



Part 32 – Abraham in Egypt

Genesis 12:10-20

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance of Abraham in the Scriptures and in the progress of redemption. Living 2,000 years before the birth of Jesus, Abraham remains for us THE great example of believing faith. He was a pagan living in the city of Ur with no idea who the God of creation was. But the LORD called to Abram and told him to go to an unspecified land.

In Hebrews 11 we're told that Abraham left Ur and Haran, "not knowing where he was going." He followed the LORD on an 800 mile trek that took him east to west from Mesopotamia toward the Mediterranean and then into Canaan – the land God promised to give him.¹ It was a land filled with pagans – people who practiced human sacrifice – people who threw their own babies into the fires of Molech. And as Abraham surveyed that land he built altars to the LORD along the way – so great was this faith in God's promise.

1. God's providence to strengthen our faith.

Vs. 10

- Remember where we are in the narrative. In the previous verses Abraham is the recipient of God's sovereign grace. Though a pagan living in a pagan land, God nevertheless drew Abram to himself and made with him his gracious covenant (12:1-3). Abraham would be the one with whom God would formalize the promise he made in Genesis 3:15 to send the Messiah and redeem his people. The Covenant of Grace will be further revealed and ratified in chapters 15 and 17. The rest of the Scriptures unveil how God directs all things (*providence*) in keeping that covenant and bringing it to consummation within the Person and work of the Lord Jesus. The Lord promised to give Abraham the land of Canaan where he would be provided for. So Abraham journeyed from Ur and traveled the length and breadth of the Promised Land (12:4-9).
- And then, after these glorious works of God's grace and provision we read in 12:10, "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." Those words come to us like a spiritual gut punch. "Why now?" we wonder. Why does there have to be a difficult trial right after such a rich blessing?
- But is this not the perplexing pattern in which God's providence so often seems to unfold? What begins with such blessing, soon turns to dismay. In this case, no sooner does God give Abraham the land than famine strikes that very land. Lest we think that this is unusual or should be unexpected, let us remember the example of our Lord. In Mark's gospel Jesus enters his public ministry introduced by John the Baptist as the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. And then as Jesus is baptized the voice of his Father proclaimed so that all may hear, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased" (1:11). That revelation of the Triune Godhead, fulfilled prophecy, and the divine nature of Jesus is followed immediately with the account of Jesus' testing in the wilderness. Plenty is followed by a season of barrenness. Promise is followed by testing.
- Consider the Apostle Paul. In 2 Corinthians 12 he recounts (humbly, in the third person) his extraordinary experience of being caught up into Paradise seeing what cannot be expressed in words (vv. 1-4). In the very same chapter Paul tells of the "thorn" which came to him ultimately from the hand of God; a source of acute pain meant to keep him humble. And there again is God's perplexing providence. In Romans 5 Paul extols the worth of a faith that is refined by times of testing: "Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope," (vv. 3-4). The Apostle Peter expresses the same hope for the role of trials: "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 1:6-7).

¹ R. Kent Hughes, Genesis (Wheaton: Crossway, 2004) pg. 189

2. God's faithfulness to overcome our failure.

Vv. 11-16

"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" (vs. 13).

- The journey to Egypt would not have been an easy one. They would have traveled south past Shechem and then Hebron and then turn west around the Mediterranean and into Egypt. This was a major undertaking to leave the land of promise and travel as far as Egypt. Although in Abraham's day Egypt was not thought of as forbidden territory. However, keep in mind that this account was written by Moses during the Exodus years. The original readers would likely have reacted with astonishment that Abraham, the father of the faithful, would have fled the Land of Promise to seek shelter in the land of their pagan oppressor. That reaction may well have been intended. Like Naomi's husband and sons, Abraham fled the land given him by God – the land in which God promised to provide – in favor of more immediate guarantees. Bruce Waltke writes:

"After receiving the promise of the land, Abraham must now, despite hardship and conflict, trust God to provide for him inside the land and protect him outside of it. In his first challenge to believe in God's faithfulness when the land is barren, Abraham will fail to act rightly... The scene is framed by the movement to and from Egypt: 'went down to Egypt' (12:10) 'went up from Egypt' (13:1). Though the verbs 'went down' and 'went up' are normal vocabulary for this movement, they also symbolically depict his spiritual and physical pilgrimage out of God's blessing and back into it."²

- To make matters more complicated it seems that Sarai, Abraham's wife, is particularly beautiful. Abraham sees this as a dilemma.

3. God's power to keep his promises.

Vv. 17-20

"But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife" (vs. 17).

- This account is spare of details. We don't know anything about the plagues or how Pharaoh found out about Sarai's true identity as Abram's wife. The point of this section is to prove God's faithfulness and power to keep his promise: "I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse" (12:3a). That promise is not meant to shed light on contemporary geo-politics. Rather it was a promise made by God to Abraham as a means of preserving the righteous seed. Dale Ralph Davis calls this God's "muscular intervention."³
- The first clause of verse 17 – "But the LORD" – is the first reference to God in this passage. In all of his scheming Abram forgot the One whose power to keep his promise was supposed to be his security. So after Abram makes and executes his plan which seems to put at risk the entire righteous line the LORD makes himself known by direct action. The bottom line is that God will not surrender the outcome of his purposes to the sometimes failing faith of his people.
- "There is an 'overflow' here for believers in the church who claim to share Abram's faith: we must realize that we not only share his faith but often his foibles and his fainting fits and his folly and his fears – all of which tells us that when the wash is all in, God's plan and God's kingdom will come because God will see to it and not because we are such outstanding members of Jesus' all-star team."⁴

*The church will never perish
Her dear Lord to defend
To guide, sustain, and cherish
Is with her to the end.*

² Bruce Waltke, Genesis: A New Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) p. 212

³ Dale Ralph Davis, Faith of Our Father (Scotland: Christian Focus, 2015) p. 25

⁴ Ibid, p. 26