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# SERMON NOTES

## Genesis #14: Abram, the Human Being

### Genesis 12:6-20

This little section of scripture is both discouraging and encouraging at the same time. It is almost typical of Abram's life, and maybe it is typical of us as we walk with Jesus. In verse six we have Abram obeying God's call to go to Canaan. Many of you may know the old hymn, "Trust and Obey." That is exactly what Abram does. God calls him into uncertainty, into risk and Abram responds by trusting God and obeying him. As I pointed out last week, in many ways, Abram is a hero of faith. Unfortunately, one of the things about Heroes is that they turn out to be human beings also. In this section, Abram shows us a cowardly, weak side of his nature. But even though Abram does some disappointing things, his life can be an example for us of how to continue in faith even when we are not perfect.

In Chapter 12, verses 6-9, Abram is still riding the "trust and obey" wave. He goes to Canaan, like God told him to. God promises to give the land to his offspring, and Abram builds an altar to worship God. When he moves down to the region near Bethel, he builds another altar there – in other words, wherever he goes, he is worshiping God. His heart is tuned in to God, he is living in faith, and everything is just fine.

But suddenly, hard times come – famine hits the region. God has called Abram to this land of Canaan, but all of a sudden there is nothing to eat. I'm reading between the lines here, but I believe that God is giving Abram an opportunity to have his faith strengthened. I suppose that's a polite theological way of saying that it was a test. But God isn't just trying to see if he could trip Abram up – I believe that if Abram would have continued to trust, there might have been a miracle. I'm not saying God deliberately sent the famine – but since it was there, it was a chance for Abram to see God come through on his behalf.

Instead, Abram ran. He went to Egypt, which was watered not by rain, but by the Nile River. Food was much easier to come by down there, rain or no rain. Now, strictly speaking, the text does not say that it was wrong for Abram to go down to Egypt. It may have been just the good and sensible thing God wanted him to do. On the other hand, God clearly called him to the land of Canaan – not the land of Egypt. And what happened in Egypt shows that Abram was, at this point, living in fear, not in trust.

Just to help us understand this a little better, let's try and climb inside the mind of Abram. Abram has responded to God by trusting him, leaving what he knows and living in faith. He wanders around the land a bit. He stays close to God. There are people already living in the area, but Abram holds on to God's promises. The promises haven't actually been fulfilled yet, but life is pretty good.

Then comes the famine. The wonderful land that will belong to Abram and his descendants doesn't look like it can even feed this one family much longer. Abram can't go home – it's way too far. God might come through and take care of him and his household, *but what has God done for him, really?* I mean, Abram has left everything, stepped out in faith and all that, but so far God hasn't actually done anything for *him*, has he? God promised to bless him, but this famine seems like the opposite of blessing. Instead of being blessed, Abram was facing ruin. God also said he would be a blessing. But he wasn't a blessing to anyone else – he had been just wandering around, and now he was fighting for his own survival. God promised to give the land to his descendants, but Abram doesn't even *have* any descendants. God promised to make his name great, but he's a stranger in Canaan. There's no doubt that at this point Abram was better known and respected in his home country than in the land of Canaan. Did Abram make the whole thing up? Did he even really hear the voice of God? I mean, we have words for people who hear voices.

Brothers and sisters in Jesus, sometimes this is what the life of faith is going to feel like. It feels like a life of foolishness, and the folly of it seems to be proved by the circumstances we get ourselves into when we follow God. We feel convinced that God is directing us to certain kind of life, or a certain action. We follow, full of faith and trust, and after a while, the first significant thing we encounter is – hardship. Pain. Struggle. Looming disaster. This is not God's blessing, is it? Surely he wouldn't lead us into this, would he?

Abram did not stick with it long enough to find out – in this particular instance. He bolted for safety.

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Conventional wisdom (and common sense) says that if you are a nomad, when there's a famine, go to the place where there isn't a famine. Later on in his life, you find Abram having conversations with God about what is going on, or what actions he ought to take. But not this first time. Abram didn't wait to find out if God would provide for him in time of trouble – he decided to fix the problem himself – whatever God might have said – and he went to Egypt.

We can see that Abram was operating out of fear, rather than faith, by what he does next. He thinks the Egyptians might kill him on account of his beautiful wife Sarai. So he tells her to say she is his sister. In Genesis 20:12 we learn that she really is his *half*-sister. So in a sense, he wasn't telling her to lie. But the point is, even though it was technically not a lie, the intention was to deceive people and conceal the fact that they were married. You can lie without saying anything technically false – but don't think for a moment you are deceiving God.

Sarai was a beautiful woman, and the Pharaoh (that is, the king) of Egypt – like most ancient middle-eastern rulers – made a habit of collecting beautiful things, including women. He took her – without Abram's objection – to be part of his harem. This is a real low point for Abram. He's running scared of the famine, and he doesn't care what God's plan is about that. Now that he has started down that path, he doesn't have enough faith left to believe that God could protect him in Egypt. He is so frightened that he's willing to give up his wife for his own personal safety. Not only that, but he gained a lot of wealth by using Sarai this way.

What happens next is really quite amazing, if you think of it. Abram has abandoned God's plan. He probably thought that God has abandoned him in return. **NOT SO.** God reaches out to Abram when he is at he lowest, most faithless and despicable. He proves at least one of part of his promise: “I will curse those who treat you with contempt.” Even though the Egyptians did not knowingly cause harm to Abram or Sarai, God showed his power and his care for them by striking Pharaoh's household with plagues until they figure it out. Sarai is reunited with Abram and they leave, unharmed, but much wealthier. We'll see next week that Abram did in fact learn something from all this, and he returned to trusting God again.

I think God probably wanted Abram to stay in Canaan during the famine. There was probably some amazing way he would have provided for him. So, I think Abram failed to trust when he went to Egypt. Abram certainly failed to trust God when he lied about his marriage to Sarai. Either way you look at it, Abram got himself into quite a mess by not trusting God, by running in fear and doubt. **But God's response to Abram's faithlessness is to bless Abram and protect him, anyway.** That, my friends, is GRACE. Abram did not deserve it. In fact he deserved the opposite. But God decided to bless Abram, and that decision was not because Abram was such a good person – he wasn't. It was a decision of grace.

God has made a decision of grace about us too. Romans 5:6-11 tells us that Jesus Christ died for us while we were still sinners. It wasn't because we earned it. He loves us because he has chosen to – not because we are so good. And our faithlessness and screw-ups will not make him change his mind about his love and grace for us.

Maybe today you are facing something like Abram faced. You've begun to trust God, to walk in faith, but you haven't really seen him come through for you yet. And now there's trouble coming. You don't see how God can deal with this trouble. You think maybe the only way to deal with it is to abandon faith and go with common sense. Now, sometimes faith and common sense go together. But sometimes they don't. If you pray and listen, I think you'll know when God is calling you into something that looks foolish.

Take a lesson from Abram, our father in faith. Don't abandon God when He's giving you a chance to see what He can do for you. Don't expect to see miracles if you live a life in which no miracles are required.

But there's one more thing. Maybe you've already fallen off the trust wagon. You just couldn't handle it – it was just too scary or uncertain. Take heart. God will not abandon us as quickly as we abandon him. That's what grace is all about. He will show you grace even when you've gone and made a mess of things. And he will invite you once more, to live a life of faith, like Abram. We won't be perfect, by any means, but we can live a life of trust, supported by God's grace.