

Genesis 12:1-20

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[0 : 0 0] all the way to page 8. All right, we're going to look at chapter 12 in Genesis, verses 10 through 20. Let me read this for us if you're there.

Picking up in verse 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. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarah, his wife, I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, this is his wife.

Then 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. When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful, and when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house.

And for her sake, he dealt well with Abram, and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels. But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarah, Abram's wife.

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? Why did you say to me she is my sister, so that I took her for my wife?

[1 : 1 9] Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go. And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.

Let's pray. Lord, we are grateful to be able to come together tonight, together as your people here in this world. Lord, thank you that you have showered your incredible grace upon us, that you have blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ.

And now we get to come to your living and active word, and we get to hear what your spirit is saying to us, your church, so that we might respond rightly to all of this grace and mercy that you have shown to us.

So Lord, help us to do that tonight, we pray. In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Well, I wonder if you've ever faced a test or a trial or maybe some kind of hardship, and in the face of that test, I wonder if you know what it's like to fail, to fall short.

You knew the right thing to do, and yet you didn't do it. Our series this summer is about trusting God.

[2 : 3 3] It's about the Old Testament character of Abraham. And as we said last week, we're studying Abraham, and the study of Abraham is really important for three reasons. Greg laid this out for us last week.

First, it's really important to know who Abraham is and to understand Abraham, because you can't really understand the Old Testament rightly, fully, until you understand who Abraham is. Along with Moses and David, Abraham is sort of one of the key figures in Old Testament history.

Second, we said you can't really understand the New Testament until you understand Abraham. Paul says in the New Testament that we are all children of Abraham. Abraham is the father of all who believe.

So as Christians, we're all spiritual ancestors of Abraham, so we should get to know him so we can understand the New Testament message too. And then thirdly, we said that Abraham shows us a concrete picture of what it means to live by faith.

What does trusting God really look like for us in the day in and the day out of life? Abraham shows us. That's why we've called this series Trusting God, because Abraham is such an illustration, such an example, such a forerunner for us of what it means to walk in faith, to trust God.

[3 : 43] But what we see in our text tonight that we just read is that learning how to live by faith, learning how to trust God, means also learning how to come to grips with our own unfaithfulness. There are times, right, when we don't trust God.

And what do we do about that? Well, we're going to walk through our text tonight and find out. And our passage opens in verse 10. If you look down at verse 10, we'll start there.

Verse 10 says, Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram, now Abram was Abraham's original name, and God later changed Abram's name to Abraham in chapter 17.

We're going to get there in a few weeks. But for now, he's Abram, but I'm going to just keep calling him Abraham, because that's how we're used to calling him. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. So this scene in Abraham's life opens with a severe famine.

I think it's hard for us to imagine what a severe famine might look like. You know, you and I can drive to the grocery store, and it's filled with food every time we go, right?

[4 : 47] But imagine going to the grocery store, and it's empty. There's no food there. You think, oh, that's funny, so I'll go to the corner store, see if there's any food there. Empty. Your fridge, your cupboards, empty.

A severe famine. And it's important to see that this severe famine comes when in Abraham's life. When does it come? It comes right after, right on the heels of Abraham's calling, doesn't it?

In the first half of chapter 12 that we looked at last week, God speaks to Abraham. He calls him to go, right? Leave your country, leave your kindred, head out to a new land where God promises to make him what?

Make him a great nation, and to bless him, and to make his name great, and to give him a land to live in. And God even gives Abraham this great gospel promise that through his offspring, all the families of the earth will be blessed.

And in response, what does Abraham do? He goes. What a spiritual high that must have been for Abraham. The living God just talked to him and said, I'm going to bless the whole world through you.

[5 : 52] Go. And he goes. But now, in our text tonight, so soon after this great spiritual high point in his life, after this incredible beginning to Abraham's story, there's a severe famine.

And I think this teaches us something very, very important. It teaches us that God's calling and God's promise of blessing upon us does not mean that we will have no trials or afflictions or struggles in this life.

Abraham was learning at an early stage, as one commentator put it, that to be in the place of God's appointment is not to be exempt from suffering.

Unless we think that this was just sort of a fluke of Abraham's experience, you know, maybe this is just sort of a weird thing that happened once and done to Abraham. No, you know, we look across the rest of Scripture and we see the same pattern, don't we? When God draws near or when he speaks in a special way in the course of redemptive history, when these spiritual high points come, they're often followed by seasons of unusual testing.

Do you remember Elijah's experience after the high point on Mount Carmel? What happens on Mount Carmel, right? This is this great scene. My kids love this scene when we read it to them in the children's Bible. On Mount Carmel, God literally sends fire from heaven to demonstrate that he's the one true God.

[7 : 19] Burns up an entire altar of wood that's covered in water. And there's nothing left but dust. And in response to Elijah's prayer, Elijah prays and says, God, show everyone that you're the one true God and not all these other gods that people are following.

God says, okay, done. That must have been a high point for Elijah. But what happens right after that in Elijah's life? After that incredible manifestation of God, Elijah ends up on the run, hunted, discouraged, and worn out.

An incredible season of testing right after that. And of course, don't we see this pattern supremely in Jesus himself? After his baptism.

Remember what happened at his baptism? The heavens rip open. The Holy Spirit comes down in the form of a dove. The voice of the Father calls out, this is my beloved Son in whom I'm well pleased. After that incredible experience of the Father's love and presence, what happens next in the life of Jesus?

He undergoes a great testing in the wilderness. 40 days and 40 nights tempted by Satan. Okay, so what does that mean for us? I think it means a few things. First, we should not expect the Christian life, the life of faith, to be free of trial and suffering and testing.

[8 : 38] You know, there are many preachers and teachers out there who will say that the life of faith is one of undiminished health and wealth and blessing, as long as you just believe enough or name enough.

But friends, that's not the biblical pattern. If you're a new Christian here tonight, my guess is if you're a new Christian, you probably know something rich about the Father's love and acceptance.

I remember when I became a new Christian, it was like I was on spiritual overdrive for months because God loves me, right? How incredible is that?

He gave his own Son for me. But, you know, you also need to know that times of hardship are going to come. That's what trusting God looks like. And maybe if you're here tonight, you've been a follower of Christ for a long time.

I bet if we were to talk after the service, you'd say, oh, yeah, that's true. I know what it's like to experience times of testing, times of suffering and hardship. But, you know, I think we also need to remember, if we've been following Christ for a long time, that even following Christ for a long time doesn't exempt us from trial and affliction because we've been through lots of it.

[9 : 43] Aren't we done now, Lord? Don't we kind of get off the train at this point? No, the normal life of faith is a life where there are seasons of hardship, even severe hardship like Abraham faced.

So we need not be surprised. And we don't need to be alarmed as if God's not in control when things start to get tough. Many saints have walked these waters before us, before you.

And this is what trusting God, the life of faith looks like. It looks like high points being followed by times of hardship. But, you know, there's another lesson here in our text.

In the face of this famine, Abraham decides to do what? He decides to go down to Egypt. You see, in the ancient world in Abraham's time, Egypt, with the Nile River kind of running through it, was much more immune to sort of these drought conditions and seasons that would happen in other places like Canaan, where Abraham was.

So, you know, in times of famine, people would often flock to Egypt. And you have to kind of wonder reading this at this point in the biblical story, you know, was this an act of obedience or sort of disobedience on Abraham's part?

[10:51] Was it right for him to go down into Egypt or not? It's hard to say, actually. We don't really know. Because, you know, it's interesting. Later in Genesis, God's actually going to command Jacob to go to Egypt. And he's going to actually preserve the chosen family in Egypt later in the story.

And when we go to the Gospels, we see that God actually commands Joseph and Mary and with the child Jesus to go to Egypt to save them from the wrath of Herod. So, it's not as if Egypt in and of itself is necessarily a bad place to go.

But isn't it interesting that here with Abraham, while we can't say for sure, isn't it interesting that we have no indication that Abraham sought the Lord in this decision of his? That here comes the trial, and Abraham simply says, Egypt I go, on his own initiative.

Abraham took everything into account, one writer said. Abraham took everything into account. Everything but God. And it's interesting, as you follow Abraham's trajectory through chapter 12, he sort of starts, kind of works his way down through the promised land, and boop, right out of it as soon as trial comes.

And it seems that these sort of seeds of unbelief or distrust that we maybe see in Abraham's decision to go to Egypt start to really come to bloom in verses 11 and 13, don't we?

[12:16] Abraham's afraid at this point in his life. And why is he afraid? He's afraid because Sarah, his wife, is so attractive that he thinks the Egyptians will kill him in order to give Sarah to Pharaoh as a gift.

Which wasn't a crazy fear, actually. Pharaohs were known for having large harems in the ancient world, and they were known for paying a handsome fee for an attractive addition to their collection of wives.

So, Abraham's afraid. Now, on the one hand, I think if you're in Sarah's shoes, maybe, I suppose it's a bit of a compliment. Abraham saying, honey, you are so unbelievably drop-dead gorgeous that the Egyptians are going to kill me as soon as they see you.

I mean, that sounds kind of nice, right? Wow. People would kill for me. That's kind of great. But in verse 13, Abraham's fear gives way to his failure of faith, doesn't it?

What's his plan in the face of this? Say that you're my sister, he says. Now, that was technically true. In Genesis 20, verse 12, a little later in the story, we learn that Sarah was the daughter of Abraham's father by another mother.

[13:37] That is, Sarah was Abraham's half-sister. So, it was technically true. But don't you and I both know that using one half of the truth to conceal the other half is clearly a lie?

So, you see the movement from faith to fear to deception. Abraham is showing us how quickly that transition can be made from faith to fear, and how ultimately that fear makes us very selfish.

Because Abraham isn't really thinking much of Sarah's well-being here, is he? Even though he sort of gives her kind of a backhanded compliment. I mean, it's not backhanded. It's sort of this weird thing.

Look at his reason in verse 13. That it may go well with me, and that my life may be spared. Not much concern there for what might happen to Sarah, is there? And here's the really scary thing about what happens in this episode in Abraham's life.

When Abraham gets to Egypt, on the surface, he's actually shown to be right. On the surface. Verse 14, the Egyptians do find Sarah very beautiful.

[14 : 50] Verse 15, she is taken into Pharaoh's house. Verse 16, instead of Abraham being killed, Pharaoh gives him a huge sum. Presumably as a bride price for Sarah. After all, if he's the brother, and if the father's not around, you pay the bride price to the brother.

So he's given this huge financial sum. Sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, camels. In the ancient world, that's like saying a one with a lot of zeros after it. But despite the appearances, you see how far Abraham has fallen.

Faith has given way to fear. Fear to selfishness and deception. Deception and selfishness. Selfishness has led to compromise. And to his own wife being forced into the harem of a pagan king.

And on top of it all, there's a veneer of success. Abraham is made rich. Now again, I think there are a number of lessons for us here.

First, don't we see that the Bible is completely honest about the failings of those whom the Lord chooses to be his servants? The Bible is not whitewashing things at all.

[16 : 10] It is showing us humanity, warts and all. It's funny, Beth and I, our pediatrician, we love our pediatrician. I think he's Jewish, actually.

But, you know, sometimes we'll ask us, like, oh, how are things going with the kids? We're like, oh, great. He's like, oh, you're reading to him? Yeah, good. We read the Bible to him every night, blah, blah, blah. He's like, oh, yeah, what do you read? We're like, we just kind of read through. He's like, man, there's a lot of interesting stuff in the Old Testament. You sure you're reading that to him?

Because he knows that the Bible shows us humanity, warts and all. It doesn't pull any punches. And here we see that even Abraham, the great man of faith, knows what it's like to fail dramatically.

What does that mean for us? Well, first, friends, I think it's a warning to us. It's a warning to us. If Abraham can give way to fear and deception, then surely all of us need to be on our guard.

It's so easy for us to think, oh, that would never happen to me. I would never do fill in the blank. But this story of Abraham should make us very humble.

[17 : 16] We are all susceptible to fear. We are all susceptible to selfishness. We are all susceptible to failure and the worst kind of failure, the failure that looks like success in the world's eyes so that we don't even see it.

So I think this is a warning to us. It's a call for us to be humble before the Lord. But this incident in Abraham's life is also a sign of hope for us.

Because, friends, after all, who of us doesn't know what it's like to move so quickly from the plane of faith to the plane of fear? Who of us doesn't know what it's like to face trial and hardship and testing and suddenly, in the face of that, to be plotting for our own protection and giving no thought to the Lord whatsoever?

Who of us doesn't know what it's like to face trial and fail? But, you see, the Bible is about people who fail.

The Bible is a message for people who fail. The Bible isn't a book for people who have it all together. And the message of the Bible is not for those who find themselves to be always faithful.

[18 : 32] The message of the Bible is for you and for me. It's for spectacular failures. That's who the Bible's written for. And, friends, if there was hope for Abraham, then there's hope for you and me.

And that's where the rest of this passage takes us. The rest of this passage shows us that there is hope. This is the third thing we have to see here, that though we are unfaithful, God remains faithful.

You see, God had promised to make Abraham into a great nation, to give him a land, to bless him, and to bless all nations through his offspring. Which we know in the rest of the Bible means that God was promising Abraham from the very start that the Savior of the world would come through him.

But here in verse 16, where are we in the story? So soon as it's begun, Abraham is where? He's outside the land. And his wife has been given away. No hope for offspring there.

And instead of blessing the nations, he's becoming just like the nations. So soon, and the plan has gone totally to smash.

[19 : 43] But in verse 17, the Lord intervenes. But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

And I hope you see that this was a very severe, yes, but a very severe mercy that the Lord sent upon Pharaoh. You see, unbeknownst to Pharaoh, he had taken another man's wife. And the Lord, rather than let Pharaoh persist in that sin, the Lord sends affliction to get Pharaoh's attention and to get him out of that situation.

Because you see, in the grand scheme of things, friends, it would have been a greater affliction for Pharaoh to remain in that relationship with Sarah, another man's wife, than to experience the temporal affliction of those plagues so that he could get out of it.

You see, there was the Lord's mercy to Pharaoh. Pharaoh, the Lord intervenes. He wakes up Pharaoh. And then Pharaoh turns around and rebukes Abraham. What is this you've done to me? He says in verse 18.

Why didn't you tell me that she was your wife? And you have to appreciate the irony there. Here is Pharaoh, the pagan ruler.

[20 : 50] Pharaoh, in this instance, proving himself to be more upright than Abraham, the chosen man of God. Isn't that interesting?

And by the way, that should be a lesson to us. We shouldn't be surprised when we find non-Christians today who are very upright and moral. That is God's common grace in the world. And here, God's able to use Pharaoh to get Abraham back on track.

Pharaoh rebukes Abraham and sends him back to Canaan with Sarah and all that they have. Now, it's actually kind of hard to say why Pharaoh let Abraham keep all that wealth he had given him.

All that one with all those zeros after it. We aren't even told how Pharaoh found out about Sarah's real relationship to Abraham in the first place. I don't think it's a bad guess to think that the Lord spoke to Pharaoh, telling him not to harm Abraham and to send him out immediately.

But we don't know. But the point here for us is, don't you see, the Lord didn't give up on Abraham. The Lord's faithfulness to his plan and to his purpose remained rock solid, even though Abraham was like shifting sand.

[22 : 08] And what are the results of the Lord's faithfulness? Abraham returns. Look back at our passage. We didn't read this earlier. But look at chapter 13.

Chapter 13, verse 1. So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and a lot with him, into the Negev. Now jump down to verse 3.

And he journeyed on 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 where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of the Lord.

Do you see the arc of this story? Hardship, Abraham's unfaithfulness, but the Lord's faithfulness comes in and it leads Abraham back home.

It leads Abraham to repentance. And it should for us as well. So friends, if tonight you see in your own heart fear and selfishness, if you see in your distant or recent or maybe even present history failure, small and large, if you see faithlessness, then tonight look at the Lord's faithfulness and come home and return.

[23 : 29] Come back to where the Lord found you at first and call upon his name and he will answer.

Let his kindness lead you to repentance, as Paul says in the New Testament. Because you see, in the Bible, the Lord's faithfulness is never an excuse to remain in sin, but it's always the reason to turn and come home.

And friends, don't we know the Lord's faithfulness to us in an even greater degree than Abraham? In Genesis 12, this passage we've been looking at, God afflicts the ruler of a pagan nation in order to rescue Abraham from his failure in sin.

But you know what happens at the climax of the biblical story? That God the Father will afflict his own son in order to rescue us from failure in sin.

That's how faithful God is. That's how much he loves us. And Jesus, God the Son, willingly stands in our place to bear the penalty of our sin so that we might repent and freely come home.

[24 : 39] I mean, think of it. Abraham sees the beauty of his bride, sees that his own life is at risk, and then in fear and selfishness puts her in danger and trades her safety for his own.

But Jesus, in love, sees the beauty of his bride, the church, and trades his safety for ours. He trades his own life down for us.

And he rose again that we might trust him and follow him in the power of the Spirit. And so, friends, if you've fallen short tonight, look at the faithfulness of your Savior and come home.

Return to him. That's what trusting God, that's what living by faith means. It means admitting your failures. It means seeing what Jesus has done for you. And even if you failed again and again, it means laying down your unbelief and coming home to God, to your faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.

Because after all, isn't that where God found us? At the cross. Isn't that the place where we need to return? And as we return there, we find that God always answers. We're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper in just a second.

[25 : 53] And that's the place, friends, where we get to, in some sense, come back to where it all began. Come back to the cross where Jesus died for us and laid down his life for us.

We get to remember Jesus' body broken and his blood poured out. We get to remember his faithfulness to us. So this is a time for us to come back to him with all our heart. So why don't we pray?

Why don't we pray and prepare to come to the table together, remembering that even when we are unfaithful, God is faithful and leads us to repentance. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we are so thankful that when we, just like Abraham, in the moments of hardship and trial, had doubted you and begun to fear and begun to put ourselves and others at risk and began to compromise and cover up.

Lord, in all these ways in which our own faith has been so shaky and faulty, Lord Jesus, your faithfulness remains. It's rock solid. It's an anchor that does not move.

And thank you, Lord, that that gives us the strength, the power that each of us in this room needs to turn back again by your spirit and to come back to you in trust and dependence, knowing that you've covered our sin, knowing that you'll give us your spirit so that we might live for you in faith and dependence.

[27 : 21] So, Lord, now as we come to the table, help us to celebrate in this time all that you've done for us and seal in our hearts, Lord, we pray your mercy and grace. Amen. Amen. Well, I wonder if, Greg, would you mind helping serve tonight?

Matt, would you help serve tonight? So, twice a month, what we do here at Trinity is we celebrate the Lord's Supper.

And if you've not been with us before for celebrating the Lord's Supper, what we're going to do is actually quite simple. We're going to take some bread that's been broken and we're going to pass it out and we're going to eat it together. And then we're going to take a cup of some juice and we're going to pass it out and we're going to drink it together.

And Jesus said that we're supposed to do these very, on the surface, simple acts to remember the most... ...