

Abram: Faithless and Faithful
Genesis 12:10 – 13:18
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This morning we're going to talk about the fight of faith. This is what the Christian life is all about. It's the daily struggle to trust God rather than ourselves, to trust God rather than the world, to trust God's Word and trust His promises, and rely on His provision and protection and power. How many of you can identify with the following scenario? You are feeling particularly spiritual and encouraged. Maybe you just had a wonderful time with the Lord in your personal devotions, or a meaningful spiritual conversation with a good friend, or you listened to an inspiring sermon, or were at a retreat, or a good Bible study. And you feel like, "Yes, God is sanctifying me. He is good. I believe Him. I trust Him." And the next thing you know, you're arguing with your spouse, or arguing with your parents or a friend, or being harsh with your children, or worrying about the future, or falling into any kind of sin. What happened?! It's like the faith that was there five minutes ago completely evaporated. You were on a spiritual high, and then moments later in the grips of unbelief.

Or there are times when it happens the other way around. You feel far from God and your actions and attitudes are far from God. But then God convicts you, and leads you to confess your sins to fellow believers, and it's as though the clouds lift and the sun shines down on you. Unbelief gives way to belief, and misery gives way to joy.

This is the battle of the Christian life. Constantly wavering between actions and attitudes that are the fruit of faith, and those that evidence faithlessness. Going back and forth between belief and unbelief. In our passage from Genesis this morning we're going to see two snapshots of Abram's life. One is a sad picture of unbelief, the other a beautiful portrait of trust and faithfulness.

I hope this will be encouraging to all of us, because Abram was just like us. He is known as a great man of faith, but he certainly had his moments of unbelief as well. So we should be encouraged that our struggle against sin and unbelief is not unprecedented. Many have gone before us who have fought the same battles, with some defeats and some victories.

Before going any further, let me give this warning: If you are not in this struggle, if you cannot identify with this fight of faith, then you are most likely NOT a Christian. If you're not battling unbelief, if you're not struggling to focus on God's promises and forsake the deceitful pleasures of the world, then you're probably not saved. Because true believers have tasted and have seen that the Lord is good, and therefore we have the desire to overcome these miserable pleasures. We're still sinful, and so we still fall into the traps of our own sin, but we are also struggling for higher pleasures, for true joy. So check your fight. If there is no fight, there is probably no faith. Where there is a fight, there is faith, and there is a desire for more of God.

This morning we're going to see Abram as faithless and faithful, just like us. Looking at these two vignettes from Abram's life will be like looking into the mirror of our own lives. There will be evidence of faith, but there will also be evidence of the sinful nature that remains in us. So let's look at these two windows into Abram's struggle of faith, first at an example of unbelief, then a display of genuine faith and trust.

Last week we looked at the call of Abram at the beginning of chapter 12. God called Abram to leave his country and his kindred and his father's house, and by faith Abram went. God granted him the faith to believe this amazing promise, and Abram set out even though at first he didn't even know where the Lord was taking him. And he went to the land of Canaan, and there the Lord appeared to him and promised, "To your offspring I will give this land" (12:7). Abram was in the Promised Land. God made this promise to him and gave him a foretaste of the blessing that would come to his descendants. And Abram worshiped the Lord there, and he traveled through the land, from the north to the south. In verse 9 we find him still traveling toward the Negeb, which was at the southern border of the land. And that brings us to the passage that I just read, in which Abram goes down to Egypt. There are many interesting parallels between this account and the later accounts of Israel in Egypt. The one we notice immediately is the fact that a famine is what drove them to Egypt. Abram went to Egypt because there was a severe famine in the land. Later, in chapter 42 Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to get grain, because the famine was severe over all the earth. Then eventually the whole family moved to Egypt to be with Joseph.

So Abram's sojourn in Egypt is a preview and foreshadowing of later events in the history of Israel. What happens to Abram in Egypt? This is where we see him stumble in his faith. This is where he is faithless. This is where he demonstrates unbelief. Notice the steps of his unbelief. Here it seems to begin with the fear of man. He is afraid for his own life, because he knows that Sarai is beautiful. And he thinks that others may try to kill him in order to marry her. So he decides to take matters into his own hands. Do you see how he is failing to trust God? Instead of asking the Lord what he should do and trusting the Lord to provide food and protection, instead of trusting God, he devised his own plan for survival. It was a clever plan, at least in his mind. He said to his wife, "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." He thought they could pose as brother and sister, then anyone who wanted to marry Sarai would have to negotiate with him. And he could stall the negotiations long enough to get out of Egypt with enough food to make it through the famine. That was the plan.

His unbelief brought fear, it caused him to take matters into his own hands and devise his own plan for provision and protection, and it also involves a lie. He lies, and tells his wife to lie, in order to save his skin. Of course, Abram could defend this statement. He could rationalize it. Because, after all, she was his half-sister. The two had the same father, but different mothers. So Abram could try to justify this scheme by saying that she really was his sister. But it was obviously deceptive because she was also his wife. He was afraid. He was self-reliant. And he was deceptive.

Can you see any of these things in your own life? Are there times when you are fearful or worried? You fret over your finances or your future plans or your children or your job. And where does that fear and worry come from? It comes from unbelief. Every sin arises from a lack of trust in the promises of God. Every sin is an evidence of unbelief. A trial confronts us in life, like a famine, or an illness, or a car problem or a broken appliance or a difficult job situation, and we can either get frustrated and fearful and worried, or we can trust that God is going to use this trial for good. We can hold onto Romans 8: 28 and believe that "for those who love God ALL things to work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." This is right where

the struggle is. The fight of faith. Because when the trial comes, our sinful nature says, “No good can come out of this.” And we do whatever we think is necessary to change the situation, rather than submitting to God’s plan. We try to take things into our own hands, thinking that we have things under control. We’re so foolish.

Abram thought his plan was so brilliant. He could stall while men negotiated with him for Sarai’s hand in marriage. But what he failed to take into account was that Pharaoh doesn’t negotiate. Pharaoh does whatever he pleases. And Pharaoh took her into his house, then gave Abram all kinds of riches. And at this point Abram must have been REALLY nervous. This wasn’t how he planned it. His brilliant scheme had backfired, and for all he knew his wife was sleeping with another man.

Next comes the really encouraging part. In spite of Abram’s unbelief and foolishness and pride and deceitfulness, God rescued him. God worked all these things for good, even Abram’s sin. That doesn’t excuse Abram’s sin in the slightest, but it shows God’s faithfulness to His promise and His power to work in spite of our wavering hearts. In verse 17 it says “the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues,” which is a foreshadowing of the Exodus. God did not allow Sarai to be defiled. He protected her, and He made the truth known to Pharaoh that Sarai was Abram’s wife. Pharaoh’s response puts Abram to shame. Pharaoh rebukes Abram and returns Sarai to him, and Abram’s sin is seen even more clearly against the backdrop of Pharaoh’s upright behavior.

In spite of Abram’s sinfulness and unbelief, God brought him out of Egypt. Leaving Egypt is a powerful image, because later God brought Israel out of Egypt in the Exodus, and then later He brought His Son Jesus Christ out of Egypt. In Hosea 11:1 God says, “out of Egypt I called my son.” And Matthew quotes this verse in reference to Joseph and Mary taking baby Jesus and fleeing to Egypt to escape from Herod (2:15). In the case of Abram, in the case of the Israelites, and in the case of Jesus, coming out of Egypt is a beautiful picture of God’s sovereign provision and protection. God watches over His children. In Abram’s case, God watched over him and delivered him even though he foolishly rebelled in unbelief.

Well, we’ve seen Abram’s faithlessness in Egypt. Now let’s look at the second snapshot of his life in which he demonstrates faithfulness. He has stumbled in unbelief, but now in stark contrast we will see him trusting God in a remarkable way.

First of all, Abram returned to where he had made an altar, and he worshiped. Verse 4 says, “Abram called upon the name of the Lord.” This is significant, because surely Abram’s worship here included confession of his sins and humble repentance. He knew that he had done wrong in Egypt. He knew that he had strayed from God and stumbled in unbelief, but now he returns to repent and worship.

Maybe you’re in a similar situation this morning. Maybe you have been straying from the Lord. Because of unbelief you have given in to certain temptations, and those sins are taking root in your heart and in your life. You need to repent. You need to confess those sins to the Lord. 1 John 1:9 says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” So Abram returned from his sinful sojourn in Egypt, and he worshiped God “where he had made an altar at the first” (Genesis 13:4).

What Abram does next is an amazing demonstration of humility and selflessness and faith in God. There was a problem because Abram and Lot were traveling together,

and they both had a lot of stuff. They had so many flocks and herds and tents that there wasn't enough room for them to stay together. The land could not support both of them. The herdsman began to argue over whose flocks would get the best pasture, whose flocks would go to the wells first. It was a tense situation, and would have been out of control if Abram didn't step up and make this wise and sacrificial proposal.

See what he says to Lot in verses 8-9, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left." Does this sound like the Abram we read about in the last episode? Does this sound like the Abram who feared man, and took things into his own hands, and even lied and put his wife in danger in order to protect himself? The cowardly, faithless Abram is now exhibiting tremendous boldness and maturity and leadership and humility and faith.

He placed himself entirely in God's hands. Rather than judging by outward appearances and trying to manipulate the situation to get what he thought was best, he simply let go of his rights and his control. Abram was older than Lot. Abram was the uncle, Lot was the nephew. So it would have been entirely appropriate for Abram to tell Lot, "You go that way, and I'll go that way." End of discussion. But instead Abram does this amazing thing in letting Lot make the decision.

That is humility and sacrifice, and it arises from a heart that is trusting in God. Apply this to your own life. Maybe it's a situation at work, or a family relationship, or a disagreement with a friend, and you feel so strongly that, "I'm right, and I'm going to get my way." That's unbelief! That's trusting in ourselves rather than God. I have a plan, and I'm smart enough to take care of myself, and I'll look out for number 1 and work things out according to my best interest. Our lack of trust in God will produce that kind of selfishness and pride and dishonesty.

But, on the other hand, when we believe that God is in control and He's working all things together for our good, then we don't have to freak out and think we need to control everything around us. And instead of looking out for number 1, we'll look out for the interests of others. This is what Jesus did for us. Abram's humble and sacrificial actions here in Genesis 13 are a faint image of Christ's humility and sacrifice. Philippians 2 tells us about Christ's humility. "though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (vv. 6-8). Abram is a Christ-figure here in Genesis 13 in that he gives up his own prerogatives for the sake of another.

Jesus died on a cross so that we can be forgiven. He died to bear the punishment that we deserve for our sin, and God raised Him from the dead on the third day. Romans 10:9 says, "if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." That's a promise. If you believe that promise you will be saved. You will be forgiven. And as you continue to believe that promise and other promises of God, your life will change dramatically. Your life will gradually become more and more like Christ's life, and you'll begin to make sacrifices for others. You'll begin to do things like what Abram did for Lot.

What would it look like for us to give up our “rights” and give up our selfish desires and make sacrifices for others? Just think about the testimony and the shock value of saying to your co-worker, “You know, let’s do it your way. However you want to do this project, that’s the way we’ll do it.” Instead of quarreling and bickering, just defer to the other person. Or a point of tension with your spouse, and instead of being selfish and trying to manipulate the situation to get your own way, you say, “Honey, let’s do what you want to do.”

Children, this applies to you in so many ways, too. I’m sure there are moments when you don’t want to share. You have a toy or a bike or a game, and someone else wants to play with it. And sometimes it’s so hard to let go. But it is such a blessing to share. You will be happier when you share. For children and adults, the issues are basically the same. The details change a little, but the root issue is the same for all of us. Are we going to trust God or not? Trusting in God will bring so many blessings to our lives. It will heal relationships and make us a blessing to others and give us joy and peace in our hearts. God will take care of you. He has great plans for you, if you are a believer. And some of the most wonderful gifts you will receive will come in the midst of sacrificing yourself for others.

This was certainly true of Abram. He put Lot before himself, but it was Abram who was truly blessed. Verses 10-13 tell us about Lot’s decision to go east toward the wicked city of Sodom. Lot made his decision based on the outward appearances. He saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered, and so he figured he would prosper there. But as we know from reading the rest of the story, this was a tragic decision, for eventually Lot would lose everything when God destroyed Sodom. Lot chose to go east because of the lust of the eyes, and his worldly aspirations all came crashing down in the end.

Abram, though, was greatly blessed. God invited him to look in every direction and promised to give the whole land of Canaan to him and to his offspring forever! Then in verse 16 God promised, “I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted.” And in the coming chapters we’ll see how God begins to fulfill this promise.

Abram was faithless and faithful. In Egypt he feared man, took issues into his own hands, and was dishonest. All because he was not trusting God. In chapter 13, though, he is a great example of faith. Instead of looking out for himself, he sacrifices his own rights and desires for his nephew Lot. He trusted that God was in control and had a good plan, and so he was able to humble himself and make this tremendous sacrifice.

This is the fight of faith. We stumble in unbelief and make fools out of ourselves. But God picks us up and grants us faith. We repent of sin and strive for greater trust in God’s good promises. This is the life of the Christian. Battling unbelief. Fighting for a greater delight in God. What’s encouraging about Abram’s story is that he is so much like us. This morning we’ve looked at only two instances in his life. There are plenty more examples of both unbelief and belief. In fact, you would think he would learn from his mistakes, but in chapter 20 he does the same thing he did in Egypt. He says that Sarah is his sister. And the same thing happens. Abimelech sends and takes Sarah. But, again, God is faithful to deliver them.

In spite of Abram’s faults and stumbling, Paul still writes of him in Romans 4, “No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had

promised” (vv. 20-21). Paul is not denying the significant moments of unbelief in Abraham’s life. Instead, he’s focusing on the overall tenor of Abraham’s life, which was a life of perseverance in faith. May we press on in faith, brothers and sisters. Stumbling along the way, but pressing on toward a greater vision of who God is, and greater delight in Him, and greater trust in His promises.