

*Foundations: The Coward's Gambit*

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*Mark 6:45-51; 1 Corinthians 16:13-14; Genesis 12:10-13:1*

Our final Scripture reading today comes from Genesis 12:10-13:1. May God bless the reading of His holy, perfect, and trustworthy Word. "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. As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, 'I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you.'" When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman. And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels. But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? 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!" Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had. So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him."

When we were on our recent trip to Gatlinburg, Tennessee, we stopped in a fascinating museum called Alcatraz East. It's a museum about American crime and punishment, about law breakers and law enforcement and how they catch criminals. It looks like a tiny museum from the outside, but there's over four hours of content, more than you can absorb in a day. It had stories from the Wild West all the way to infamous trials in the present day.

What's fascinating is how bravery and cowardice kept showing up. There was no honor among thieves in the American west – they were far more likely to ambush lawmen or shoot them in the back than they were to get into a draw in the middle of town square. Famous killers were typically cowards who used deception to trick and trap others. And it contrasted with the bravery of many who were determined to put a stop to evil or rescue those caught in evil's wake. It's not a theme of the museum; it just became obvious the more we read and learned.

As we come to today's passage, though, we see that God works differently than we might expect. God redeems and restores and works with deeply flawed people. Something we see so often throughout Scripture is that God uses terribly cowardly people. Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Gideon, Elijah, Peter and the other apostles – all have striking episodes of sheer cowardice. These are men that the Bible recognizes as people of significant faith, yet all of them also have moments of deep forgetfulness when they fail to recognize the strength of God. From a human perspective, their cowardice might disqualify them for leadership. But God turns things around and shows us that His redeeming power is greater than our greatest weaknesses.

As we approach today's reading, we remember where we've been – Abram and his family were deep in the heart of moon worship territory in the land of Ur. God speaks to Abram and tells him to move where God will lead him. It's a long journey of years and over a thousand miles, but Abram trusts God, and Abram is led to the land of Canaan, what we think of now as modern Israel. Moving from every comfort he knew to a new land with only God as his guide took great faith, and Abram is commended for it in Scripture.

But Canaan doesn't turn out to be the land of wine and roses after all, at least not when Abram and his crew arrive. Ur might have been pagan, but ancient Canaan was wickedly pagan. They were habitually licentious and lustful, and since murder was considered a lesser crime than adultery, it wasn't unusual to consider killing a man to take his wife. The clans there worshiped a variety of different gods, but most practiced child sacrifice. And not only that, not long after Abram and his family arrive in Canaan, there is a severe famine. Now Abram doesn't consider heading back to Ur; he doesn't abandon his faith in God and say, "I've had enough of this." But he does take his entire caravan to Egypt in search of temporary relief.

And this brings up the first thing I want to talk about today: *beware the burden of unmet expectations*. It's a subtext in this week's passage, but it grows over the course of the next several passages we'll talk about in the coming weeks. I believe the reason that Abram gets himself and Sarai into trouble in Egypt is because he's started to doubt himself and what he's heard from God. God has led him to this land, but God has not shown him any of His real might or power yet. Canaan is a land of debauchery and sin, well-occupied and fortified.

And so, perhaps we might be a little generous to Abram. His scheme to save his own skin in Egypt is based on the fact that Abram still believes that whatever God might do for him, he's still got to look out for number one – he trusted God enough to leave his homeland, but not enough to trust God to save him from the hand of someone who might want to kill him to take Sarai for himself. It's not so much pride so much as self-sufficiency – the idea that the only one who's looking out for me is me.

We sometimes believe that because we do the right thing, because we have become believers and strive to become faithful followers of Jesus, God is going to make our lives perfect. And that's rarely the case. Most people around the world face calamity and hardship because of their decision to follow Christ, not blessing after blessing. But if we think that God is some sort of all-wise Santa Claus, a machine where if we push the right buttons we'll be showered with an earthly jackpot of riches, we will have unmet expectations. If we think our obedience to God puts us in His debt, we are wrong. We need to make sure that our casual look at external circumstances does not drive us to distrust God – He is there, though we may not recognize Him.

Many sins that come back to haunt us time and time again are sins we pick up because of the unmet expectations we have of God. I must provide for myself, so I'll take the high paying job with questionable ethics rather than the low paying job that serves God's Kingdom. I must provide for myself, so I stop waiting on God to provide a spouse and fulfill my lusts my own way. I medicate myself with whatever pleasure of choice makes me feel best. It is one thing to say we trust in God. It's another thing to act in ways that show it. When we act on our unmet expectations rather than continuing to trust in the storm, that's where we run into problems.

My thought for myself and for all of us this morning is simply this: trust God even when He hasn't met your expectations. He knows what's best. God had a plan for leading Abram to Canaan. Abram didn't need to scheme to keep himself safe on his sojourn to Egypt. Yes, there was a famine. Yes, Canaan was filled with wicked people. But that didn't mean God wasn't going to fulfill the promise.

The external circumstances didn't matter – God was still faithful and trustworthy. And so for us too, when God doesn't answer your prayers the way you'd hoped, when you've followed Him in faith and so far have nothing to show for it, keep trusting. Because our hope ultimately isn't for perfection and comfort and safety in this life but for the love, peace, and security of God in the next.

Back to the passage...Abram has this scheme. "Tell everyone you're my sister, Sarai." Abram is convinced that Sarai's beauty is going to be a problem. At this point, she's 65, but lifespans were much longer; she lives 127 years, so she's just at middle age. As someone from a faraway land, she would have been uniquely exotic. As we said before, murder was less a crime than adultery, so Abram's thoughts are not off-base!

And Abram's plan is really to save them both from problems; courtship in ancient times often took several months' worth of exchanges and conversations and gifts to the family. If any ordinary man had taken a liking to Sarai, they would have had plenty of time to plan an escape out of Dodge. While the plan saves Abram's skin, it also would have saved Sarai from becoming someone's trophy wife in a foreign land.

The only problem with the plan is that it doesn't count on Pharaoh. Pharaoh's courtesans are the ones who take note of her, and Pharaoh hears them. And Pharaoh doesn't ask; he takes what he wants. To be fair, Pharaoh treats Abram like a king. What's not obvious from the passage is that in this era, female donkeys were the prized riding animal in Egypt, and camels (which don't do particularly well in Egypt) were a novel rarity. This shows just how taken Pharaoh is with Sarai and how much he showers on Abram for her hand. Pharaoh's only sin here is his ignorance of the truth that Abram and Sarai have kept from him.

This is a real pickle for Abram. His failing, his plan, has put God's promise on the line. Everything is at stake. Any hope of making a nation out of Abram also rests on Sarai. She's now gone, a part of Pharaoh's harem, soon to be taken to his chambers. If it weren't for God's intervention, Abram would have bungled everything. There's no earthly solution to the fix Abram has gotten them in.

Then comes the plagues. Our translation says "diseases," which may be right, but the word is the same as what described what happens in the Exodus 500 years later. Pharaoh's household is afflicted, and somehow the truth comes out – Sarai is Abram's wife. And Pharaoh is indignant. He gives Abram a tongue-lashing, and in the Hebrew, his final retort doesn't even have all the proper connecting words. It's basically, "Look! Wife! Take and go!" He's so mad, but he's also terrified, so he has Abram's caravan briskly escorted out of the country.

It's really important for us to note that this simple story, told in a few lines, is a direct parallel to the Exodus. Look at the similarities – the people of God are oppressed. The lives of the males are at risk and the women will be married and entrapped in the Egyptian system. God sends a series of plagues on Egypt which eventually leads to the people of God coming away with significant Egyptian wealth when they are told to leave. What was true for Abram was true for his descendants nearly half a millennia later. Where there was no hope, God comes through, rescuing and delivering His people. The ancient Israelites living enslaved in a foreign land could have hope because God had come through before.

This brings us back to a point that I've made in the past, but it comes up so often that we must repeat it: *God is faithful to His people despite their serious flaws and sins.* Abram really makes a mess of things. His plan completely leaves God out of the equation. It makes assumptions about the people they'll meet, it leaves Sarai in the lurch, it imperils God's promise of making a mighty people of Abram. God comes through when Abram is completely out of options, and does so despite the fact that Abram didn't count on God to do anything.

God is always faithful to their people despite their waywardness. Sometimes, we hear that God in the Old Testament is fierce and angry and is loving and kind in the New Testament, that either something changed or God isn't the same God or something. But what I see in the Old Testament is God being continually and repeatedly loving to His people despite their immense failures. God never reneges on His promises, even when His people make it virtually impossible to keep them and still be just.

The Israelites who He's brought of the wilderness reject Him, but He allows their children to enter the promised land. Their descendants reject Him as their king and want an earthly ruler, but instead of rejecting them, He gives them what they want – a series of kings. Their continual wickedness leads God to exile them into Babylon for 70 years, but He still brings the remnant home. When the time comes for Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah, they reject Him too, nailing Him to a cross. Yet the Father resurrects His Son and offers salvation to all those who would trust in Him – including those responsible for His death!

The reason we worship every week, the reason I'm here preaching, the reason there are 2 billion believers around the world, is because God is faithful to sinners. He moves mountains to accomplish His will and to rescue poor, weak people like you and me. We may be cowards. We may be liars. We may be guilty of any number of sins. But God remains faithful. God did not look at Abram and say, "You missed your shot!" God was faithful and rescued Abram and Sarai out of the mess they got themselves into.

Friends, rest in the arms of your savior Jesus. Look to Him, learn from Him, love Him, follow Him. Do not test Him with your sins. But know that when you stumble, when you fail, God is still there. You know, I think about how many times Jesus chided the disciples for their lack of faith. Over and over again, they disbelieve; they don't trust. Jesus feeds 5,000 people in front of the disciples, and then when He wants to do it again for a crowd of 4,000, they are still like, "We don't have enough food for us, let alone them!" They saw the miracles and still fell down on their faces.

But you know what? Jesus never said, “I’ve had enough of you all!” These were the disciples He had chosen. He stuck with them. He was faithful to them. They’re a mess. After three years with Him, when He is arrested, they all head for the hills; Peter and John are brave enough to eventually track down where they’ve taken Him, but then Peter denies knowing Him! Yet Jesus doesn’t abandon or forsake them. After His resurrection, He restores Peter and encourages them all. He sends the Holy Spirit to them soon after His ascension into heaven so that they always have Him with them.

Friends, we need not be afraid. Throughout history, God has stuck by His people as they floundered. There’s nothing you’ve done or will do that will make God throw up His hands in despair. He made you; He knows you; He loves you *as* He sees the flaws and knows every sin you will commit. Scripture says, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. You can be bold and brave in the Kingdom of God because you know that God is with you, even if you’ve been cowardly and shameful in your past.

Here’s my last thought, another one that’s not new, but I think we have to think about in light of the parallels to the exodus to come: *choices create unforeseen consequences*. There’s one major unforeseen consequence right at the heart of this passage – Abram doesn’t foresee the consequence that Sarai would catch Pharaoh’s eye. His gambit didn’t take that into account. Abram’s choice also leads to the plagues on Pharaoh’s household. That was really unforeseen.

But what’s even more unforeseen, the consequences we can never know, are what might have happened if Abram had said, “You know, I’m going to trust God to keep His promise and keep us safe in Egypt.” Abram made public sacrifices to God twice in our last passage. Next week, he’ll do so again when he’s back in Canaan. He proclaims the name of the LORD and calls upon Him; Abram worships Him. The sojourn in Egypt is bookended by Abram’s sacrifices to God before and after. What’s noticeably missing is Abram building an altar and proclaiming the name of God in Egypt.

Pharaoh is rightfully enraged at Abram for not being honest and allowing his wife to become a part of the royal harem. Abram and Sarai’s lives are spared only because of the king’s fear of the God who has brought these plagues on his household. What might have happened if Abram, who had called upon the name of the LORD before and proclaimed God among the peoples he’d met, had been honest with the Egyptians? What might have happened if Abram, rather than attempting the coward’s gambit, had presented the Egyptians with the one true God? Would his descendants have been oppressed as slaves? Or would Egypt have become a God-fearing nation that would have been a genuine friend of Israel? We can’t know. We’ll never know because Abram took what he thought was the safer, easier path rather than to trust God.

Friends, we all live with plenty of regrets from roads not taken, from choices made without putting God first. But thankfully, we also know the value of good choices we’ve made – you’re here this morning, which is on the right track! The best thing for us to do is act as disciples of Jesus, following His paths, showing His kindness, mercy, and grace to others, living as citizens of God’s Kingdom and children of the King. Those consequences might not be immediately apparent to us either – and yet we know that we will never regret living in step with God rather than following the coward’s gambit.