

God's Faithfulness: Our Failures

I. The Covenant

A. The Enhancement of The Blessings

Notice how the promises of this covenant dovetail with the blessings of God at the time of creation (in chapter 1). God promised reproduction and food.

Notice how in the first eleven chapters we track the encroachment of sin into the world, culminating in the shocking behavior at the tower of Babel in chapter eleven. So this covenant, here in chapter 12, marks the place where God steps in and begins the process of restoring what was lost in the Garden at the fall of Adam and Eve.

The covenant God made with Abram required nothing more on Abram's part than "leave it all behind and follow me." That was it! Abram did.

But the covenant enhanced the blessings of Genesis one. More than just reproduction, but Abram would become a great nation! God was not beginning to fill in the blanks of His promises. They looked pretty generic in Genesis 1, but God reveals the details to Abram and it is anything but generic! God promised food in Genesis 1, but He now reveals He is not just going to make sure there is fruit hanging on an occasional tree in some garden, not just a nice garden. No, he is going to give them the whole country, which was later described as flowing with milk and honey! The land God would give them would be rich and fertile and provide bountifully!

We never see the full dimensions of God's promises until they begin to unfold.

B. The Scope of the Covenant

There are three aspects of the covenant blessing.

First, Abram would be blessed.

Second, he will be a blessing.

Third, he will be a channel of blessing.

Two of these three are conditional

1. God will bless Abram and family if they remain faithful to God.
2. Abram and his family will be a blessing to others because of the position of favor with God (because they remain faithful)
3. Through Abram and his family, all the people will receive blessings from God. This is the only unconditional part. God will work through them, even if they fail to receive the blessings for themselves.

We can't be satisfied to merely be used of God. God uses donkeys and jawbones and all kinds of strange stuff to work through. We must remain faithful to personally receive the blessings He has for us.

II. Worshiping God.

God's Faithfulness: Our Failures

6 Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7 The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him.

8 From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. (Genesis 12)

Abram answers the call of God to leave it all behind and follow God to a new land. The journey is about 500 miles and will take nearly a month if they manage to go 20 miles per day. Once he entered the land he made stops at Shechem and Bethel for short layovers, each time building an altar to the Lord.

Here we begin to see some evidence of Abram's religion. He was an idolater, which meant he was religious. He encountered the true and living God and had no problem continuing to carry out his religious duties. He merely switched from idolatry to worshipping the one true God. But some scholars suggest there is more to building these altars than merely having a place to worship. It has been suggested that building such altar sites was tantamount to laying claim to the territory.

If this is true, Abram was claiming the territory in the name of the Lord.

We are always supposed to worship God for who He is, but that is not to say we don't find it easy to break out into worship for the things He has done. You have seen many times when God performs a miracle for someone and they just break out into worship. It happened so often in the Bible when Jesus toured the country healing the sick and raising the dead. Time and again they shouted and danced about and gave glory to the Lord for what He has done.

But here is an instance of worshipping God for what He is still in the process of doing; worshipping God for what He is yet to do. Worshipping God for His promises yet to be delivered.

It is easy to worship God for what He has done in your life. The nobler thing is to worship God for what He has yet to do for you. Worship doesn't just follow God's handiwork. It also precedes it. I am not trying to suggest some kind of manipulative formula that makes God answer your prayers. You don't even have to know what God is going to do. He is worthy of worship no matter what He is going to do. Whatever it is, you can rest assured it is going to be great!

III. Life's Little Detours

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

It is easy to miss the depth of the story here because the narrative moves so quickly. Behind verse ten there some very trying challenges confronting Abram. He moves by faith from his homeland to Canaan. After entering the land, God speaks again to him at Shechem and promises him "This is the land I will give to your heirs."

God's Faithfulness: Our Failures

Then famine hits and Abram is forced to move to Egypt, leaving his promised land behind.

The pathways to God's promises are full of detours. The problem is, we often interpret detours as the end of the promise. Or, we second guess ourselves. "Well, maybe we didn't really hear God. Maybe this was our own runaway imagination."

Or begin to have all these doubtful thoughts. We think God abandoned His promise. Maybe He changed His mind. Maybe we did something to offend Him.

Abram was forced to leave the land that was promised to him. Under these similar circumstances, would we be inclined to despair? Nothing in this narrative is mentioned to indicate Abram discouraged or disillusioned. He handled the detour with patience and without losing faith.

We don't always fare so well. Sometimes the smallest detours unravel us. Our attention span is too short. Our patience runs thin. Our faith is easily shaken.

When Jesus got on the boat and told his disciples, "Let's go to the other side" they didn't know that meant they had to go through a storm. Many detours and dangers fill our path we did not expect. We expect a straight line between point A and point B. But God often leads us on a winding path which rarely makes any sense to us at the time.

I can just hear all the arguments I would have concocted under those conditions. "Lord, why did you lead me here, just to have me move out again?"

"Lord, why the famine? Poor timing, Lord! Couldn't you have waited until after the famine to bring us here?" Why didn't you stop the famine?

But if this teaches us anything, it teaches us that even when we are walking right in the middle of God's will, there will be struggles and detours and inconveniences. We can't buy into the mistaken notion that the middle of God's will is all smooth sailing. It isn't.

IV. The Scandal

¹¹ As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. ¹² When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."

Egypt escaped the famine of Canaan because they relied on the regular flooding of the Nile to keep the soil productive and, in this case, the Nile was unaffected by the drought that was plaguing Canaan. So, Abram found a temporary place to survive while his promised land endured a devastating famine.

Entering into Egypt, Abram does something that has troubled many people who read the story. He made this secret plan with his wife Sarai, that she would pose as his sister, not his wife. Abram believes Sarai is so gorgeous, that when the Egyptians see her, they will want her.

Now, here is the interesting part. Sarai is 65 years old and Abram still thinks she is a knock-out!

God's Faithfulness: Our Failures

So, Abram reasons that if she poses as his sister, they won't consider Abram a threat. But our confusion is, "Wait, if she poses as his sister, won't they think she is available?" It doesn't seem well thought out at all. As it turns out, they do see that she is a woman of rare and remarkable beauty, and they think she is available, and it seems from verse sixteen that Abram negotiated a trade for Sarai, taking some livestock and servants in return. I don't know what Abram's end game was. When they are ready to leave, I guess they will sneak out in the middle of the night. Who knows? It all seems to poorly planned and so messy.

Furthermore, we are disillusioned with Father Abram for being so sneaky and conniving. How can such a corrupt person be considered the great father of our faith?

And we are at risk of drawing faulty conclusions from this story.

First, we might be tempted to conclude that we all have flaws and God is ok with that.

Second – which is a slight variation of the first point – we might think that because it is in the Bible, we are justified in doing the same thing. We can tell little white lies because Abram told a white lie. That is the error of not knowing the difference between what is descriptive and what is prescriptive. Or, another way we put it, is the difference between informative and normative. We are told of many things Bible characters did that we are not supposed to emulate. Being found in the Bible doesn't automatically justify every action.

To further muddy the waters, this narrative does not include a clear moral commentary on Abram's actions. Of course Egyptians suddenly started having these strange plagues and when they figured out it was a curse because Sarai was Abram's sister, they quickly returned her and showed Abram the border. But nothing is said about how God dealt with Abram. The curse was strictly on the Egyptians and that adds to our confusion.

The fact is, the author was trying to relate a story and evidently was not trying to add moralizing comment along the way. It is left up to us, in view of what we know to be right and wrong, to make that judgment. Abram was wrong. God did not approve. The fact is, this is only one of three times Abram did the same thing (including chapters 20 and 26).

Remember, Abram was still developing his relationship with God and had a lot of burrs that needed to be sanded off. God was more interested at this point in Abram's life that he stayed focused on the promise and stayed faithful than perfecting all his character flaws. We can learn something from that as well. God doesn't expect full maturity and perfection out of you when you begin your journey with Him. But He does expect growth and progress. He will take you just as you are, but He is not willing to let you park there. When you first start your journey, you will have plenty of issues. Ten years later you will still have issues, but they had better not be the same ones, or you simply aren't growing, and that is unacceptable.