

Stumbling, Falling and Rescued

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Genesis 12:10-20
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Dear People of God,

We've all been mesmerized by the story of the young boys in Thailand trapped in the cave and finally rescued from certain death. The day after the rescue, heavy rains moved in and the cave apparently flooded and the pump being used broke down. The team was rescued in the nick of time. However, the one person in all of this who is likely feeling the worst is the coach who brought the boys into the cave in the first place. People have been very gracious and supportive, which is right and good. But I'm pretty sure that young man has huge regrets.

We all know that feeling to some degree when it comes to our own failures. Don't you just hate yourself sometimes? I mean, you think you're doing pretty well as a Christian and then you really blow it. I sometimes open my mouth and later think, "What did I just say?" I want to kick myself! Are you trying to serve God but you get frustrated by your fall into old sins time after time? Have you asked God to help you with a particular sin you struggle with, and the next thing you know, you have done it again?

Do you struggle to make progress in your walk with God? Abram did too. Everyone does. Imagine being Abram. He is 75 years old when he leaves Haran. Now that's not quite like being 75 today for the life expectancy was about double. Terah, Abram's father was 205 when he died. Abraham was 175. He set out from Haran eager to claim the land that the Lord would show him. He headed for Canaan and when he arrived at Shechem, the Lord appeared to him and said basically, "This is it! The Promised Land." Abram kept moving until God made it clear to him where the Promised Land was. Abram had to learn to let God lead—even when the direction was unknown to him.

And similarly, we also must learn to listen to the Lord, through His Word and the Holy Spirit as He leads us through our lives so that we grow in faith too.

Publicly Professing Faith

When God revealed to Abram that he was in the Promised Land, Abram made a sort of public profession of his faith. We read in Genesis 12:7,

Gen 12:7 So Abram built an altar there (in Shechem) to the Lord.

He worshipped God, not the idols of the Canaanites or the moon-gods of his family. He built an altar to the LORD. After that, in v.8 we read that

Gen 12:8 Abram moved down toward Bethel, where he pitched his tents, built another altar to the Lord and "called on the name of the Lord,"

Two times—and a third later—Abram builds altars to God, as if to mark the whole land and dedicate it to God from top to bottom.

The altar is significant. It is the place where one worships God. Don't forget Abram was in the land of the Canaanites who worshipped other gods. So by erecting an altar to the LORD, Abram is giving an outward sign of his faith. On this point, John Calvin says, "the inward worship of the heart is not sufficient, unless external profession before men be added." If true faith resides in the heart, "public confession afterwards arises, as its fruit." (Comm.,354).

In effect what Abram is doing here is what you and I can do to show that we love and follow the Lord. Publicly confess God. We do that by attending worship. You might not think your neighbours watch you or care what you do, but they know if you are committed to God when they see you go to church faithfully. Or when you tell friends that you'll join them later in the day because you first want to go to worship. We also show that we love and follow the Lord when we partake of the Lord's Supper we declare that we find our help in Christ alone. When we speak of Him in our conversations with schoolmate, coworkers and other, we are raising an altar. And when they see that we consciously live for Him. In short, others see our devotion to God when we love and serve Him. These are our altars erected in the land.

And that can be difficult in the midst of a society that is more and more hostile to Christ. But then we should notice Abram was building his altars in the midst of the Canaanites who were known for their cruelty to those who differed from them. So each time Abram built an altar to the Lord, the Canaanites would be offended. For it stands to reason that when we serve a different God than the people around us, they may could take offense, feeling that we are condemning their gods as useless. We live in a society that tries so hard to let everyone do what they want, serve who they want and worship how they want. All gods are considered equal, in some sense. But increasingly we are seeing that it's only okay to serve your own God as long as it doesn't offend other people. If we say that Christ is the only way to God or that we think certain life-choices are not in keeping with God's will, then we get backlash today. Nonetheless, we are called to live so that others can clearly see who our God is—that we love and serve Jesus and bow at His altar.

Despite the confrontations Abram may have faced in Canaan by serving the Lord, he remained faithful to God. He took God's call seriously and followed His leading. And that's the same challenge we face.

Predictable Human Failure

"But wait," you might say, "I am not like Abram. I struggle to stay faithful to God. I often do not stand up for Jesus. I fail. I don't feel like my life is so devoted to God that unbelievers can see my faith in Jesus Christ." Well, you are not alone. That's why, secondly, it is important that we see that Abram was far from perfect. In fact, I want to look with you at what Abram did wrong. He may have been God's chosen leader, but that wasn't because he trusted God completely. He, like us, resorted to following his own human wisdom at times. He, like us, needed grace from God. And that's why looking at Abram's life is not about trying to be like him or

any other so-called hero in the Bible; all of God's servants in the Bible help us see that we can only love and serve God by His grace.

Through the famine we read about, God tests Abram. Wandering around Canaan was a trial. But up to this point Abram seems to have been able to follow God without too much problem. He lives on the promises God made to him and his descendants. But when famine drives him out of the Promised Land, Abram gets scared and doubts God's faithfulness. So Abram made his own survival plan.

I don't think most of us are so different from Abram. Like him, we may know the promises of God, but when the going gets rough, we may doubt that the Lord will come through for us. So we might seek our own refuge or make our own survival plan.

We are not able to see all that God sees. His plans far surpass our comprehension. That's why we get scared at times... we can't see into the future. Yet, we are much better off just following God's leading and sticking to His word than we are trying to figure God's ways out or especially trying to help Him see how our ideas or plans are better than His. But that's what can happen when we have our faith tested. Even the best Christians become afraid of what we see or the uncertainty of what lies ahead. And then we may fall into the sin of self-reliance. We might get up on the water like Peter and walk toward Jesus, but the moment we take our eyes off of Him, we go down.

When there was no food in Canaan, Abram decided to go to Egypt which had the reputation of being a bread basket because the Nile River provided a rich supply of water. Going to Egypt was not necessarily wrong for Abram. After all, he had a lot of people and animals to care for--probably everyone who left with him from Haran was still with him on the way to Egypt. As a good businessman Abram tried to foresee any problems. Knowing what the Egyptians were like, he wanted to be ready for them. Traveling into a foreign land, with all his wealth made him an easy target for Egyptians to rob him.

Moreover, kings in those days considered it a status symbol to have a harem consisting of a wide variety of women in the palace. It seems natural that the Egyptian Pharaoh would then want to bring Sarai into his harem. But it was unacceptable, even in Egypt, to take another man's wife. So the obvious answer to this dilemma was for Pharaoh to kill Abram and then his widow would be available to become another trophy in his harem.

As Abram thought this all through, fear set in. He didn't want to die. So his business mind starts scheming instead of turning to God in prayer. In his mind, then, he devised a great plan that would not only spare his life, but also help him to hang on to his riches and possibly even increase them.

However, the plan involved a "white lie." Technically, Abram and Sarai were half brother and sister. They had the same father, but different mothers. Sarai agrees to say she is Abram's sister instead of his wife and the plan works great. Pharaoh brings Sarai into his harem, Abram is showered with gifts to pay for his sister. And everyone is happy. Right?

Wrong. Abram must have felt terrible. It is clear from the following chapters that he really loved Sarah. She was not just a wife to be used like another item that this man owned. This must have been a real crisis for Abram to let another man take his wife. I suspect that he wasn't counting on Pharaoh actually taking Sarai from him. But that's what happened. Sarai is in Pharaoh's possession. And Abram is at a real low point in his life. Of all the plans he could come up with to save his life, the best one involved losing his beloved wife to the Egyptians. I'm sure he felt like kicking himself!

We Christians can get ourselves in such difficult situations when our faith turns into fear and we think we have to solve all of our problems by ourselves. That is not God's plan for us. Abram's fear in the midst of this test led him to break the ninth commandment which forbids lying and he almost broke the seventh as well. If Pharaoh had had sexual relations with Sarai, he would have committed adultery. And Abram would be the one to blame. But, you see, Abram figured he had to get himself out of the challenges he faced in Egypt. And maybe, for a while, Abram really believed that he had done the right thing. When the Pharaoh decided he wanted Sarai, he heaped riches upon Abram. Abram could have reasoned that God was blessing his decision. But God was not pleased with His servant Abram. Abram's choice was bad and put at risk the person he loved most. Undoubtedly, Abram had regrets.

Mercy from God

Thankfully God had mercy on His misguided child and intervened. God in His grace comes through. So thirdly, we see that God faithfully rescues Abram from his own messed up plan and puts him back on the right track. God called Abraham to be the father of all believers. It's clear from the following chapters that God wanted Sarah to be the mother. A substitute wife would not do. Needless to say, then, God was not pleased with the way Abraham tried to save his own life at the expense of Sarah.

Whenever we break God's commands to fulfill what we see as God's calling, then, we can be sure that we are not in the will of God. Abram may have been so intent on returning to the land God had promised him that he figured God would approve of any means necessary to fulfill that promise. But that was not the case. The Heidelberg Catechism wisely teaches us that actions done which do not arise from true faith in God and are against His law do not please God. (A. 91)

But nevertheless, God is patient with Abram. God is so kind to His children and so wise in dealing with us. God used Abram's lie to help strengthen his faith. Despite Abram's lack of trust in God to take care of the situation, God did. He let Abram take a few lumps and then rescued him and Sarai from the terrible situation they got themselves into. Yes, they got themselves into it. It wasn't all Abram's fault. Sarai agreed to the plan. But despite their poor choice, God's plan continues. Despite the sins of His children, God is able to move us to where we need to be. In fact, He is faithful with His children to complete the good work He has begun in us all. Even when we stumble and fall, God looks after us. He covenants to be our God even when we become fearful and faithless. That is also why we partake of

the Lord's Supper. We celebrate that God is faithful as He rescued us in Christ and continues to rescue us from the traps we fall into in our journey through life.

Look at God's care for Abram. Despite his sin, he came out of Egypt with more wealth than he went in with. He didn't have to give it all back to Pharaoh before he left. Pharaoh just wanted Abram gone. Fear drove Abram to sin against his God, his wife and Pharaoh. But God graciously intervened to help His frightened child and to work out His sovereign plan for Abram and Israel. And He does that for us too. We may have all sorts of sins and regrets, but God works with us in our brokenness.

The wonder of being God's child is that His faithfulness to us does not depend exclusively on our faithfulness to Him. We shouldn't think that God will give up on us the moment we mess up. Despite Abram's lie, God moves into action for him and his wife. He uses Pharaoh to set them back on the route to Canaan. There is never a time when God is not faithful and at work in our lives!

All of us—young and older Christians—fail our dear God time and again. But the point of this story is that you and I can take comfort in knowing that God is not going to abandon us as soon as we go astray. No, Jesus said He is the good shepherd and He will go out and look for His sheep and bring us back to the fold. Greater than the rescue of those boys in Thailand, He has rescued us from the depths of sin. And He mercifully continues to rescue us from traps we fall into throughout our lives. What a blessing it is to be a child of this faithful God.

We often sell Jesus short. We trust Him only up to the point when we feel afraid and then we decide to take over ourselves. Christians sometimes say, "I know the Bible says God is faithful and we can take Him at His word and trust Him to bless us when we do what He says, but that's not realistic. It doesn't work that way in the real world." But the fact is that God's way always works the best.

So when we want to do what honors God but human obstacles raise fear in our hearts and stop us from fulfilling God's plan for our lives, what do we do? Well, that's when we need to turn to Jesus, pray for strength and then trust Him as we move forward in faith. We do not need to cave in to our fears. Put up your altars, profess your faith. Then continue to seek Christ's strength to live out your faith, to do God's will, in your life even when it seems scary. When we trust and obey, it bears witness to the light of Christ in us. And it ultimately blesses our world.

In closing, we must make following Jesus the number one goal of our lives. And when problems—trials and tests of our faith—arise on the way to doing that, we can trust Him. We do not have to fear. Rather, because of Jesus, we can move forward in faith. When we forget to keep our eyes on the Lord, we will fall into sin and we will have to try to wiggle our way out of tight spots. But even then, we may take comfort in knowing that our faithful God will stand by us. He will pick us up when we stumble and fall. He'll rescue us and set us back on track. He is so faithful, merciful and good.