

“God’s Sovereignty When Faith Fails”

Genesis 12:10-20

Dr. Jerry Nelson

www.soundliving.org

The man in the OT story was then known as Abram. Abram “blew it.” When circumstances mounted against him, his faith failed. When he couldn’t see God’s hand working, he put his own hand to work. If God wouldn’t save him, he would have to save himself. More importantly, if God’s will was going to be accomplished, Abram felt he would have to take it on himself to do it, because of God’s failure to act. Yes, Abram “blew it”, his faith failed. But the beautiful fact demonstrated in today’s story is that even when Abram failed, God didn’t.

Can you remember a time in the past when you almost walked away from God? Maybe it was in high school or college. Oh, you probably weren’t about to become a Buddhist or Hindu but you were nearly at the point of just abandoning belief in anything – just going your own way to just live life. You didn’t plan to become anti-Christian; you might even still go to church but you would just ignore the whole idea of any real relationship with God. Maybe it was when a tragedy struck your family - you had some serious questions about God that almost made you walk away. Maybe it was in a particularly difficult time when it seemed that God didn’t do what he supposed to do. Can you think back to that time you started down a path that would have led you completely away from God but along the way something brought you back?

Now, thinking not about the past but about the future, have you ever wondered if some day something might happen causing you to abandon God? Have you wondered if things got too difficult in life, if you would or could remain faithful to God? The encouraging lesson in today’s story is that even when you fail God, he won’t fail you. What God promises, God does.

The background to our story is the following: Abram was told by God to leave the city of Haran, and go to a land that God would show him. Abram was promised by God that Abram would become the father of

a large and great nation of people, that his name would be great and that through Abram all the peoples on earth would be blessed. Abram obeyed God and set out for Canaan. There, God said to this man Abram who had no children and couldn't have children, "To your offspring I will give this land." Now the story itself: The book says, "Now there was a famine in the land... the famine was severe." There was no water, no pastureland, animals would die, there was no social safety net in Canaan – people too would die unless something changed. This was the "promised-land"? – This was God's promised blessing? – a famine? No sooner does Abram get to the land God directed him to and a famine breaks out – can't stay here – it won't work. What kind of a promise is this? I obey God and things go wrong not right. I'm supposed to follow God and things in life fall apart?

At that point, it seems to me, Abram made a common but critical mistake – he acted without consulting God. Earlier when Abram was at Bethel he built an altar and called on the name of the Lord. Later when Abram was back at Bethel, it again says he called on the name of the Lord. But in between those two times there is no mention of seeking the Lord.

*The story tells us that when the famine struck – Abram went down to Egypt to live. Egypt would make sense – the Nile River delta would be the last place to dry up – pasture and food would be available. It may not have been wrong for Abram to go to Egypt. On at least two occasions God sent his people to Egypt. **But Abram doesn't appear to have even asked God** – he just went. If God wouldn't take care of things then Abram would.*

*Now at the time that Abram and his family were about to enter Egypt things got a little sticky. And we learn something about Abram's character – what he valued. Knowing that the Egyptians were powerful and that his extended family back in Haran was unavailable to support him, Abram devised a plan to secure his own safety. He said, in essence, to his wife, Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are" and it will be obvious to the Egyptians as well. Those Egyptians have a weird sense of morality. If you are my wife, they will kill me so that you are eligible to be married to one of them but if you say you are my sister then they won't have to kill me, they will even pay a dowry for you. Here were his actual words, "**Say** you are my*

sister so that I will be treated well for your sake (or on account of you) and my life will be spared because of you.”

It doesn't take much imagination to realize the bind Abram was in. Behind him, in Canaan, were famine and death for his cattle and even his family. Ahead of him were the Egyptians who would think nothing of taking his life so they could get his wife. The rationalizations that must have gone through Abram's mind certainly would have gone through mine: If God is going to be able to bless us, I have to stay alive and if we are going to be a great nation some day, it won't happen if I'm dead.

But what does Sarai think of this scheme? Does she protest? Does she object to being made vulnerable to any Egyptian who might want her? The storyteller doesn't tell us about Sarai because Abram is the one in focus. And when we put Abram under inspection we see a pretty sorry excuse of a man of faith. Abram here shows his true colors. Years later he will have a faith that believed God could even raise Abram's son from the dead – but he doesn't have that strength of faith yet.

God's promise to Abram involved Abram and his wife. God's future for Abram and for the world (“Through you all the peoples on earth will be blessed”) hinged on Abram AND Sarai. But Abram was ready to jettison Sarai, to cut her loose, to make her vulnerable to be snatched up by some Egyptian to be his wife. And for what? - “So that I will be treated well... and my life will be spared.”

Abram was to be the ancestor of a great people. Sarai was to be the ancestress of that people. But Abram was willing to give up the ancestress to save his own skin and to preserve his possessions. He was willing to lie, he was willing to ask his wife to lie, he was willing to lie in front of his nephew Lot, he was willing to let his wife be taken as another man's wife – all because he couldn't trust God. There is a high cost to faithlessness.

*But the story moves on. **In the next scene** we see in our mind's eye that Abram and Sarai have moved into Egypt and are living there. And just as Abram had predicted the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman. Now it is possible that in Abram's scheming he*

had hoped that worse case would be some Egyptian would begin negotiating for Sarai (as was the custom) and Abram could stall him long enough for the famine to be over in Canaan and they could get out of Egypt. But whether Abram had such a plan in mind or not the author doesn't tell us. And it becomes a moot point when some of the Pharaoh's servants tell Pharaoh about Sarai and he doesn't need to negotiate – he is king. We reach the low point of the story when we envision Sarai being led away from the family home to be taken to become part of Pharaoh's harem.

Genesis 12:14-15 “When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she (Sarai) was a very beautiful woman. And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace.” What must Sarai have felt? Surely, she thought when she was actually taken Abram would step up and admit that he is her husband and appeal to the Pharaoh's mercy to spare him. But not Abram.

We get further insight into this man when the next thing the author tells us is this: “He (The Pharaoh) treated Abram well for her (Sarai's) sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels.” Well how about that - God must be blessing Abram's decision. Imagine if Lot had dared to ask if Abram had done the right thing. Abram would point to the wealth they had and say – “of course it was right – look how God is blessing us.” But material possessions are no certain sign of God's blessing. The man who thinks only in terms of dollars and acquisitions can miss that fact. Abram missed it because Abram was more concerned about his possessions than about obeying God.

*How long did Abram allow this to go on? How long did his wife languish in the harem of Pharaoh while Abram raked in the cash? Self-preservation and materialism had become the driving forces in Abram's life. And like uncle, like nephew. Lot was there, learning all the time. And in the next chapter of Genesis we will learn that Lot learned well about such selfishness and materialism. Abram was willing to sacrifice his own **integrity**, his **marriage**, his **wife's honor**, his **witness** before Lot and his **ability to influence the pagans** for good – all for the sake of protection and property.*

I said this was the low point of the story because nearly everything God had said would be true of Abram and Sarai was now impossible. They were supposed to be come a large nation of people – but Sarai is off in the Pharaoh’s harem. They were supposed to possess the land of Canaan – but they are tied to Egypt because of the famine in Canaan and the wealth they are acquiring in Egypt. And as the next part of the story will tell us – instead of being a blessing to the nations of the world – Abram is a curse.

This we see in the third scene in the story: *The Pharaoh and everyone in his household – meaning his entire harem, his children, and probably his officials – everyone came down with serious diseases. At that point “Pharaoh summoned Abram. “What have you done to me?” he said. “Why didn’t you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her to be my wife?’...” How did Pharaoh find out about Abram’s lie? Did Sarai not get the disease and so it became obvious that she was somehow involved? Likely, Pharaoh would have assumed the disease was some punishment by the gods and would want to know by what power Sarai wasn’t afflicted. Did Sarai then confess? We don’t know, but however he found out – Pharaoh wasn’t pleased. Why didn’t he just kill Abram at that point? Probably because he was afraid of the power of Abram’s God – so he feared Abram. So this pagan Egyptian king made Abram do what Abram should have done all along. Pharaoh said to him, “Here is your wife. Take her and go.” Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.”*

You can imagine the relief Abram must have felt as he made his way out of that country. You talk about dodging a bullet! He got out with his life, his wife and the wealth he had acquired. Why? He didn’t deserve that. Abram was a miserable failure. Why did he get away scot-free? I don’t think he did? His integrity was shot. His marriage should have been in shambles. His witness was scuttled.

*But why did he get out of that predicament at all? Verse 17 tells us, “But **the Lord** inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram’s wife Sarai.” I think the first words of that verse give us the most important lesson of the whole story. God intervened. When Abram was selling the future of his family and the*

world for a larger herd of cattle and donkeys – God wouldn't sit by and do nothing. God had promised and God would keep his promise. God would be faithful even when Abram was faithless.

Moses, the author of Genesis, was writing this for the people of Israel 500 years later, so they would be encouraged as they faced the days ahead when they were commanded by God to invade and take over the land of Canaan. What if their faith failed? What if they weren't up to the task? What they heard from Abram's story was that God was up to the task and God wouldn't fail – even if they did.

Ephesians 3:6 says, "The mystery (of Christ) is that through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus." The promise that God made to Abram about an eternal land, a family, and a blessing to all the peoples of the earth is God's promise to us. And God has said to us, (Philippians 1:6) "...he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." What God starts, he finishes. He is the one who said, (1 Corinthians 10:13) "No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it." God is the one who also said, (Ephesians 1:11-14) "In Christ we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with his will... And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession..." God's promise to you is as strong and binding as God's promise to Abram.

Do not fear the future. Do not fear that your faith will fail and all will be lost. God is stronger than our failures. If you are in that place of fear right now where it seems that God is not there, God is not hearing – then know from God's own Word, he is at work. He will not fail even though we have.

Abram had failed but God preserved him. And Abram's faith was strengthened. The opening words of chapter 13 of Genesis say that

Abram went back to Bethel, to the altar he had built there and he called on the name of the Lord. I imagine that was quite a worship service! Everyone and especially Abram, humbly thanked God for getting them out of Egypt alive after the mess they had made. And most of all they praised God for his faithfulness to them – he never fails. “He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion, until the day of Christ Jesus.”