

SUNDAY, APRIL 25, 2010

Sunday, April 25, 2010: Jeopardizing God's Promise

Jeopardizing God's Promise
Genesis 12: 10 – 20.

I. Introduction.

Last Sunday, I introduced you to the story of Abraham. Technically, I introduced you to Abram. That was his name for the first 85 years of his life.

Abraham is the father of three world religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. All three religious groups look up to Abraham as the prototype of faith.

Two themes dominate the Old Testament stories about Abraham: Faith and Journey. On one hand, Abraham was a man of faith. God spoke, and Abraham obeyed. On the other hand, Abraham's faith was a journey. He was constantly on the move. God promised that Abraham's descendants would have their own land. But, Abraham never settled down in that land.

Since, Abraham is the prototype for our faith and Abraham's life was marked by journey, I am inclined to interpret Abraham's example as proof that faith for us is also a journey. Faith is not a one-time event. Faith is more than praying a prayer at Vacation Bible School or Wake Up Weekend. Faith is the trajectory of your life. It begins with a prayer / commitment to Jesus as Lord. This is the first step of the journey.

Sometimes the journey of faith is smooth and straight. But, most of the time it is marked with suffering, struggle with sin and temptation.

Sometimes the journey of faith is defined by success and faithfulness. But, most of the time it is filled with failure and restoration.

This is what happened to Abram. In Genesis 12: 1 – 9 (last Sunday), Abram is presented as the picture of perfect faith: God speaks and Abram obeys. There is no questioning, no wavering and no doubt. Genesis 12: 10 – 20 shows a different picture of Abram's faith. Instead of depending on God's word and promise, Abram takes matters into his own hands. He fails. He shows his humanity. But, God is faithful to Abram.

Read Genesis 12: 10 – 20.

In Genesis 12: 1 – 9, God turned Abram's life upside down. Abram was comfortable and secure in Haran. He lived with his elderly father, his one living brother and a whole clan of nieces and nephews. But, God spoke to Abram.

God did not want Abram to remain comfortable in Haran. God wanted Abram to embark on a 400 mile journey to a land Abram had never seen—the land of Canaan. God spoke, and Abram obeyed.

We don't know how long it took Abram to travel from Haran to Canaan, but we do know that

Abram didn't remain there long. Canaan did not have the major rivers and irrigation techniques of Haran. Canaan depended on the weather to water the crops. As long as there was rain, the crops could grow. When the rains stopped, the crops failed. Drought led to famine. So, Abram had to move again.

Egypt was the logical choice for Abram. It was the political power in the area. It also had the great river Nile to provide water for crops.

But, Abram was worried about entering Egypt. He was concerned that the Pharaoh would want to take Sarai to be his wife and would kill Abram. So, they developed a ruse. Sarai would claim to be Abram's sister.

The ruse worked—at least it worked for Abram. Abram's life was spared, but Sarai was purchased by Pharaoh to be one of Pharaoh's wives. Pharaoh gave Abram sheep, cattle, donkeys, slaves and camels. Instead of being killed for Sarai, Abram became wealthy. He was blessed for lying.

The ruse didn't work very well for Pharaoh either. The Bible says that God sent plagues (diseases in the NIV) to Pharaoh and his household. This caused Pharaoh to give Sarai back to Abram and send him out of the country. But, Abram got to keep all of Pharaoh's gifts.

I have always struggled with this Scripture. On the surface, it seems that God has rewarded Abram for being crafty. When Abram was in a foreign land, he crafted a lie to save his life. Pharaoh was deceived by Abram's lie, and Abram is sent on his way with great riches.

The problem with this interpretation is the way it equates God's blessings and material wealth.

It is certainly true that Abram was blessed by God. It is also true that Abram became a very wealthy man. In fact, the gifts from Pharaoh were the beginning of Abram's wealth. But, this does not fit with the overall biblical teaching about wealth.

I wish I could tell you that God blesses all faithful men and women with material success. I wish I could tell you this story of Abram's wealth could be your story. I suppose I could tell you that, but I would not be faithful to the biblical witness.

The Bible never teaches us that only the faithful will be wealthy. In fact, we have biblical examples of wicked people with great wealth. Even in our story today, Abram received his wealth from Pharaoh. Pharaoh was not faithful to the One True God. He was an idolater. Yet, this idolater was a wealthy king.

The New Testament teaches us that wealth often gets in the way of our commitment to Jesus. In Jesus' own words, "**Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God (Luke 18: 25 NIV).**" Wealthy men and women often do not think they need Jesus. They think they can solve their own problems. They think money will provide safety, security and happiness.

This is not a story about God's blessing the faithful with material wealth. If it were, then we would expect Abram to appear more faithful. As it is, Abram does not model faith. He models the opposite of faith. If anything, Abram seems more like a faithless doubter than a model of perfect faith.

God is the One who is faithful. God made a promise to Abram, and here we discover that God will be faithful to do exactly what he promised.

Abram placed God's promises in jeopardy. What would have happened if Abram had been killed in Egypt? What would have happened if Sarai had become princess of Egypt and the mother of Pharaoh's children?

Fortunately, we don't have to wonder about this, because God intervened. And, this is the point of the story.

God made a promise to Abram, but Abram was not so sure God would be able to keep his promise. Could God be faithful in the midst of a famine? Could God be faithful when Abram faced the threat of a foreign king? Could God be faithful when Abram exchanged his own wife for worldly wealth? Could God be faithful when Abram was not faithful? The story answers with a resounding "Yes."

II. Temptation Comes After a Spiritual High Point.

The story of Abram in Egypt illustrates that no one is exempt from temptation. If Abram was the prototype for our faith, and Abram faced temptation...Then, you and I will certainly face temptations.

Also note when this temptation took place. It was immediately following God's call and announcement of his promises.

Sometimes you and I face temptations immediately after experiencing a spiritual high point. It might be a youth retreat where the worship and the preacher speak directly to your life situation. It might be a mission trip where you experience God's provision and miracles in new ways. It might be a private experience of prayer in which God reveals his purpose and direction for your life. Then, the next day you are right back in the real world.

God never changes. He is the same wherever we are. God is the same on the spiritual mountain top and in the spiritual valley. God is the same in the real world as he was at camp or on that mission trip. We are the ones that change. God's faithfulness never changes and never fails.

Has this ever happened to you? There is some sin that you struggle with. Maybe it's not a big sin, but you know that it is wrong. So, you take it to God in prayer. You confess your sinfulness and promise never to do it again. But, then you do...When you face temptation, you do the very thing you promised never to do again.

One moment you are close to God, pledging that you will always follow his will and serve him with your life. The next moment you are yielding to temptation. How can that happen? Why does that happen?

The problem is that we are trying to face temptation on our own power. You and I are not strong enough to resist the temptation to sin. We need the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit.

One of the great things about being a Christian is the way God forgives us of sin. But, that is not all God promised us. He also promises to give us the strength and the direction to make it through temptation. In other words, we can choose to face temptation and then pray for forgiveness...Or, we can pray for guidance before yielding to temptation.

Abram could have prayed, "Lord, you promised to bless me. But there is this famine that is

threatening my life. I need you to help me through the famine.” Or, “Lord, you promised to bless me with children and a nation of descendants. But, I can’t be the father of a nation if Pharaoh kills me in Egypt. I need you to help me.”

III. God’s Resources Are Better Than My Resources.

Abram moved to Egypt because of a famine. He was hungry and did not have a way to provide for his wife, his nephew and their servants. But, that is not the case when Abram left Egypt. He left a wealthy man.

On the surface, it seems that Abram entered Egypt with no resources and left Egypt with the resources to provide for his family. However, that is not what we read in Genesis 12: 1 – 9.

At the beginning of Genesis 12, we discover that Abram has the greatest of all resources. He has the promises of God. Yet, Abram jeopardized those promises when he traded his wife for wealth. Without God’s intervention, Abram’s ruse would have been the end of the promises. Sarai would have become an Egyptian princess, and Abram would have lived out the rest of his life comfortable and wealthy in Egypt. There would have been no Isaac and no great nation.

This was not God’s plan. So, God went to work behind the scenes to rescue Abram from his own mistakes.

Abram did not go to Egypt without resources. Instead, Abram went to Egypt with the greatest resources of all. First, God gave Abram his promise to make Abram into a great nation. Second, God gave Abram his protection in order that God’s promises might one day be fulfilled.

This is the lesson Abram had to learn the hard way. If God promises something to you, God will also give you his presence to guarantee his promises are fulfilled.

What about you? Are you willing to trust in God’s promise and God’s presence? These are the very best resources you can ever have.

This is what the Apostle Paul wrote about to the churches of Philippi, when he said, **“I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1: 3 – 6 NIV).”**

God has promised to mold you into the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. God has promised to save you and to prepare you for eternity in Heaven. God has promised to give you life beyond death. And, the God who began this work in you will also grant you his presence to bring it to completion. Even when you think you have the resources to make it without God, God is working behind the scenes to fulfill his promises.

IV. Failure Is Never Final.

The only way this story makes sense is to admit that Abram failed. He chose to solve his own problem on his own terms. He sinned against God by lying about Sarai. He did not fully believe that God would fulfill the promises God made to him.

But there is a great lesson for us in this. Even when Abram's faith failed, Abram's God never fails. Even when Abram gave up on God, God never gave up on Abram. Human failure is never final.

This was a lesson all of Jesus' disciples had to learn. Each time Jesus taught them about his Kingdom, they failed to understand. When Jesus died on the cross, the disciples failed to remain faithful—instead, they ran away in fear. Yet, in the resurrection, Jesus restored his disciples and gave them his presence to sustain and empower them.

V. Conclusion.

This is a better picture of faith—at least it is faith the way I experience it personally. Faith is not always easy. Faith is a constant struggle between God's promise and my willingness to trust. It is a struggle between God's faithfulness to fulfill his promises and my efforts to place those promises in jeopardy.