



SECURITY AT WHAT PRICE?

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

Catalog No. 1403

Genesis 12:10-13:4

Third Message

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November 19th, 2000

In our last study we looked at Abram's call and his immediate, obedient response to forsake family and country for a new land. We noted how he walked through the whole land "step by step," in three stages, picturing the ideal conquest of the land. Next, Abram sanctified the land by faith, building altars and calling on the name of the Lord (i.e. bearing witness to those around him, cf. Exod 33:19¹). In Abram we discover what it means to be truly human: God's man follows God's call to a place he doesn't know (symbolized by the *tent*), then he sanctifies it by faith into what is holy, through worship (building *altars* at the "crossroads" of life) and evangelism ("calling on the name of the Lord").

Having completed this journey of faith, Abram now faces three tests regarding the new promises of land and seed. From his story we learn that it is not enough to have initial faith. Faith is a dynamic, not a static thing. It must be tested in order to grow. Every believer will find his or her faith severely tested, honed and refined. Now, just as Adam was tested with regard to what he ate, in this instance Abram will be tested by lack of food. This scene foreshadows Israel's testing in the desert (Deut 8:1-11) and finds its climax in Christ, who triumphed over the tempter when he was hungry in the wilderness (Matt 4:4).

I. The Journey to Egypt (12:10-20)

A. Facing the Crisis – Abram's Pre-planning (12:10-13)

Now there was a famine in the land; so Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. (12:10, NASB)

The narrator begins by highlighting the fact that there was a famine in the land of promise — a very severe famine (Hebrew: "*heavy*"; cf. Gen 26:1; 47:4; Ruth 1:1). Unable to support his family, Abram does what most Semitic nomads did when food was scarce: he heads southwest to Egypt. Because it was irrigated by the Nile, Egypt was blessed with abundance. The Egyptians did not have to depend on seasonal rains for their crops (see Deut 11:10-12). People could almost tell the time of day by the rise and fall of the tides from the Nile delta. Sarna gives an excellent illustration of the common influx of Bedouin shepherds who regularly crossed into Egypt for seasonal pasturing of their flocks in the delta. He quotes a report from an "Egyptian frontier official sent to his superior, the 'Scribe of the Treasury,' concerning Edomite shepherds to whom permission was given to cross into Egypt." The report reads:

"We have finished letting the Bedouin tribes of Edom pass the fortress, to keep them alive and to keep their cattle alive."²

So Abram heads for the security of Egypt, but in his mind it is only a temporary venture (suggested by the verb "*sojourn*").

And it came about when he came near to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, "See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman; and it will come about when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, 'This is his wife'; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you." (12:11-13)

Everything appears to be fine until the destination comes into view. That is when fear overtakes Abram and he voices his concern to Sarai. These are Abram's first spoken words in Scripture. Like Adam's first words, they speak of the beauty of his wife. Even at sixty-five she is very attractive. But, unlike Adam's words of poetic praise for his wife, which ascends into heaven, Sarai's beauty provokes fear in her husband. He lacks legal protection against the tyranny of local inhabitants who may try to satisfy their lusts with her, then kill him and take Sarai for themselves, leaving her unprotected in a foreign land.

So Abram asks Sarai his wife to lie on his behalf, saying that she is his sister. Putting Abram's plan in the most positive light, his statement is a half-truth. Sarai was indeed his half-sister. Some Jewish commentators (Sarna) refer to a dual status given to some wives in that culture of "*sister-wife*," which gave them superior legal status. Attributing the best of motives to Abram, as Sarai's "brother" he could ward off potential suitors with delaying tactics until the famine ended (this proved to be the case for Rebecca, 24:55, and Dinah, 34:13-17); then the couple could return safely home. In this way it may "go well" with him on account of her, which he further defines as, "I can keep on living on account of you." So instead of dying on account of her beauty he can continue living on account of her willingness to lie.

But, far from attributing positive motives to Abram, the narrator clearly condemns his action as a lack of faith. There is no mention of prayer in the text. There is a glaring absence of the "*tent*," "*altar*," and the "*calling on the name of the Lord*," the things that gave Abram his new identity in the land. Comparing this scene with Genesis 3, we find Abram in the role of the tempter,

asking his wife to lie on his behalf.

In reply to Abram's request, Sarai makes no verbal response. Her silence symbolizes her obedience.

B. The Crisis Out of Hand (12:14-16)

And it came about when Abram came into Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And Pharaoh's officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. Therefore he treated Abram well for her sake; and gave him sheep and oxen and donkeys and male and female servants and female donkeys and camels.

Events unfold just as Abram had foreseen. The Egyptians recognize Sarai's beauty, but then things escalate out of control. Rather than the common male population desiring her hand in marriage, and Abram taking on the mantle of brother-protector, Sarai's beauty finds praise on the lips of Pharaoh's chief officials. Her praise goes all the way to Pharaoh, the only one who could *take* a wife without a brother's consent. In the Hebrew text, the word *Pharaoh* falls at the end of each of the three phrases, landing with an emphatic thud. Abram had not planned on this: his wife now in Pharaoh's court, the promised seed now severely threatened. "The very ruse that he had relied upon became a source of evil to him."³ And, according to Abram's words, so it happened. He was treated extremely well on account of her, but very differently, and painfully so, than he expected. Pharaoh makes him rich, bestowing on him a multitude of gifts to show kindness to Sarai's "brother."

The narrator includes a detailed description of the gifts to emphasize how wealthy Abram had just become: a great herd of cattle and sheep, oxen and donkeys, servants to manage the wealth; and female donkeys and camels (which were rare, having just been domesticated) to transport everything, representing the best that Pharaoh could give. Abram was hoping that things might go well on account of Sarai. Not only did things go really well, he got filthy rich in the process. But what price did he pay for his security? He now must live with the painful irony of being a rich man who had just lost his true wealth, his wife, and probably his future as well.

What will happen to Sarai? Will she be violated? What will happen to God's promised seed? Will salvation history be put in jeopardy? Again we find the resolute grace of God overruling lack of faith and bad choices.

C. The LORD's Intervention (12:17-20)

But the LORD struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. (12:17)

The mother of Israel is in Pharaoh's den, but God intervenes to save the royal family: "the LORD struck Pharaoh and his house." The verb can be also translated

"touch," as it is in Genesis 20:6, when God prevented Abimelech from "touching" Sarah. So God touches Pharaoh's house with great plagues lest he touch Sarai and violate her. Instead of bringing blessing, Abram's lack of faith brings a curse. Living under these plagues (we can only imagine what they were) gets Pharaoh's immediate attention. Something is dreadfully wrong, so he investigates to get to the bottom of the matter. The plagues struck just at the time when he acquired Sarai. The only explanation must be that she is Abram's wife.

Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go." And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they escorted him away, with his wife and all that belonged to him. (12:18-20)

The text is replete with verbal echoes from Genesis 3. Immediately Pharaoh *summons* (the Hebrew is *qara'*, "called," the very thing Abram is supposed to be doing with the LORD) the guilty party for questioning. He reprimands him for the deceptive deed (in the exact wording of God's reprimand to Eve, Gen 3:13), then for his silence ("Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?"), and finally, for his lying, which placed the whole nation at risk. Pharaoh's reaction appears a little extreme to us who live in an age when adultery is condoned. But in the oriental world, adultery was severely condemned. Cassuto quotes an old Assyrian law which may reflect the general consensus of all nations in the Fertile Crescent. It stated that if a man should happen to go on a journey with a married woman (a man other than her father, brother, or son), and he was not aware that she was married, he had to swear in an oath that he did not violate her, and then he to pay a fine to her husband.⁴

After being subjected to Pharaoh's verbal tirade, Abram utters not a word in his own defense. His silence is an apt symbol of his guilt. Unlike Adam, who placed the blame on others (his wife, and ultimately, God) when questioned about his sin, Abram takes full responsibility. His deception was wrong. His lack of faith and trust placed his wife at risk and caused a nation to incur the wrath of God. "This teaches us that untruth is not only ethically reprehensible, bringing retribution in its train, but is also injurious from the practical point of view, since it has no foundation in fact and must sooner or later be exposed and do harm to the person who resorts to it."⁵ Just as Sarai sat silent before Abram's request, so he now sits silent before an angry Pharaoh. He will not speak until he has fully obeyed and returned to the land (a good model of repentance).

Pharaoh wastes not a second issuing the command, "Now behold your wife! Take (her) and get out!" The verb "take" is used three times. Pharaoh is saying, "I took her from you (v. 15, 19), but now you come and take her back (v.19) and get out of here!" His command

to go (*walek*) is a sad reminder of God's first command (*lek leka*) for Abram to leave for the land of promise. To ensure that their departure is immediate and that they arrive safely at the border unmolested, Pharaoh dispatches the couple with an armed escort. In this manner Abram and Sarai leave Egypt and return to the promised land. Their leaving is much more open and public than their deceptive arrival.

II. The Return Journey Back to the Land (13:1-4)

So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, he and his wife and all that belonged to him; and Lot with him. Now Abram was *heavy laden* in livestock, in silver and in gold. And he went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place of the altar, which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the LORD.

So the couple make a forced departure out of Egypt and back to the land. Notice that God not only completely restores everything that is Abram's, he is *heavy laden* with riches — more than he had ever dreamed. The narrator uses the same adjective to describe their wealth as he did the famine. The famine was "*heavy*" in the land, and Abram is now "*heavy*" laden with wealth. But these riches are dual-edged. God had blessed Abram despite his lack of faith, yes, but his new found riches will prove to be a reminder of the terrible price he paid for seeking security the world's way. Without God's direct intervention he would have lost his wife, his future family and his eternal promises.

What kind of conversation did these two, Abram and Sarai, have on the way home? Did they exchange words? Did their eyes ever meet? Did Sarai give Abram the cold shoulder all the way to Bethel? Did Abram's newly acquired wealth sting him with embarrassment? Picturing the scene, they appear like a small nation on the horizon. There was no way to hide what had happened. It's one thing to hide the gold and silver, but what does one do with cattle and camels driven by a host of newly acquired servants? It's like coming home in a fleet of platinum Mercedes cars. God certainly has a way of keeping us humble.

Yet, despite what was going on inside them, we learn how resolute Abram was to get back on track. Armed with fresh resolve from what he knows was the direct intervention of God, he retraces his way, step by step, back into the land of promise. He journeys on, staying just ahead of the herds, until he is back in the Negev. He does not wait there but continues on until he reaches the last place when he was in a proper relationship with God. He is going back to beginnings, back to that place where he pitched his tent between Bethel and Ai and built an altar. There he is immediately restored, and once again *calls upon the name of the LORD*. Rather than feeding his hunger on the security of the world, he calls out to God to feed him in the land of promise.

What can we learn from Abram's journey to Egypt?

III. Lessons in Egypt

A. The Necessity for Testing

The first thing we learn from this text is that our faith must be tested, honed and purified. As James says, "Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, known that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (Jas 1:2-4). Faith cannot be static. Faith is dynamic and needs to be constantly exercised. Adam, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, David, even Jesus was tested. In the wilderness Jesus learned to trust the word of God to provide for his hungers rather than feeding himself, as the devil suggested. Thus he quoted Deuteronomy 8:3, "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4).

That is the purpose of every test. We are to learn to trust God for everything. We are to get up each morning and feed on the word of God.

B. The Price of Security

The text not only speaks of the necessity of being tested, it also shows the nature of our weakness. It is tempting to appeal to natural wisdom in times of crisis. We can operate with the best of motives in order to care and provide for of our families, but ultimately, we have to ask ourselves, Are we living by faith, or are we taking the world's way to provide security? And, if we are seeking security the world's way, we have to ask, at what price?

People must face this issue in this valley where homes are unaffordable and jobs have undergone a revolutionary redefinition. To achieve financial security, they no longer work for wages but for stock options. They earn salaries, but what they really labor for is those elusive stock gains. The cost, of course, is the long hours demanded by the company. Basically, companies own their employees. Though vacation time and holidays are included in the package, people who take their allotted days off, especially at one time, are frowned upon and penalized in subtle ways. In order to keep them motivated, employers say that this "sojourn" is just a temporary thing until the public offerings are announced or the company is bought out. Sadly, however, the sojourn often turns out to be a permanent condition. For some, the promise of infinite wealth is fulfilled. But this text would pointedly ask, Is our wealth a reflection of God's blessing or our lack of faith? And secondly, what price are we paying for it? Are we sacrificing our real wealth of a wife and a future with our children? And are we sacrificing our own identity (*tent, altar, calling on the name of the Lord*) and instead of bringing a blessing to those around us are we bringing a curse instead?

Men, if I could be so bold, permit me to offer a couple of suggestions. First, we ought to set clear boundaries

for our work. There is nothing wrong with working hard and well. Of course, there are times when we have to work harder and longer, but we need to set clear boundaries that our families can count on. Would it be terribly wrong to limit our work week to 50 hours? Why not take the phone off the hook between 6 and 8 p.m. each evening and preserve the sanctity of the dinner hour? What would it cost you to resolutely set aside your weekends to be with your children? What would happen in your marriage if you took your wife out to breakfast once a week? Would the company collapse if you planned a two-week vacation for your family every summer? These are merely suggestions. These choices will cost you, but the investment is worth it. My three daughters are all grown now and are out of the home. I can honestly say that I have never regretted the time I spent in their worlds. Now when they come home, it's always a joy to watch them pore over the albums of countless memories of family vacations we took through the years.

There is one more lesson to learn from our text.

C. The Grace of Restoration

No matter how much we fail, God is committed to getting us back on track. Though Abram leaves the land and sacrifices his wife's honor, God acts to put things right. Ten times in this text we hear the word *wife*. The point could not be more emphatic: Abram may jeopardize his wife to seek security, but God will come raging back, shouting at him even through a pagan king, to restore his priorities to their proper place. Then, once Abram has heard the stinging rebuke, he retraces his steps back to the exact spot where he left God's land. At that place he is fully restored as a man of faith.

No matter how long and how far we have strayed, God's calls us back. Adam and Eve were driven out of the garden, yes, but Abram and Sarai are thrown out of Egypt and marched back into the land, wealthy beyond measure. God is determined that man be blessed. That is his grace in action. Amen.

*"Ho! Every one who thirsts, come to the waters;
And you who have no money come, buy and eat.
Come, buy wine and milk,
Without money and without cost.
Why do you spend money for what is not bread,
And your wages for what does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good,
And delight yourself in abundance." (Isaiah 55:1-2)*

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1. The Lord is the subject of the verb in Exod 33:1, therefore it is not a reference "to prayer but to the proclamation and explanation of the Lord's name and the attributes connected therewith." Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part II, From Noah to Abraham* (trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964), 332. I have depended heavily on Cassuto's work for my observations on this text.

2. Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 102.

3. Cassuto, *Genesis*, 353.

4. Cassuto, *Genesis*, 357-358.

5. Cassuto, *Genesis*, 361.