

Abraham and Pharaoh

Genesis 12:10-20

Covenant Waterfall, 30 January 2022

Read

Pray

Introduction

I'm sure everyone here is old enough to remember Hansie Cronje. He was the captain of the SA cricket team during the 90s, incredible player, captain and role model. He was a hero to many South Africans, especially high school boys, of which I was one during that time. I remember when the match fixing scandal happened and it came out that he was a big part of it. None of us at school could believe it. How could this man who we'd looked up to for so long as a hero, be exposed as a dishonest, lying fraud? Felt like a great betrayal.

In this morning's passage in Genesis 12, we are carrying on with Abram. Last week he was introduced to us as a champion of the faith. He believed in God's promises to him, against all odds. We saw him as a man of great faith, whom the NT holds up as a hero. But in our passage this morning, we see a different side to Abram. Not a man of faith, but a man who acts faithlessly, dishonourably and sins – despite having received incredible promises from God, just moments before.

What we're going to see this morning from this text is that God is faithful to his promises even when we are unfaithful.

- Abram's scheme
- Abram's lobola
- Abram's shame

A. Abram's scheme, vv.10-13

Remember from last week, the context of this passage – God called Abram and promises to bless him, to make his name great and that he will be a blessing to all nations. God also promises the land of Canaan to him and his descendants. Abram believes all these promises from God, despite his circumstances. Circumstances? His wife, Sarai, is barren, and he has no land of his own, as he's a nomad. So what we see here is that Abram is man of great faith. Last week, we ended on Gen 12:9 where Abram was in the Negev, which is in the wilderness region of the land of Canaan, which the Lord had promised to him

Our passage begins from verse 10 of chapter 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 leaves the land that God's promised to him and goes down to Egypt because of the famine. Sounds familiar? The same thing happens years later with Abram's grandson, Jacob, whose son Joseph gets the whole family down to Egypt, where the entire Israelite nation end up living for some 400 years. Why then does Abram and later Jacob, go to Egypt in times of famine? Canaan reliant on regular rainfall, but Egypt, even without much rainfall – has the Nile – a huge river which always flows even in times of drought.

But what's already wrong with this picture? Abram is leaving the land of promise! Already he is not trusting that God will provide for him in the land. What's happened to this man of faith? He seems to be wavering!

But this is only the start of Abram's wavering faith. Carry on in verses 11-13:

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."

See here Abram hatches a plan. He knows Sarai is beautiful and because of that he thinks that the Egyptians will kill him in order to take her. So what's his plan? Verse 13 – she must say that she is his sister. Why? If she's his sister, and not his wife, they won't have a reason to kill him. So he's saving his own bacon here, doing it for selfish reasons. He also assumes that, being her brother, he'll be able to fend off possible suitors. See this later in Genesis 24

with Rebecca and Laban. Brothers could keep possible husbands at bay, protecting their sisters. Sarai never objects to all this, so we assume that she consents to this plan too.

The reality is that Abram sins here. He spins a lie – a half truth. Yes – Sarai is indeed his half-sister, as we saw last week. But he deliberately hides that fact that they are married. Even if his reason for doing so is noble – to protect his wife (main reason, see in the text, seems more concerned about himself) – that doesn't make it right. A lie is a lie – it's sin.

For us – remember that the end never justifies the means. Sometimes we are put in situations where it would be easier to tell a “harmless lie” (white lie) than the inconvenient truth. Think it will get us out of trouble. But only leads to more problems as we'll now see with Abram and Sarai.

B. Abram's Lobola, vv.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.

It's clear now that Abram wasn't just exaggerating about his wife's beauty (remember, she's around 65 years old!). The Egyptians concur, v.14, they saw that she **“was very beautiful.”** But what Abram doesn't count on in his scheme is that Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, shows interest in Sarai, as his princes have told him about her beauty (v.15). Now when Pharaoh desires a woman, Pharaoh gets that woman. He cannot be refused. This is clear from the text, he takes her – either to have in his harem, or as one of his wives. How do we know this? Verse 16 tells us that Pharaoh pays Abram a bridal price (lobola). Abram receives sheep, oxen, donkeys, slaves and camels from Pharaoh for Sarai.

Now Abram is in a serious pickle. Because he's lied about Sarai being his sister, Pharaoh has taken her as his wife, not realising that she's already married. While he banked on being able to refuse his Sarai to other men in marriage, posing as her brother, this hasn't been possible, as no one can refuse Pharaoh. So Abram is now deeper in his mess, caused by his own lies and deception. His wife is now sleeping with another man. Not just any other man,

Pharaoh himself. And Pharaoh is not aware that he is now sinning by committing adultery. On top of all this, Abram has profited financially off the whole situation by getting lobola from Pharaoh. How is he going to get out of this mess?

C. Abram's shame, vv.17-20

In the middle of this mess, God intervenes. Verse 17:

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

The Hebrew word that is used for “plagues” here can also mean skin diseases or boils (Lev 13). In Leviticus 14, skin diseases are regarded as a consequence of serious sin that require a sacrifice to be performed. So what's clear here is that Pharaoh is being judged by God for his adultery with Sarai.

Other thing we see here is that part of God's promise to Abram is also being fulfilled. In Genesis 12:3, God promised Abram that anyone who dishonours him will be cursed. Though Pharaoh has not intentionally set out to dishonour Abram, the reality is that he's still dishonoured him by committing adultery with Sarai, even if he's not aware that he's doing it.

Verses 18-20 continue...

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.

It's clear from the text that Pharaoh is livid – here the tone in his language: “what have you done to me? Why didn't you tell me... why did you say...take her and go...” He realises that Abram's God is cursing him with this plague, and this causes him to confront Abram. Abram has deceived him about Sarai and led him into committing a serious sin – adultery. This was a serious sin even in the eyes of the pagan Egyptians. So Pharaoh expels Abram from Egypt.

Verse 20 – Abram leaves, taking Sarai and all his possessions – his lobola, his loot from Egypt.

It's interesting that throughout his confrontation with Pharaoh, Abram doesn't utter a word. What can he say? His guilt has been exposed through his sin. There is a great irony here: the pagan Pharaoh is outraged by sin and fears God. Realises he shouldn't have another man's wife and realises that God is judging him through the plague. So he wants to set things right – gives Sarai back to her husband.

Yet God's chosen servant, Abram, supposedly this "man of great faith" has not shown any outrage against sin, nor even seems to fear God. He actually seems quite indifferent to it all, having lied and deceived his way throughout this episode. Abram acts like someone without faith. God has also promised him that he will be a blessing to the Gentile, pagan nations, yet what we see here is that is definitely not the case!

How does this all point to Christ?

What are we to make then of Abram, the father of our faith, whom Hebrew 11 lists among the great men of faith? Here we've seen him to be a lying, deceiving, self-serving sinner. Isn't this all very disappointing? Especially since we saw that last week, how God had chosen him, blessed him and made these profound promises to him.

Does Abram's sin here then disqualify him from God's blessing? Does God give up on him as a result? No, we know that this is not the case. We will see in the coming weeks that God goes on to make a covenant with Abram and fulfils the promises that he made to him. How can this be? Surely Abram has blown it – he's been unfaithful to God, not fully obeyed him, sinned against him? We think this because so many of us are hard-wired in our hearts that our obedience to God is dependent on him blessing us – that it's up to us to get ourselves right with God.

What God's dealings with Abram show us is that this is simply not the case. What we see instead is that God is faithful to his promises even when we are faithless. 2 Timothy 2:13 tells us this, **"if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself."** God's promise to Abram is not at all conditioned on Abram's obedience, but in God himself.

In fact if we look at every character in the Bible, we find that the Scriptures take care to soil each one. The sins and failures of every biblical “hero” are meticulously recorded for us – from Moses’ murder, to David’s adultery, to Paul’s persecution of Christians, to Peter’s denial of Christ. Why is this the case? The Scriptures are making a point that there is only one perfectly Righteous One. There is only One who is completely blameless and sinless.

Actually all of us, just like Abram and every other biblical “hero” have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory. I’m sure we can all recognise the sinful tendencies of Abram in ourselves: our bent for self-preservation, even if it means doing sinful things. Lying when it is convenient for us, acting in ways that are self-serving, deceiving others and justifying our actions because we think it’s for the ultimate good. Reveals our sinful and depraved heart – our capacity to self-deceive. Struggle with this every day. Therefore it is impossible for any of us to get right with God through our own obedience. No matter how hard we try, we’ll never be good enough, still struggle with sin even as believers. Actually we all deserve to face God’s wrath and condemnation for our sins, just like Abram.

Yet there is good news. Thankfully in the fullness of time, God sent Jesus Christ to earth, truly God and truly man. Jesus is the only man who is truly righteous as he has perfectly obeyed God’s law. He is the only one who has lived honourably, faithfully, completely without sin, making him perfectly righteous before God. This is why Romans 5:19 declares:

“For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.”

Though all of us, like Abram, deserve condemnation because of our disobedience, the incredible news is that by trusting in the “one man’s – Jesus’ obedience” on our behalf, we too will be counted as righteous before God. If we trust in Christ, his obedience to the law is credited to us. In other words, God sees us like Christ as having completely obeyed the law. It’s only through trusting in Christ’s obedience that we are made right with God – that our sins are forgiven, that we are called his own sons, and sealed by his Spirit with the assurance of eternal life in him. Not mean that we just live as we please, making our obedience unnecessary. No – our good works flow from having received this gift of grace, desire to honour God by the power of his Spirit.

Brothers and sisters, repent and trust in Christ Jesus. Trust in his perfect obedience on your behalf, on his finished work of the cross, that he has forgiven your sins and done everything necessary to reconcile you to God the Father. And like Abram, you can know that you are saved not by your faithfulness, but by God's faithfulness to you in Jesus Christ.

Amen