

Rewarding Faith With Famine

Genesis 12-13:4

Introduction

In our last discussion, we began the biography of Abraham, the first pioneer. We discovered in him, a man of rare faith; a man who was willing to leave everything behind that represented security and stability. He left his society; he left his family. He was instructed by God to leave everything that had been his for many years and to go to an unknown land that God had promised to give him.

I wonder if we would have obeyed such instructions from God? Abraham did. We will discover this fact, in Genesis, chapter 12, as we review the promise of God to Abraham, or Abram, as he is named at this point in time.

Abram's Courageous Response of Faith

Genesis, chapter 12, is where we find ourselves again today. Look at verses 1 through 4a.

Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him; and Lot went with him. . . ."

The fact that Lot went with him was a mistake, as we will discover later. Continue to verses 4b through 5a.

. . . Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, . . .

Perhaps you have moved to this town in recent days, and you know what it is like to move everything you have accumulated. You probably wondered how in the world your attic held all that stuff. Well, Abram cleaned it out and took it with him.

Continue to the next phrase in verse 5.

. . . and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, . . .

This is the servants. What an adventure this is. Continue to the last phrase in verse 5.

. . . and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan.

Abram will now build two different altars. They are highly significant.

The place of Abram's altar

Let me tell where Abram builds the altars.

The oak of Moreh

1. The first altar is at the oak of Moreh.

Look at verse 6.

Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the Canaanite was then in the land.

Understand that the oak of Moreh is a literal tree. This is the location of the first altar. "Moreh" means "teacher," and in old times, during the days of Abram, there would be the guru, or the teacher, who sat at a tree, and this was the tree of Moreh. This was the "oak of the teacher".

The idolatrous guru was supposed to be able to hear the voices of the gods as they rustled through the leaves of the tree. It was at this very spot, this idolatrous location, that Abram set up an altar. What a man of courage! It is as if he said, "I know that you have your idolatrous practice, but God has promised me the land. So, right here under the leaves of this oak tree, I will build an altar to my God."

Between Bethel and Ai

2. The second place Abram builds an altar is between Bethel and Ai.

Look at verse 7.

The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So

he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.

This was the first time Abram understands that it is Canaan. He builds an altar there and then proceeds. Continue to verse 8.

Then he proceeded from there to the mountain 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.

Now, again these places are highly symbolic or significant. “Ai” literally means “pile of rubbish”. It was symbolic of the temporal world. In fact, it would become a terrible place for the Israelites in their history, as it would develop. We will discover this, as we go through the Old Testament.

“Bethel” literally means “the house of God”. This was symbolic of everything that represented the presence or the fellowship of God, including heaven or the kingdom.

Right in the middle, between the pile of rubbish, representing the world, and the place of God, or the coming kingdom, Abram builds an altar.

What a tremendous illustration this is of the New Testament pilgrim, or you and I, who have built an altar. We live our lives somewhere between the pile of rubbish, this world that we are passing through, and the coming kingdom of God. That is where Abram built his second altar. It is an illustration to us, and I think a warning, of a great danger that comes when we forget this world is not permanent. We become distracted by the scenery, and we dig down deep. We put the tent pegs in way too far. We are pilgrims; we are not settlers.

So, Abram pitches his tent and builds an altar.

The importance of the altar

Now, before we go any further, understand the importance of the altar. Let me give two points.

The altar represents a place of worship

1. First, the altar represents a place of worship.

Note in verse 7, that a theophany has occurred. A theophany is the appearance of the form of God. No man has ever seen God and lived. So this is what we consider theologically, a theophany; that is, the visible glory of God came to Abram. It is as if God gave

Abram an outline of His figure, but never showed His face. The altar represents then, the place where Abram would worship God.

The altar represents a place of fellowship

2. Secondly, the altar also represents a place of fellowship.

This is a great day. Abram has made it through the desert; he has arrived in the land. God says, “This is the land that I am going to give to you,” so Abram builds an altar and has wonderful fellowship with the glory of God.

I can hear Abram singing the hymn, *What A Fellowship*.

What a fellowship, what a joy divine, leaning on the everlasting arms;

What a blessedness, what a peace is mine, leaning on the everlasting arms.

Can you hear him singing?

O how to sweet to walk in this pilgrim way, leaning on the everlasting arms;

O how bright the path grows from day to day, leaning on the everlasting arms.

Understand that at this point in Abram’s life, he is excited; he is thrilled. Everything is wonderful.

Then, bang! In the next verse – he lives happily ever after. No! Look at verse 10a.

Now there was a famine in the land . . .

Right in the middle of this, God interrupts Abram’s rejoicing with a famine.

How do you respond when God interrupts your rejoicing with a period of famine? How do you respond when a trial or a test knocks on your door, especially when it comes on the heels of close communion and fellowship? It leaves us scratching our heads. We cannot figure it out. You might say, “I thought I’d arrived, Lord. I’m in Canaan. Here’s the altar. We’ve had great fellowship. Then, bang! – a trial.”

Perhaps you feel like King Hezekiah. In II Chronicles, chapter 31, verses 20 and 21, we read these words,

Thus [King] Hezekiah did throughout all Judah; and he did what was good, right and true before the Lord his God. . . . seeking his God . . . with all his heart . . .

Then, note chapter 32, verse 1a.

After these acts of faithfulness [the] king of Assyria came and invaded Judah . . .

This is the time when you think it is not worth it. After all the acts of faithfulness, guess what God does? He brings an enemy king to invade the land.

I think of Jesus Christ Himself, who, as recorded in Luke, chapter 3, went under the waters of baptism. When He came out of the water, His Father's voice was heard from heaven saying, in verse 22b,

. . . You are My beloved Son, in You I am well-pleased.

Then, in Luke, chapter 4, verses 1 and 2a, we read,

Jesus, . . . was led around by the Spirit in the wilderness for forty days, being tempted by the devil. . . .

Let me give you something to remember. This is something that most Christians never get and as a result, they give up when famine comes into their lives. It is this:

Initial obedience is the starting point on the road to spiritual maturity.

Initial obedience is the starting point. We have the idea that it is the final destination. We say, "Lord, I surrender to You. I want to be like Christ."

Then we think, "Well, great, that takes care of my sanctification. I'm here; I've arrived."

However, all of a sudden, God brings a trial into our lives, and we say, "Hey, wait a second Lord. What are You doing?"

God replies, "I'm answering your prayer. I'm going to make you like Christ."

"But, wait a second. I said I wanted to be like Christ. I said I want to surrender."

God, in effect, says, "I don't necessarily care that you say that, I want you to experience it. I want it to be a reality in your life."

So, testing comes to do just that.

Abram's Cowardly Retreat of Fear

Now, what lay ahead for Abram in terms of spiritual growth? In the next ten verses, we will find out.

Before we get into that and before we are too hard on Abram for checking out and heading for Egypt, however, notice the question that he is probably asking. We have probably asked the same thing. "God, where are Your promises? Where are they?"

God's three promises to Abram

Abram had been given three promises from God. God promised:

1. The land – Abram gets to the land, looks around, and sees the Canaanites with their chariots of iron and their armies led by blood thirsty pagans.
2. The seed – Abram is promised a myriad of descendants, yet he still is without child.
3. The blessing – God promises to bless Abram, but here comes a famine.

So, Abram asks the question, "Where are the promises?"

He probably scratches his head and says, "Well, isn't there a verse in the Bible that says, 'God helps those who help themselves'?"

No! Abram thinks, "Where can I find bread?"

Egypt was known as, "the granary of the ancient world," so he heads for Egypt. Abram retreats in cowardly fear.

Look at verses 10 and 11 of Genesis, chapter 12.

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. It came about when he came near to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, . . .

We will get to Abram's words to Sarai in just a moment. But first, understand that Abram is heading to the place that throughout the Old Testament, represents rebellion to God and bondage to the world. Help was not in Egypt, help was at the altar. Abram had just built it. I think the angels in heaven were probably saying, "Abram, stay there. We've got a recipe for manna and we'd like to use it."

The angels probably said, “Shucks, now we got to wait until Moses comes along.”

The angels know that there are rocks there that are ready for gushing, if Abram (or you and I) would only go to God. But he cannot see the promises, so Abram begins leaning on his own understanding; his own reason, and he heads for Egypt.

Ladies and gentlemen, imagine that you had walked up to Abram right in between these two verses, and said, “Listen, Abram, I want you to understand that in about three months, you’re going to be alone in Egypt sitting in a tent. Your wife will have just been added to the harem of the Pharaoh, and your herds will be increasing.”

Abram would have said, “You’re reading the wrong tea leaves or something. Not me!”

However, we will discover that that is exactly what happens.

Let us look at a few verses before we go further. The prophet Isaiah wrote these words. Do you see yourself in these words? Notice Isaiah, chapter 30, verses 1 through 3, very carefully.

“Woe to the rebellious children,” declares the Lord, “who execute a plan, but not Mine, and make an alliance, but not of My Spirit, in order to add sin to sin; who proceed down to Egypt without consulting Me, to take refuge in the safety of Pharaoh and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt! Therefore the safety of Pharaoh will be your shame and the shelter in the shadow of Egypt, your humiliation.”

I think we could add a postscript to these words. “And when you go down to Egypt; when you trust in the world system; when you do not ask My counsel or My advice, don’t blame Me when you get in a mess.”

Recently, my family and I took a trip to Atlanta. We were all packed and ready to go. As we normally do, we were traveling through the night because the kids are controllable at that time, being asleep. Now, I knew the tires on the car were getting bald – I knew it. They were smooth and I had no business making an eight hour trip. In fact, before we left, I even checked to see if the spare was in the trunk. I was being foolish, but we left. I did not tell Marsha about the tires, of course. I figured, “God is sovereign, so we will get there.”

Well, two o’clock in the morning, you guessed it – a flat tire on the side of Interstate 85. Two a.m.! Why don’t these things ever happen in the driveway or just as you pull into the gas station – a full service gas station that has a sale on tires. It happens at two o’clock in the morning. So, I pulled over, and you know the way those semi’s whipped by. I tried to convince Marsha to get out and change the tire, but she would not do it! I got out to change the tire.

Now, wouldn’t it have been foolish for me to get out there and kind of kick the car and look up at the stars of heaven and say, “God, why did You do this to me? Why have You gotten me into this mess?”

That would have been absolutely foolish!

The last thing Abram could have said, when he got down to Egypt and all of this stuff started to happen that we are going to look at, was, “Lord, why in the world did You do this to me?”

Abram’s problems were the result of his rebellion.

Many times we rebel against God; we get away from God. We do not ask advice or counsel and we get boxed into a corner. Then, guess who we give the credit to? God!

So, I went to the back of the car and pulled out the spare. Now the spare is barely more than a bicycle tire. They say you can go a hundred miles on those things. You can’t! You can’t! Those treads evaporated, and I had to stop every twenty five miles. By now the kids were up and uncontrollable. Finally, we pulled into a motel.

The next morning, I got up and went to a gas station. They happened to have a six dollar spare that fit the hub. It was worth every penny of it – six dollars, not a penny more, because when I got up to about forty five miles an hour, the car started to just shake. We shook into Atlanta – all the way there. It was my fault.

Abram is boxing himself in. I want you to notice what happens in verses 11 through 13 of Genesis, chapter 12.

It came about when he came near to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, “See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife’; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please . . .

(I like the word “Please” in there – Abram is on his knees; he is begging, “Please, Sarai, . . .”),

... say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you.”

Now this was not really a lie. In Genesis, chapter 20, verse 12, we are told that Sarai is Abram’s half sister. They had the same father, before God gave the penalties for marriage within the family, so she is his half sister.

Abram is clever. He says, “I’m not really lying, I’m just telling a half truth. Tell them you’re my sister, and everything will be okay. We’ll stay here; we’ll get all the food we need; we’ll survive. We’ll slip back into Canaan and everything will be all right.”

So, Sarai does what Abram asks.

Now, we know that it was a common practice in this day that if the Pharaoh wanted a woman, he respected marriage enough to kill the husband to get her! That was as far as his respect went. As a matter of fact, that is exactly the practice that David followed. You may remember that when he saw Bathsheba, he wanted her, so he took care of Uriah, her husband. David adopted the practice of a pagan Pharaoh. By the way, I think that is probably the reason why the people never said anything to David – they were pagans too. They said, “Our king is acting just like the Pharaohs of Egypt. He took care of the husband.”

That was the way it was, until Nathan confronted David. That was the practice of the time, and that is exactly what would have happened to Abram and Sarai.

Well, let us continue. Look at verse 14.

And it came about when Abram came into Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful.

Sarai was sixty-five years old. With the length of life they lived, she would probably be about thirty-five years of age in respect to how long we seem to live on planet earth. So she was really reaching the blossom of her womanhood. Abram knew she was beautiful. He was no dummy – he knew that as soon they laid eyes on her, they would knock him off.

Continue to verse 15 and note what happens. This was a shock to Abram.

Pharaoh’s officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house.

Uh oh. Abram did not anticipate that. He did not think that it would go that far.

Now, the custom was for there to be a twelve month period of preparation before a woman was added to a harem. During that time, she was simply taken care of and Pharaoh did not touch her. She would be added to the harem officially, after the twelve month time. We do not know how far along this went, but I can just imagine Abram sitting alone in his tent realizing that he had really gone way too far.

I read a story by Gary Richmond that intrigued me. Gary used to work for the Los Angeles Zoo. He talked about the day when the curators of the reptile section of the zoo needed to perform surgery on a king cobra. Since Gary was on staff, they solicited his help. They said, “Look, Gary, you come with the four of us. We’re going to go into the cage of the king cobra.”

I think the king cobra was about ten feet long. You may know that king cobras have a cape that spreads as they stand almost erect.

So Gary comes along and they say, “Now, you need to help the surgeon. You grab the head and three of the other men will grab the body. Once you’ve got it, somebody else will take over. Then you help with the surgery.”

They walked into the reptile cage and it was huge. Soon, the king cobra came around the corner. It was as if he recognized what they were up to and he immediately, as it were, stood and spread his cape. He then looked back and forth at each of the five men, as if he were selecting his prey. Gary was standing there with his knees knocking.

Soon, the snake darted at one of the men. He was an expert, so he leapt out of the path of the snake and grabbed part of the body. All five men were then, quickly able to hold onto the snake.

So, Gary began helping the surgeon. The surgeon said, “Take some towels and wad them up. Then, stick them in the snake’s mouth.”

Gary tells that the snake was growling and hissing all during this. And, although they had de-fanged the snake, it still had the venom sacks with venom strong enough to kill an elephant.

So Gary wads up the towels and sticks them in the snake’s mouth. The snake chomps down on those

things and begins to grind. The venom dripped from those towels.

The surgeon said that the reason this was done was that although it was not really difficult to catch the snake, it was tough to let go and get out without getting bitten. So, they milk the snake; drain the venom. Then, if he per chance, gets a hold on one of the men, they will not die.

Gary continued and used this story to illustrate the story of Abram in Egypt. Abram, in effect, easily grabbed on to the snake. He tells a little lie; a little half truth, and thinks they will have it made. Now, however, he is embracing in his tent, a serpent that is venomous. He is probably looking over his shoulder and constantly wondering if his lie has been discovered and they are coming to take his head. And, just outside the tent, another deposit of cattle has arrived with a note from the Pharaoh saying, "Thank you, Abram, for coming to Egypt. Oh, that sister of yours, she's mine in three months."

It all started with a little lie. My friends, dishonesty is an epidemic, even in the church. I understand that in 1811, a conscience fund was started in Washington, D.C. when a man sent in five dollars that he had stolen from his taxes. The fund still exists today and, in fact, has had nearly four million dollars added to it.

Well, there is hope because of the first phrase of verse 17. Circle these words,

But the Lord . . .

If it had not been for the Lord's intervention, there would have been no hope. What is Abram going to do? Go up to the Pharaoh and say, "Pharaoh, I lied. I'd like my wife back."

No way. So, the Lord intervenes. Look at verses 17 through 19.

But the Lord struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. Then 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, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go."

Consequences of Abram's sin

Now, do not get the idea that everything is taken care of; that there are no problems now that God has

intervened; that Abram is off the hook. No. Let me give several consequences of Abram's sin.

Lost blessing

1. First, there was lost blessing.

If Abram had stayed at the altar at Bethel; if he had called to God because his needs were not being met, God would have responded miraculously or in some way to provide for him. God did this for Moses, the children of Israel, Elijah, and many others. But, as a result of resting on his own reason, Abram lost the blessing of seeing God work; seeing God provide for his need.

So often you and I forfeit the blessing of God because instead of waiting on Him to provide, we figure it all out.

An increase in possessions

2. Secondly, there was an increase in possessions.

When Abram left Egypt, verse 2 of chapter 13 tells us that he was very rich. Why is this a consequence? Because these riches would cause the dispute among the herdsmen of Abram and the herdsmen of Lot that would finally cause a family split.

Do not ever think it is inevitable that if we grow rich, it is the blessing of God. In Canaan, in the will of God, Abram was living hand to mouth, while in Egypt, out of the will of God, he was getting rich. I do not mean to imply that when you stay in Canaan, poverty is the hand of God, nor that riches are the hand of Satan. But in Abram's case, this was in fact, true.

A maid servant named Hagar

3. Thirdly, when Sarai left Egypt, she brought along a maid servant to help, named Hagar.

This maid would bear a son, because Abram would once again listen to his reason. That son would grow up to be, even to this day, the arch enemy of the Israelite – the Arabian nation.

Lot was led astray

4. Fourthly, Lot evidently developed a taste for Egypt that persisted; he was led astray.

Abram took Lot back out of Egypt, but he could not get Egypt out of Lot. How tragic it is when a more mature believer, who should know better, leads a younger believer astray.

A lost testimony

5. Notice the fifth consequence, in verse 18, that you may not have caught; that is, a lost testimony.

Look again at verse 18.

Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?"

Abram is confronted by a man who, at this particular point in his life, is more godly than he is – and the man is a pagan Pharaoh. The Pharaoh is straightening out Abram's ethics; he is clearing up his morals.

How difficult it must be to be confronted by a pagan who knows even better than you. Perhaps you have received rebuke lately. Maybe it is a son who says, "Dad, you sure are gone a lot lately," or a friend who confides in you and says, "Are you doing okay? You really, really seem impatient lately," or a spouse who says, "Is everything right between you and the Lord? I don't see the fruit."

Abram was confronted by a pagan king that Abram should have won.

Abram's Committed Return to Fellowship

Well, is there hope? Yes. Let me give a reason why. Because Abram returned to the altar.

In verse 20 of chapter 12, Abram and all with him, are escorted out of Egypt. I mean they took them right to the border and said, "We never want to see you again."

Then, look at chapter 13, verses 1 through 4a.

So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, he and his wife and all that belonged to him, and Lot with him. Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold. He went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, . . .

(note this),

. . . to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the

place of the altar which he had made there formerly . . .

Returning to the altar

What is Abram telling us? Let me give a couple of things.

Go back to the place of departure

1. First, go back to the place of departure; go back to where that fork came in the road and you went left, when God said to go right.

If you want to straighten it all out, go back to the place where you departed. I do not know about you, but your Egypt may be a bar. Your Egypt may be the principal's office for cheating. Your Egypt may be in front of a cable television set where you secretly watch immorality. Your Egypt may be in the home of another man or another woman. Your Egypt may be much more subtle; such as, telephone conversations riddled with gossip or an unused Bible that is dusty and has marked on it the invisible words, "for Sunday's only". But wherever it is, you are in Egypt. Go back to the place of departure.

Go back to the place of dependence

2. Abram is also telling us to go back to the place of dependence.

Would you notice the last part of verse 4.

. . . and there Abram called on the name of the Lord.

In your life, just how essential is God? How often do you hear yourself say the words, "I can do it myself. Leave it to me."

Go back to that place, like Abram, and once again call on the name of the Lord. Go back to that place of dependence.

Application – Lessons From a Backsliding Saint!

Let me apply this passage with four lessons that we can learn from a backsliding saint.

Do not be surprised when famine arrives in your life

1. First, do not be surprised when famine arrives in your life.

It is as if we are shocked when famine comes. But the path of faith is an ascending hill that is designed by God to develop the muscles of our faith. The journey is not a level plain where we can casually stroll nor is it a descending hill upon which we can coast. That is not faith. It is a climb. And that famine is designed by God to help you on your way.

Famine comes to test and strengthen our dependence on the Lord

2. Secondly, famine comes to test and strengthen our dependence on the Lord, even when He seems silent; even when He seems distant; even when He seems unfair.

As Proverbs, chapter 3, verses 5 and 6 tell us,

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge [trust, depend on] Him, and He will make your paths straight.

God never runs short of patience

3. Thirdly, God never runs short of patience.

This is an amazing thing. If I had been God, I would have said, "Abram, you are a loser. I'll get another person to fulfill the covenant I've given to Israel. Forget it. You have caused the heathen to blaspheme My name. You have tested Me. You almost gave your wife away. I'll find somebody else."

However, God did not do that.

A story is told of Thomas Edison, when he was working on an improvement to his first light bulb. He finished it and handed the finished bulb to a young boy who was an assistant in the lab. That boy had to take it to the vacuum chamber up some stairs. He cautiously took each step one at a time, but then, at the last minute, he dropped the bulb and it shattered into a thousand pieces. The whole staff had to spend another twenty four hours making another bulb. When they finished, to the amazement of the staff, Edison handed the newly made bulb back to the same boy. That probably marked him for life. It changed that boy's life, I would imagine. This time he accomplished the job.

Multiply that by ten million. That is how God is patient with His children. We drop the ball. There we are in the middle of Egypt, and God still cares.

Going to another source for help will never solve what faith in God can

4. Let me give one more application. Going to another source for help will never solve what faith in God can.

If we would only get this through our heads. Egypt will never help; it will never satisfy. There are no altars in Egypt; there is no fellowship in Egypt; there is no worship in Egypt. We have to return to Bethel, the place of fellowship; the place of worship; the place where God patiently waits for us to return.