

## 22

# Starting and Stumbling

### GENESIS 12:10-20

The immensity of Abram's faith-response to God's call is meant to remain as a perpetual wonder to us in the community of faith. Two millennia before Christ, as Abram dwelt in the moon-worshipping context of the storied city of Ur, he heard the voice of Yahweh call him to an unspecified land where he would bless him, and through him bless the whole world. And Abram believed God, ultimately leaving Ur and Haran "not knowing where he was going" ([Hebrews 11:8](#)). As Abram followed God's direction, he trekked a great 800-mile arc that took him east to west across Mesopotamia and down the east end of the Mediterranean, where he descended through Damascus into Canaan, which God then promised to him (cf. [12:7](#)). There Abram's trek of faith became a tour of faith as he traveled the length of the promised land, building altars in its very heart and calling upon (that is, proclaiming) the name of the Lord in the midst of the land's pagan inhabitants.

Once again the immensity of his faith stands as a wonder because he was not allowed to take immediate possession of the land. Rather, as [Hebrews](#) explains, "By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land; living in tents ..." ([11:9](#)). Abram believed that the land would go to his offspring. His journey from north to south served as a tour of inspection, but not outright possession. The writer of [Hebrews](#) explains, "For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (v. [10](#)). What a great man! What

faith! He had nothing but God’s word. And he believed it.

Abram’s sojourn was not easy. Naturally his initial expectation when he departed from Ur was to take possession of the land. But that was not to be. He remained an interloper in pagan territory. Everywhere he went he found Canaanites. Debauchery was *de jure* in Canaan, and he had seen enough of that in Ur. They likely scoffed at his altars and his preaching. He certainly met no righteous Melchizedeks.

And on top of all this, “there was a famine in the land” (12:10). As to whether Abram was surprised at this, we cannot know. Famine is always a possibility for those who live close to the earth. But certainly this is not what we would expect after such a protracted and stellar display of faith. We would expect some tangible rewards, or at least a pleasant respite. After believing in Christ and exercising my newfound faith, I expected nothing but blue skies. But this was not God’s way with this progenitor of faith or with his children. And because of the story’s primary importance, we learn that faith is regularly followed by famine, even severe trial. That is God’s way.

**Faith is always tested.** The tests may not be as immediate as Abram’s, but they always come. Experience and God’s Word taught James, the Lord’s brother, to advise, “Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing” (James 1:2–4). Here faithful Abram, who had left all to follow the bare word of God, who had been outstanding in his 800-mile trek to the promised land and in his tour of inspection, got whacked. He was literally starved out of the land.

## **FAITH LAPSES (VV. 10–13)**

*Abram’s flight.* There was nothing remarkable in Abram’s decision to go

down to Egypt for help, nor is there any portent in the description of this: “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”(v. 10). All Abram intended was a temporary stay in Egypt until the famine ended. He was not abandoning the promised land. If that had been his intention, he would have gone back to Ur. Going to Egypt was the natural thing to do. Those in Canaan and especially the Negev did this regularly because the Nile always guaranteed food. An Egyptian inscription reads: “Certain of the foreigners who know not how they may live have come ... their countries are starving.”<sup>1</sup>

Abram did the natural thing, and herein the problem lies. There is no mention that he sought God’s will in the matter. The famine had created the fear of starvation, and Abram then instinctively moved to allay his fear, without reference to God’s will. Given what then befell him, it is apparent that if he had solicited God’s will, the story would have been quite different. Abram’s going to Egypt was not so much an intentional sin as it was a reflexive turn to his own devices. He did not deny God; he simply forgot him. He forgot how great God is.

How like Abram we are! Trials come, and we automatically go into survival mode. We scheme, we prognosticate, we run through the “what ifs,” we shore up our position, we pile sandbags. And God? Oh yes. We ask him to bless our ways.

*Abram’s deception.* The problem with going down to Egypt was that Sarai was a woman of legendary beauty. If the face of Helen of Troy could launch a thousand ships, Sarai’s could launch a thousand caravans. What are we to make of her beauty? Some liberal critical scholars say that she was not beautiful and in fact did not even exist. Rather, they say that she is the product of the cultural tendency to glorify the national mother

<sup>1</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), p. 287 cites ANET (*Ancient Near Eastern Texts*), p. 251.

figure.<sup>2</sup> Of course, these same critics also say Abram did not exist!

Some have suggested that her beauty was in the eye of the beholder—namely, her lovestruck husband Abram. Such loving delusion is not uncommon. James Boswell’s *Life of Samuel Johnson* records Boswell’s amusement that Johnson always thought his wife was beautiful—“that the impressions which her beauty, real or imaginary, had originally made upon his fancy, being continued by habit, had not been effaced, though she herself was doubtless much altered for the worse.”<sup>3</sup> All of us, if we live long enough, will be “much altered for the worse”—but not in the eyes of love. No doubt Abram always saw Sarai as an unfaded beauty. But the story also reveals that here, with Sarai sixty-five years old, the Egyptians thought the same (cf. 12:14)!

Evidently Sarai was a knockout and remained the same for a long time. We must remember that the patriarchal life span was still about double our own. Abraham died at 175, Sarah at 127. Jacob thought that 130 years were “few and evil” (Genesis 47:9). Sarai’s sixties would be equivalent to our thirties and forties, and her ninety years at the birth of Isaac to our fifties.<sup>4</sup> Sarai’s eye-stopping Mesopotamian beauty no doubt dazzled the Egyptians, and that could be a problem. Abram had substantial reason to fear. The law of hospitality that was so central in biblical thought did not necessarily apply in Egypt, or so Abram feared.

All this ran through Abram’s mind as his family and servants crossed the Sinai Peninsula toward Egypt. “When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, ‘I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, “This is his wife.”

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188 explains: “Gunkel suggested there was a natural tendency to glorify the national mother figures (cf. 24:16; 29:17).”

<sup>3</sup> James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson* (London: Penguin, 1979), pp. 70, 71.

<sup>4</sup> Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), p. 117.



Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. 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' ” (vv. 11–13). This deception was not new to Abram's thinking. Earlier, when Abram left Haran, he had said to Sarai, “This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother” (20:13). Now, at the border of Egypt, Abram put the deceit to work. And he would do it again (cf. chap. 20). “This man of God, being a man still, appears in a new light, or rather in the old light, the light of his old nature” (Candlish).<sup>5</sup> Abram, by nature, was a cunning man.

Those who imagine that he knowingly was risking Sarai fail to understand that posing as brother and sister was designed to buy time so they could escape. Abram was playing off the well-known custom of fratriarchy, as Nahum Sarna has explained: “Where there is no father, the brother assumes legal guardianship of his sister, particularly with respect to obligations and responsibilities in arranging marriage on her behalf. Therefore, whoever wished to take Sarai to wife would have to negotiate with her ‘brother.’ In this way, Abram could gain time to plan escape.”<sup>6</sup> Just as Laban, the brother of Rebekah, would use his position as brother to put off Eliezer's approach, so Abram hoped to forestall Sarai's suitors. It was brilliant. No one would get hurt, apart from the feelings of Sarai's would-be husbands.

And besides, it was only a half-lie because Sarai was his half-sister (cf. 11:27–30; 20:2). Abram could ease his conscience in saying “truthfully” that she was his sister, while also knowing how the Egyptians would take it. Pretty smart! Abram probably congratulated himself for being so wise

<sup>5</sup> Robert S. Candlish, *Commentary on Genesis*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, n.d.), p. 190.

<sup>6</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 95.

and forward-looking. He was a responsible man. And he was helping God. After all, if something happened to him, God's promise would be undone. Clever man, Abram.

There were only a few little problems. This trickery was not an act of faith. Abram was living as if the God who had spoken to him in Ur, who had promised those incredible personal and global blessings, who had led him to and through Canaan and promised it to his descendants, did not exist. God was not in the driver's seat—Abram was. And more, he was using a lie to promote God's work. George Burns was joking when he said that the key to his success was first learning honesty; once he could fake that, he could achieve anything.<sup>7</sup> Abram had mastered the art of fake honesty in Ur, and it was no joke.

How the great man had stumbled. And he did not even suspect it—yet.

### **TRAGEDY IN EGYPT (VV. 14–16)**

Abram had forgotten one thing: *Pharaoh*. The average Egyptian would have happily negotiated for his sister. But not Pharaoh. Abram never thought of that.

*Sarai suffers.* Everything disintegrated in an instant.

*When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels. (vv. 14–16)*

Great! Sarai became a part of Pharaoh's harem. What was going on in

<sup>7</sup>D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge, *Letters Along the Way* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1993), p. 252.

those chambers? Was she now in Pharaoh's arms? "Oh, Pharaoh, Pharaoh ... let my Sarai go!" Sarai, so beautiful, would surely become one of Pharaoh's favorite entertainments. And from then on, life would have taken its natural course. She well could have lived and died in Egypt, had her place in a royal tomb—and her excavated mummy would be grinning up at us in the British Museum. Good job, Abram.

*Abram prospers.* And then there was an excruciating moral twist. Pharaoh was so pleased with obtaining Sarai that he made Abram a very rich man. Two of the gifts tell all—the female donkeys and the camels. Female donkeys were far more controllable and dependable for riding and therefore the ride of choice of the rich (the Lexuses and BMWs of the Nile).<sup>8</sup> The camels (note the plural) had just been introduced as domesticated animals and were a rarity. They were prestige symbols, for show by the very rich, not for utility (the equivalent in my mind of a Ferrari Testarosa).<sup>9</sup> And Abram now had several in his stable. So faithless, deceitful

<sup>8</sup>Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis*, p. 96 explains:

The riding animals are placed last. The separation of female from male asses reflects the experience of ass-herders. The male has a very powerful sex drive that asserts itself when he scents the presence of a female of the species, even from afar. He then becomes almost uncontrollable. For this reason, the female affords superior convenience and greater ease of handling as a riding animal. Possession of many she-asses was a sign of much wealth, as may be seen, for example, in [Job 1:3](#) and [42:12](#).

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, explains:

A solution to the problem may perhaps be sought along other lines. Certain bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian lexical texts from Mesopotamia equate a domesticated animal called "a donkey-of-the-sea-land" with a dromedary, thus proving a knowledge of the latter in southern Mesopotamia in Old Babylonian times (ca. 2000–1700 B.C.E.) Moreover, the scribes knew to differentiate between the dromedary and the Bactrian camel, and a Sumerian text from that period mentions the drinking of camel's milk. The original habitat of the camel seems to

Abram was inundated with luxurious things, while his beloved spent frantic days and sleepless nights in Pharaoh's harem.

### **GOD INTERVENES (vv. 17–20)**

There was absolutely nothing that Abram could do except perhaps die in a futile attempt to save his wife. Maybe it would come to that. It appeared that all was lost.

Then it was that God sovereignly acted: “But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife” (v. 17). Literally, Yahweh inflicted great plagues on Pharaoh and his household. The Hebrew construction stresses the severity of the plagues; so we understand that Pharaoh’s household was overwhelmed by them. But Sarai was untouched.<sup>10</sup> The word translated “plagues” often refers to skin diseases. So possibly the Egyptian court suffered from something akin to a plague of boils (cf. [Exodus 9:9](#)).<sup>11</sup>

*Abram reproached.* We surmise that because Sarai suffered no affliction, Pharaoh’s servants questioned her and learned of the deception and reported it to Pharaoh. Thus came Pharaoh’s stinging reproach. “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? 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’”(vv. 18, 19). The concluding line is staccato—just four

have been Arabia. It is likely that the domesticated camel at first spread very slowly and long remained a rarity. A wealthy man might acquire a few as a prestige symbol for ornamental rather than utilitarian purposes. This would explain their presence in Abraham’s entourage, their nonuse as beasts of burden, and their special mention in situations where wealth and honor need to be displayed, as, for instance, in [Genesis 24](#).

<sup>10</sup> Allen P. Ross, *Creation & Blessing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), p. 276.

<sup>11</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Vol. 1, p. 290.

Hebrew words: “Here ... wife ... take ... go.”<sup>12</sup> Such disdain. Pharaoh assumed the moral high ground. Abram appeared the sinner, Pharaoh the saint.

Had Sarai been in Pharaoh’s bed? Some scholars think so because Pharaoh says, “I took her for my wife,” indicating actual adultery,<sup>13</sup> and the plagues seem to indicate that Pharaoh actually did commit adultery.<sup>14</sup> More likely Sarai escaped undefiled, as Allen Ross explains: “The words of Pharaoh need not be interpreted to mean that there had been sexual contact. He simply stated that he took her for a wife. In a royal household, it would take time for her to come before the monarch (note the twelve months for Esther’s preparation [Esther 2:12]). Moreover, the statement ‘Here is your wife’ strongly suggests that she was returned unharmed, as his wife.”<sup>15</sup> Also, if Sarai had been defiled, she would never again consent to do the same deception later with King Abimelech—and neither would Abram (cf. chap. 20)!

*Abram expelled.* Abram’s exit from Egypt was in ignominy: “And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had” (v. 20). Abram remained silent under Pharaoh’s reproach, uttering not a word. What could he say? He would build no altars in Egypt. Neither would he proclaim the name of the Lord. Abram and his entourage humbly crept out of Egypt.

Abram’s lack of trust in God (doubting that he would keep his promises) had reduced him to a scheming, little man. This great giant of faith had become, for the present, a very small man. And he felt it.

If we wonder why Pharaoh did not punish them but rather sent them

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), p. 382.

<sup>14</sup> Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Vol. 1, p. 289.

<sup>15</sup> Ross, *Creation & Blessing*, p. 277.

off with their new riches, it is because Pharaoh was still suffering the effects of the plagues. He never again wanted to be on the receiving end of the power behind Abram. Significantly, those new riches were no blessing to Abram. The ill-gotten gain caused huge trouble in the following years, first in the strife with Lot's herdsman, and then through a young Egyptian woman named Hagar, who was likely one of the maidservants given to Abram by Pharaoh.

Having dissected Abram's failure, we must again affirm that he stands as a man of faith and among the greatest of men. If we doubt it, we must read on through chapter 22, or the celebration of his faith in [Hebrews 11:8–12, 17–19](#), the longest section devoted to anyone in that famous chapter.

Abram started so magnificently but stumbled in ignominy because he did not expect the famine, the trial that came after his experience of faith. But famines are God's way. Trials are what produce perseverance and maturity so that we may become complete, not lacking anything.

Abram stumbled because, when testing came, he forgot God. He did not disbelieve in God. He forgot how great God is. And forgetting God, he resorted to his own devices, his stealth and manipulation. And then his world graciously fell in. But this was allowed by the goodness of God, because God had greater things for Abram to do.

The message for us who have believed God and trusted him for salvation and life is this: Expect trials as a part of God's plan, just as they were for Jesus who was made "perfect through suffering" ([Hebrews 2:10](#); cf. [5:7–10](#)).<sup>16</sup> We say this because the Apostle Paul reveals that God's promise

<sup>16</sup> [Hebrews 5:8, 9](#) explains: "Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him" (cf. [2:10](#)). This does not mean Jesus passed from disobedience to obedience. Nor does it mean that he developed from imperfection to perfection. The idea is that he became *complete* in his human experience.



to Abram in [Genesis 12:7](#) (“To your offspring [literally, “seed,” singular] I will give this land”) actually had Christ in view. He argues this in [Galatians 3:16](#), explaining, “Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, ‘And to offsprings,’ referring to many, but referring to one, ‘And to your offspring,’ who is Christ.”

Therefore Christ is the one through whom the whole world will be blessed. He is the one through whom the global blessings will be fulfilled. Also, as the ultimate heir of Abram, he is the man of faith *par excellence*.<sup>17</sup> Jesus did not stumble when trials came. His faith never wavered. He did not look to his own devices but only to God. Abram was a great man of faith, but Christ is the perfect man of faith. Abram left his home and family in Ur to go to an unknown land, but Christ left heaven in obedience to the Father’s call. Abram is known for both his great faith and great failure. Jesus’ life was one of unexceptionable faith. His life was all in faith and by faith from beginning to end.

Here is the great benefit: As Christians who have experienced the regenerating power of Christ, we are *in* Christ (cf. [2 Corinthians 5:17](#)). And, therefore, because we are *in* the man of faith, he not only saves us but empowers us to live a life of faith! The very one to whom Abram’s faith pointed, the very one to whom the promises pointed and who fulfilled the promise, is the one who enables us to live by faith. Jesus is the beginning and end of faith.

So when trials come, as they must, do not turn to your own resources but to Christ. And he will sustain your faith.

Enduring trials was essential to his perfection as our Savior.

<sup>17</sup> Iain M. Duguid, *Living in the Gap Between Promise and Reality* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1999), pp. 24–27 explains the biblical theological connection between [Genesis 12:7](#) and [Galatians 3:16](#). His work on Abraham repeatedly demonstrates the connection between his life and the gospel. The book is well-written and full of application.