

Genesis 12:10-20 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. ¹¹ When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, ¹² and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake." ¹⁴ When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵ And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁶ And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.

¹⁷ But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. ¹⁸ So Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹ 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." ²⁰ And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.

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Genesis 12:10-20 | Abram & Sarai in Egypt

Last week John did a wonderful job of kicking off the next phase of our series in Genesis. God initiated his covenant with Abram. This covenant becomes the through line of scripture around which all the hope and drama of redemption depends. In the first eleven chapters of Genesis we are introduced to the universal implications of sin. The fundamental relationship of our existence, the relationship between man and God is broken. This brokenness flows from the first people down through all of creation.

God's plan for this universal brokenness is not universal but particular. He zooms in on one man, and makes a promise to this one man of a blessing that will be for the whole world. To Abram he says go from your father's house to a land that I will show you. I'll make you a nation, give you the land, bless those who bless you curse those who curse you, and bless the whole world through you.

God gives to Abram a promise. That is all.

The promise of land and offspring become the center of the drama for the story of Abram and today we begin to see this drama unfold. In Abram's stories we see the nature of the covenant. Something best learned through narrative. Timothy Ward says this;

Narrative is the form of writing best suited to answering with clarity and conviction the key questions which the offer of a promise always raises: Can I trust the person making this promise? What happens when it seems as if he is failing to keep his promise? What will be the consequences if I trust him, or if I don't?

Many of us fall into a mechanistic type of thinking when considering the promises of God. Like they are a version of Karma. You get out of them what you put into them. But God's promises, are not Karmic, or formulaic. They are revelations of his very character, of God's heart towards his fallen creatures. Abram was given a promise of land and offspring, but immediately Abram's trust in God's promise comes under challenge. We'll see how this story reveals God's covenant in action.

1. Promise Pressure: Hunger, Fear, Wealth

Genesis 12:10 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.

Abram obeyed God's command and went down to the land of Canaan. While in the land God promised him he would give this land to his offspring. The promise of land and offspring are held together. But Abram begins to experience the pressure of this promise when the land he has been promised undergoes a severe famine. Abram seeks food in the fertile Nile river delta of Egypt. The land was promised by God to Abram, and yet it seems like a death sentence to stay in the Promised land. Remember part of the promise to Abram was that he would be blessed. Abram is forced into those questions.

Can I trust the person making the promise? What happens when it seems as if he is failing to keep his promise?

In his feeling of vulnerability he takes matters into his own hands and flees to Egypt. Before entering Egypt he takes even the truth itself into his own hands.

Genesis 12:11-12 When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, ¹² and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake."

You see Abram's hunger and decision to leave the promised land is a part of a whole shift away from confidence in God's promise. God had promised that those who bless Abram will be blessed and those who curse Abram will be cursed. God told Abram that he would be on his side. But Abram treats God as though he is not a factor, and instead trusts in his own lies for rescue.

There is a pattern to Abram's drift, and it begins with his expectation of what it will mean for God to be faithful to him. It must mean the land God promised will not have a famine. If it does have a famine then God can't be trusted. If the author of reality can't be trusted, then we must take it upon ourselves to define our own reality. It is only in the reality of our own making that we will be truly safe. And for a while, Abram likely thought he was right.

Genesis 12:14-16 When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵ And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁶ And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.

Everything went precisely according to Abram's plan. We don't know how long they maintained this ruse. But long enough for Abram to be given a bunch of livestock and servants, so let's say more than week. Abram continued living the lie. He gets taken into his lie by wealth.

We can see that at this point in Abram's life, the promise of God was a secondary factor in his decision making. Primarily his choice to follow God is pragmatic. When he sets out in faith in God's promise he is setting out conditionally. I'll go to the land and be blessed, but we're going to need some blessing pretty quick. When that doesn't happen, he conjures his own blessing, in his own promises, which are actually lies, and lives it out so long as he continues to be blessed.

So here's a question. What lies does Egypt require you to tell so that it blesses you? What lies does our culture require you to tell?

God upholds his end of the bargain.

2. Promise keeper

Genesis 12:17 But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.

Remember, Abram's blessing came at the cost of his wife, and while Abram did not remain faithful to her, God remained faithful to both of them. Part of God's promise was "him who dishonors you I will curse." Abram was being dishonored by having his wife taken, whether Abram was willing to recognize it or not. All of Abram's priorities were out of whack driven by hunger fear and greed, but God remains faithful to his word and faithful to the truth. Pharaoh was acting against his chosen one, therefore God sent plagues upon Pharaoh's household.

Pharaoh is either told by God, or Sarai or pieces this together somehow, but he realizes he has been deceived by Abram and really takes him to task.

Genesis 12:18-19 So Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹ 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."

All of Abram's lies are laid bare before him, and he doesn't respond. Abram must have realized what he had done. Ironically, Abram is forced back into the promise of God by the very means through which he abandoned God.

As to the answers to Pharaoh's questions, the fact is there is no counterfactual that we can run. Abram likely had very good reason to think that Pharaoh would have killed him, and perhaps he would have. But here Pharaoh sends him away, at least feigning a high ground. But Pharaoh had learned one thing, not that Abram was honest or trustworthy, but that God was on his side.

Genesis 12:20 And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.

Abram leaves with men under orders and he takes with him his wife and all that he gained in Egypt. Hundreds of years later, his offspring would do the same.

God remained faithful to Abram by bringing him through the judgement of the plagues, and out the other side.

What do we do with the ambiguity of this story? Wouldn't it have made more sense if God had come down and rebuked Abram in the same way that Pharaoh rebuked him? Wouldn't it have made more sense if Abram left without all the goods he gained from deceit? If he was chased out of Egypt instead of protected by Pharaoh's soldiers?

What do we learn here? God is faithful. In this strangest of circumstances, God remembers his promise, defends his people, blesses them, and draws them back into his plans for him. Abram returns to Canaan, Sarai returns to Abram. They both see a new depth to the reality of God's faithfulness.

You see God does not relate to us mechanically. He's not like Pharaoh. He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. God is not like a man, he is perfectly faithful. In the covenant of God we see the heart of God on display. But nowhere do we see the heart of God more perfectly revealed than in Christ. It is Christ, who receives the plague because he stands in truth. It is Christ who we betray and yet he still sends us out in blessing. While we were yet sinners Christ died for us. In the sinfulness of our own compromising soul, tossed about by hunger, fear, and greed; look to the steadiness of the heart of God who calls you out of your lies back to the glory of his promises toward you in Christ.

