

Learning to Walk by Faith Genesis 12:10-20

Anxiety is a common human experience. It seems we are all to some degree or another fearful or anxious about our future. The secular culture sees it as a syndrome, a disorder, or a mental illness. The Scripture doesn't see anxiety as an immutable diagnosis, but as a willful behavior, a harmful pattern of thinking, and a lack of faith and trust. Fear, worry, and anxiety result from an unhealthy fixation on the future and a lack of faith. While God doesn't promise we will be free from anxiety in this life, he also doesn't justify or excuse it. But he does teach us how to deal with it.

The Apostle Paul commanded us, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil 4:6-7). While anxiety does reveal our frailty and weakness, it also exposes a distrust of God. Worry is a desire to control your future. It is an intense, all-consuming, vitality-draining, joy-stealing, and soul-crushing exercise in futility that prevents you from living fully in the present. It is a futile attempt to predict the unpredictable, control the uncontrollable, secure the unsecurable, and prevent the unpreventable. As Corrie Ten Boom once wrote, "Worry doesn't empty tomorrow of its sorrows; it empties today of its strength."

Fear, worry, and anxiety are the opposite of trust; they are incompatible with faith. They lead to **doubt, discouragement, and disobedience**. If faith is life walking, anxiety is crippling. If faith is like hearing, anxiety is deafening. If faith is like breathing, anxiety is suffocating. Anxiety doubts God's inherent goodness, questions his ability to provide, forgets the assurance of his promises, and usurps his prerogative to exercise his wise providence over our lives.

From this story, we are reminded that our faith is not perfect. It is oftentimes fragile and frail. But the object of our faith is perfect and strong. Oftentimes, our faith is revealed as weak, maybe weaker than we thought. Whenever our expectations are unmet, our desires unfulfilled, our plans frustrated, when our control is disrupted and proven to be an illusion, when our comfort is threatened, when things do not go according to our wishes and demands—we are tempted to **question God's goodness, character, power, and his promises**.

The context to this story is vital to our understanding the point. Abram was a brand-new man with newfound faith. He had just gone through a major change. By God's sovereign grace, he was transformed from an unbelieving pagan to a worshipper of the one true God. He became a man of faith. Abram was just chosen and called by God—the heir of promise (12:1-9). We must understand that Abram's faith was **genuine and active**, but it was not yet cultivated, experienced, or mature. It was brand new, infantile, and blooming.

Not only was his faith new, but Abram had the newfound assurance of God's promises. They were divine guarantees—divine "I wills." God gave him an incredibly solid foundation to build his life upon—unilateral, unconditional promises that God would accomplish for him. But his initial faith was weak, and he had to learn to walk by faith and not by sight. He had to learn that worry leads

to wandering. Doubt leads to disobedience. Faithlessness leads to folly. Mark Vroegrop says, "Waiting on God is living on what I know to be true about God when I don't know what's true about my life."¹

1. Anxiety Leads to Hasty Decisions (v.10)

A severe famine was in the land. The text explains that it was a heavy, grievous, burdensome one. So, Abram immediately sought refuge in Egypt. Of course, Canaan depended on rain, but Egypt had a constant source of water in the Nile. There are three famines mentioned in Genesis, during the patriarchal times (12:10; 26:1; 41:56). In chapter 26, God gave Isaac specific instructions. In chapter 42, Jacob instructed his sons to go down there to buy grain so they would not die.

I think it would be wrong to assume that this was Abram's best course of action. Two things are evidently absent—1) God's instruction to go to Egypt, and 2) Abram's seeking of God's will. At what point did he head down to Egypt? The first sight of famine? The first feelings of hunger? God just brought him to the land and now Abram was questioning him? This is the Promised Land? It's as barren as my wife. How are you going to provide for us? He panicked and grasped at the first sight of deliverance. Abram's decision seems to be rather imprudent and impulsive.

In Proverbs 3:5-6, we are instructed to "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths." It seems as though Abram decided this on his own. This is made even more clear by his scheming and meddling. He did not trust or acknowledge God. His paths were not straight; they were crooked. His plans included lies and deception and placing his wife in a very precarious situation.

We may be tempted to think that God was silent, but his word was already spoken plain and clear. We should not make decisions out of fear. Isaiah 31:1 warns, "Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help and rely on horses, who trust in chariots because they are many and in horsemen because they are very strong but do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the Lord!" It seems that this decision was impulsive and based on fear.

2. Anxiety Leads to Reckless Scheming (vv. 11-13)

The text explains that Sarai wasn't simply beautiful; she was very beautiful. She was jaw-dropping and drop-dead gorgeous at 65 years old. Abram feared that people in Egypt would be so jealously consumed by her beauty that they would kill him to take her as their wife. As he faced a seemingly insurmountable problem, he forgot God's promises and allowed his fear and anxiety to take control. He designed an elaborate ruse. Fear and anxiety are motivated by self-preservation.

There was some wisdom in this strategy. His motives might have been well-intentioned. He anticipated a problem and tried to avoid it. He sought to protect himself. But he tried to control the circumstances and outcome. He did this in his own strength, in his own wisdom. He did not

¹ Mark Vroegop, *Waiting Isn't A Waste* (Crossway, 2024).

consult God. And he placed his loved one in a very bad situation. He was self-dependent and self-sufficient. He trusted in himself and in his own human solutions.

Deception is a major theme throughout Genesis (think Jacob and Esau, Laban and Leah, Joseph's brothers). Deception is carried out. It is shown to be wrong. It moves God's plan forward. But it is descriptive not prescriptive. If you pay attention, you'll see that it always comes with long-term, unintended consequences. It always comes with collateral damage of broken trust, fractured relationships, and these sinful tendencies are learned and practiced by later generations.

His mistake was believing that his life was his own hands—that his wellbeing and preservation depended upon him. Even worse, he placed his wellbeing on his wife, foolishly willing to barter with her and sacrifice her. In seeking to protect his wife from the Egyptians, he ended up **objectifying her** in the process—using her as a pawn in his scheme and placing her in a dangerous situation. Notice what he asks her to do. He places his entire security on her—"It may go well with me because of you." Because of Sarai? What about God? What about the Creator and Redeemer who just made unilateral promises to you regarding your life and protection and wellbeing and success. Neither he nor his wife were meant to carry this burden.

In the fog of fear and anxiety, he clearly forgot the promises of God. He lost sight of God's Word. He forgot the protection clause: "He who dishonors you I will curse" (12:3).

3. Anxiety Fails to Account for the Worst Possibilities (vv. 14-16)

Elisabeth Elliot explains that "Fear arises when we imagine everything depends upon us." Worry attempts to predict the future and to minimize risk. It attempts to know and control all future variables before they happen. They try to anticipate and avoid the worst-case scenarios and all of the "what ifs," then worry about them before they happen. It tears us apart and eats away at us. Fear is what we feel, worry is what we do, and then anxiety is that same fearful feeling intensified. **But there are some dangers that are impossible to predict.**

Abram hoped that by claiming to be her brother, he could fend off all potential suitors with promises of marriage without actually giving her away. He thought it could buy him some time. Brothers often tried to delay and control the details of their sisters' marriages, especially the dowry. Rebekah's brother, Laban, oversaw and directed her marriage to Isaac with her father Bethuel (Gen 24:55). Jacob's sons oversaw and directed the marriage of Dinah, delaying it, and deceiving Shechem (Gen 34:13-17).

Notice that in these verses while she's in Egyptian custody, she's referred to as "the woman." She becomes the woman, scorned and objectified. The situation was far worse than Abram expected. This was the worst-case scenario that he didn't foresee. Pharaoh himself, one of the most powerful rulers, saw her beauty and took her into his harem. She was quickly abducted. We know that the kings before the flood took for themselves wives as they pleased. The kings after the flood took for themselves wives as they pleased. When the nation of Israel wanted a king like the surrounding nations, Samuel warned them that the king would **take, take, take**—he'll take your

horses, take your gold, and take your wives. And of course, we know that David did this. He abused his power and took what he had no right to take. This is characteristic of absolute power.

Abram thought he could control the situation, but it quickly went off the rails and got out of his hands. It very quickly turned into a situation much bigger than he imagined—the highest, most powerful individual, Pharaoh himself, took her into his own harem. Abram lost control and learned that he never had it. Abram did not fear without cause, but he sinned by fearing too much and too soon. He failed to trust in God's promises and instead leaned on his own machinations.

4. Anxiety Fails to Account for the Best Possibilities (v. 17)

Abram quickly learned that this whole situation, like the rest of his life, was outside of his control. He had no ability to control the circumstances. His scheming and wisdom and meddling had let him down and actually made things worse. He brought himself and his wife into this very unfortunate situation in which he now lost all control and all leverage. God immediately intervened. What did God do? "God plagued Pharaoh with great plagues." This word most often refers to physical illness or a skin disease like leprosy. God touched them and struck Pharaoh's house with some kind of severe physical infirmity.

God protects his servants by undertaking their cause even against the most powerful monarchs. Psalm 105:12-15 recounts God's faithful intervention on behalf of his people: "When they were few in number, of little account, and sojourners in it, wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people, he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account, saying, 'Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm!'"

Bruce Waltke points out, "The profane scheming of the elect couple almost shipwrecks their faith pilgrimage. The Lord's gracious intervention, however, provides the plot's resolution and saves them."² Abram didn't need to scheme. He didn't need to meddle. He didn't need to put his wife in that situation. He may not have even needed to go down to Egypt. The God who bound himself to Abram through **his unconditional choice, unfailing call, and unilateral promises**, now acts on his behalf. We see the **invincibility** of the promises and the **omnipotence** of the God who promises. We see that his gifts and calling are irrevocable, despite our failings.

5. Anxiety Makes Sense for God's Enemies (vv. 18-19)

Notice the desperation of Pharaoh. You can hear it in his words and see it in his actions. He is terrified. This is a powerful man now humbled, distraught, and gripped by intense fear of the living God. This is like Pharaoh in Exodus who let the people go out of desperation. There it took plague after plague after plague, but here, one plague—one small manifestation of God's power—brings him to his knees.

² Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Zondervan, 2001).

God is more powerful than the most influential leaders of any age. God humbled and humiliated this wicked ruler and brought him to his knees. He crippled him. Imagine this: one of the most powerful dictators in the Ancient Near East on his knees before Abram—a nobody from nowhere—begging him to take his wife back and to leave his country immediately and even to take with him all the endowment he was given.

The Israelites plundered Egypt on the night of the Exodus. Abram here surprisingly pillages and plunders Egypt. God worked it together for good. No matter how bad we complicate things, God works it all together for good. When we fall apart, we do so in the palm of his hand.

6. Anxiety Comes with Long-term Consequences (v. 20)

It is clear that Abram didn't protect his wife, Sarai; God did. Abram didn't preserve his own life; God did. Abram didn't preserve the promise; God did. Abram didn't secure the blessing; God did. Abram didn't enrich his material wealth; God did. God did it all, despite Abram's failure.

What can we learn from this? It seems that all of Abram's fear, worry, anxiety, and scheming accomplished nothing good. He lost more than he gained. Remember, there are long term, unintended consequences to our sin and scheming. Before you're tempted to think this all worked out, it is worth noting that **Abram's ill-gotten gain was both a blessing and a burden. It was providential and plagued.** This specific accumulation of material brought him problems for years to come. First in the strife with the herdsmen of Lot in the next chapter, and then the tension over an Egyptian maid named Hagar in chapter 16. Where do you think they picked her up?

Sometimes it is better to suffer than to scheme. We complicate things when we scheme. Would they have been better off without these material blessings? Ultimately this is a story of God's faithfulness despite Abram's faithlessness. Despite the weakness and crisis of faith, God fulfills his promise. It is unilateral. Abram could not attain security by his own intelligence or his own schemes, God had to deliver him from these impossible circumstances. The best treasure he walked away with was a tangible reminder of God's enduring faithfulness.

Matt 6:25-34—Jesus had a lot to say about anxiety.

Fear is incompatible with faith. Anxiety and worry come from a heart that doesn't trust in God. Fear is a fog in our minds; worry is a perfect storm inside our hearts; anxiety is a crushing burden on our backs. **Worry leads to wandering; doubt leads to disobedience; faithlessness leads to folly.** Self-dependence is a lie. Self-sufficiency is a false refuge. Worry and anxiety are consuming and controlling emotions. Fear is paralyzing. It makes us do irrational and irresponsible things. We rationalize foolish ideas, tantalize foolish thoughts, and strategize foolish plans. All of these point to a lack of faith.

Ed Welch says, "When life is hard—especially when life remains hard—the allegiances of our hearts become more apparent."³ Trials reveal our hearts. Trials reveal where our hope lies. They reveal the basis of our faith and who we actually trust. Trials reveal the weaknesses and holes in our faith. Trials shake us off of every false hope and teach us to trust the Lord. Do we hope in God or do we hope in ourselves? Do we trust God or in comfort and wealth?

Our faith is tried, proven, purified and strengthened in the fiery trials. **We must discipline our hearts and minds not to wander by worrying.** According to Hebrews 11, faith is by definition the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen. If you find yourself in a position where you are unable to see ahead, where you can't see the details or the destination, and can't imagine God's deliverance, that's where faith matters most.

1. We must understand that fear, anxiety, and worry result directly from a lack of faith.
2. We should never make decisions based on fear and anxiety.
3. We must let God be God. Nothing good comes from playing God, for you are not infinite, omniscient, or sufficient, and you weren't meant to be.
4. When we experience these negative feelings, we should inspect our hearts to discern what we're trusting in other than God. We must get to the root problem.
5. We must repent of our self-sufficiency and control and then learn dependence and trust.
6. We must learn that God's Word is more trustworthy than our feelings and circumstances, and more reliable than our own wisdom and strength.
7. We must acknowledge God's presence in every trial, cling to his promises, and go to him in prayer.
8. We must lean on him and his unconditional promises, his unchanging character, and his unceasing presence.

D. A. Carson is helpful here: "The promise of deliverance, the assurance we're accepted by the Almighty God, is tied not to the intensity of our faith or to the consistency of our faith or to the purity of our faith but to the object of our faith."⁴ Like Abram, our faith perseveres ultimately because it is preserved; and that in turn, motivates us to persevere even more valiantly in the face of real danger and in the midst of real doubt.

³ Ed Welch, *Side by Side* (Crossway, 2015).

⁴ D. A. Carson, "Good Friday from 5 Angles," The Gospel Coalition, 2023.