

## From Triumph to Trial

Genesis 12:10-20

In every journey of faith there come times of crisis in which one must choose to walk by faith or walk by sight. To walk by faith is to follow God's call trusting in His protection and provision despite threatening circumstances. To walk by sight is to judge things according to appearances, and respond to circumstances according to your own strength and judgement, even if it may differ from God's call.

Like the man at the water pump in the desert we must choose between what seems most immediately helpful, or to trust in the message we have been given for what is best in the long run. The journey of faith is to prime and pump the well; to draw upon what is deep and bountiful. The problem is that circumstances often make that a scary thing to do. It means giving up what we control, and trusting in what we cannot see or control.

Often, these times of crisis often come after a time of spiritual victory, success, or growth. It seems things are going good. Progress is being made in the journey. You begin feeling confident about yourself, then something threatening enters the picture. Because of our success, we become complacent or confident, not confident in God, but confident in ourselves, our own strength of will and our own cleverness in getting things done. And the result is we let down. We let our guard down. We let our trust down. We let our prayer down. We let our devotion down. Letting down is when you go to where God calls you, but when the going gets tough, the tough get... well, in this case high tail down to Egypt.

Last week we looked at a time in Abraham's life when he struggled with halfway obedience. He didn't go as far as God called him. He didn't leave behind all that God called him to leave behind. That is one kind of spiritual danger we will face in our spiritual journeys. This morning we will look at a different challenge in Abraham's life.

### I. Triumph Leads to Trial

The first thing we see here is that triumph often leads to trial. Last week we saw Abraham stopped in Haran when God had called him to Canaan. However, by our text this morning Abraham has obeyed God's call fully and is in Canaan. Abraham has arrived in the Promised Land. Look at verses 6-9 of Genesis 12:

<sup>6</sup>*Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the*

*Canaanites were in the land.<sup>7</sup> Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him.<sup>8</sup> From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the Lord and called upon the name of the Lord.<sup>9</sup> And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.*

It is a time of spiritual growth and victory. A couple of things I want to point out here. He's arrived. The names and places mentioned here are all in the Promised Land. Notice also that the Lord appears to Abraham and makes him a promise. Last week, we saw how when Abraham did not obey God fully, there was delay. It was as many as fifteen years. For fifteen years, Abraham did not see God or hear from God, but now that He has followed God fully, he has a first hand, intimate encounter with God. What a blessing! What an experience this must have been. We know it was special to Abraham, because what does he do? He builds an altar to honor God. It is a time of worship. It is a time of spiritual success and victory. But unlike fairy tales the next verse does not read, "and he lived happily ever after."

Rather, verse 10 reads, "*Now there was a famine in the land.*" All of the sudden Abraham's faith is being tested. Just because he's in the Promised Land doesn't mean things will be easy from now on. Just because you follow God fully in His call, doesn't mean that everything will go well for you. Sometimes our greatest tests of faith come after our greatest successes. The steepest cliffs follow the highest peaks.

It's a pattern we see throughout Scripture. In 1 Kings 18, Elijah singlehandedly, well Elijah plus God takes on King Ahab and 450 prophets of Baal and wins. They each build altars with sacrifices and pray to their respective Gods to accept the sacrifice. The prophets of Baal sing and dance and cut themselves. Elijah mocks them. Maybe your God is in the bathroom. When Elijah prays fire from heaven consumes his sacrifice the altars the other sacrifice. Everything. It's a huge victory. In the very next chapter Elijah is fleeing from the evil queen Jezebel and he curls up under a bush and begs God to die.

In Matthew 16:13-20, Peter makes the bold proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah the Son of the Living God. It's a huge moment for Peter. Jesus blesses him and calls him the rock on which he will build the church. He then turns around in the very next verses and tells Jesus there is no way he will be killed and raised on the third day. Jesus rebukes him saying "God behind me, Satan." Talk about letting down.

Despite what so many so-called preachers on radio and television say, faith doesn't always take you to where the going is easier. In fact, just the opposite is true. Expect one of two things after a time of spiritual triumph: One, is to be attacked by Satan. The other is to have your faith tried by God. The

result of both is to test your faith. To prove it genuine. Spiritual victory without testing is usually weak and short lived. Testing hardens one's growth.

James 1:2 says, *"Consider it pure joy my brothers whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."*

Have you ever bought a new pair of pants and reached into the pocket and pull out a little slip of paper that reads "inspected by 21." What does that tell you? Supposedly your new garment was stretched and pulled and subjected to stresses to prove that it would withstand the wear and tear of life. This is what the testing of our faith does. **A faith not tested is a faith not to be trusted.**

In Abraham's journey, this test came in the form of a famine. Think about it. God calls you. He asks you to trust him. He promises to guide you, to protect you, and to provide for you, and what's the first thing that happens when you get there? A famine. In your own journey of faith, the story might read like this, "Now there were layoffs in the land." "Now there was illness in the land." "Now there was a divorce in the land." "Now there was betrayal in the land." "Now there was a rebellious child in the land." "Now there was infertility in the land." "Now there was addiction in the land." Have you ever had a line like that in your spiritual journey? Have you ever wondered why God was leading you into that?

It is important to realize this and to expect these trials, so that we don't let down. **A journey of faith that doesn't lead us through difficult areas is not a faith that can truly take us to where God wants us to be.** When we let down we can quickly lose much that took a long time to gain. This is exactly what Abraham did.

I don't want to be too hard on Abraham here, and I don't want to read too much into the text. But look carefully at his response and what he does versus what he doesn't do. Just a couple of verses earlier Abraham is building an Altar to God and worshipping him. But when the famine hits Abraham doesn't pray. He doesn't go to God. He doesn't trust in the provision and protection of God. He doesn't seek God's guidance at all. He tries to solve things his own way. God had brought him from Ur to Haran and then across the desert to Canaan. Now when the famine comes he doesn't trust God and goes to where God does not call him.

Verse 10 continues, *"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."*

For Abraham, letting down meant going to Egypt. Our Egypt's can be anything. They can be a bad habit or an addiction. They can be a destructive relationship. They can be a godless attitude that we indulge in when we're not trusting in God. We might let our anger run wild. We might become very

selfish or critical. Maybe your way of running to Egypt is to jump back into an old sin that you left behind years ago. We have all sorts of ways of running to Egypt. It's our way of trying to do things our own way, instead of following God even through the trials. Where is your Egypt? Where is it that you are tempted to go in your spiritual journey that God has not called you? Wherever and whatever that is, don't go there.

If God was calling you to be somewhere when times were good, what makes you think He wants you somewhere different now that times are difficult? Too many of us give up on God's call when difficulties arise. **Hardship is not always a sign that God wants you somewhere else. Many times its proof that you are exactly where He wants you to be.** Trials are where your faith becomes real. It becomes a part of who you really are.

## II. **One Faithless Act Leads to Another**

The problem with letting down, is that once you let down in one thing, it becomes very easy to let down in another area. There is a tendency in the spiritual journey for one faithless act to lead to another.

At the museum of Science and Industry in Chicago there are many fascinating, hands-on and interactive displays to help you understand the principles of Science and Engineering. It was here that I first saw something I've seen many times, but the one at the museum in Chicago is the biggest I've seen. It is a large funnel. I had to climb flights of stairs to get to the top of this one. At the top you put in a coin and it begins to roll. At first it goes very slowly, as it leisurely makes its way around the top of the funnel. But as it continues its pace quickens. It goes faster and faster. As it reaches the bottom it is moving so quickly it is just a blur.

Letting down is the same way. The spiral of sin starts slowly at first with one little thing, almost insignificant, by itself. It doesn't take you far away from where God wants you to be, but it is followed by another and another. Before you know it, your fall through the funnel is a blur. When you're not walking in faith it is hard to trust God in anything.

This is what happens to Abraham. He lets down in following God's call and heads to Egypt, but as soon as he escapes one problem he is faced with another one. He has a very beautiful wife, (There is one problem every guy would like to have) and he is entering a kingdom where the Pharaoh is accustomed to taking any woman he wants. As a foreigner, Abraham fears that Pharaoh will have no qualms about killing this beautiful woman's husband, so he could have her for himself. Look at verses 11-13

<sup>11</sup> *When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, <sup>12</sup> and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then*

*they will kill me, but they will let you live.* <sup>13</sup> *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."*

Again, not trusting in God, Abraham takes things into his own hand. Instead of trusting, he is scheming. He decides that if he tells the Egyptians that Sarah is only his sister, then Pharaoh won't be tempted to kill him. That part may have been true, but what Abraham didn't consider is that it really opened the door for Pharaoh to take Sarah as his own. Soon, Abraham found himself caught in the spiral.

**Beware of Satan's little lie: Just this once. One little sin and no more. This one time and I won't do it again. It will go this far and no farther.** Brothers and sisters, it doesn't work that way. Letting down starts you on a course that is very hard to alter. It's like taking a step on an escalator. It takes only 1 step to get on, but five to get off.

### **III. Faithless Acts Hurt Others**

Not only do faithless acts tend to trap you in a downward spiral, they also almost always harm others. Faithless acts hurt others. Our decisions and actions affect and influence those around us. We never sin in a vacuum. When Abraham decided to turn tail and run to Egypt, he wasn't the only one caught up in his decisions. It hurt those he loved. Abraham didn't consider all the consequences to his actions, especially to others. He only considered how it might affect him, and he ended up putting his wife Sarah in a very dangerous situation.

<sup>14</sup> *When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman.*

<sup>15</sup> *And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace.* <sup>16</sup> *He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels.*

<sup>17</sup> *But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai.* <sup>18</sup> *So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife?"* <sup>19</sup> *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!"* <sup>20</sup> *Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.*

We may be separated by 4,000 years from Abraham, but this is such a window into our own culture. Abraham made a decision that he thought was best for him. He never considered what it might mean for his wife or even for poor Pharaoh.

We live in a very individualistic society. America has always had an individualist streak. We prize rugged individualism. Are heroes are those who can face the odds by themselves, and pull themselves up by their own boot straps. We love the John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, and Bruce Willis type of characters. We want to make our own choice and do our own thing. We want to do what's right for us.

However, it's becoming more pronounced in our younger generations, and what makes it so dangerous is that we've removed our individualism from any sort of objective moral framework.

There's a book that came out in 2011 called *Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*. It is a study of modern teens and young adults. The authors observe, "...how strongly individualistic most of them are when it comes to morality... They said that morality is a personal choice, entirely a matter of individual decision."<sup>i</sup>

In this individualistic way of thinking, the only test for right and wrong is whether or not it hurts someone else. As one young woman on Twitter named Monica tweeted, "Everyone should be allowed to do whatever they want, as long as they're not hurting anyone." A motorcycle rider says it's no one else's business whether he wears a helmet because it doesn't hurt anyone else. On the surface, it seems like a pretty good rule. There are a lot of things we could agree would be okay, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else. Feel free to swing a baseball bat around, as long as you are not in a room full of people. Even God's Word 1 Cor. 8 tells us to give up our freedoms for the sake of others.

But can you build your entire ethical system around this one principle? First of all, who measures the hurt? You or the other person? I read about a group of girls who call themselves lifters, who share shoplifting scores, and secrets on Tumblr.<sup>ii</sup> They justify their actions because they need it, and it doesn't hurt anyone else except those big stores who have lots of money anyway? Who defines the hurt? The thief, the company, the store owner, the loss prevention officer, the customers who have to pay higher prices because of their selfish entitlement?

Secondly, what types of hurt do we count? Is it only physical hurt or financial hurt? What about emotional hurt? What about the wife or the parents of the motorcycle rider who is worried to death every time their loved one goes riding without a helmet. Is their hurt real? What counts more— what makes you happy or what makes your loved ones fearful?

Thirdly, how do you know ahead of time what the long-term results of your action will be? For instance, the motorcycle rider may go out a hundred times without a problem, but how does the motorcycle rider know that the 101<sup>st</sup> ride will result in an accident with a traumatic head injury? Does their previous good choice suddenly become wrong, because now it hurts someone else in a real way?

I found one discussion about a report about how staph infection was spreading among gay men. This was a real struggle for some. One writer says she's a big gay rights supporter and definitely [believes] that a person should be true to their own sexuality (as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else)." This created a huge dilemma in her mind because in this case their sexual activity was creating a public health crisis.

“I’m not hurting anyone else.” The drug addict says, “I’m not hurting anyone,” The alcoholic says. What about their families who have to cover for them? Who wonder what sort of mood they will be in? What about their coworkers who have to pick up the slack? What about the other driver in the accident?

The one involved in sexual sin says, “I’m not hurting anyone.” What about the emotional baggage you and your partner will have to carry around for years. Do you realize that the person you marry someday will still have to deal with the emotional baggage from your hooking up right now? What about all the children that are born because two people are having so much fun not hurting anyone? What about all the grandparents who have to sacrifice their own plans and dreams to raise and pay for their grandkids because mom and dad are doing what’s right for them and not hurting anyone?

Do we not see that we have been sold a pack of lies? It doesn’t hurt anyone else is myth. It is a lie that first came from Satan and we’ve been retelling it ever since. Satan loves to have us think that we are independent and can do our own thing without harming others. It’s a lie that Abraham told himself, and it wasn’t true then, and it isn’t true today.

This is certainly what happened with Abraham. His decision to go to Egypt didn't just affect him, but his entire family that he brought with him. His decision to lie didn't just hurt himself, but his wife and Pharaoh as well. He put his wife in a compromising situation where she had to live a lie and be in an adulterous position. He also hurt Pharaoh, because God had to inflict serious illness on Pharaoh's family to protect Sarah, and to open his eyes to what was going on.

**Brothers and sisters, there is no such thing as a harmless sin.** When we quit trusting in God, and think only of ourselves we not only hurt ourselves, but we almost always hurt loved ones around us. I know that I certainly am guilty of this. I have done foolish things at times when I was only thinking of myself instead of others. Not only does it negatively impact my own spiritual journey, but it hurts the spiritual journey of those I am to be helping. It hurts feelings. It violates trust.

We must also realize that Christ has called us to a much higher ethic than don’t hurt others. Doctors may pledge “do no harm.” Google may have the motto “Don’t be evil.” But Jesus calls us to something more than merely restraining ourselves from hurting others.

It’s an ethic that begins not with don’t, but do. “Do to others as you would have them do to you,” Jesus says in Luke 6:31, It’s a positive call. It a call to make a positive difference in their lives. It’s a call that doesn’t ask, “Am I hurting them,” but it asks, “How am I helping them.”

It's an ethic that doesn't put our own needs first, but considers others. Paul writes in Philippians 2:3-4, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others."

It's an ethic built on love. The same love that drove God to send His Son. It's the same love that drove Jesus up Golgotha's hill to take His place on our cross. If your best defense for why you can do what you're doing, is "I'm not hurting anyone." I want you to consider that God may have called you to a much higher purpose than that. Don't you think your Creator has more in mind for you than just don't hurt anyone while do whatever the heck you want to do.

Friends, in guarding against letting down, we must see the big picture. We must understand how our lives are spiritually interconnected. What I do and say affects you. What you do and say affects each other and affects me. The life of faith not only looks to God, but it looks to others. The life of faith looks to God and trusts, and it looks to others and loves.

Just like last week we see here the grace of God. Though Abraham lets down, God still works with him. Despite Abraham's lie, God protects him and his family and provides a way. But God's plan doesn't continue until Abraham goes back to where God had called him. Because of Abraham's letting down and lack of faith, God's plan took a major detour and Abraham was exposed to many dangers. But again we see that a flawed faith is not a failed faith. God can lift up those that have let down. He can stop the downward spiral, if you only look to Him in faith.

Remember that triumph can lead to trial. Your faith must be tested to grow, to be proven genuine. Remember that one faithless act easily leads to another, and remember that faithless acts almost always hurt others.

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<sup>i</sup> Smith, Christian & Christoffersen, *Kari Lost in Transition: The Dark Side of Emerging Adulthood*, Oxford University Press, 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> Herwees, Tasbeeh, *We R Cute Shoplifters*, Good, Issue 37, June 1, 2016 <https://www.good.is/features/issue-37-we-r-cute-shoplifters>