

## **“THE HARD WORK OF FAITH”** **(Genesis 12:4-20)**

The story is told of a man crossing through a desert in Nevada in the early 1900's, and he found himself without water. As his situation grew desperate, in the distance he spotted a pump near an abandoned shack. With a burst of energy, he ran up to the pump, and noticed a jug of water sitting by the pump with a note attached to it. The note said, “There is just enough water in this jug to prime the pump, but not if you drink some first. This well has never gone dry, even in the worst of times. Pour the water in the top of the pump and then pump the handle quickly, and you will get all the water you want. After you are finished getting the water you need, refill this jug for the next person who comes along.” The letter was signed “Desert Pete.”

The big question is: Do you trust Desert Pete? Do you take what precious water you have and believe what “Desert Pete” says is true? If you do, you risk pouring out all the water and getting none back at all if the pump fails. Or do you play it safe and drink what little water there is, and forego what could be an endless supply of water? I love this story because it's a powerful picture of what it means to live by faith.

Faith, by its very nature, involves risk. It requires believing what we cannot see. The Bible says we walk by faith, not by sight. It would be nice to walk by sight, and know exactly what will happen if we pour out the water, but God has so designed life that we walk by faith. Hebrews 11:6 says that without faith it is impossible to please God. Once we do believe and put our trust in Christ, we begin a lifetime walk of faith until the day we die – and along the journey of faith our faith is often challenged with obstacles and difficulties – all of which are designed to build our faith muscles and develop within us a faith that is tough and resilient and durable.

Last week we began a study of the life of Abraham, who is the father of all who believe by faith. No Bible character teaches us more about faith than Abraham, and what we will come to love about Abraham is that he wasn't a superhero who did everything right. Some days he had extraordinary faith, and other days he fell flat on his face and wilted. If someone were to draw a graph of your faith using a line – like an EKG – the ideal would be a line that is slowly going up, showing a steady progression of faith. But most of us have a line that looks like this – up and down, high and low. Abraham's life looked much like this, and in our passage today we see both faith and failure.

Last week in verses 1-3 we saw God say to Abraham, “Leave your country, your people, and your family and go to a land I will show you.” God doesn't give him a map or a time-line – He just says, “Go... stay tuned for more directions.” The God makes three promises to Abraham: 1) I will give you a land; 2) I will make from you a great nation with many descendants; and 3) I will bless you and make you a blessing to the whole world. Through Abraham God is enacting a plan to reverse the curse of sin and provide salvation through Christ – who comes from the line of Abraham. All those who come to faith in Christ become sons of Abraham, and share in his blessing. God is not calling Abraham to some small endeavor, but to be part of His plan to save the world, and to do so will require incredible faith.

Today we're going to look at verses 4-20 of Genesis 12, where Abraham faces three big challenges to faith – and they are the same challenges we face in our Christian walk. The first challenge is found in verses 4-5, and that is the challenge of **LEAVING YOUR COMFORT ZONE**... “So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.”

We find out in Genesis 11 that Abraham lived in a city called Ur, in what today is the country of Iraq. Every indication is that Abraham was comfortable in Ur – Ur was located in an area called the Fertile Crescent – between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers – an area known for its advanced civilization and prosperity. It was well-watered and a busy hub of commerce. Abraham had everything he wanted right there – he had wealth, he had family and friends, he had security, he’s 75 years old, and there’s no earthly reason for him to leave.

But in faith Abraham obeys God’s call and leaves behind all he’s ever known. Along with his father Terah, his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot – Abraham heads northwest along the Euphrates River and comes to a place that will come to be called Haran, after Abraham’s brother who died back in Ur. Genesis 11 says that Abraham settled in Haran, but Haran was not the Promised Land and it was not his final destination. Verse 5 says that Abraham accumulated many possessions and added people to his entourage. I’m sure that the thought of staying in Haran went through Abraham’s mind, but after his father Terah dies in Haran, Abraham continues traveling south until he comes to the land of Canaan.

In the journey of faith there is always the temptation to settle for something less than God’s best – to stay Ur – to stay in Haran – to stay in your comfort zone where things are predictable and safe – but that’s not the life God calls us to. Every person in the Bible God used was called to leave their comfort zone and step out in faith. Noah was called to build an ark where there was no water or rain – David was called to defeat Goliath with just a few small stones – Jonah was called to walk into a pagan city and preach repentance – Peter was called to step out of the boat and walk on water. In this life, God does not call us to be comfortable and safe – He calls us to follow and obey Him even when we don’t know what the outcome will be. He calls us to risky faith.

For example, God calls us to evangelize and be His representatives on earth, and doing so carries a risk... What if they laugh at me? What if they no longer want to be my friend? What if I make a fool out of myself? God says, “Don’t worry about the outcome, just be faithful to do what I’ve called you to do.” God calls us to set aside a portion of our income each week and give it to Him.” That takes faith... What if I don’t have enough left over? God says, “Don’t worry about tomorrow – seek first the kingdom of God and all these things will be added unto you.” The Christian life is not for the faint of heart – it’s an adventure in which we leave our comfort zone and step out in bold faith, trusting God to take care of us.

The second challenge Abraham faced, and we face, is **VIEWING EARTH AS OUR TEMPORARY HOME**. We see this in verses 6-9 where Abraham goes from place to place to place, but never settles down... Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.

Abraham leaves Haran and travels south to Shechem, which is located right in the center of what would become the Promised Land of Israel. He stops at the “great tree of Moreh,” which makes you ask, “What is this tree and why does Abraham stop there?” The tree was obviously a prominent landmark, and historical records show that it may have been a center of Canaanite cult worship. The Canaanites were the wicked offspring of Noah’s cursed grandson Canaan, who lived in the land and would become enemies of Abraham’s people.

Abraham comes to a place of pagan worship, in the center of the land of what would become the land of Israel, and God appears to him and says, “To you and your offspring I will give this land. This is it, Abraham. This is the Promised Land.” In response, Abraham built an altar there to the Lord. He plants a flag, so to speak, and marked the land as belonging to the Lord. The altar was a memorial to God so that all who passed by in the future would remember what happened there. Shechem became a very significant, sacred sight to the Jewish people as the place where God appeared and reaffirmed His promise to Abraham.

It would seem natural for Abraham to settle down right here in Shechem – in the heart of the Promised Land – but he moves on. He heads south about 30 miles to Bethel and Ai, where he builds another altar, worshipping and calling on the name of the Lord. Then he sets out for the Negev region to the south. Abraham is a nomad.

There’s a key phrase in verse 8 that will become a predominant theme in Abraham’s life. It says that Abraham “pitched his tent.” The author of Hebrews noted this when he said, “By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:9-10).

Abraham lived in tents his whole life – he never owned land or had a permanent home – when he died, all he owned was the burial plot where his body was laid to rest – he never lived to see God’s promises fulfilled – but he died in faith. Abraham placed his faith not in this world, but in the world to come. He took his jug of water and poured it all into the next life. His motto was, “This world is not my home, I’m just passing through.” He viewed himself as a “stranger in a foreign country,” never adopting the customs and cultures of the pagan world around him – instead he was looking forward in faith to a more glorious, permanent home. Because he lived with an eternal mindset, he was able to hold the things of this world loosely – enjoying them but not getting attached to them.

Not many people live that way – it takes a tremendous amount of faith to say, “This life is not all there is – there is a better life to come and I’m putting all my eggs in that basket. I will enjoy this life, but I’m not going to be preoccupied with having money or fame or power – instead I’m going to be preoccupied with obeying God’s call and being a blessing to others – I’m going to pour all my time and energy into serving God with the few years I have on earth and doing all I can to point people to Christ. I’m going to lay up treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy.”

For some the pull of the present world is too great and they live as if this life was all there is. But in doing so, they miss out on both worlds. C.S. Lewis said, “Aim at heaven and you will get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and you get neither.” When you live with an eternal mindset, you get the best of both worlds – you get eternal life in heaven, and abundant life here and now!

To this point Abraham has shown remarkable faith – he’s left everything behind to follow God, he’s lived in a tent, he’s built altars, and he’s been obedient to God’s call. But Abraham’s faith graph line is about to take a dip. Abraham is human, and under pressure – when his faith is tested – he fails.

In verse 10 we see a third challenge Abraham faced, and we face, is **TRUSTING GOD IN A CRISIS**... “Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe.” A famine is Abraham’s first big test of faith. Faith is easy when the refrigerator is full, the bills are paid, and life is going well – but what happens when there’s a crisis, a hardship, a setback? That’s where the rubber meets the road and our faith is revealed for what it is.

The book of James says that testing is a positive thing, and something we should consider joyful because of what it builds perseverance. It builds our faith muscles so that we will be strong and mature in every area of our lives.

Famines were common in biblical times, and in the hierarchy of needs, food is right up there – if you don't have food, you don't live. Imagine Abraham, giving up everything to obey God's call, and here he is in the Promised Land, and there's a severe famine. Having lived in the Fertile Crescent, it was something he'd never experienced before. What do I do? Where do I go? The natural response in times of crisis is to hit the panic button, and to look for the quickest possible solution.

In the ancient world, during famines people went down to Egypt. Each year the Nile River Delta would flood and provide the perfect environment for crops to flourish. It was the logical place to go, and Abraham packed up his tent and left for Egypt. Should he have gone? We're not told that that going to Egypt was necessarily wrong, but we also don't see that Abraham consulted the Lord or that the Lord directed him to go. It appears as though he made this decision on his own. It's the same decision we all make when faced with a crisis – do I turn to the Lord and trust him or do I turn to Egypt?

In the Bible Egypt symbolizes the world – a pagan culture that trusted in power and wealth and human wisdom. The Promised Land was the land of blessing, while Egypt was the land of bondage. After 400 years of bondage, God called Israel out of Egypt, to turn their back on Egypt, and return to the Promised Land.

Later in Israel's history the prophet Isaiah used Egypt to symbolize those who run to the world to solve their problems... “Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the LORD” (Isaiah 31:1).

Running to Egypt is a constant temptation – to trust in someone or something else besides the Lord. Even after being delivered from bondage in Egypt, the Children of Israel wanted to go back – the comfort of the familiar was better than living by faith in the desert. When we're faced with a crisis, the temptation is to somehow, somehow relieve the pressure as quickly as possible. We don't like pain and to relieve the pain we turn to anything – to another person, to our own ingenuity, to moving somewhere else, to working 14-hour days, to taking pills.

The best thing to do is to simply slow down and be still before the Lord. Don't run from your problems, but take your problems to the Lord. Bathe your problem in prayer and say, “Lord, I don't know what the answer is, but I'm going to trust you.” It is often said that we shouldn't make decisions when we're in distress, when we're panicked, or when we're afraid. Hasty decisions usually don't turn out well. Instead, Proverbs 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”

Often times we trust in Egypt without even realizing it – we just run to the quickest solution – and Abraham's problems begin before he even enters Egypt. Verses 11-13 say, “As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, ‘I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.”

Egypt was ruled by powerful Pharaoh's – godlike kings with unlimited power – and if a Pharaoh saw a woman he liked, he would make her a part of his large harem. Abraham knew about this which maybe should have tipped him off that he shouldn't go, but instead he comes up with plan.

His plan went something like this... “Sarah, you’re a beautiful woman (just what every wife wants to hear) and when the Egyptians see you, they’re going to assume that you’re my wife, and they’re not going to hesitate a second to take me out and let you live. So here’s the plan: say you are my sister, and things will go well with me – they’ll let me live and treat me well.”

At first glance, it sounds like Abraham is kind of a coward, but it’s more likely that he’s trying to take advantage of Egyptian customs to save both of their lives. As Sarah’s brother, Abraham would be seen by the Egyptians as Sarah’s guardian, and he would be the one through whom any marriage arrangements would be made. He figured that any negotiations for marriage would take time – time he would use to obtain food and get out of Egypt. But he didn’t figure on what happens next.

Verses 14-16 say, “When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that 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. He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels.”

Ut-oh... Part of Abraham’s plan works – they treat him well because of Sarah and give him a generous dowry for Sarah – what he didn’t plan on is that Sarah would immediately be taken into the palace of Pharaoh. It’s the classic, “It sounded like a good plan at the time.” Abraham and Sarah are in deep trouble, and God’s promise to bless Abraham with many descendants through Sarah is in jeopardy.

Abraham must have had some sleepless nights thinking about Sarah and how he was going to get himself out of this jam. Have you ever done something really stupid and pound your head into your hand and say, “Dumb, dumb, dumb”? Abraham is powerless to change his circumstances. But God is working behind the scenes to deliver Sarah and fulfill the promises He made to Abraham.

Verses 17-20, But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram’s wife Sarai. So 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? Now then, 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.

This reminds us of the exodus, where God inflicted ten plagues on Pharaoh, and after the tenth plague Pharaoh said, “Go – get out of Egypt.” This is like a sneak preview of the exodus. The Egyptians were very superstitious and believed that bad things were the result of offending one of their gods, but when Pharaoh sees that Sarah doesn’t get sick, he deduces that he must have offended Abraham’s God by taking Sarah to be his wife. He gives Abraham a tongue-lashing and kicks him out of Egypt, just as another Pharaoh will later tell Moses and the Children of Israel to leave.

A huge lesson in this story is God’s faithfulness to what He promises. God promised to bless Abraham and to save the world through his people, and nothing can derail God’s plan. His plan was threatened when Abraham foolishly decided to go to Egypt and lie about Sarah, but once God enacts a plan and makes a promise, it’s going to happen despite what opposition comes against it. God’s promise of blessing Abraham with many descendants could not be fulfilled if Sarah became Pharaoh’s wife, but through His providence He protects Sarah and preserves her as the chosen vessel through whom the Messiah will come.

Scripture is filled with promises God makes to us – He promises to come again, He promises to deliver us from all pain and suffering, He promises to restore the earth to its Eden-like conditions, and He promises to never leave us or forsake us but keep us safe until He comes. God is faithful to keep His promises even when we mess up and go to Egypt.

Abraham suffered repercussion for his choices – he probably had some patching up to do with Sarah for putting her in that position, he failed to be a blessing to the Egyptians, and one of the slaves he received from Pharaoh was Hagar, with whom he would later have a child. His trip to Egypt was costly, but nothing would derail God's promises.

Like Abraham, God has called us to walk by faith, not by sight – and we must decide what we're going to do with our jug of water – are we going to pour it all out in faith, staking everything on His promises and what He says is true? Or are we going to play it safe and live only for this present world.

Walking by faith is not for the faint of heart.

- It's not easy to leave Ur and Haran, where things are predictable and comfortable and step out in obedience to God.
- It's not easy to live your whole life in a tent, and pour everything you have – your money, your time, your energy, your resources – into the life to come.
- It's not easy to trust God when there's a famine and you're anxious to solve your problem quickly.

It takes incredible trust in God to take the only life you're given and give it to Him, and say...

- I'm all yours, God. I'll go where you want me to go – even if I have to leave my comfort zone.
- I'll live this life as a pilgrim and invest this life in the life to come.
- I'll trust you when hardships come, knowing that they develop in me a tough faith that perseveres.

Living by faith is an adventure, but it's worth the risk – pour out your jug of water and you get the best of both worlds – you get eternal life heaven, and you get abundant life here and now.