

Genesis 12:10-20 An Opportunity to exercise our faith

Introduction

Why did [x] happen? We can all put in here a number of things that turned our world upside down? It may in some cases that something ‘just happened’ and is part of what happens in life in the world where the good and the difficult or even the evil might overshadow our pathway. The recent batch of stories linked to Madeline McCann’s disappearance reminds us afresh of every parent’s worst nightmare with respect to their young child or children. To loose sight of your child or children for a moment, a few minutes or a few hours causes your life to stand still, and it is worse still when it is on holiday. How many million times must they have replayed in their heads the moment they left Madeline in her bed while they went for a meal a short distance away and regretted it every painful time. The ‘if onlys’ are a part of all our experiences –thankfully most are less significant than what the McCann’s have had to go through, but bad enough at times to cause us to be deeply shaken with the challenges we are facing. For many of us it can revolve around our financial needs being met. News of a job loss when we had reasonable expectations of a career and its associated financial security and suddenly with the bills coming in a financial nightmare looms over the horizon; for other people it can be our health; Brian Irvine, the gifted former Aberdeen footballer, recalled the day in a small room in an Aberdeen hospital when a doctor told him he had multiple sclerosis. For a young man at the height of his career at the most successful club, outside the Old Firm of Celtic and Rangers, this was bleak news indeed. Aberdeen were to release him from his contract though John McCormick, manager of Dundee, offered him a two-year contract. However, on the day Brian came to Dundee one of the tabloid newspapers had as its sports headline ‘why would Dundee want to sign a player with MS?’ The directors had a copy of that paper on the table in the room where they met to discuss the matter with Brian. He wondered: ‘why could the papers not have found out about his health situation a day later?’ All credit to the manager who insisted that the board honour the deal he had agreed with Brian, but it might have been so different. All of us, if not already, will have those dark days when we ask our difficult questions about why life has to be the way it is. And what adds to our trials is the fact that so often we never locate a definitive answer as to why a particular difficulty has taken place; although sometimes there may not be a ‘reason’, we naturally want to make sense of life and struggle to live with the tension of not-knowing.

1. The problem Abram faced (Genesis 12:10)

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. (a) **The significance of ‘going to Egypt’ in the Bible*** In the Bible there are a handful of references to God’s people being assured that it is appropriate to go and stay in Egypt for a time. In the Old Testament, the aged Jacob was given this encouragement from God in Genesis 46:3: *I am God, the God of your father, he said. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there.* Later, in the New Testament, Joseph, the step father of Jesus was given this advice after the wise men had left: *When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Get up, he said, take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him (Matthew 2:13).* However, as a general rule, going to Egypt in the biblical text is a synonym for backsliding. God’s people are usually urged to stay away from Egypt. Isaiah 31:1 is an example of this fact: *Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in the great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Israel, or seek help from the Lord.* To trust in ‘Egypt’ was to rely on

additional human resources alone rather than God –when that is inappropriate. There is a legitimate seeking of human resources –when ill we seek medical support; when a job loss is experienced we seek the best way to get another appropriate one; but the point to be made here was that the problem Abram faced was this: should he step out of the revealed will of God –only for a short time- to alleviate a pressing problem? It may be that the equivalent dilemma for us might be something like: ‘borrowing’ some money from work to pay a debt that would definitely be paid back next month. Or cheat in a test/ exam at school because we genuinely didn’t have time to study –next time we would go back to the hard work of adequate preparation. Or a sports person just the once taking a performance-enhancing drug to help them get through a difficult time; the list goes on, but we can see how easily it is to cross the line when the pressure is on –maybe even now for you in something you are facing? (b) **The difficulties Abram had already endured** (i) Infertility Sarai had struggled with her infertility /ability to conceive a child. In a culture where status was associated with the number of children you had this was a painful experience for this couple. It is bad enough today in our culture where there is a much smaller expectation of children being produced when a couple get married. I understand that around one on seven couples cannot conceive a child ‘naturally’; (ii) Cultural adjustment moving from an urban society to a basic nomadic one. It is far easier adjusting to having more comfortable surroundings, much harder travelling the other way; when we lose jobs or health on a medium to longer-term basis, it can also mean major financial and social adjustments, which depending on existing commitments might be very difficult. Abram might have been rich compared to the locals in Canaan, but compared to the people back in Ur he and his family were living in much reduced circumstances. Our missionaries overseas, in the two-thirds world, may be in a similar context. What is worse Abram did not know where God wanted him to finally settle down when they left Ur, this must have brought a degree of insecurity. (iii) Loss of family support the smaller group that went to Canaan left the extended family behind. Many of us may also live a big distance from our families and miss them, but at least we can phone or e-mail each week; they had no means of regular communication. This fact when combined with other pressures makes it a much greater sense of loss than it would have been had all been going well. (iv) The death of his father Terah The loss of immediate family members is inevitably painful. There is a sense for most people of an unwanted closure that is keenly felt. In a foreign land the distance from family would have felt much greater at such times. (v) The Canaanite social and religious culture As Christians we can be aware of being a minority in our own land at the current time, yet no-one could deny the Christian heritage of Scotland. The Canaanites had no knowledge of the God who had called Abraham. This family was professing a minority religion in a land where people enthusiastically worshipped other gods. The pressure to conform would be immense, like that of Christian brothers and sisters in Islamic-majority lands today. (vi) A famine in the land (Genesis 12:10) Life for this family was hard enough and now on top of the other challenges they faced *Now there was a famine in the land...* This was not a problem of food price inflation which can be a struggle to deal with; it was a growing absence of food for animals and humans. How would he, how do we address the next obstacle that lands unexpectedly on our pathway? Christians do not face fewer problems than other people, in most of the world they face more than the average citizen due to persecution and oppression. Nonsense like the prosperity theology peddled by some God Channel preachers and the extremist fringe of the Charismatic Movement is a lie. Our sympathies lie with this struggling family and the pressures they faced at that time.

2. The proposition Abram suggested (Genesis 12:11-13)

(a) **A wrong choice** God had not led this family to Canaan to let them die of famine. He would have provided for their needs in the land, even if for a time it was really hard to get by. We know that Abram only intended a temporary stay, as Genesis 12:10 indicates, but he was in effect saying, ‘God I’ll need to take care of this one and do it my way’ –by implication suggesting that God’s plan for his life needed a little ‘adjustment’, to say the least. Most of us have been there at one time or another; if we haven’t said these words, we may have thought them or acted in a manner consistent with it. In times of famine in that region ‘everybody’ was going to Egypt. An Egyptian wall painting, dated 1878BC, depicted the ‘whole nation’ of Canaan travelling there in the midst of a famine. Another example from written texts produced during the reign of Egyptian Pharaoh Merneptah (1224-1214BC) records Edomite families coming to that country with all their possessions, including their cattle, to find food and water. ‘Every-one was doing it’, does that expression sound familiar? Therefore I must... In every generation there are occasions or contexts where the pressure to go with the flow seems irresistible. Or we can follow the writer of Psalm 91 who wrote: *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty.* ² *I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust.* It is not the complicated things in the Bible that we find difficult to handle or the things we don’t understand. So often like here it is things that are very plain to understand, but exceedingly difficult to practise. This wrong choice was followed by (b) **A wrong proposal** 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.* Had he remained in Canaan Abram would probably not have considered this step. What is the point here –in order to save himself from any danger he now pressures Sarai, his wife, to potentially make herself available sexually to another man –if that becomes necessary while they are in Egypt. [maybe he was thinking but not saying, after all she is infertile and cannot get pregnant, therefore...its nearly okay?] This is seriously out of order. In the Hurrian culture, it has been argued, that a man was allowed to adopt his wife as his sister. Likewise a woman given in marriage by her brother, as Rebekah was by Laban (Genesis 24) to Isaac, could legally become her husband’s sister, thus allowing him the option of another marriage if the first one was less than successful, for example, no children were produced. The major Hurrian city was Haran where Abram lived for many years (E.A. Speiser –see V.P. Hamilton, *Genesis*, pp.381-2). By contrast Proverbs 3:5-6 tells us: ⁵*Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding;* ⁶ *in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.* This is not only the best way to go, but it also avoids us being faced with more problems and difficulties than God ever intended us having to face in our lives.

3. **The point Abram missed** (Genesis 12:14-16)

(a) **The problem suddenly gets much bigger** (Genesis 12:14-15) 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.* I am sure Abram intended to keep a low profile in Egypt. Sarai was clearly a rather beautiful lady that all the men in her company could not avoid finding attractive. Instead he spend the whole time in that country ‘negotiating’ over the status of his wife with Egyptian officials who were in the business of procuring additional wives for the Pharaoh. The lie, or legal half-truth about Sarai’s status only makes matters worse. Had Abram said, Sarai is my wife, thanks for the complements, I quite agree she looks great! They might have backed off right away and not bothered him anymore. Instead by failing to take a moral stand up front it suddenly got much harder to do so at each later stage. In today’s society Christian sexual morals are unfashionable with the

majority of the population. There is an expectation of sexual availability outside of marriage. It is hard for many young Christian adults to take a stand, fearing they might be considered peculiar or something worse for declining the invitations that might come their way. Actually when you and me stand firm for our principles, in a wide variety of social contexts there are other people who wanted to do the same but didn't have the moral courage to do it on their own, but seeing a Christian stand firm gives them the inspiration to do what is right as well.

(b) **The problem of Abram's success** (Genesis 12:16) ¹⁶ *He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels.* Abram has done wrong and prospered materially. It happens all the time, tax fiddles; insurance scams; all kinds of ways in our land that people clever enough to arrange it carefully can get away with wrongdoing and make themselves rich and materially prosperous. It can also happen in ways that may be legal but less than ethical –such as a business withholding payment to a supplier in economically difficult times, in the hope that they may go bust due to cash supply problems. This and many other forms of unethical practice might be legal, but it is lacking in integrity. It raises questions about the kind of person I am and how I might define success in life. As a Christian sports-person would I be happy to cheat to win, knowing if I don't (and lose) that almost certainly others will be less scrupulous? Is my integrity of paramount importance? Remember the furore in 2001 when it was discovered that Alder Hay Children's Hospital, Liverpool, had retained hundred's of children's bodies for medical research, without parental consent. The goal of being better trained to help sick children was a worthy one, but the public outcry made it very plain that there was a better way than that to proceed with medical research. We need to be honest here as Christians about sin. In the short-term many people can be much better off and get ahead in life by doing wrong. Over the longer-term sinful misconduct does not pay, but it can take years, sometimes many years for this to come to light. One big moral issue today is cohabitation before marriage. The facts from thousands of marriages in the recorded data are plain. A marriage is more than three times more likely to be successful if the couple have not cohabited before marriage, and this fact is most pertinent in noting that the vast majority of these couples have children. Yet it is hard for a man or woman pressured to cohabit to say 'no' when the vast majority of their generation are doing just that –apparently oblivious to the fact that the rising divorce rate in the UK, amongst the highest (if not the highest) in the Western world, points to a serious failure somewhere in how we are relating to one another in many of our marriages in Britain. In this latter case it appears sadly that many people are choosing short-term convenience or pleasure and risking possible future loss. We are not 'kill-joys' for taking a stand on Christian moral principles. The social data is compelling –our permissive society is not working! However, in some situations it genuinely appears likely that people can get away with wrongdoing. But as Christians we have to take a stand doing the right thing for the right reason. In passing here note that Abram acquired *menservants and maidservants* as a gift from Pharaoh for Sarai. In Genesis 16:1 it states that Sarai *had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar...* This moral compromise would open the door for others in future years. The pain that would bring could all have been avoided by following God in the present situation. This principle is so true for us as well. God our Father in heaven loves us so much that He wants to prevent us from facing heartaches that could so easily have been avoided in life. After all there are more than enough challenges and difficulties we can face when we do live God's way, without facing additional difficulties. There was a price to pay for Abram's prosperity, but it was not apparent until years later. This is something we need to remember when we are tempted to envy people who appear to have got away with flouting God's laws and on the surface are doing very well indeed in their lives.

4. **The protection Abram experienced** (Genesis 12:17-20)

(a) **God's protection of Abram** (Genesis 12:17) ¹⁷ *But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai.* Remember that Genesis as a book was not in circulation until the time of Moses and the Israelites after they had escaped from slavery in Egypt. Can you think of what connection they would have made to their day? It is obvious, the plagues in Egypt that forced Pharaoh to finally let them go (Exodus 7-11). God helped Abram in the way He answered our prayers. On the surface this is correct, but there are huge differences. The Israelites in Egypt in Moses' day had done nothing wrong and faced hardship from the Egyptian authorities. God rescued these people from gross injustice. Abram and Sarai were rescued, something Abram did not deserve, but it was damage limitation. There would be negative consequences in the longer term for Abram, he had not got away with his wrongdoing. The same principle applies to us today that we need to bear in mind in making our choices at work, at home and in our church meetings. God is often merciful and forgiving, which we may not deserve, but we must not sin with impunity as there is always a later price to pay. (b) **Pharaoh's challenge to Abram** (Genesis 12:18-20) 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.* This man, God's chosen man, leaves Egypt humiliated. He has got his money and possessions, but his credibility has been shot to pieces. Abram will go back to Canaan and to the place where he ought to have been all along, but has he really learned his lesson or is he thinking 'I have got away with it'. God preserved Sarai's honour when her husband was unwilling to do so. The Pharaoh comes out of the story with a lot of credit and sympathy looking a more decent person than the one who professes to believe in Almighty God. What a tragedy when people of the world show us up by their maintaining of higher standards than we who profess to honour God's name. Notice there is no reference to Abram worshipping God in Egypt. Then and now it is very difficult to maintain our walk with God when consciously living out of fellowship with Him. May we always guard our thoughts, words and actions so that we show by faith our trust in the Lord and His guidance for our lives. God wants the best for us and we will only receive it as we stand firmly on the pathway He has laid out for us in the Bible, Amen.