

GENESIS 12:10-20 (OUTSIDE THE LAND OF PROMISE)

Introduction: Today we're going to continue through, and finish up, Genesis 12. In these verses are some things that seem foreign to our current idea about how to do things and Abraham, the great man of faith, is often called weak, lacking faith, or even sinful in what occurred. But I've never looked at these verses this way.

What we need to do when reading the Bible, is put aside our own thoughts which come from a modern world view and try to insert ourselves into the times, locations, cultures, situations that we read about. If we don't do this, we can find ourselves making unfounded judgments about the way things were done.

This isn't always easy, because some of the things that happen are so foreign to us, that we simply can't process how these things could be. When we come to passages like this, we need to continually ask ourselves, "What is God trying to tell me here?"

If we do this, then we will be far better off than throwing unfounded accusations at biblical figures. When the Bible condemns an action, we should too. But when it doesn't, it usually means that we should accept it at face value and not insert our own condemnations, but instead attempt to learn from them.

Text Verse: Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines;
Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food;
Though the flock may be cut off from the fold,
And there be no herd in the stalls—¹⁸ Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy
in the God of my salvation. Habakkuk 3:17, 18

May God speak to us through His word today and may His glorious name ever be praised.

I. Going Where God Leads

In the first half of Genesis 12, God had made the great promise and proclamation to Abram –

“Get out of your country, From your family And from your Father’s house, To a land that I will show you. ² I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

In obedience to this, he departed just as the LORD had spoken to him, taking along his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran.

As he passed through the land, the LORD appeared to him and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” It would be good to note that it says “**to your descendants** I will give this land.” It doesn’t say that Abram would receive it.

After building an altar to the LORD at that place he moved two more times. First to the mountain east of Bethel and then further south, into the Negev desert.

This is where we start today’s passage –

¹⁰ Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land.

The famine, like all natural events on earth, was directed by God. Abram would have no doubt about this as he already had a relationship with the Lord, had heard His promises, and had believed them and offered offerings to Him.

Many commentaries barbecue Abram for leaving the Promised Land and heading to Egypt, stating he lacked faith in the move. I don’t see that here

at all. The land promise was made at this time to his descendents, not to him.

He received the promise and believed it, confirming that belief by building an altar and offering on it. And then after that he moved further south. Maybe he was sightseeing and checking out the land. We have nothing else to go on. But eventually a famine comes.

Famines are used throughout the Bible for the correction of the people of the land. Abram was living among the Canaanites and certainly saw their lifestyle and may have even preached to them, who knows... A famine comes along at some point and there's no reason to think that Abram didn't realize it was to correct the very people he was dwelling with – the Canaanites.

A good example of this kind of correction from God due to disobedience is found when King David took an unauthorized census of the people of Israel. Famine was one of the choices David was given as punishment in 2 Samuel 24:13 –

“So Gad came to David and told him; and he said to him, ‘Shall seven years of famine come to you in your land? Or shall you flee three months before your enemies, while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days’ plague in your land? Now consider and see what answer I should take back to Him who sent me.’”

David chose wisely because he understood God's great mercy, even to the disobedient –

“And David said to Gad, ‘I am in great distress. Please let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies *are* great; but do not let me fall into the hand of man.’” 2 Sam 24:14

And of course, this led to David's purchase of the land which became the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Even in disobedience and punishment, God's purposes always work out to fulfill His plan.

The Promised Land is mountainous and it is completely dependent on two seasons of rain in order to grow its crops and provide water. Apart from correcting the Canaanites, the famine may have had a secondary purpose of teaching Abram that everything comes from the Lord and so he was completely dependent on Him. He would also learn that direction and deliverance is found in Him alone.

And so the natural thing to do would be to go where the Lord was providing food and water, to Egypt. I can't personally find any fault in Abram's decision. It's logical and it's what any right thinking person would do.

What would be less right thinking would be to stay put in a land with no hope of providing anything to eat or drink. But we too often get stuck in our rut and become unwilling to move, even though it's the right thing to do.

We can look at famines in America in the past and around the world even now and see people who won't simply get up and move when it's time to do so. Whose fault is that? In some cases, it's because of national borders or war, but in many, it's simply a resistance to move on.

And in the same way, how often do we get spiritually dried up in a church that has nothing to offer, like a barren desert, but we stay because we feel at home with the people around us... as if they are the reason for staying. In cases like this, we hint that God is only a side issue and a secondary priority in our spiritual life.

Clinging to a spiritually dead church because it's our home would be like Abram staying in Canaan when there was nothing to eat. We need to follow the Lord and His provision, not sit idly and become so malnourished, either physically or spiritually, that we are no longer of any use to Him or to those dependent on us.

And so off to Egypt he goes. The Hebrew name for Egypt is Mizraim. This name came from one of the sons of Ham, a brother of Canaan. The English name for Egypt comes from the Greek.

One possibility is that it goes back to a king named Aegyptus, but what is more probable is that it comes from the color of the soil around the Nile which the Greeks called aegyptios and also from a vulture which has the same dark color which is called aegyptus.

¹¹ And it came to pass, when he was close to entering Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, “Indeed I know that you *are* a woman of beautiful countenance.

Believe it or not, Sarai is probably somewhere around 65 years old at this time. What a silver-tongue Abram must have been to call a lady of this age “a woman of beautiful countenance.” Oh, but she really was as we’ll see in a moment. He wasn’t just being nice, but Sarai was a woman of true beauty.

I don’t want to tread on any thin ice here, but if I can think of a modern parallel to Sarai that everyone has seen, I’d propose Raquel Welch. I didn’t say “I’d propose TO Raquel Welch.” I was merely suggesting that she is one such as Sarai.

Raquel Welch was born in Chicago on 5 September 1940 and that would make her as of today 71 years, 8 months, and 29 days old or 3743 weeks old, or 26,204 days old, or 628,896 hours old, or 37,733,760 minutes old, or 2,264,025,600 seconds old.

And just to check and make sure she didn’t suddenly wrinkle up and blow away since her last movie, I did an image search on Google and yes, she still looks lovely.

So if Raquel looks good at this age, then there is no reason to assume that a woman younger than her couldn’t be just as lovely in Abram’s time as well. And as a second reason to believe this, Sarai lived to 127 years of age and so she was really only in her middle ages at this time. Although the ages of people continue to decrease throughout Genesis, at this time, 65 really isn’t that old.

¹² Therefore it will happen, when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, ‘This *is* his wife’; and they will kill me, but they will let you live.

Abram was so convinced of her beauty that he actually feared for his life. I do this a lot when I’m out with my own wife. She is so incredibly beautiful and such a pleasant soul, that I’m continuously in fear around her. I know exactly how Abram felt.

¹³ Please say you *are* my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you.”

In Genesis 11:31, we saw that Sarai was Abram’s sister because she was a daughter of Terah his father. Later, in Genesis 20, we’ll see that she was actually Abram’s half sister, meaning she came from a different mother. This is what that account says –

¹¹ And Abraham said, “Because I thought, surely the fear of God *is* not in this place; and they will kill me on account of my wife. ¹² But indeed *she is* truly my sister. She *is* the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. ¹³ And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father’s house, that I said to her, ‘This *is* your kindness that you should do for me: in every place, wherever we go, say of me, “He *is* my brother.”’”

So Abram isn’t lying, nor is he asking Sarai to lie. They simply aren’t telling the whole story. I think every commentary I’ve ever read which addresses this issue says that what Abram did was wrong, lacking faith, and/or sinful – every one of them.

And yet, I’ve read this story probably 50 times and I’ve never felt this way about it. The logic of these commentaries is that he was willing to sacrifice his wife for his own safety and that he was lacking in faith toward God in asking her to say this.

That’s really inserting a personal opinion and a personal worldview into the story. Here’s an example of a typical commentary on this story. This one is from Matthew Henry –

“The grace Abram was most eminent for was faith, and yet he thus fell through unbelief and distrust of the divine Providence, even after God had appeared to him twice. Alas, what will become of the willows, when the cedars are thus shaken.”

How do we know that this very action of Abram wasn't an action **based on faith**, not lacking it? Let's read it again –

¹³ Please say you *are* my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you.”

He'd been given a promise by God that his descendants would be given the land. Nothing was said about Sarai – and to this point, she's barren. There is nothing to suggest that Abram was required to have only one wife and we'll see that after her death he will have another wife named Keturah, and concubines to boot.

He has no idea that Sarai will ever have children, only later will come God's promise that the child will come through Sarai. All he's doing here is ensuring that he won't be killed because he's her husband. Does this in any way negate his belief in God's promise?

So why should we assume Abram was either lacking faith or sinning. One thing is for sure, if Abram were killed because of Sarai, her life would certainly be in jeopardy. With him out of the picture, she would be at the whims of whoever got to her first.

We're going to see in just a few chapters that when Abram's nephew Lot is abducted, he goes after the entire army who took him, fights against them, and brings Lot and the others back safely. Why don't we assume at this point that he wouldn't do the same for her when the opportunity arose?

In other words, he may see Sarai as the very instrument which saves him in the first place and keeps him alive. God has made a promise to him and she is a part of that plan. I have no problem at all with what he's done here. The very thing that makes him a faithful man is that his actions were based on faith.

If God were to come to one of you and promise that you'd be wealthy someday, would you assume that a pot of gold was going to fall out of the sky at your feet? Or would you assume that He would use your circumstances to get you to the point He promised?

I think any reasonable consideration would say that both you and your surroundings are involved in the process. You're simply exercising your faith through hard work and the opportunities that God places in your path as you go. Abram is doing the same.

II. I Will Bless You

¹⁴ So it was, when Abram came into Egypt, that the Egyptians saw the woman, that she *was* very beautiful.

Abram was born 352 years after the flood and this about 75 years later or about 430 years after the flood. There probably wasn't much difference in the complexions of the world's people by then.

Although changes certainly occurred as people moved away from Babel and started breeding among family groups, they would start to have more and more differences between them.

The Chinese would look more and more Chinese the further east they moved and the Scandinavians would look more and more Scandinavianish the further north they moved, but these changes would be gradual.

If you look at the people in paintings from 500 years ago, they look pretty much like their offspring 500 years later. So the beauty of Sarai isn't so much a beauty of difference and novelty, but a real beauty which would be recognizable in any society.

¹⁵ The princes of Pharaoh also saw her and commended her to Pharaoh.

Archaeology apparently shows that by this time there was already a monarchy established in the area. This was about 430 years after the flood

and about 330 years after the Tower of Babel, but the people had moved as far as Egypt and established a large society.

According to Jewish and Arabic writers, it was at the time of Reu the son of Peleg that Egypt was established and this is actually right in line with the Bible, so we can be confident it's correct.

And that's really not hard to imagine when we see what kind of a society America grew to in much less time. After the signing of the Declaration of Independence, we went from 13 rural colonies with a few larger cities to 50 states filled with industry, agriculture, and a large society.

The main seat of government when Abram moved to Egypt was in the delta region which is in the northernmost part of the land and very close to where Abram probably arrived. The people under Pharaoh would have immediately noticed Abram and his large company arriving from outside of their region.

None of this is improbable and in fact, it's more than likely, especially considering God's hand in it all.

¹⁵ (con't) **And the woman was taken to Pharaoh's house.**

Regardless of what Abram thought when he asked Sarai to say she was his sister, this couldn't have been easy on him. This doesn't mean his faith had to be weakened at all, but being taken in by Pharaoh isn't the same as being taken in by some lesser person.

He may have planned to rescue her otherwise, but it would be a lot less likely under Pharaoh. However, Abram is described throughout the Bible as a man of faith and he certainly exercised his faith in prayers to God for his wife.

Once again, I just don't see things the way other commentators do. I don't see anything sinful or lacking faith in his actions and if you look at how things do turn out, there's no reason to think they aren't a response to

prayers of faith, offered by a faithful man. As James says it in the New Testament –

The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much. ¹⁷ Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed earnestly that it would not rain; and it did not rain on the land for three years and six months. ¹⁸ And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth produced its fruit. Prayer really does work.

¹⁶ He treated Abram well for her sake. He had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys, and camels.

In the process of handing over Sarai, Abram is actually blessed just as God promised. He received all kinds of gifts because of her and these are the wealth of nomads. If you travel around the Middle East, you'll see the nomadic families with all of their livestock and possessions. The more of these, the higher status they are.

So concerning both the blessings promised by God and the safety of Sarai, we need to remember that not everything that happens is recorded in the Bible. Only the things that are relevant to the story are given to us.

Abraham will do this same thing again in Genesis 20. He will tell Abimelech the King of Gerar that Sarah is his sister. After Abimelech finds out that she is his wife, God will speak to him and say this:

“Now therefore, restore the man’s wife; for he *is* a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore *her*, know that you shall surely die, you and all who *are* yours.”

We’re often not given all the information in the biblical account to allow us to reason out what happened based on other passages in the Bible. Abram was a prophet and so why can’t we assume that every step he’s taking is taken by faith. He understood that everything will work out according to God’s plan.

Speaking of Abraham and his line, right down to Israel, we read this in the 105th Psalm –

¹³ When they went from one nation to another, From *one* kingdom to another people, ¹⁴ He permitted no one to do them wrong; Yes, He rebuked kings for their sakes, ¹⁵ *Saying*, “Do not touch My anointed ones, And do My prophets no harm.”

Did Abram know this? There’s no reason to assume he didn’t. God had given him a promise and so why should he think that things wouldn’t apply in this situation too?

I don’t mean to belabor the point about what he did with his wife, but nowhere else does the Bible say that what Abram did was wrong or that he lacked faith and so I think we need to avoid that line of thinking and see God’s hand in everything that’s occurred.

And in our own lives, we need to do the same. I don’t care how bad a situation is or how frustrating it is, or how much we may lose – financially, personally, or interpersonally. Whatever happens, we need to understand that it happened because God allowed it and so it’s a part of what He ordained for us.

If we can see that in everything that happens, then we really are living by faith in a world which would otherwise seem scary, overwhelming, or maybe even pointless.

But the psalmist said we can have confidence in what happens when we trust in the Lord –

⁵⁷ *You are* my portion, O LORD;
I have said that I would keep Your words.
⁵⁸ I entreated Your favor with *my* whole heart;
Be merciful to me according to Your word.
⁵⁹ I thought about my ways,
And turned my feet to Your testimonies.
⁶⁰ I made haste, and did not delay

To keep Your commandments.

⁶¹ The cords of the wicked have bound me,
But I have not forgotten Your law.

⁶² At midnight I will rise to give thanks to You,
Because of Your righteous judgments.

⁶³ I *am* a companion of all who fear You,
And of those who keep Your precepts.

⁶⁴ The earth, O LORD, is full of Your mercy;
Teach me Your statutes. Psalm 119

One last thing about Abram's time in Egypt – ancient tradition recorded by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus says that it was he who delivered arithmetic and astronomy to the Egyptians. These were sciences which came from the Chaldeans of Babylon where Abram came from.

If this is true, then all of the wisdom for the great achievements of Egypt like the building of the pyramids came from Abraham. Only when they had been given insights from him were they able to combine them with the great physical construction which is found throughout the land.

III. The Wife is Restored

¹⁷ But the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.

The first time God's chosen people enter Egypt, which was 430 years after the Flood, it results in plagues on Pharaoh's house. And then 430 years after that, the chosen line of Israel will again be in Egypt, enslaved by the Egyptians under Pharaoh's rule and it will again result in plagues.

As it says in Ecclesiastes 1:9 and as we will learn is O so true, both in the Bible and in history –

That which has been *is* what will be,
That which *is* done is what will be done,
And *there is* nothing new under the sun.

The patterns of the Bible are rich, complex, and astonishing. How wonderful it is when we think about how God has woven everything together in this great drama we're participating in.

God shows that He is in complete control of the situation. The psalm I read earlier said, "He permitted no one to do them wrong; Yes, He rebuked kings for their sakes..." Even when it may seem that things had turned out for the worse for Abram, the Lord had a handle all of it each step of the way.

And it is no different in our own lives. He made a promise to Abram and Abram believed it. He has made a similar promise to us and we need to hold fast to it, even when things seem beyond our control... what is it? Romans 8:28 –

"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

Should we have any less faith in whatever our trial is than Abram did? This is exactly what he is commended for in Hebrews 11, the great Hall of Faith of the Bible, and it is what God will commend us for when we stand in front of him.

¹⁸ And 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'? I might have taken her as my wife. Now therefore, here is your wife; take *her* and go your way."

Regardless of whether Abram acted in faith or faithlessly, he gets rebuked by Pharaoh. God's hand of judgment for having this prophet's wife in his home must have been heavy on him. This is so evident to him that instead of killing him, which you'd think he'd do, he realizes that would be an even greater mistake.

So instead, he rebukes Abram and ensures him that he hadn't yet done anything to her. "I might have taken her as my wife" means that to that point she hadn't been violated by him.

Before we finish up this verse, let's look at the similarity in terminology between this account and that of the Exodus, 430 years later, when Pharaoh speaks to Moses –

Pharaoh says to Abram, “Now therefore, here is your wife; take *her* and go your way.”

Pharaoh says to Moses, “Then he called for Moses and Aaron by night, and said, ‘Rise, go out from among my people, both you and the children of Israel. And go, serve the LORD as you have said. ³² Also take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone; and bless me also.’”

Two Pharaohs – 430 years apart – both bid the prophet of God to be gone.

²⁰ So Pharaoh commanded *his* men concerning him; and they sent him away, with his wife and all that he had.

And so Abram left having journeyed to Egypt, gained more wealth, and was also delivered from the famine of the land of Canaan. God had protected him and blessed him in his pilgrimage and he would continue to do so all the days of his life.

In a spiritual application of what we've seen here today, I'd like to remind you from the sermon two weeks ago that Abram pitched his tent between Bethel, the House of God (a picture of heaven), and Ai, the heap of ruins (a picture of hell). After that, he headed south and then into Egypt.

In the same way, Jesus came and dwelt among us as a human being, living on earth between heaven and hell. From there, he journeyed into the land of chaos, pictured by Egypt.

You see, like Sarai who belonged to Abram, but was taken to the house of Pharaoh, we were all created by God, but we strayed into the land of chaos and sin. From that place though, we have been delivered by Jesus, our rightful husband.

By faith in Him and what He has done, we can be rejoined to God and He will safely take us back to the Land of Promise. Abram means “Exalted Father” and Sarai means “Princess”

To our great and exalted heavenly Father, we are a princess and a treasure worth seeking out. And so He stepped out of His eternal home of heaven and walked among us. He keeps us safe – even when at times we might think we are left unattended.

This is why I believe Abram had faith during the entire episode. It’s because his life and his actions only look forward to the greater salvation found in Jesus. May we never forget the great deeds God has accomplished on our behalf in the Person and work of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Abram in Egypt

Now there was a famine in the land
And so Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there
The famine was severe which came from God’s hand
And so to a more fertile land, his journey he did prepare
And it came to pass as they closed in on their destination
Outside of Egypt, Abram told Sarai his wife
You really are a beauty, almost beyond imagination
And for a beauty like you, other people will want to take my life
Please my lovely bride; say that you are my sister
That it may be well with me for your sake
And that I may live, and not killed by another mister
Yes, for you certainly my life they will take

So it was when Abram came into Egypt finally
That the Egyptians saw the woman, she was very beautiful
And the princes of Pharaoh told him of her immense beauty
And so she went to his home, to Abram she was so dutiful
And Pharaoh treated Abram well for her sake
He gave him sheep, oxen, donkeys, camels, and servants too
What a trade it was, so much did Abram make
Why Abram could have started his own little zoo

But the Lord plagued Pharaoh with great plagues because of Abram's wife
So much so that Pharaoh feared even for his own life.
And so Pharaoh called Abram and asked him quite plainly
What is this thing which you have done, even to me
Why didn't you tell me that she was your wife?
Why did you say she was your sister instead?
I could have taken her and then lost my own life
Yes, because of you, right now I could be dead

Now therefore, here is your wife – take her and go your way
I don't want to see you any more, not another day
Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him
And they sent him away with his wife and all he had
Yes, they sent him away before things got too grim
And when Abram left, they were surely very glad
Now in the story of Abram there certainly is a lesson
For each of us to remember as we live out our days
We need to be sure of our convictions, not just a 'guessin'
That God is in control and He deserves all our praise

Live your life with faith like Abram had
And in the end, you'll see that life ain't that bad

Hallelujah and amen...