

Prayers

Opening prayer

Great God and Creator of our world, You have given us life and breath. You have breathed Your Spirit into us, so that can be aware of ourselves, of each other, and of You. Enliven our spirits this day so that as we go about our daily work, we may be consciously caring of others, and personally mindful of Your ministering presence. We ask this through our Saviour Jesus, who has given us new life by His blood! AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas_ *(Alternatives that can broaden the experience of prayer)*

Obtain a song or hymn book and sing some songs in praise to God. Do this quietly or out loud as you feel led by the Spirit

On-going prayers

- **Pray for remote churches.** *Pray for small churches in islands and remote regions of the world, where Christians live and work in sometimes very isolated conditions. Pray that they will know the fellowship of all believers to be a real thing.*
- *Pray for all those who have been affected by civil unrest, in cities or in countries throughout the world. All of them feel the pain of having personal life disturbed and unsettled.*
- *Thank God for the gift of the Scriptures, for both the Old and the New Testaments*

Meditation

Lord God, touch my life with love;
Wrap me in the stillness of peace,
Clothe me with the purity of holiness,
Calm my spirit in quiet simplicity,
Meet me in the mysteries of life,
Shine within the depth of my being,
Free me from all bondage of the mind,
Draw me to the source of healing,
Mend my bones and restore my flesh,
Lift my soul to heights of faithfulness,
Restore my hope, my faith, my love,
Create eternal hope within my heart;
Lord God, redeem this child of Yours,
Forever, and forever: so be it.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Genesis 12: 10-13: 1

¹⁰ Now there was a famine in the country. So Abram went down to Egypt to live there temporarily as a foreigner as the famine became severe in the land. ¹¹ As he came near to entering Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife,

‘Look, I am all too aware that you are a very beautiful woman, ¹² and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, “This is his wife”. They will kill me, but let you live. ¹³ Please say you are my sister, so that I will be well treated, and my life spared because of you.’

¹⁴ When Abram arrived in Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was very beautiful, ¹⁵ and when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they commended her to Pharaoh, so she was taken into Pharaoh's palace. ¹⁶ He treated Abram well because of her, and he received sheep, oxen, asses, slaves, servants, donkeys, and camels. ¹⁷ But the LORD struck Pharaoh and his household with severe diseases because of Sarai, Abram's wife. ¹⁸ So Pharaoh summoned Abram, and said,

'What have you done to me? Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? ¹⁹ Why did you say, "She is my sister," so that I took her as my wife? Now here is your wife. Take her, and go!'

²⁰ Pharaoh gave orders to his men about him. They sent him on his way with his wife and all he had. ^{13:1} So Abram went up out of Egypt, back to the Negev, with his wife and all his possessions, accompanied by Lot.

Review

After the amazing story of Abram's journey to Canaan (12:1-9), this reading plunges us into a very puzzling story. Having travelled to Canaan as the Lord commanded, Abram decided not to stay there because there was '*a famine in the land*' (12:10). This hardly seems the actions of someone who was trusting in God, and it seems that having first been obedient to God, Abram had not yet learned to be completely submissive to God's will. So Abram travelled on through Canaan further south as far as Egypt, but if he thought that it was dangerous to stay in Canaan, Egypt was no soft option, and he had to hatch a plan for his own survival (12:11-13). Today's reading today takes us back to a time far distant from our own, and it gives a glimpse into the life of Abram the nomad, as he sought to balance the call of God had placed on his life with the realities of the world in which he was set.

Abram went to Egypt primarily because when drought affected large areas of the Middle East, the Nile Delta continued to give the land its fertility. Egypt was therefore a safe haven at a time of drought, but the Egyptians were somewhat wary of people of other nations who came looking to benefit from its relative safety; such prejudices are well recorded in the archaeological records of Egypt. Abram however, was concerned that in these circumstances, the Egyptians would seek to take advantage of him and his family, and mostly that his beautiful wife might be taken from him because of her good looks. He therefore decided to pass her off as his sister!

Now if we look back into Genesis chapter 11 verse 29, we will find that Abraham was right to say that he was related to his wife; she was in fact his niece and the sister of his nephew Lot! It seems that the word 'sister' was used in those days as a more general term of family membership. Nevertheless, Abram's plan did not go entirely as planned, for Sarai came to the notice of Pharaoh, and was taken straight to his harem! In recompense, Abraham was given considerable wealth (12:16), but the plan unravelled when people in Pharaoh's household became ill and it was believed that this was because of Sarai. Pharaoh was not amused at the deception, and made his anger clear (12:18-19), but the story he tells us that Abram was still able to leave Egypt with the goods and wealth that he had gained from Pharaoh. God had his hand upon what happened to Abram and Sarah, even though their schemes were not entirely godly.

What are we to make of this? To begin with, Abram certainly showed something less than faith in God; after all that he had gone through, he did not trust God to help him stay in the land of Canaan. This may sound a harsh judgement in the circumstances, but it makes sense of our reading here. You will find that in the first part of Genesis 12, God spoke to Abram directly to tell him what to do, but in the second half of Genesis 12 there is no contact between God and Abram. Abram did not consult God about his predicament, and in addition, his ruse to call Sarai his sister was in opposition to Levitical law (Lev 18:9,11). Of course, the law was given many years later, but it was certainly a factor in the minds of those who penned the story we have here in Scripture. In the end, God had to intervene not by speaking to Abram with the direct personal voice He used earlier, but by bringing a plague to Egypt to persuade Pharaoh to let Abram and his sister go.

Now verse one of chapter 13 is best used as the conclusion to chapter 12, rather than the story that follows in chapter 14. It tells us that after this rather awkward event, Abram left Egypt promptly because their actions were foolish. They then returned to the Negev, the desert regions of southern Israel and Judah, known as the place Abram spent most of his later years.

All this is rather shocking: Abram, the great man of God, seems to have failed at the first hurdle of faith! Once the 'Promised Land' was reached, he did not trust God for the first major decision he had to make. He did not even consult Him! Whatever else the story tells us about Sarai and Abram, we should see that even in this faithful and revered man, faith was initially incomplete. It would have to grow through his life; he was certainly not perfect! The theme of Abram's immaturity sets the stage for the coming stories of Genesis, which a journey of faith that would only end towards the conclusion of his life (see ch22). There was a long way to go, but Abram had started his journey with God.

Going Deeper

Whoever wrote down the Genesis story of Abraham was well aware of the contradictions and difficulties of the whole story of Abraham. It is fascinating to read about what happened and discover that God was able to use the whole situation for good. Abraham may have needed to grow in faith, but God was not going to relinquish His promises!

Going to Egypt

The first intriguing thing about this story is that it is one of three stories in Genesis which are very similar. The other two are Abraham's journey to Gerar (Gen. 20:1-18), and Isaac's flight to Gerar with his wife Rebekah (Gen 26:1,7-17). In each case the stories read remarkably the same, however, there is a strange feature of them which both links them and separates them. If we call our story today no1, and then Abraham's journey to Gerar no2, and Isaac's flight to Gerar no3, then this will help us see what is going on.

A careful examination of the details of each story shows that each detail is the same for two stories, but different for the third, but the two stories that agree is different for each detail! For example, the reason for the journey is famine in two cases (1&3), but not in the other (2); the destination is Gerar in two cases (2&3) and Egypt in the other (1); the couple in two cases is Abram and Sara (1&2) and Isaac and Rebekah in the other (3); in two cases (1&2) the wife is taken into a harem and in the other (3) she is not. In addition, this analysis could continue through at least five other significant features of these stories, where we find this apparently random pattern of 2 and 1 throughout!

What are we to make of this? All three stories were undoubtedly connected in the minds of those who wrote them down for us, and we should therefore try to find out what this might be. The best explanation is not that this is one story, modified for three purposes, but that each story derives from a different event that was critical to some major feature of the story of Abraham and his descendants. The writers convey this to us both by making connections between the stories and also keeping them separate, as we have seen.

Each story concerns a major test of faith for the couple involved and relates to one or more of the blessings or promises of God. It is relatively obvious to us that Abram and Isaac, the men involved in these stories had their faith in God and their honesty to others severely tested. Indeed, they might even be said to fail, for in our story today, Abram failed to trust in God by moving out of Canaan to Egypt as soon as there was a problem. He appeared to take advantage of the developing situation to gain personal wealth at the expense of risking his wife in Pharaoh's harem! That, however, is only half the story. In each case the men placed at risk what has sometimes been called the 'holy seed'. This means the lineage of God's people through His chosen 'couples'. Sex is not specifically mentioned, of course, but the implications are clear. Abraham and Sarai were not able to have children and Sarai was therefore said to be barren, but in the first two stories above, she was sexually compromised, and in the second story (Gen 20) she was already pregnant with Isaac. If she were to be 'taken' by another man, then God's promise of a lineage through her and her husband would at the least be in doubt and at worst fatally compromised. The same is true, but with different implications, of the third story of Isaac and Rebekah (Gen 26).

The treatment of Sarai

It is true that Sarai was indeed Abram's half sister. Archaeology and anthropology has also established (astonishingly) that it was accepted for wealthy men to have a social contract with their wives to make them their legal 'sisters' and thus able to receive their share of inheritance if the man were to die, for in those days a wife was not entitled to any inheritance at all! Yet none of this or any other explanations of Abram's behaviour excuses his cavalier attitude towards God's promise to create His own nation of people through himself and Sarai.

Abram traded his wife's beauty for personal security and wealth in circumstances that would not have arisen if he had trusted in God's direction and leading in the first place. He was put off by naturally occurring human problems, but found himself in evil's grip, and subject to his own sinfulness. He even had to plead with Sarai (v13) to 'agree' their story before going into Egypt (the clear implication of the Hebrew of verse 13). God then had to intervene through supernatural means (v17) to secure Sarai's release, before the two of them headed straight back to where they had come from in the first place, the Negev (13:1).

Abram had to learn from this experience and Sarai as well. She went along with her husband, as we might expect of a woman of those times, but as we read we cannot but wonder whether she should have said 'no' to Abram and challenged him when he was walking away from God. Within a few chapters we will discover that Sarai was by no means a mute and compliant wife; she did indeed learn from this and, later on, had cause to chastise her husband and point him to God (21:6,12). This 'emancipation' of Sarai is an important part of the stories of Genesis.

The last thing we can learn from the three similar stories of Abram and Sarai, and of Isaac and Rebekah, is that it is of the nature of evil to strike at a person's weakest point. God had promised Abram that he would be a blessing (12:2) which was a wonderful promise to receive! He had also promised that Abram's name would become great (12:2) which was already happening as Abram grew wealthier. But the promise that God would create a 'nation' from him and his wife was the hardest to believe, given the circumstances, and that was the point at which the enemy attacked Abram, taking his heart away from God and directing him back towards his own judgement; thus compromising God's promises. It was no small matter.

God's intervention in Egypt, and Abram's return to the Negev

Yet the covenant agreement God had declared with Abraham (12:1-3) did not yet include any specific demand on Abram, apart from the implicit requirement to be obedient to his call; and God was not going to give up on those He had chosen. Abram and Sarai returned from Egypt after His intervention having escaped a 'close call' on one part of the blessing concerning their future to produce a nation, but experiencing the benefits of one of the other blessings. Pharaoh dismissed the pair without taking away what he had given them. Even the list of gifts Abram received (v16) from Pharaoh was an accurate list of an oriental procession of a very wealthy nomadic man. Domesticated sheep, cows and oxen first, male donkeys (asses) next as beasts of burden, but in front of the female donkeys so that they could not smell their scent and be distracted (!), with male slaves and servant girls attending the beasts of burden, and finally, the patriarch Abram himself and his wife riding on a camel, the grandest and largest beast of burden from which a rich nomad could survey the whole 'train'. It would have been an impressive scene.

Interestingly, Lot is mentioned only briefly at the end of the story (13:1). If Abram and Sarai were indeed to be the people through whom God would make a nation, then Lot's place in God's plans was peripheral. The next story in scripture (ch13) contrasts Abram and Lot, and clarifies that despite Abram's problems, God's blessing remained with him.

Discipleship

Application

There is no-one mentioned in the Bible who is perfect, except Jesus. The impression has sometimes been given that because certain characters of the Old Testament pointed to Jesus and His Gospel, they were in some way different from the rest of us; special, or even perfect. Certainly Abraham, Moses, David, and Elijah are some of those whose greatness has presented as akin to perfection. It is very important to remember that those who penned God's Word made it extremely clear that the people they wrote about were imperfect people, yet chosen by God, and taking their place in the history of Israel. Each had some quality which was used by God, of faith, leadership, honesty or prophecy, for example. The writers of scripture were always careful to record their faults as well as their glorious part in God 'salvation history' of the world.

This is an amazing feature of the Bible which is radically different from almost all other ancient documents including other religious writings. There is something deeply human about this, and it has a purpose. It means that if we read scriptures properly, then the focus is always on God (in the Old Testament) or on Jesus (in the New). The Godhead alone is the source of all perfection, and it is only ever reflected in the lives of people recorded in scripture, Old Testament or New. For this reason, there is no reason why we cannot be inspired by great characters such as Abram, and because they were 'real' people like us, we can read scripture and learn from them because they personally knew the evils, trials and temptations of real life. Because of this, we can also use scripture to learn how Satan works through evil, for it is now no different from the way he has always worked. Being fundamentally in rebellion against God, he uses our every weakness to keep us apart from our Saviour and our salvation, just as he tried to lead Abraham astray. In the long term, however, God's will prevails!

Questions for groups

1. In what ways do you think Abram could attempt to justify his actions in this story? Can he make a good case at all?
2. Imagine yourself in the place of Sarai. What are the risks of what you are being asked to do by your husband. What should she learn from this experience?
3. Is it right that Abram leaves Egypt a more wealthy man? Why would God allow this?

Discipleship challenges

- *How easy it is to let slip our contact with God and His guidance, and find ourselves making decisions without any assurance that we are acting in His will! This is what was happening to Abram. How can we make sure that we do not fall into the same trap?*
 - *I suggest that you consider where you are weakest in respect of God's priorities, for that is where you will, most surely, be attacked by the enemy. A defence against the enemy can be mounted if you know where you will be attacked!*
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Final Prayer

Heal our wounds of life, Lord Jesus and cleanse them at their source. Bless us, we pray, by turning our hearts from despair to hope, from unhappiness to joy, from brokenness to wholeness, and from darkness to light. This is Your glorious work, and we praise Your Holy Name Lord Jesus. AMEN
