

2. The crisis and the failure of our father

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[0 : 00] Well, good afternoon, everybody, and welcome to the Tron Lunchtime Service. It's wonderful to see you here, especially if you're a visitor, or if this is your first time with us, we hope you feel at home.

Well, please do take a seat and turn in your Bibles to the book of Genesis, chapter 12. Genesis 12, you find that on page 9 of our church Bibles.

We carry on our three-week series in the life of Abraham. Genesis 12, and we begin reading at verse 10. Hear the word of the Lord.

When Abraham 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 Abraham.

[1 : 30] And he had sheep and oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys and camels. But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abraham's wife.

So Pharaoh called Abraham 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. And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him. And they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.

So Abraham went up from Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had, and lot with him into the Negev. Now Abraham was very rich in livestock and silver and in gold.

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.

[2 : 39] And there Abraham called upon the name of the Lord. Amen. We've just sung these words in that hymn. Prone to wander, Lord I feel it.

Prone to leave the God I love. And I don't know about you, but I love singing those words. Because they are so honest. And for me, they sum up the constant experience of my heart.

Prone to wander, prone to leave the God I love. And what about you? Well, it may be that you're not as perverse as I am. But I think for most of us, if we're being honest with ourselves, we would say that we all feel the same way.

One moment of the day, your heart may seem to be truly tuned to sing the grace of your God. And yet, perhaps only moments later, we find that our hearts wander away.

And it shows in our behavior. Perhaps we find ourselves in some difficult situation. A time of testing or trial. And instead of being patient and looking to the Lord and leaning on his gospel promises, we end up behaving as though the Lord was never even there in the first place.

[3 : 50] We stumble and our faith fails. Well, friends, what an encouragement it is to look at Genesis 12 and see that Abraham, the father of our faith, was just like us.

But he, too, was prone to wander and prone to leave the God he loved. That's what we see in this next episode of Abraham's life. And what a contrast from what we saw last week, those of you who were here.

Remember verse 1 in chapter 12. The Lord came to Abraham by grace alone, undeserved kindness. And he preached the gospel to Abraham, commanding Abraham to repent and believe, calling him to leave behind his old life in the land of his father that was immersed in the darkness of pagan idolatry, to instead walk in the light of the revelation of the Lord.

And the Lord promised to shower upon Abraham unimaginable blessings if he responded by the obedience of faith. And they're listed there for us in verses 1 to 3. And you remember, I find Ralph Davis' summary of these to be most helpful.

He calls this the quad promise because they're made up of four components. The Lord promises people, place, protection, and program. Let me just unpack these for you once again because they're so helpful.

[5 : 08] They're so key to know. Firstly, people. The Lord tells Abraham he will make him into a great nation and he will have offspring. Secondly, place. The Lord tells Abraham that he will have a home, the land that the Lord will show him, which turns out to be the land of Canaan.

Verse 7. Thirdly, protection. The Lord says to Abraham, I will bless those who bless you. And the one who dishonors you, I will curse. In other words, the Lord will be present with Abraham to protect him from his enemies at all times.

And fourthly, program. The Lord says that Abraham will be given a special place in the Lord's program of redemption. He will become a conduit through whom God's blessings will flow to all of the nations of the earth.

That is, Abraham and his family line will forever be used by God to undo the curse of the fall and establish the kingdom of God and blessing. All of the wickedness that we read about in Genesis 1 to 11, well, the calling of Abraham is God's answer to it.

And it's a glorious calling. Well, how did Abraham respond to all of that? And the answer is, by the obedience of faith. Verse 4. Abraham went as the Lord told him.

[6 : 28] He leaves behind his old life and follows the Lord. He journeys through Canaan, showing undivided loyalty to the Lord, worshipping the Lord in public. Verse 8. We're told that he built an altar to the Lord between Bethel and Ai and called upon the name of the Lord in front of all of his Canaanite neighbours.

He shows great faith. But it doesn't take long for this new convert to learn just how hard it is to stay faithful to the Lord.

And I'd like us to look at this passage under three scenes this afternoon. Firstly, we see the measuring of Abraham's faith, the measuring of Abraham's faith.

The life of faith will be marked by times of great testing and trial. Please look at the start of verse 10. Now there was a famine in the land.

What? Come again? But didn't the Lord just appear to Abraham and confirm that the land he was standing in was the land of promise? And didn't Abraham just walk through that land symbolically claiming it for the Lord by building altars and calling on his name in front of the Canaanites who lived at that time as a prophetic statement of what would happen in the future?

[7 : 44] And now we're told there's a severe famine in the land and it surrounds Abraham. Just notice that the whole of verse 10 is structured like a sandwich. The famine is mentioned twice, like two bits of bread at the start and at the end of the verse.

And right stuck in the middle between this severe famine is Abraham. The structure of the verse is meant to teach us what it was like for Abraham in the flesh. The severe famine engulfed him and the land of promise.

And friends, of course, we know from the early chapters of Genesis that the Lord God controls the creation that he has made. And so it is not fanciful to conclude that this famine came about by the Lord's hand.

This is the Lord's doing. So what's going on? Well, the Lord has brought Abraham into a time of testing. The Lord is measuring the faith of his servant.

Really, the question is, will Abraham choose famine and stones in the promised land under the will of the Lord? Or will he choose food and sustenance outside of the land and thus outside of God's will?

[8 : 54] That is the test that he faces. And it's a tough one. It's a hard test. He's just been given these great promises from the Lord. He's taken huge steps of faith. But will he carry on doing so?

Well, we'll see what he does in just a moment. But let's just stop there and learn a deep truth about the Lord our God. It's clear from these verses and from all over the rest of the Bible that this is the Lord's way of treating all of his people in the same way.

He will bring his children into times of trial. Times when our faith will be measured and tested. As Ralph Davis puts it, God laces our lives with his strange pattern.

God makes promises and yet all of a sudden those promises can appear so fragile. God may assure you of something and then something comes along that places question marks after that assurance.

But if this pattern is strange, it is also common. Just think about the Lord Jesus for a second. Think about him at his baptism. You remember the marvelous assurance he received from God the Father when he came up out of the water.

[10:00] He heard the voice from heaven. You are my son, the one I love. I'm delighted in you. Great assurance. But then what happens next? Immediately, the Spirit of the Lord sends him out into the wilderness where he's severely tested and tempted.

You see the pattern? Great assurance. Immediately, severe testing after that. And as God's people today, we need to know that this is a pattern that may also be true of our lives.

Our faith may be measured and tested. In fact, there will be times in your life when things happen that it will seem like the promises of God look very doubtful.

And you actually will think, are these going to come to fruition at all? If you haven't faced such times, then get ready. That's the first scene, the measuring of Abraham's faith.

The second scene is this, the mess of Abraham's failure. Abraham stumbles into unbelief. Please look again at verse 10. Now there was a famine in the land, so Abraham went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.

[11:12] And instead of trusting in the Lord's promises and staying in the land of promise, Abraham flees to Egypt. He seeks security outside of the will of God.

Now let me just say, some commentators wouldn't agree with that. Some would say that Abraham wasn't doing anything wrong in seeking refuge and sustenance in Egypt. That was all he could do. And he's not given an explicit command to stay in the land after all. But I'm not convinced by that for a number of reasons. Just look at the movements that Moses tells us about here.

Verse 10, Abraham went down to Egypt. In verse 1 of chapter 13, after the Lord rescues him, Abraham went up from Egypt.

Now at one level, of course, those are just geographical movements, but it seems to me Moses is also speaking of the spiritual significance of his movements as well. And then later on in Genesis 26, probably more convincingly, Abraham's son, Isaac, finds himself in pretty much the same situation.

[12:17] No need to turn to it, but let me read what it says. It says this, Now there was a famine in the land besides the former famine that was in the days of Abraham. The Lord appeared to Isaac and said, Do not go down to Egypt.

Dwell in the land of which I shall tell you, sojourn in this land, and I will be with you and will bless you, for to you and your offspring I will give all these lands, and I will establish the oath that I swore to Abraham your father.

You see, what was later explicitly stated to Isaac was surely implicitly stated to Abraham back here in Genesis 12. Go to the land that I show you.

And the land of Egypt was not the land that the Lord had shown Abraham. The final reason why I'm convinced that Abraham going down to Egypt was wrong is to do with the original recipients of the book of Genesis.

To whom was this book originally written? And the answer, of course, is the people of Israel whom the Lord had just brought out through the Exodus, brought out from slavery in the land of Egypt who were now headed to the promised land so that they would then take the promised land to become a great nation for the Lord's name.

[13:33] I hardly think Moses would write something in Genesis that would even suggest to Israel that they should return to Egypt for sustenance. No, quite the opposite is in fact the case.

I think Moses is writing to stop Israel from looking back to Egypt and to instead trust in the Lord of their forefathers. The Lord who was leading them on away from Egypt into the promised land.

So for all those reasons, I think it's to correct to say that Abraham's movement down to Egypt was one of unbelief and a crisis of faith. The Lord brings him into a time of trial and he fails.

And his unbelief carries on in verse 11. Please look at verse 11. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai, 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 that you are my sister, that my life may be spared for your sake. As he's about to enter into Egypt, his faith in God's promises is trumped once again and this time it's down to the fear of man.

[14 : 47] So he fears that when the men of Egypt see his wife Sarai, they will be so attracted to her that they will kill him and take her for themselves. And you know, Abraham's actually right to assume this because that is exactly what happens from verse 14 to verse 16.

But remember, Abraham has just received the promise of the Lord's protection. It's one of the Ps in the Quad promise. The Lord said, I will bless those who bless you, Abraham, and I will curse those who dishonor you.

But as was the case with facing the famine, Abraham acts as though the Lord wasn't even there at all and he's not even heard any such gracious promise. He makes no reference to the Lord or to the promises that the Lord has made with him.

And so he whips up a scheme to try and deal with the situation. He says to Sarai, let's pretend you're my sister and so should any lustful Egyptians take in a liking to you, see you, they won't kill me.

Now there was some truth in what Abraham was saying here. We find out in Genesis chapter 20 that Abraham and Sarai were indeed half siblings.

[15 : 58] Abraham says of Sarah in that chapter, see, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, no, not the daughter of my mother. And she became my wife.

So there is partial truth in what Abraham said here, but it was meant as an intentional deception. It's just like the story I heard of the underage lads who wanted to fight during the American Civil War.

And the minimum age for enlisting in the fighting was the age of 18. So what some of the lads would do who were under 18 was they would write 18 on two bits of paper and they would stick them in the soles of their shoes and then they'd walk up into the enlistment desk.

And so when they would ask, are you currently over 18? They would say, yes, I'm over 18. You see? You get it? That's it. Now at one level, one sense, it may have been true, but it was an act of deception nonetheless.

And so if Abraham, Abraham here has done the same thing, he has this deceptive scheme in place and he's probably thinking, ha ha, if Egyptian men want Sarai, then they won't be tempted to kill me, but rather they will come to me and try and negotiate for her with me as her brother.

[17 : 14] And of course, I can just neglect their advances, reject them, and I can preserve my life and Sarai's life as well. But what Abraham didn't take into account is Pharaoh, the king of Egypt.

And he takes a great liking to Sarai. And back then, when a king wanted something or someone, there was no stopping him. Verse 15, Pharaoh takes her, no doubt to be part of his harem, the woman through whom Abraham was supposed to produce the great offspring who would be an integral part to God's program of redemption.

She is now enslaved to Pharaoh. Notice verse 15, how Sarah simply becomes the woman. She's stripped of her dignity, purity, and her identity as Abraham's wife, stripped of her privilege, position in God's redemptive program.

Moses wants us to be so clear. Abraham's crisis of faith, his failure to trust in the Lord's promises, has messed up everything. His disobedience has apparently even derailed God's program of redemption.

For as long as Sarah and Abraham are kept apart and unable to be together as husband and wife, there will be no hope of them coming together to produce offspring. An offspring through whom the Lord would make into a great nation who will then be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

[18 : 43] And remember that from that offspring would eventually come the Lord Jesus. And so in one sense, what Abraham's done here is unbelief has apparently hindered the coming of the Christ.

Well, what are we to make of this for our lives today? Well, surely the lesson Moses is teaching us is clear. We must take our unbelief and our disobedience very seriously indeed.

If Abraham, the one that the New Testament calls the great man of faith, can stumble and fall, then what chance have we got? As God's people on earth today, as the true children of Abraham through union with Christ, we must do all that we can to walk in a manner worthy of our calling.

When the people of God don't do so, then the gospel of God is brought into disrepute and we fail to be a conduit of the blessing that we're called to be. Now just look at the instance here.

Abraham is supposed to be a blessing to Pharaoh. And look what happens. As a result of his disobedience, verse 17, instead of being a blessing to Pharaoh, he's brought curses upon Pharaoh.

[19 : 55] It's the same for the church today. When a church refuses to trust and obey in the Lord, it will cease to be what it's supposed to be. And the nations round about will suffer as well because

the church will not be the effective gospel witness that it should be.

Friends, instead of crumbling in times of trial, we must learn to take the promises of God and as it were, rub them into our fearful circumstances.

It's not enough to know God's promises and assurances. We have to apply what we know in the situation that we are in. That is the only thing that will help us to stand firm and avoid the mess of Abraham's failure.

Well, is there any hope? Yes. An astounding hope. The Lord hasn't been mentioned so far in this episode at all. God hasn't been mentioned at all.

He's been ignored and rejected. And instead of bringing great punishment upon Abraham or leaving him in his mess, the Lord chooses to show him abundant mercy. This brings me to a third point, the mercy of Abraham's Lord.

[21 : 06] In verse 17, the Lord inflicts plagues upon Pharaoh. Now, we're not told specifically what these were. We're not told how Pharaoh finds out, but he eventually comes to know that he has been cursed by God because of Sarai and that Sarai is actually Abraham's wife.

And after a stern rebuke from the Egyptian king, he commands Abraham and Sarah to leave his land. And this, of course, is a foretaste of what God would do later on at the Exodus for Abraham's descendants.

He brings plagues upon Egypt and delivers his people from bondage and sets them free to worship him. But don't miss the significance for the big picture. As I said in my last point, Abraham's unbelief had derailed God's redemption program of bringing blessing to all the nations through his offspring. But is that a problem for the sovereign God of creation? The answer is no chance. By securing their deliverance from Egypt, the Lord re-rails his plan of redemption.

And just notice where Abraham returns to in chapter 13, verse 3 and 4. Notice the geography that's mentioned and the emphasis on at the beginning and at the first.

[22 : 21] Look at verse 3. And he journeyed back 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 Abraham called upon the name of the Lord. Being back in Bethel and back to the altar is very important.

It's as if Abraham is purposefully going back to start all over again. As if his geography is an expression of his repentance. Remember the significance of the altar.

It's the place where atonement is made by the offering of a substitute. And that's where Abraham goes back to. He goes back and starts all over again there. Our friends maybe you're here this afternoon and you've found that like Abraham you've made some major blunders in your life.

Maybe you're deeply disturbed by the way in which you've failed the Lord and the way in which you've stumbled before him. We should let these verses fill you with hope because this is how our Lord God treats his stumbling and wayward servants.

[23 : 32] Maybe you really have been rebuked by the Lord's word recently and you've been unsure of whether or not you could turn back to him. Well Abraham's journey back to Bethel back to the place of the atoning sacrifice says that you can.

What does the Apostle John say in his first epistle? He says, If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness and the blood of Jesus his son cleanses us from all sin.

That is the lesson that Abraham learnt through the measuring of his faith and the mess of his failure. He learnt that his God is so merciful and if he fails and stumbles he can turn back to him and find forgiveness at the place of atoning sacrifice which for us is the cross.

And he learnt that the Lord is faithful to his promises. His gospel promises are unstoppable. And that should make us rejoice for Abraham's God is our God.

Well, let's be quiet for a moment to respond to the word of God in our own hearts and then I'll pray for us. Through God's grace we are his debtor.

[25 : 07] Daily I this thought renew. Let that grace Lord, like a fetter bind our wandering hearts to you. Prone to wander, Lord, we feel it.

Prone to leave the God we love. So take our hearts, Lord. Take and seal them. Seal them for thy courts above. We pray all of these things in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Amen. Amen.