

Dealing With Difficulty 1-21-07

Genesis 12:10-20 (NIV)

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. ¹² When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you." ¹⁴ When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman. ¹⁵ And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. ¹⁶ He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels. ¹⁷ But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. ¹⁸ So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? ¹⁹ 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!" ²⁰ Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.

Abram was given the promises and challenge of the first three verses in this chapter when he lived in Ur. He began with a halfway kind of obedience and ended up way-laid in Haran. When Terah, his father, died, Abram finally followed through with the original instructions given to him by God. He did allow one family member to go with him though, Lot. Still, he let God lead him into the land that God had promised to show him. He had a revelation of the Lord. He built altars and proclaimed the name of the Lord even at the headquarters of Baal worship. He went through the entire land, staking it out for God. But then, just when you thought our Genesis roller coaster was only headed up, we come crashing down to a new depth. Our father of faith was challenged by conditions in the world. (Revelation 2:10)

¹⁰ 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. Abram journeyed through Israel down into the Negev. The Negev receives much less rainfall than northern Israel. It is pretty much a desert. Abram's wealth consisted of his livestock. These animals had to have pasture. A famine could wipe out his stock. So to preserve his wealth, he went down into Egypt. Egypt didn't need rain; it had the Nile delta.

In Scripture, Egypt represents the world. In a later time, the Children of Egypt would be slaves in Egypt. (Exodus 1:8-11) Egypt was advanced and seemed to have everything going for it, but they worshipped false gods. If indeed God is sovereign over the weather, why would He allow a famine to drive Abram into Egypt? Abram had a number of souls that depended on him. He couldn't sit there in the Negev and watch his herds diminish and his people go hungry. He could have gone north, back to the land he came from with the Tigris and Euphrates, but God had told him to leave.

Commented [notes1]: 10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life. Rev 2:10 (NIV)

Commented [notes2]: 8 Then a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. 9 "Look," he said to his people, "the Israelites have become much too numerous for us. 10 Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country." 11 So they put slave masters over them to oppress them with forced labor, and they built Pithom and Rameses as store cities for Pharaoh. Ex 1:8-11 (NIV)

Notice in that verse that Abram is going “for a while”. He isn’t going to settle, but plans to return as soon as there is rain. So what is God doing? He is stretching Abram’s faith. (James 1:12) We must have faith in order to please God, and so God is in the business of stretching our faith. (Hebrews 11:6) We would think that once you begin to obey, things should go well. That isn’t how God works! He often comes through at the last minute, or even after we thought it was way too late. God tests us to teach us to be totally dependent on Him. (Philippians 2:8) Abram had been a good testimony in the rural area of Palestine among the Canaanites, but how would he do in the big city of Avaris, Egypt? Do you see the stretching taking place in the heart of this man of faith? Can you see the same in your own life? We expect ease after obedience but that is not God’s way. (Luke 12:48)

Picture him leading his caravan among the great structures of Egypt, among people of yet another language and dress. There is actually a hieroglyph in one of the tombs at Beni Hassan showing the arrival of a party of Israelites. The group includes 37 people, armed men, women and children bearing gifts and presenting themselves before an Egyptian prince. Could this have been Abram’s entourage?

Was God challenging Abram to continue to build altars and proclaim the name of the Lord even in Egypt? Does God do the same with you, fellow sojourner? We may not live in tents and be called to travel to distant lands, but we, too, are stretched and challenged nevertheless. It may be a new work environment, or a new friendship, or difficulties in health or finances but you could sum it up with that description. God is stretching your faith. There is a kind of famine. The direct equivalent would be a loss of income, but any number of things can be used of God to stretch your faith. (Deuteronomy 8:2)

Going into Egypt itself is not bad. Joseph will go into Egypt. The sons and families of Jacob will go into Egypt. In a future time, Israel as a nation will be forbidden to return to Egypt. But Jesus’ family would go into Egypt at the Lord’s command. (Matthew 2:14) Escaping difficulty to survive is not necessarily a sign that God is judging you. It is more likely a sign that God is blessing you with more faith, with lessons that will serve you in the future. The problem is not going into Egypt; it’s what we do once are there. You might think your difficulty is the issue, but it is really about what you do with the difficulty. Egypt is about being surrounded by the temptation to compromise.

¹¹ As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, “I know what a beautiful woman you are. Hold on! She is at least 65, and Abram is worried about what a looker she is? Now some of you women over that age can’t see any problem with that. But remember, He is worried about the king wanting to have her for his own because she is so ravishingly beautiful. Every culture and age has its own definition of what a beautiful woman is. As children of God we need our own as well. I am very disappointed at the way many Christian women try to dress and look to be sexually desirable. Lovely is one thing, but desirable by the world’s standards is another.

Listen to how Peter describes Sarah and other godly women’s beauty: ³ Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of

Commented [notes3]: 12 Blessed is the man who perseveres under trial, because when he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him. James 1:12 (NIV)

Commented [notes4]: 6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him. Heb 11:6 (NIV)

Commented [notes5]: 8 And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! Phil 2:8 (NIV)

Commented [notes6]: 48 But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked. Luke 12:48 (NIV)

Commented [notes7]: 2 Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years, to humble you and to test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands. Deut 8:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes8]: 14 So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, Matt 2:14 (NIV)

gold jewelry and fine clothes. ⁴ Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. ⁵ For this is the way the holy women of the past who put their hope in God used to make themselves beautiful. 1 Peter 3:3-5a (NIV) He goes on to say that to not do so is to give way to fear. What kind of fear causes women to rely on outer beauty? It's fear that you won't be desired, cared for and valued.

The other side of this equation is the desire of Pharaoh to have what is beautiful. He wanted to possess Sarai for his own pride and pleasure. This is man's weakness. It has nothing to do with Sarai's inner beauty. Her physical form and facial structure is one that he imagines to satisfy. So he took what he wanted out of sheer greed for personal gratification. This was the downfall of David and his son Solomon, unrestrained passion. It has been the downfall of many once great men. We are not ignorant of the enemy's devices. (2 Corinthians 2:11)

Men, we all share this kind of temptation. We must recognize how destructive it can be. We have to deal with it once and for all in our heart and carry that conviction out on a moment by moment basis. Outer beauty is fading as all of us over 50 can attest. (Proverbs 31:30) If that is what you think will satisfy you (that thought is a lie), realize that it will be short lived, shorter than you can imagine. The men I know who gave into this temptation didn't continue the relationship for more than a year! Their homes were ruined. Their ministries ended. (Proverbs 9:17,18) The real victory is when you can recognize the greed of your own heart as it desires to take something that is not meant for you for personal satisfaction, and refuse to give in to it. Godly love is not selfish. Worldly love seeks only to please self. (1 Corinthians 13:5,6)

Sarai did not give way to fear, but that is exactly what Abram did. ¹² When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you." Sarai was a half-sister of Abram. They had the same father, but not the same mother. (Genesis 20:12) He was deceptive but he didn't actually lie. Deception wasn't the main problem. It was his lack of faith in God! Our father of faith was a work in progress, and part of his training is this failure. Fear for his own life caused him to be willing to even see his own wife violated. Could not the God who called him out of Ur, who appeared to him at Shechem, the God whom he proclaimed and built altars to, could He not keep Abram safely in Egypt?

Some of us have faith when we are in surroundings we are comfortable with, but put us in a room of intellectuals, or perhaps a group of group of rowdy macho men, whatever the setting in which you feel totally out of your comfort zone, and we find out how much faith we really have. (Numbers 1:23) I remember as 20 year old, on the isle of Hawaii, proclaiming my faith in Jesus, but at night in a sleeping bag trembling with fear that some big Hawaiian men were going to beat me up. I can relate to Abram's fear. One minute you're confident in God and the next your teeth are rattling.

Abram relied on his cunning instead of his faith in God. He had more faith in his cunning than in the God that appeared to him. Where is your faith placed? Just

Commented [notes9]: 11 in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes. 2 Cor 2:11 (NIV)

Commented [notes10]: 30 Charm is deceptive, and beauty is fleeting; but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised. Prov 31:30 (NIV)

Commented [notes11]: 17 "Stolen water is sweet; food eaten in secret is delicious!" 18 But little do they know that the dead are there, that her guests are in the depths of the grave. Prov 9:17-18 (NIV)

Commented [notes12]: 5 It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. 6 Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. 1 Cor 13:5-6 (NIV)

Commented [notes13]: 12 Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. Gen 20:12 (NIV)

Commented [notes14]: 23 The LORD answered Moses, "Is the LORD's arm too short? You will now see whether or not what I say will come true for you." Num 11:23 (NIV)

because you have a revelation doesn't mean that you are going to be more confident in your faith. It just makes you more accountable. He still needed to be stretched and to grow. Don't you? I know I do. I don't like famines. I don't know if anyone does. But it is in those times of difficulty that we grow the most and our faith truly increases. Those who go on with the Lord always look back on those times as times of intimacy with God and great steps forward in their faith. (Psalm 81:7)

¹⁴ *When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman.* ¹⁵ *And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace.* The Egyptians would not have killed Abram to take Sarai. How do I know? I know because the promise of God had not come to pass and could not if Abram was killed. The vast majority of our worries will never materialize. They are a complete waste of time. Abram didn't save his life through his cunning; instead, he risked the purity of Sarai.

Many of us have made horrendous blunders on our faith journey. Blunders as bad as that of our father Abram. The blunders are lessons in humility. They remind us that we are of the same stuff as Cain, Lamech, and Nimrod. We are flesh. (Psalm 103:14-16) Abram was flesh. But those of us who have responded to the call have become sons and daughters of God, and our blunders are lessons to learn from. They fall forward, lessons in humility, and revelations of our need to lean wholly upon God. They remind us that God did not call us because of any good thing in us, but because He is good and His mercy is great. (Ephesians 2:8,9)

You would think that in that position, Abram would have cried out to God for forgiveness and mercy. But we have no indication of that. In fact, later in Genesis we will see him do this all over again. (Genesis 20:2) But just because Abram was still young in his faith does not mean that God will leave him to his own devices, and the same is true for us. (Proverbs 16:9)

¹⁶ *He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels.* Abram prospered! This is pretty difficult for most of our theology. But put yourself in Abram's shoes. He would have expected God to smite him with a disease. Instead, he prospered. It would be easier to have the disease than to be prospering while your wife is being groomed to be the new bride for a powerful man. I see him in utter anguish of his soul, unable to think of anything but what might be happening to his beautiful Sarai.

¹⁷ *But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai.* God afflicted Pharaoh instead! This pagan didn't know she was married, so God in His mercy was keeping him from doing something evil. I don't hear many theologians talk about this. The one who was guilty prospered and the one who was ignorant was smitten! It kind of tosses all our easy formulas out the window. Yet, we can see how God used both in His mercy to help each man.

I want you to note the attitude of the world and even Abram toward women, and contrast it with God's perspective. Pharaoh, and even Abram at the time, saw women as possessions, special ones no doubt, but things nevertheless. God's word says that

Commented [notes15]: In your distress you called and I rescued you, I answered you out of a thundercloud; I tested you at the waters of Meribah. Selah
Psalms 81:7 (NIV)

Commented [notes16]: 14 for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.
15 As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field;
16 the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.
Psalms 103:14-16 (NIV)

Commented [notes17]: 8 For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--
9 not by works, so that no one can boast.
Eph 2:8-9 (NIV)

Commented [notes18]: 2 and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her.
Gen 20:2 (NIV)

Commented [notes19]: 9 In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps.
Prov 16:9 (NIV)

she, too, is made in the image of God. (Genesis 1:27) He afflicted the house of Pharaoh to preserve her integrity. Women are never merely a thing in the sight of God.

18 So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife?" 19 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!" 20 Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had. God revealed to this pagan king that he was in a heap of trouble if he touched Sarai. He feared that revelation enough to send Abram, Sarai and their caravan off with all that was given to them, probably as wedding gifts for Sarai.

All is well that ends well, right? Not exactly! At first glance we would think Abram sure lucked out. God had mercy on him and spared his wife and multiplied his assets in the midst of Abram's lack of faith and willingness to put his wife at risk. What a gracious God! (1Corinthians 10:13) It's not quite that simple.

Sometimes we escape situations we placed ourselves in and come out smelling like a rose. God is good! We thank Him for His mercy. We begin to wonder if maybe our sin was all a part of God's plan and if we aren't so bad after all. God will test us again. We forget about something that is usually unavoidable, consequences. While they were there in Egypt, they must have been given a servant for Sarai named Hagar. (Genesis 16:1) I would suspect that Pharaoh assigned her to Sarai when he took Sarai from Abram. Those of you who know the rest of the story know the turmoil and heartache that rose out of her presence with the chosen couple. Israel is still paying the price today for Abram's poor decision that had its roots in the compromise in Egypt. In fact, the turmoil in the world today goes back to the turmoil in Abram's home. (Genesis 16:12)

What are we to learn from this? I've said it before, but it bears repeating. Sin will always cost you more than you want to pay and take you further than you want to go. Abram was still the father of faith and would come to a place of faith that we all admire, but on the way there he was just like you and me. I love the honesty of Scripture. It gives us hope for our own spiritual journey. Amen? Are you in the midst of famine right now? Don't lean to your own cunning or clever solutions. Look to the Lord. Build your altar there too, and proclaim the name of the Lord. God will keep you. He will see you through. Your fears may come to pass, but God will see you through in ways you could not have dreamed of. Why? Because you are His child and He is a faithful father. It is by His faithfulness that you learn to have faith. (Psalm 36:9) When we are faithless, He remains the faithful God.

The New Testament does not mention Abram's shortcomings. It only speaks of his great faith. You see, the blood of Jesus covers his failures, and only his acts of faith remain. (Psalm 103:12) The same will be true for you. That should encourage us all to step out in faith in obedience to God's word. Every self-directed scheme of our own will be covered, though we will deal with the consequences in this life. Abram's life exhorts us to lay up a legacy of faith, for that is all that will endure. (Hebrews 10:17) Praise be to God. Let us be about that which is lasting.

Commented [notes20]: 27 So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.
Gen 1:27 (NIV)

Commented [notes21]: 13 No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.
1 Cor 10:13 (NIV)

Commented [notes22]: 1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar;
Gen 16:1 (NIV)

Commented [notes23]: 12 He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers."
Gen 16:12 (NIV)

Commented [notes24]: For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.
Psalms 36:9 (NIV)

Commented [notes25]: 12 as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us.
Psalms 103:12 (NIV)

Commented [notes26]: 17 Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."
Heb 10:17 (NIV)

How do we do that? By remaining in the faithful One, the seed of Abram, Christ Jesus.

