

The Journey of Faith
(2) Abraham's first mistake
Genesis 12:10-20 May 8th 2022
Introduction

You and I live in a culture filled with celebrities. Celebrity chefs, celebrity boxers, celebrity actors and actresses, celebrity YouTubers, and so on. John Drane, a Christian writer, has suggested that Celebrities exist because many people are insecure about their own identity so they attach themselves to these celebrities, and copy their dress and behaviour in the search for personal meaning and identity. Day by day these celebrities publish their seemingly happy and perfect lives online.

Unfortunately, we have also seen the rise of Christian celebrities. I say “unfortunately” because there is only One Person worthy of our esteem and worship and exaltation and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. Everyone else in the world is a flawed sinner. And the Bible goes out of its way to tell us the faults of the great heroes of faith so that no-one will hero-worship them.

We're making our way through the life of Abraham and today we hear about a big mistake he made. And we'll hear of more faults on future Sundays. The Bible does not gloss over the sins of its greatest heroes (That's one reason to believe the Bible is true!). Abraham is a great man of faith, don't get me wrong, but like you and I and everyone in the world, he had feet of clay.

Let's not bring celebrity culture into the church, brothers and sisters! Let's honour where honour is due, but let's not set any Christian on a pedestal, no preacher, no musician, no teacher, no apologist. (If we do then it is likely that one day we'll be disappointed—and even stumbled if they should fall. It seems to me that in recent years the Lord has allowed many prominent “Christian Celebrities” to fail in order to steer us away from glorifying men.)

Today we shall study the frailty of Abraham to learn from him, but then, we will observe the amazing faithfulness of God who in his grace and mercy rescues his people and brings them back.

#1 The Frailty of Abraham

Thus far, God has called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldeans and by obedient faith Abraham has arrived in the land of Canaan. Well, just as Abraham finally “arrives” in Canaan he

encounters an enormous problem—a severe famine, verse 10! This is a gigantic difficulty! Abraham is responsible for lots of people, many of whom he's acquired on his way, verse 5. (In 14:14 a short time later, we read of 318 trained men born in his household! 318 soldiers among your people, must translate into a community of over 1000 people).

Imagine the problem: you are responsible for hundreds of people, all living in an unfamiliar land and among strange people—possibly hostile. And then a severe famine strikes the land, threatening to wipe you all out, not to mention the promises God has made to you! Abraham is in a perplexing and serious fix. I wonder what's going on in his mind! Did I hear the Lord correctly? Perhaps I got it got it wrong! Perhaps God did not all me to Canaan.

I wonder if the same has happened to you? God has led you somewhere but when you've arrived you've been confronted by serious difficulties.

We support missionaries who went to serve in one particular nation on one particular project but when they arrived the project shut down! How confusing!

Adoniram Judson was called to be a missionary in Burma, but when he arrived in India on route, everyone from the Captain to the seasoned missionary William Carey, told him that Burma was going to be impossible and tried to put them off.

Someone becomes a follower of Jesus. Everything changes, it is so exciting, but then an enormous difficulty comes across your path.

Abraham's experience is a common one!

Let's watch how Abraham handles this crisis and learn from him. Perhaps you have a big decision to make in life — may the Lord speak to you this morning, may he help and equip you to make the right choice.

The bottom line is that Abraham made a mistake: he decides to take his household down into Egypt, the ancient famous bread-basket of the world. There was always bread in Egypt! It's the obvious human solution! How do we know it was a mistake? Genesis does not tell us directly it was a mistake, because the Lord wants us to mediate on the stories and work things out for ourselves. But two signals tell us the wisdom or otherwise of the decisions Abraham makes:

1. What are the consequences of this decision—good or bad?
2. What is Abraham's walk with the Lord during these events: does he hear from the Lord, does he get a fresh revelation? Does he pray to the Lord, call on his name, make a new altar?

In this case, the outcome is bad, God does not speak to Abraham in Egypt, and we do not read of Abraham calling on the name of the Lord. Abraham's decision to take his household to Egypt was a big mistake. Let's take a closer look at where this great man of faith went wrong:

(1) Abraham was THOUGHTLESS. Abraham did not think through all the implications of the decision enough: if this domino falls then what domino might follow? What if his band became so settled in Egypt that no-one would want to move back to God's promised land? (He had experience of that problem already when the family had stopped half-way at Haran for 15 years according to some commentators). What if Sarai was kidnapped by Pharaoh? What would happen to God's promise that he would become a great nation then? He thought about Sarah's beauty, we'll come back to that in a moment, but he did not think it through enough.

A common fault in the mistakes we can make is not to think issues out enough. God has given us minds to think through the implications of all the decisions we make; to consider the consequences of our actions. "If I do this, then what might flow out of that?"

2) Abraham was SELFISH. In the second place, Abraham's decision was selfish. Abraham knew that his wife would be the object of men's attention. She was 65 but in those days that was mid-life, Sarah lived to the age of 120 and Abraham to the age of 175. Sarah was a stunning beauty, a head-turner we might say. And so Abraham came to Sarah with a suggestion. If some powerful man wanted Sarah—and there was a real risk that he'd kill Abraham to take her— then they were to pretend that she was his sister, not his wife. Abraham's life would then be spared.

Just a minute Abraham, they don't kill you but spare a thought for Sarah—what kind of life is he going to have separated from her husband and becoming part of a strange family in a strange land? Not to mention the forced adultery she would suffer? Abraham's thinking of his own safety, not the well-being of his wife—right?

Whenever we make decisions do we think of the consequences of that decision of those around us? Our husband, our wife, our children, our home group, our church? How will the Kingdom of God be impacted? If we only think of Number 1, it is a pretty sure sign we're making a big mistake.

3) Abraham was DECEITFUL . Abraham was only telling half the truth when he told Pharaoh that Sarah was her sister. Sarah *was* Abraham's half-sister, they had the same father but different mothers, Genesis 20:12. But Abraham was planning to call Sarah his sister in order to deceive people into thinking *he was not married* to her, that he was only her brother—so they wouldn't kill him if they wanted her. And the writer of this chapter tells us in verse 11 that Abraham did not ask Sarah to join in this deceit until they were crossing the border— he left this idea as late as possible, presumably to give Sarah as little time as possible to think it over and refuse! And also, I wonder if Abraham thought to himself, “this sister thing should work because we have no children to blow our marriage cover.”

God never honours decisions that involve deceit! Deceit and lying belong to our old lives, which we must leave behind, brothers and sisters. We can be sure a decision is wrong if it needs deceit to pull it off? Right?

4) Abraham was FAITHLESS. Thoughtlessness, selfishness, deceit. But these aren't the worst traits of Abraham's decision. Worst of all, and indeed the source of the other mistakes was this: Abraham's decision was without faith in God!

Instead of trusting in the invisible God who called him to the land of Canaan he trusted in his senses, he trusted in the breadbasket of the world, Egypt. “Abram went down to Egypt.”

What should Abraham have done? He should have prayed , “Lord you called me to this land, you provide for me and my household. I can't go to Egypt because I may lose my wife and then what will happen to the promise of becoming a great nation? I can't go to Egypt because my household might become so settled that I may not be able to persuade them to come back to your promised land. Lord we're in a fix—provide for us!”

And then Abraham should have waited for God's answer! For nothing is impossible with God! He us able to provide manna from the heavens, quail from the skies and even water from a desert rock!

The root error of Abraham's was that he acted out of fear instead of faith; and all the thoughtlessness, the selfishness and the deceit were all by-products of a faith-less decision.

Here it is in Romans 14:23, *"Everything that does not come from faith is sin."*

Perhaps you have some decision to make? Great or small? God wants you to use your **God-given mind**. We can be spared a thousand pains by thinking through the future dominoes that may or will fall.

Christ wants us to *think about others*, our loved ones our home group, our church families, the wider kingdom of God.

The Lord wants us to *avoid deceit or lying*.

But above all God wants us to *trust him*: to take the situation to him in prayer and trust in his Omnipotent power and Omniscient wisdom. He wants us to trust him, even if it doesn't make sense! Even if we are fearful! Even if we can't work it all out! He wants us to trust him!

"Faith is the hallmark that makes the ring of decision authentic"

The very worst outcome took place. Abraham was right about the men of Egypt! But he didn't take into account Pharaoh's sycophantic Harem scouts who were on the look out for the next beautiful woman they could line up for the king—in the hope of some reward, of course. Sarah was taken into the palace, the king's harem. In those days, we read in the book of Esther, a woman may go through weeks of beauty treatments before being presented to the king. Perhaps that is what happened to Sarah. The king, in any case, gave her "brother Abraham" what amounts to a great dowry, verse 16.

I wonder what Abraham was thinking during those dark moments: "we've managed to buy food, in fact I've become quite a rich man, but I've lost my wife, and what now of the promised become a great nation?" We're not told what Abraham, or his household, or Sarah thought in those dark moments. But we do know what God did for his erring child: he rescued him!

#2 The Faithfulness of God

When we go astray, our great loving shepherd brings us back. God does three things to restore Abraham:

First of all, God lovingly chastises Abraham. This is how it happened. Pharaoh's household got seriously sick, and the timing lined up with Sarah's welcome into the king's harem so perfectly that Pharaoh –correctly—suspected that the two must be connected. He made an investigation and found out that Sarah was not Abraham's sister but wife. He called Abraham in and gave him a proper courtly ticking off. Abraham's chastisement was to be rebuked by a pagan king.

Then God rescued Abraham, verse 20. Pharaoh's soldiers round up Abraham's household and escorted them out of the land. No chance of settling in Egypt!

But notice that Abram was not asked to return the dowry, God was so gracious to Abraham, he was allowed to keep the wealth he had been given in Egypt! It could all have ended up so differently, but the Lord is gracious to Abraham and restores him. And now, at last, after foolish decisions and backsliding, Abraham is back on track, 13:1-4.

Conclusions

What stands out in this story pre-eminently, is not so much the foolishness of Abraham, but the faithful mercy and grace of God to wayward sinners.

*The King of love my Shepherd is,
Whose goodness faileth never;
I nothing lack if I am his
And he is mine for ever.*

*Perverse and foolish oft I strayed,
But yet in love he sought me,
And on his shoulder gently laid,
And home, rejoicing, brought me.*

God was not going to allow Abraham to drift away! God was not going to let Abraham derail his sovereign plans to make him into a great nation, to bless the world through him!

Is this not a great comfort? God is determined to “complete the good work he has begun in us” (Philippians 1:6). And no backsliding, no mistakes, no faithlessness, no disobedience can thwart his sovereign loving gracious plans. He will bring his people back, he will restore us; for when we are faithless he remains faithful.

Let us worship and glorify his faithful name together, as we sing, “Great is Thy Faithfulness.”