

The Ups and Downs of Trust

Gen 12:4-13:4

Main Idea: God puts us through crises to deepen our trust in him, but even in failure, he graciously welcomes us back to him.

Call: Lamentations 3:21-26 & Ps 56:3-4

Scripture: Matt 14:25-31

I. Intro

Last week, we began our studies in the life of Abraham and Sarah from the book of Genesis. Abraham and Sarah are the couple from Ur of the Chaldeans, whom 4000 years ago now, the living God called into an adventure of trust. An adventure that obviously impacted their lives, but also impacts you and me living 4000 years later. As God told them in the initial call, go from your country to a land I will show you, and if you do, you will be blessed and become a blessing, even a blessing to all families on earth. All families? Really? All families? Yes. Because God's call upon their lives set in motion, as one writer says, "an unthwartable work of new grace" (Johnson MP3). Grace which we will continue to see throughout their story, and grace that ultimately culminates in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And, it's through him that all people can indeed find life and find blessing. Paul will go onto say that Abraham and Sarah are paradigms of faith for all of us. All who follow in their footsteps, in their tracks of trust, will find what Abraham and Sarah found, namely friendship with the living God.

Now, when Paul talks footsteps, he probably has in mind Abraham and Sarah's two most famous steps. The first step being the one that led them from Ur of the Chaldeans to the land of Canaan. The second step being the culmination of the story when Abraham takes the promised son, Isaac, up Mt. Moriah. But, between these two steps, there are many other steps of trust. Some might even be called missteps.

Our text today recalls one of those missteps. And, I am so happy that the writer of Genesis included texts like these. Otherwise, we may think that following in the steps of Abraham and Sarah would require perfection. Our text shows us otherwise. Our text today will hopefully be an encouragement to all of us who are traveling our own fantastic adventure of trusting this God.

So, I invite you into our text, chapter 12, verse 4. We finished last week with the implied question, "How will Abraham and Sarah, at this time Abram and Sarai, respond to God's gracious and extraordinary promises that we looked at last week?" Chapter 12, verse 4.

II. Up (12:4-9)

12:4 So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. 5 And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had

acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan, 6 Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7 Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. 8 From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. 9 And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb. (ESV)

A. Abram and Sarai Go (4-5a)

Abram and Sarai respond in trust. They throw their entire weight upon this God who they barely know. Notice that Abram is 75 years old. That tells me that God is into calling retired people into ministry. Notice also that Lot goes with him. Abram was called to leave his father's household behind, but Lot comes with him. Lot's presence is ambiguous. And as we will find, every time Lot shows up in the story seems to bring trouble.

But, we see here that Abram and Sarai step out in radical trust. They leave their country, their culture and most of their kin behind. They leave their identity behind and set out for Canaan from Haran, and the text simply says they arrive there. It would have been about a 500 mile journey (800 km). Although the narrator isn't interested in giving us details of the trip, it most likely would have been a difficult journey with all of their possessions and animals, and moving through bandit infested lands.

B. Abram and Sarai Walk (5b-9)

But they arrive in Canaan. There is no welcoming party for them, but there are people there. As they walk through the land "*there were Canaanites there.*" This is probably a foreshadowing of the obstacles to trust that will arise from this new identity that they are embracing. Perhaps this is when the doubt and anxiety arise in Abram. "*Did I really hear this God correctly? Is this really where we're supposed to be? Should I have talked more to Sarai?*" But, in the midst of this doubt and anxiety, this God, this good God, appears again with assurance, with another "*I will give,*" verse 7. This God only gives good gifts to his children (James 1:17). It's as if this God wants to reassure and encourage Abram again that he is faithful. He can be trusted.

And, how does Abram respond? Abram "*the pilgrim becomes Abram the builder, building neither tower nor city, but altars*" (Hughes, 187). Altars are places to meet God, symbols of a life of trust. Abram is worshiping this God for the first time, building altars throughout the land, right next to Canaanite shrines. You can imagine the Canaanites watching him as he travels through the land claiming it for this God.

As Calvin said, Abram "*endeavored, as much as in him lay, to dedicate to God, every part of the land to which he had access, and perfumed it with the odor of his faith*" (Greidanus, 143).

Abram is perfuming the land with the odor of God as he walks through the land. He is worshiping. Worship is not simply inner thoughts and feelings, although it does include them.

Worship expresses itself in public action. “Worship is a verb” (Webber book). Abram is proclaiming God everywhere he goes, filling the land with the fragrance of the living God.

This Calvin quote has really stuck with me throughout this week. I think Calvin is referring to what Paul says in Corinthians that we are “the aroma of Christ” (2 Cor 2:15). With what kind of perfume am I filling the land with as I walk through my days? When I’m at home, when I’m at work, when I’m driving on the road, when I’m at my kids sporting events? Yikes! That’s a tough one! Lord forgive me! Is the aroma of Christ emanating from me – the fragrance of grace and love and joy and acceptance and peace? Or is it a fragrance of antagonism or division or judgment or superiority? Am I blessing others or only myself? That has been very convicting for me this week.

Abram is claiming this land for the living God effectively saying, “In you God I trust.” And, the fragrance of God fills the land.

But, then, verse 10a.

III. Down (12:10-20)

10 *Now there was a famine in the land...*

A. Abram’s Crisis (10a)

And, we’ll stop there. After a tremendous start and mountaintop high in fellowship with God, immediately a crisis. Not only are there Canaanites in the Land, but now a famine. God has promised him the land, but immediately the land can’t even sustain them and their animals. What will Abram do now? How will he respond to this crisis?

And, we recognize that this is common in the life of faith. Maybe you’ve had this experience. We have high points, mountaintop experiences, but the good times don’t last forever. We come down the mountain only to be confronted with trouble and turbulence.

- Elijah defeats the false prophets on Mt. Carmel and afterward a threat is made on his life, which leads him into deep depression (1 Kings 19:1-4).
- Jesus gets baptized, hears his Father’s assurance, *“You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased”* (Mk 1:12-13). And, afterward, the spirit drives him out into the wilderness for testing.
- Some of the disciples are taken by Jesus to a mountain where he is transfigured before them. And, what happens next? They come down off the mountain and are thrust immediately into a situation which they don’t know what to do.

Why does the life of faith have mountain top experiences and then crises?

- The mountaintop experiences are to provide encouragement and assurance during this fantastic adventure of trusting God. Mountaintop experiences are to encourage us in the day to day life of following Jesus.

- Because the crises will come. I wish I could promise you that there would be no trouble or turbulence in the life of faith. But there will be trials and testing. I know some of you are in the middle of severe trials and testing right now. Why does God do this? The crisis is there to prove and improve our trust in him, to prove and deepen our trust in him. And, in the midst of them, it can be hard to see that God is good. But, we try to remember what Paul says in Romans (8:28): *“In all things, God works for the good of those who love him.”* God is good all the time, even when we can’t see it. God works deeply in us through our crises. The turbulent times can be transformative if we let them. Did you ever notice that transformation doesn’t happen when we are comfortable? Transformation happens when we are uncomfortable, because that’s when we must lean more into God and his promises.

For Abram, God is preparing him to be his man, just like he is preparing you to be his person. So, a crisis. For Abram, a famine. What will Abram do? Will he respond in trust or in fear?

Verse 10b:

So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.

B. Abram Leaves and Lies (10b-13)

Abram leaves. He responds in fear. Notice he doesn’t seek the Lord. Instead of throwing his weight on the Lord, he throws his weight on himself. He fears for his life and leaves the promised land, not because God told him so, but because he is afraid of starving to death. He bolts for Egypt. This is the natural place to go at that time, for Egypt always had food because of the Nile River. He doesn’t plan on staying long, only staying until the famine is over.

But, it gets worse, verses 11-16:

11 When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, “I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, 12 and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. 13 Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.” 14 When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. 15 And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house. 16 And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.

So, the famine hits, and Abram immediately fears that he will starve and bolts for Egypt. In Egypt, he fears that the Pharaoh will take his life. So, he layers fear upon fear by instructing Sarai to lie and say that she is his sister. He leaves, then lies. Sarai’s in her mid-60s at this point and very beautiful, and he is afraid that the Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the world, will kill him to have her, if they are a married couple. So, he makes her lie to save his own skin. Notice when Abram instructs Sarai to lie, how he repeatedly focuses on himself, verses 12-13: *“When they see you, they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.”*

Abram has gone into self-preservation mode. And, we ask, what are you doing man? What about Sarai? It's really interesting to see the comments from the male and female commentators at this point. The male commentators say words like "ambiguous situation" and "making the best of a bad situation" (Freitham, 48). The female commentators say Abram was "brutal" and "despicable" (Baldwin, 38). I agree with the female commentators, Abram *is* being despicable at this point! He is treating Sarai like property, hoping to save his life because of her beauty. But, in doing so, he is risking the entire program, putting the entire promise of descendants at risk. If she has a child by Pharaoh, it would compromise her status as the matriarch. And, besides, aren't you, Abram, supposed to be a blessing to the nations? How is lying a blessing?

The amazing thing is Abram will do the exact same thing in chapter 20, only this time with Abimelech in southern Canaan. In both cases, Abram throws himself onto himself and a lie! Now, in chapter 20, we do find out that Sarai is actually his half-sister. In other words, it is a half-truth that she is his sister, but a half-truth is still a full lie.

So, in the Abram story, we see the addictive power of sin. One writer defines sin this way: "Sin is a basic and all-encompassing self-centeredness. It is the need to control in order to get what we want. An attitude that colors every relationship, including the one with God... We may [say we] trust in God and love God a great deal, but at the essential level, we are in control or we struggle to be... Sin is a deadly infection and everyone is in the grips of this" (Miller, 45).

And, fear is a primary cause of going into self-centered mode. Abram is afraid. And, Abram allows fear to control him. Fear directs his emotions and his decisions, which prevents him from trusting God. This is why "fear not" is the most constant refrain in all of Scripture. Because fear prevents us from trusting God and going deeper with him. We don't trust God if we live in fear.

This is an especially appropriate word for us in our culture. Our culture is full of fear and fear-mongering. Today, it seems we are encouraged to be afraid of everything.

- We're supposed to be afraid of high cholesterol, of high blood sugar, of new diseases and now of old diseases,
- We're supposed to be afraid of old age, of whether our pension funds will last, of funding for Medicare and social security.
- We're to be afraid of high taxes.
- We're to be afraid of whether our houses are declining in value and whether we are going into debt.
- We're to be afraid of a lack of insurance, of insurance companies.
- We're to be afraid of layoffs or of a lack of cutting edge skills.
- We're to be afraid of guns. We're to be afraid of no guns.
- We're to be afraid of identity theft or someone stealing our passwords.
- We're to be afraid of ISIS.
- We're to be afraid of Muslims and anyone who doesn't look like us.

- We're to be afraid of progressives. We're to be afraid of conservatives.
- We're to be afraid of not getting into the right high school, of not getting into the right college.
- I'm afraid of putting my kids through college.
- And, there are lots of marketing professionals out there playing on our fears, and they'll offer all kinds of ways to relieve our fears (and our pocketbooks in the process).
- And, of course, on top of all of this, there is the evil one who wants us to be fearful of everything so that we will not live a life to the full, and become an aroma of grace and love and joy and kindness, and we won't bless others. For when we let fear control us, we will not be a blessing to others, because we are only looking out for ourselves, like Abram. This is the point behind the verse that perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18). Because love seeks the best interests of the other. And, we love because he first loved us.

Abram fears. He doesn't trust God. And, now, he's in trouble.

C. Abram's enrichment (14-16)

In verse 14, we see that as the events unfold, they unfold exactly as Abram thought. The Egyptians are struck by Sarai's beauty. Pharaoh takes her into his harem, making her a subject of the most powerful man in the world. And, Pharaoh does treat Abram well, enriching him with all kinds of stuff.

But, he's in trouble. What about the promise of land and descendants? Abram is out of the land, and Sarai is in the harem of the most powerful man in the world. It's only been a few verses and it seems the entire program has crumbled. It's a seemingly hopeless, even impossible situation that Abram in his fear has caused.

Verse 17:

***17** But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. **18** So 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,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go." **20** And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had. (ESV)*

D. But, God (17)

In the midst of an impossible situation, we get the best words in all of scripture. "But the Lord!" But God! But God! God interrupts and intervenes. When everything seems hopeless and impossible, God intervenes. Impossible is nothing for God. It's the turning point of this story, and the turning point in all of our stories. But God! God doesn't turn away. God doesn't walk away. Even with Abram's misstep, God doesn't give up on Abram. God protects Abram and Sarai, and why? Verse 17b: For the sake of Sarai! God protects them for the sake of Sarai.

God brings diseases on Pharaoh and the Egyptians for the sake of Sarai. In chapter 20, there is a “but God” moment as well, verse 20:3. God will close the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarai. And, in both cases, these pagan leaders call out Abram about his lie. In both cases, these pagan leaders are shown to be more righteous than Abram. Both view adultery as a great wrong, and they both lecture Abram on proper ethics. In fact, adultery is known as the “great sin” at that time. Marriage was sacred even to pagans.

So, even though Abram tries to “work out his own morality” here, in the intersection of the three cultures— Mesopotamian, Canaanite and Egyptian – we see that there is a moral standard at work (Achtemeier, 175). There is a standard morality that crosses every culture and every civilization. Morality is not relative, regardless of what Hollywood says or the media says. Morality is not relative. And, of course there would be an innate ethic built into us, because we’re made in his image. CS Lewis makes this argument powerfully in his book, *The Abolition of Man*, a book which he considered to be his most important work. I think it’s fascinating that those pagan cultures back then are more righteous than our western culture today.

In both texts, chapters 13 and 20, the leaders deport Abram and Sarai. Here, Abram returns to the Promised Land, verse 13:1:

IV. Abram’s Return Step Up (13:1-4)

13:1 So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb. 2 Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. 3 And he journeyed on from the Negeb as far as Bethel to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, 4 to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of the LORD. (ESV)

After this misstep, Abram and Sarai return to the promised land to the Negeb, but they don’t stop there. They continue on to the exact place where he had first called on the name of the Lord. He goes back to that place, to where he had that mountaintop experience, where he met with God. Was it because he felt he needed forgiveness? Was it because he felt a need for a new start with this God? I think so. He then throws his entire weight back on God, calling on the name of the Lord again. As Joyce Baldwin notes, “It is important to notice that he came back, that the way was open for him to come back, and that the Lord received him back” (Baldwin, 39).

V. Conclusion

God in his amazing grace and abundant mercy welcomes Abram back with open arms. It tells us that any prodigal can come home. As someone has said, grace means “you can start over again,” and that’s exactly what Abram did. For our God is good. He is good. I grew up with not a good view of God. I thought every time I failed, God was going to punish me with a lightning bolt. I don’t know where I got that idea, but that’s not the living God. The living God is good and you know what? If you believe that someone has your best interests in mind, that that person really does love you and will protect you, you can trust them. God is good, has your

best interests in mind, loves you and will protect you. You can throw your entire weight upon him.

As a reflection to the sermon, we're going to close with a short guided prayer. I'm going to call the band up here to join me on stage. And, I want the rest of us to bow our heads.

Guided Prayer

What crisis are you facing right now? What turbulence is rocking your life right now? God is giving it to you to prove and improve your trust in Him. He is good and you can trust him through it. You don't need to fear. Bring to mind the crisis you are facing right now. Maybe it's a crisis with your family. Maybe it's a crisis with job or lack thereof. Maybe it's a crisis with your marriage. Maybe it's a crisis in your classroom. Maybe a crisis with your health. Will you decide right now to throw it and yourself onto the living God, the one who made you, the one who loves you, the one who will never leave you? With your eyes still closed, I invite you to take your hands and place them on your legs. Rest them on your legs, palms up. And, now, I invite you to mentally place in your palms whatever crisis it is you are facing, and close your hands around your crisis. Now, I invite you to lift your hands and open your hands, as though lifting your crisis to the Lord, offering them to him because you trust him. And, then turn your hands over so you can't hold onto your crisis any longer (Johnson MP3).

Over and over and over again, you O Lord have proved faithful to your people. In your mercy and grace, will you work deep down in our souls to trust you more and more and teach us to not be afraid. Amen.

Benediction (adapted from Ps 55-56):

As you go, as Abram and Sarai went,
Fear not, for he is with you, and he is for you
 He keeps track of your tossing and turning,
 He even keeps your tears in his bottle,
Cast your burdens on him
He will sustain you and
not permit you to be moved
You can trust him.
Amen.

Resources

Achtemeier, Elizabeth. *Preaching from the Old Testament*

Baldwin, Joyce, *The Message of Genesis 12-50 (The Bible Speaks Today Series)*

Freitheim, Terence, *Abraham: Trials of Family and Faith*

Greidanus, Sidney. *Preaching Christ from Genesis*

Hughes, Kent. *Genesis: Beginning and Blessing (Preaching the Word Commentary)*

Johnson, Darrell W. *Regent MP3 3690B*

Lewis, CS. *The Abolition of Man*

Miller, Keith. *Sin: Overcoming the Ultimate Deadly Addiction*

Weber, Robert. *Worship is a Verb*