on the unfaithful pilgrim. What you see in this incident is that Abraham was nothing without grace. Abraham may be unfaithful in his commitment to God’s will, but the Lord is never unfaithful to His promises, “*If we believe not, yet He abideth faithful: He cannot deny Himself*” (2 Tim. 2:13). He may have taken his eyes off the Lord but the Lord never took His eyes off Abraham.

Although the Lord has been watching this situation unfolding under the shadow of His sovereign providence, we now read for the first time the Lord appearing in the narrative. At the point of disaster with Abraham utterly helpless, the Lord intervenes to deliver His erring child. We are not told in detail what these plagues were or how Pharaoh made the connection with Sarah. Clearly, God revealed it in His time to achieve His purposes. The Lord will never allow His sovereign purposes to be derailed by man’s unfaithfulness. He can even work through man’s failures. This is a recurring theme throughout biblical and church history.

God even uses Pharaoh to rebuke Abraham and to send the disobedient child back to where he should have been, “*What is this that thou hast done unto me? why didst thou not tell me that she was thy wife? Why saidst thou, She is my sister? so I might have taken her to me to wife: now therefore behold thy wife, take her, and go thy way.*” This was a great humiliation and irony for a believer to be publicly rebuked by an unbeliever. His testimony now was in tatters before Pharaoh. However, we must give credit to Abraham that he accepts this deserved rebuke without retort or excuse.

The Lord was very gracious to Abraham in that he was sent away with all of his possessions. Material prosperity in the life of a believer is no guarantee that he is walking in God’s perfect will. Abraham left Egypt richer than when he entered but that was only because of grace. The Psalmist rightly noted,

**The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will He keep His anger for ever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. (Psa. 103:8-10)**

Abraham will learn from this incident but it will be a painful lesson. The way of transgressors is always hard. God is not trying to destroy him but mold him to be the man God wants him to be. What began with a small step of compromise almost cost Abraham everything. It takes grace to get into the promised land of God's will for Abraham but also it takes grace to stay in the promised land of God's will. If Abraham had stayed in Canaan, his faith would have grown, as he would have witnessed God taking care of him the worst of circumstances. FB Meyer notes,

“How thankful should we be that the Bible does not shrink from recording the story of the sins of its noblest saints! What a proof of its veracity is here, and what encouragement there is for us! - for if God was able to make His friend out of such material as this, may we not aspire to a like privilege, though we, too, have grievously violated the high calling of faith? The one thing that God requires of His saints is implicit obedience - entire surrender. Where these are present, He can still make Abrahams out of us, though, by nature, the soil of our being is prone to barrenness and weeds.”

We should all learn the lessons of this story. It is easy to point the finger at Abraham but we need to consider our unfaithfulness. Do we not identify with him in this incident? All of us are good at professing faith but not so good at demonstrating faith. It is all too easy to surrender to expedience and compromise. We need to confess with the great apostle, “*For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing*” (Rom. 7:18). We are apt to trust and obey God as long as things are going well for us. When the crisis of life comes (and they will), then we all have to “run to Egypt” for help. It may appear the “logical” thing to do but the consequences will never be right.

We cannot control our circumstances but we can control our reaction to our circumstances. There is never any excuse for disobeying God's word, “*There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it*” (1 Cor. 10:13). Egypt may give you their wealth but they will exact a heavy price on your testimony. Whatever the threat, don't run to Egypt. Run to the sovereign Lord and you will find, “*The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer; my God, my strength, in whom I will trust*” (Psa. 18:2). Every pilgrim can sing,

*Through many dangers, toils and snares  
I have already come  
'Tis Grace hath brought me safe thus far  
And grace will lead me home.*

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. How can we live as pilgrims and keep ourselves free from loving the things of this world?
2. Why do we fail so often in a crisis?
3. What do we learn about God in this incident?
4. Are there any strong Christians in this world?
5. How should we react to changing circumstances?