



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## A Test of Faith

Genesis 12:4-20

Fr. William Klock

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When we left Abram last time God had just established his covenant with Abram. He had called Abram to leave his home and his family, his spiritual responsibilities and his gods, and to follow him to a new land. In return God promised Abram that as he followed him, he would bless him and that through him, all the world would be blessed. We saw that this was the beginning of God's re-revelation of himself to humanity. We had turned from him and walked so far into sin that we'd eventually forgotten him entirely. Now God promises to reveal himself through Abram that the world might know him again. And we saw that God's revelation of himself through Abram and his descendants was unconditional: whether they walked in faith or walked in sin, the rest of the world would see God at work.

And so, as we pick up the story again in 12:4, we see Abram obeying God's call.

**So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan.** (Genesis 12:4-5a)

The Hebrew text emphasises Abram's faithfulness in that the verb God uses when he tells Abram to "go" is the same verb used here to tell us that Abram "went". In faith Abram obeyed and did exactly what God called him to do. He and his wife along with Lot and his family, all their flocks and herds and their households—their slaves and their hired hands—all set off on a 500 kilometre journey to a new home that they didn't yet know. The trusted—they had faith—that God was leading them.

**When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.** (Genesis 12:5b-6)

So they travel south, probably through Damascus and along the Sea of Galilee and through the hill country into the heart of the land controlled by the Canaanites. We're reminded that at this point Abram could enter the land, he could build an altar and claim the place for God, but he couldn't truly claim it as his own. Shechem was in the thick of Canaanite country, but Abram camps nearby at a place called Moreh where, we're told, there was an oak tree. He probably camped away from the city for practical reasons: to keep his people from getting into trouble with the locals. "Moreh" literally means "teacher" and the oak tree there was probably associated with some pagan oracle to whom the people would go for instruction. Oak trees are large and grow very tall and were often sites for pagan worship. Think back to the ziggurat at Babel and the desire of the people to entice the gods down the stairway to heaven with their worship. Oak trees and other tall trees served similar purposes. The word "place" in verse 6 translates a Hebrew word associated with sacred or religious sites. This tells us that Abram is still worshipping like a pagan, but we can also see that even if his worship is pagan in style, it's no longer pagan in content. Look at verse 7:

**Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.**

We don't know what was going through Abram's head as he travelled through the hill country of Canaan. God had promised to take him to a land that would be his own, and yet as they passed town after town and city after city, Abram was probably wondering how he could ever possess this land that was already filled with cities and armies and a thriving culture. Sure, he could blend in, finding a small and unsettled place near one of the cities, and settle down, but I imagine he was sceptical about the whole place being his. And yet in faith he had come and as he arrived, God spoke again. And again reiterates the promise: "To you and to your offspring I will give this land."

However crazy a proposition this may have seemed, we see Abram's faith as he piles stone upon stone and builds an altar. He went to Moreh to worship at a place that the local people recognised as sacred and where they worshiped their pagan gods and goddess, but Abram doesn't use their altars. No, he builds his own—he worships the one true God and separates himself from the idolatry of the Canaanites. Some people have taken Abram's building of the altar as a sort of flag-planting: Abram claiming the land for his own. I think the altar is more

practical than that. Abram was settling in this place, even if for just a little while—the text doesn't tell us how long he was there—and as a man of faith he desired to worship his God. Building an altar was as natural for him as pitching his tent; as natural as it would be for us to move to a new town and find a church in which to worship. And what better reason to build an altar and to worship? God had called him to step out in faith and to follow him to a new country. Abram took that step of faith and was now in that new country. He'd arrived safely, but he'd also discovered that the land was already occupied. If there was a time for prayer, this was it. And God speaks again to confirm the promise. Yes, this land will be Abram's and it will belong to his descendants. We might expect Abram to give up at this point, thinking this God talking to him was just an imaginary voice in his head. The land already belonged to someone else and Abram still didn't have any descendants. But instead Abram continues to worship this crazy God who kept promising crazy things, even building an altar for him. But brothers and sisters, God and his promises only seem crazy when we lack faith. God's wisdom is foolishness to the world, but to those with faith it's life.

Now, in verses 8 and 9 we see that Abram doesn't stay at Shechem.

**From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD. And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.**

Abram moves further south and from the valley at Shechem up into the hills around Bethel, not very far from Jerusalem and another sacred site. Again, he pitches his tent. Considering that he would have "pitched his tent" at every stopping point along his journey, the point here seems to be that he stayed at Bethel for some time. And as he pitched his tent so too he built another altar and "called upon the name of the LORD". This doesn't just refer to simple prayer; it means that Abram truly worshipped God in all that that means. He trusted, he obeyed, he followed, he praised, and he thanked.

And then, yet again after some time, Abram packs up and moves. On from Bethel we're told that he went south to the Negeb, to the southernmost part of Canaan. If you think of a map of modern Palestine and of the state of Israel, the Negeb is the area contained in the pointy part at its southern end. So now Abram's travelled the whole length of

Canaan, entering at the very northern end, moving down through the central hill country, and finally settling in the southernmost part. It may have been controlled by the Canaanites, but what Abram does is important. Gordon Wenham calls his journey from Shechem to the Negeb an “acted prophecy”<sup>1</sup>; Abram’s journey and his pitching his tent and his altar building prophetically point to the day still hundreds of years away when his descendants will cross the Jordan to conquer and occupy the land, from the Negeb in the south to Shechem in the north. Abram here steps out in faith for the sake of his future children.

Friends, Abram’s faith points to our own faith in Jesus Christ. Not only does Jesus hold out his hand and ask us to follow him, trusting in him for something we won’t fully see this side of eternity, but Abram also illustrates what real faith looks like. Walter Brueggemann put it this way: “[D]eparture from securities is the only way out of barrenness.”<sup>2</sup> Think of the Gospel. It’s only as we let go of any ability we think we have to save ourselves, only as we let go of all our false spiritual securities, and trust wholly and fully in the sacrifice for our sins that Jesus made at the Cross that God takes away our spiritual barrenness and infuses new life into us by his own Spirit. As Abram walked away from his people and his country to follow where God would lead, so we turn away from all of our false securities and follow Jesus into a new life.

And if we could only keep walking by faith in that new life everything would be wonderful. The sad thing is that we so often go back and pick up those old, false sources of security. We stop walking by faith and instead walk by sight—trusting in the thing we can see today instead of the promises of God. And when we do that, we get ourselves into trouble.

Abram walked in faith all the way through Canaan, from one end to the other, and, as we’ll see, he walked right out the other side and left. Look at verse 10:

**Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.**

Famines weren’t an uncommon thing in Canaan, especially in the southern Negeb desert region. To grow crops and to raise their herds, the people had to rely on rainfall and sometimes the rain didn’t fall. In contrast, Egypt was a consistent land of plenty. The people there relied on the annual flooding of the Nile to fertilise and water their crops. The same thing will happen again in the time of Joseph. When there was a famine, people went to Egypt, because Egypt almost always had food. It was common enough for hungry foreigners to arrive in Egypt during famines that the Egyptians documented it; we have some of those documents today: “Certain of the foreigners who know not how they may live have come....Their countries are starving.”<sup>3</sup>

Now, to everyone else in Canaan, going to Egypt for food when there was a famine made perfect sense. But Abram should have been thinking differently. God had made him a promise that this land would be his; God had seen him safely arrive in Canaan and then safely travel all the way from one end to the other; Abram had built altars and faithfully worshipped this God who had promised him land and family; but now when a famine comes he sets his faith in God’s provision aside and, with the Canaanites, he goes looking for salvation in pagan Egypt. Yes, from a worldly standpoint it makes perfect sense, but from the standpoint of faith, it doesn’t make any sense at all. And yet, brothers and sisters, we do the same thing. We trust our eternal souls to the care of God and his promise of eternal life, but when we run into trouble with the tangible things of this life, we trust in ourselves and our own ability to deal with life’s problems. But hear me: It’s in the tangible things of daily life that true faith shows itself. In comparison, it’s easy to entrust our souls to God. You and I have never seen our souls. And you and I have never seen heaven or hell. Souls and afterlives are, from where we stand now, pretty abstract and even “unreal” concepts. Frankly, it’s not that hard to trust in Jesus to keep your soul out of hell when, for many of us, we have trouble even grasping the reality of souls and afterlives. But notice what happens when we face a problem in *this* life—a problem that has to do with things we *can* see and things that are very real and tangible to us. All too often faith flies out the window. Not only do we throw

ourselves into worry and anxiety and forget God’s promises, but we often set aside his call to holiness and try to meet our needs in sinful ways. I used to work in a sales environment and I saw salesmen who had put their souls in the hands of Jesus to get to heaven, but they would lie, cheat, and steal their way into a sale for the sake of a paycheck. I think of times in my own life when I made a mistake in my own job and, when confronted about it, feared man more than God and dishonestly weaselled my way out of the situation. We all do it. And yet problems in daily life, like Abram’s famine, are opportunities to prove whether our faith is real or not. If we trust him with our eternal souls, shouldn’t we also trust him with our daily lives and struggles?

In Abram’s case the choice to set aside faith and walk by sight becomes even more complicated. Not only does he leave the land God had promised him, but we read that when he got to Egypt he found something more to fear. Look at verses 11 to 13:

**When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, “I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.”**

This is what happens when we start trusting in ourselves instead of in God. We can gather from the text that Abram had no reason to fear violence or the theft of his wife in Canaan, but he does in Egypt. He could have avoided this problem by staying in the land God had promised. But he doesn’t do that. So, again, instead of trusting God and walking in obedience and holiness—remember he was called to be a witness of God’s goodness and holiness to the nations—he starts scheming. He feared that because his wife was beautiful, some Egyptian might kill him and take Sarai for himself. She was his half-sister and so that’s how he presents her, conveniently leaving out the part about her also being his wife. He probably expected that this way he could fend off potential suitors—maybe even getting gifts from them as they sought Sarai’s hand in marriage—and then skip out when the famine was over along with his new wealth. We don’t know enough about that culture to know exactly what Abram was up to, but it was dishonest and it was a foolish move from the standpoint of faith.

<sup>1</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), p. 283.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> “Texts from the Tomb of General Hor-emheb” in James B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), p. 251.

As we might expect, the ruse worked better than Abram anticipated and ended up backfiring on him. He was looking for protection from wealthy Egyptians with whom he might be trading—and probably hoping he could manipulate these men who wanted Sarai and come out a bit wealthier himself. He didn't expect her to catch the eye of Pharaoh himself.

**When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.** (Genesis 12:14-16)

Abram might have been able to play games with Egyptian merchants, but not with Pharaoh, who simply takes what he wants. Abram, too, gets what he wanted. Pharaoh showers him with gifts, giving him slaves and enlarging his herds; he even gives him camels, which were very rare at this time before they'd been domesticated in large numbers. But in exchange for riches and security, Abram's now put God's promise in jeopardy. First, Abram abandoned the land the land that God had promised to him and to his descendants. Now, because of his dishonest scheme, he's put God's promise to give him a son and to make him a great nation in jeopardy. Thankfully, God remains gracious and true to his promises even when we turn away. As St. Paul reminds us: "If we are faithless, he remains faithful" (2 Timothy 2:13). God comes to Abram's rescue, but he does so in an unusual way:

**But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. So Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife; take her, and go." And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.**

Either Sarai confessed the ruse or God spoke to Pharaoh. Either way, it's the pagan king who confronts the lying and scheming man of God. Consider that Abram's mission was to be a blessing to others. Here, because of his lack of faith and his disobedience, he instead brings a curse on others and a rebuke on himself—he fails in his calling and

mission. Pharaoh calls him out on his sin. Think about that: Abram was God's prophet, God's faithful follower, God's means of revelation to the world and yet it's pagan Pharaoh who worships idols and considers himself divine who acts righteously and brings the rebuke. And it's a stern rebuke. In Hebrew he sends Abram off with four terse words: "Here...wife...take...go!" We can hear Pharaoh's anger in his dismissal, but we can see that he was also lenient with Abram. Adultery was a great sin in the ancient world. Under other circumstances Abram certainly would have been executed for what he had done in deceiving the king, but Pharaoh knew that Abram was under God's protection and so he only sends him away, back to Canaan. Pharaoh becomes God's instrument to put Abram back on the track of faith: he returns Abram's wife and sends him back to the land God had promised. And Abram offers no response; he gives Pharaoh the last word and in that he acknowledges his guilt. Reading between the lines, we can see Abram slinking silently away in shame.

Now, consider the contrast between the first part of Chapter 12 and the last part. Abram follows God's call in faith. He leaves his country and family and travels to the land of promise. He settles there and he worships God there. He receives the promise again of land and family. But then God tests that faith. When times get tough, Abram abandons the promise, he abandons his faith in God's goodness and God's provision, he abandons the land God promised, and he goes to Egypt. And, further, in Egypt he lies and schemes and ends up falling into his own pit. Abram was the one God was supposed to use in his mission, but because of Abram's sin, God turns the tables and pagan Pharaoh is the one who speaks for God, who rebukes Abram, and who puts God's plan back on course. Abram failed the test of faith.

How often do we fail in our own tests of faith? Again, we're ready to give Jesus our souls, which we haven't seen, but when it comes to daily life, how often are we ready to compromise and to scheme and even to lie in order to address the needs we can see? God has promised that he will take care of us if we will only follow him. As Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matthew 6:33). It's a sad day when God has to use an unbeliever to remind us of his promise and to rebuke us and put us back on God's path. I imagine we've all experienced that at some point.

Abram had a choice: famine and stones in God's will or bread outside of it. Abram chose the bread. You and I will face the same temptation. Will we accept the stones in God's will and trust him or will we leave his will to find bread? We may very well find food to eat by stepping out of his will, but in the end we will find ourselves spiritually starving. We need to be prepared in advance—committed to following God in faith no matter what. We need to remember, as the writer of the book of Hebrews tells us, "Without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6) and as St. Paul tells us in Romans, "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23).

But thanks be to God that he is faithful when we are unfaithful and that he pursues us even when we stray. Through the sacrifice of Jesus—the one who refused Satan's bread and chose the stones in his Father's will—through him and through his cross, we find forgiveness for our failures and for the times when we lack faith. But let us think on that sacrifice; let us think on the fact that God gave up his only and beloved Son that we, his rebellious creatures, might have life. Let us think on God's promises and all the ways that he has made good on them in our lives, that we might always trust and follow him, that we might never be lured away from his will.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, thank you for your promise of life. Thank you for never ceasing to love us, even when we turn from you. Keep the vision of your Son and of his Cross always before us that we might be always reminded of your love and provision. Give us the grace to follow you always, even when times are hard. As the man in the Gospel cried out we cry out too: "We believe. But, Lord, help our unbelief!" Strengthen our faith we ask, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.