

Human Strategy & Divine Sovereignty (From Faith to Fear)

Genesis 12:10-13:4

Sunday September 12th 2010 Morning Service

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Abraham had been learning what it was like to walk with his Lord. The Lord had called him to step out of where he was and walk to a new land, a land that represented all that God wished to give him. It is just the same for us. When we first hear God's call to turn to Christ and walk by faith we have to leave behind all our former securities and live a totally new way.

After his journey to the Promised Land Abram built an altar near Bethel, and there he sacrificed and called on the name of the Lord. The building of altars in the OT is particularly significant; it represents a particular dedication to the Lord, worshipping him and going to him for cleansing and forgiveness. The animal would symbolise a substitute, taking the punishment for the person's sins. Unknown to them this pointed towards what Christ would ultimately do for them in the future, not in symbol but in reality.

1. The Failure of the Man of Faith

Abram now packs up his tent and moves south to the desert area of the Negev, on the edge of the Promised Land. This is strange. He seems to be moving towards the periphery of the land of blessing, towards the southern border with Egypt. Was he wandering from God's clear path? What does this teach us? Even if we are walking close to the Lord now, temptation may come tomorrow. Yesterday's commitment and faith is not sufficient for today's challenges. And then, Abram is not recorded as building any more altars on his journey south. If we do not keep in the centre of God's will, if we don't maintain a position of worship, cleansing, trust and prayer then we are more vulnerable to spiritual attack and more vulnerable to sin.

Famine comes to the land and the man of faith gives way to fear. Instead of crying out to the Lord and staying in the Land of Promise, he takes things into his own hand and heads further south to Egypt. God had called him to the Promised Land. God had not called him out of the Promised Land. Fear floods his heart. The man of faith becomes the man of fear – and soon he will be a man of failure. He should have depended on the Lord to supply his needs within the Promised Land. We can so easily fall into this trap. We will run from God's will and depend on our own schemes to get out of a particular crisis. The Father of Faith sinks to become a frightened refugee.

What situation are you facing? Do you feel fear rising in your heart? Do you look around in desperation for some Egypt to depend on? Rather than calling on the name of the Lord you imagine other stratagems. Abram fled the famine rather than prove God's deliverance. Here was Abram's test of faith. He failed. God still had work to do in his heart.

Seeking deliverance from Egypt came at a price. Abram has to concoct a lie to be able to take refuge in Egypt. Abram imagines that Pharaoh will have him killed for his wife. Again the man of faith is filled with fear. He fears dying from famine and now he fears murder at the hands of Pharaoh. He is willing to lie and say that Sarai is not his wife, but only his sister, to preserve his own life. We need to be clear what Abram is doing here: he is willing to sell his wife to become a slave, to become one of Pharaoh's many wives, to bear his children. Abram obviously valued his own life very highly indeed.

What we see here is a terrible spiritual principle being enacted step by step. It is this: one sin leads to another, and usually a worse one. This is why we must cut sin off at its root; we must put it to death. The more we walk down this path the more deadly and dangerous it is. Abram not only lies to Pharaoh himself, saying that his wife is his sister, but he also asks Sarai to tell that lie herself.

But not only was Sarai taken into the harem to be personally abused, something else was at stake here. God had planned that Abram and Sarai would bless the whole world through their children. Their children would become the people of Israel, to whom the Law would be given and divine truth would be revealed. And above and beyond this it was one of their ultimate children in the future who would be the Messiah, the Saviour of the world. God's plan of salvation was at stake here.

2. The Protection of the Man of Faith

But God is watching. When Sarai is taken into the harem the Lord brings terrible sickness on Pharaoh and his household. Pharaoh is stopped in his tracks and challenges Abram, accusing him that Sarai is actually his wife. Pharaoh is more spiritually aware here than the Father of Faith. Doesn't this sometimes happen in our day, where the unbeliever has more integrity than the believer and even rebukes them? Such people of principle do exist and God uses them.

Pharaoh now sends Abram and Sarai away back to where they came from. He does not kill Abram, and more than that, he lets him keep all the treasures that had been heaped on him when he had taken Sarai into his harem. Abram leaves Egypt an extremely rich man. What we see here is that Sarai is protected, Abram is protected and they are also blessed with many riches. This shows us how gracious God is to sinful people, that he can even turn disaster into blessing. Imagine for a moment that the Lord treated you as you deserved. Not only in the sense of final judgement, but also in allowing the full consequences of all your sins to have their full terrible effects here in this life. If God's unseen gracious and protecting hand was not continually delivering you from your own folly where would you now be? The Lord protects and delivers us far more than we know.

3. The Restoration of the Man of Faith

The story is not over yet. Not only is this a tale of someone walking step by step away from the Lord and the Lord protecting him, it is also a tale of complete restoration. Abram did not merely head north into the desert, not even to the desert of the Negev within the borders of the Promised Land. No, where did he end up? He finished right back where he started, near Bethel, at the altar. He is back in the place of worship, forgiveness and calling upon the name of the Lord. Abram strayed, but Abram was restored.

Having said all this, there is an underlying message here that reveals how someone can have peace with God. Abram is a man going his own way who gets into a terrible mess, but whom God deals with not as he deserves, but in grace and mercy. Every human being is someone who has turned from God and who needs to come back to him. All of us deserve eternal punishment as the legitimate result of our lives lived under our own lordship. The way back to God is to recognise his delivering power and trust in his way of forgiveness, the Lord Jesus Christ. We need to come out of the land of rebellion and into the land of salvation and blessing. We need to turn from our sin. We need to bow at the altar of sacrifice. We need to come to God in worship, receiving his cleansing through the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross; and we need to live in dependence on him, calling upon him for his help. There is a way back to God.

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