

Genesis 11:27-13:4 • Abraham and the Cycle of Faith

Introduction

While Abraham is lauded elsewhere in Scripture as a man of faith, and faith is the signature feature of all who are declared to be his children, he was not a perfect believer. It may be comforting to witness his struggles and realize that the same working of God's grace in spite of his ups and downs is available to navigate our own similar issues. It has been rightly said that Abraham's journey is our journey as we leave the old life in the world for the new in Christ. Ultimately faith cannot be proven in anyone until it has endured a test requiring trust in God in spite of the circumstances. But it is reassuring to know that there is real and tangible hope for recovery even if our performance through such trials is less than ideal, or in the worst case, fails completely.

²⁷Now these are the records of the generations of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran; and Haran became the father of Lot. ²⁸Haran died in the presence of his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. ²⁹Abram and Nahor took wives for themselves. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai; and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah and Iscah. ³⁰Sarai was barren; she had no child.

³¹Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran, his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law, his son Abram's wife; and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans in order to enter the land of Canaan; and they went as far as Haran, and settled there. ³²The days of Terah were two hundred and five years; and Terah died in Haran.

[Read 11:27-32]

Observation: Much may be gleaned by the meaning of people's names: Terah = "to delay", "turning" or "wandering"; Abram = "a high father"; Nahor = "inflamed", "heated"; the person Haran = "very high", Lot = "veil", "concealed"; Sarai = "contentious", "quarrelsome"; Milcah = "queen" or "counsel"; Iscah = "protected" or "sheltered". This can apply to places as well: Ur = "furnace" or "fire" (from the root "to make light or kindle"); Chaldea = "astrologer" or "wanderer"; Haran = "very dry" (as in parched by the sun); and Canaan = "low region" or "humbled" (from the root "to be humble, brought low or subdued". Note how they reflect what is taking place with each of these individuals and places within the overall context of the passage.

Q: Why is it that only the genealogy of Shem is provided in the previous verses?

- A: God is showing the seed line from which the Messiah will come.
- Of Noah's three sons, God chose Shem. (Gen. 10:10)
 - Of Shem's five sons (Gen. 10:22), God chose Arphaxshad. (Gen. 11:10)
 - This continued through a succession of Shelah, to Eber, to Peleg, to Reu, to Serug, to Nahor, to Terah and finally to Abram. (Gen. 11:12-26)

Point: Although for each of these figures it is recorded that they "had other sons and daughters", God reveals those whom He selected to not just bring into existence a Hebrew nation, but the lineage by which would come the Messiah.

Q: By itself, this text implies that it was by Terah's efforts and desires that he and Abram and their whole family left Ur "to enter the land of Canaan". How do we know this is not the full account of what actually took place?

²And he said, "Hear me, brethren and fathers! The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, ³and said to him, 'LEAVE YOUR COUNTRY AND YOUR RELATIVES, AND COME INTO THE LAND THAT I WILL SHOW YOU.' ⁴Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. From there, after his father died, God had him move to this country in which you are now living. (Acts 7:2-4)

A: The move was actually initiated by God's calling of Abram. However, his stopover in Haran appears to show that he did not leave his entire life behind, which did not just include leaving his country of origin, but his relatives as well.

Q: How did this affect Abram personally, and how will it visit him as recurring problem yet again?

A: Instead of continuing to Canaan he will be sidetracked for some time in Haran, but then he still won't leave all the relatives behind so that he will experience the well-known problems to come with his nephew Lot.

Application: *Partial obedience to God's Word and will can be costly in lost time and personal loss. Abram began to leave the old life as represented by leaving Ur, but he did not arrive at God's desired destination.*

¹Now the LORD said to Abram,

“Go forth from your country,
And from your relatives
And from your father's house,
To the land which I will show you;
²And I will make you a great nation,
And I will bless you,
And make your name great;
And so you shall be a blessing;
³And I will bless those who bless you,
And the one who curses you I will
curse.
And in you all the families of the earth
will be blessed.”

[Read v.1-3]

Q: What kind of promises did God give to Abram?

A: They are unconditional promises. Notice that they are characterized by God's statement “*I will*” and do not come with conditions which Abram must meet.

Q: What exactly did God specifically promise?

1. (v.1) A land.
2. (v.2) A great nation.
3. (v.2) A great name.
4. (v.3) To receive a blessing and to be a blessing to the whole world.

Q: In Abram's particular case, why would it take considerable faith to believe God?

A: We have been told that he and his wife are getting quite old and that they have no children. When Scripture uses the term “*barren*”, it usually describes a permanent condition for which there is no hope of recovery.

Point: *If Abram and Sarai had completed their journey without the years of delay in Haran, their situation might have seemed at least a little less desperate. This is a wonderful example of God's patience and grace.*

Q: What may be particularly ironic about the way the previous chapter began with the Tower of Babel as compared to God's promise to Abram?

A: Whereas one of their stated agendas was, “*let us make for ourselves a name, otherwise we will be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth*” (Gen. 11:4), God calls Abram to a place where He will “*make your name great*”. (v.2)

Application: *How well do we trust God's plan for our life, and in the pursuit of that path, trust in His personal work in and for us? What might it take to get us to complete the journey we began from the old life in the world to the new one in Christ?*

⁴So Abram went forth as the LORD had spoken to him; and Lot went with him.

Now Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. ⁵Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his nephew, and all their possessions which they had accumulated, and the persons which they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan; thus they came to the land of Canaan. ⁶Abram passed through the land as far as the site of Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. Now the

[Read v.4-6]

Q: Did Abram make a mistake where Lot was concerned?

A: Since one of God's specific commands to Abram was to “*Go forth...from your relatives*” (v.1), it would seem that Abram might have avoided all the troubles to come associated with Lot if he had left him in Haran.

(Continued on next page.)

Canaanite was then in the land.

Q: So if it Abram compromised by leaving most of his relatives except for Lot and his family, why is there no explicit condemnation expressed by God in Scripture?

A: As will be seen, Abram will be responsible to a great degree for his choice by first having to rescue Lot (Gen. 14) and then pleading Lot's case in the shadow of Sodom's destruction (Gen. 18-19)

Application: *We are responsible not just for our choices, but in following through on the possible consequences. We are not allowed to simply say, "That was a bad choice" and walk away from it, but will be held accountable to deal with it.*

Q: Why would the meanings of the places listed here provide the appearance that initially, at least, they had arrived at the right place?

A: "Shechem" = "the place of the shoulder", a representation of a strong foundation which is further associated with "the oak", a very strong and solid tree, and "Moreh" = "teacher", an allusion to learning God's lesson.

Point: *This is a far distance from "Ur"—"furnace", the ultimate destination of the old life from which we are rescued.*

Q: Why might be important it is specifically stated in v.6, "Now the Canaanite was then in the land"?

A: Just as Abram had to trust God's promises for an heir in spite of his age and Sarai's condition, he had to trust God's promise for a land still occupied by others. It may carry an additional meaning as well of Abram as a believer and personal witness to the rest of the world, much in the character of when we say that we are to live **IN** the world but not **OF** the world.

Application: *Our best position in this life is to be established on a firm foundation of obedience to God's Word and ways.*

⁷The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.

⁸Then he proceeded from there to the mountain 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. ⁹Abram journeyed on, continuing toward the Negev.

[Read v.7-9]

Q: Why is it appropriate for Abram to repeatedly pitch his tent and build altars, something he'll do repeatedly while moving around Canaan?

A: The tent represents what we might call a "pilgrim", someone not setting down roots in this life but obedient to God on a daily basis and always ready to move; the altar reveals his practice of worshiping God.

Q: What might be significant about the meanings of "Bethel" and "Ai"?

A: "Bethel" literally means "the house of God", while "Ai" means "the heap of ruins". They are a greater expression of Abram's spiritual condition in that he turns his back on the old life as represented by Ai, and is committed to his new life as he faces Bethel, "the house of God".

Q: How will this be reflected in Lot's life to come?

A: In the next chapter, we will see in Gen. 13:11 that Lot has to turn his back on Bethel—"the house of God", to journey eastward toward Ai—"the heap of ruins". It is a picture of returning to, or at least being in pursuit of, the old life.

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Q: But why might his “continuing toward the Negev” be foretelling of what is to come for Abram?

A: “Negev” comes from the Hebrew root word “to be parched”. While it can refer to a designated geographical area, it is often translated as simply “south” or “southward”, which is the initial direction one takes when going from the Promised Land to Egypt, as will be seen shortly.

Application: *We are to treat this life as a temporary residence, ready to go when and where God directs, and always engaging in our primary purpose where God is concerned—worship.*

¹⁰Now there was a famine in the land; so Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.

[Read v.10]

Q: What seems to be absent from the way we might expect a man of faith like Abram to deal with “a famine in the land”?

A: There is no record of inquiring of God. It would appear that he alone makes the decision to leave the place to which God originally directed him. God never tells Abram to go to Egypt.

Q: How do we know from this one sentence that there is probably something wrong with Abram’s faith?

A: Unlike the account of Jacob when he sends his sons to temporarily visit Egypt in order to purchase food because of a famine they were experiencing, it is here specified, “Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there”. The Hebrew word “sojourn” (Strong’s #1481) describes someone who settles in to stay, not merely making a temporary visit. He has left Canaan to take up residence in Egypt. We will learn that it takes being kicked out of Egypt for him to return to where he is supposed to be.

Q: How do we know that it is possible that Lot was a bad influence in this regard?

A: Later, in Gen. 13:10, it states that Lot saw the area of Sodom and Gomorrah as “like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar”. Lot had obviously become enamored with Egypt; it became his personal standard.

Q: What other legacy of this visit will Abram have to deal with where Sarai is concerned?

A: We will learn that Hagar is Sarai’s Egyptian maid, (Gen. 16:1) the one through whom Ishmael will be born and ensuing division within Abram’s household.

Q: What is the repeated, greater spiritual meaning of going “down to Egypt”?

A: It represents the old life to which we are never to return, and is a continuing problem not just for Israel in the Exodus, but other biblical figures as well. There is always a vast difference between those who temporarily visit or are commanded to go and then return from Egypt versus those who attempt or desire to “sojourn” there.

Application: *In the course of this life, our faith and trust in God will be tested. Regardless of how severe the circumstances, the answer is never to return to our old life.*

¹¹It came about when he came near to Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, “See now, I know that you are a beautiful woman; ¹²and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife’; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³Please say that you are my sister so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you.”

[Read v.11-13]

Q: How might we describe Abram’s overall situation?

A: When unaddressed, sin always leads to further sin. Abram has gone from trusting in Egypt to trusting in a lie concerning Sarai to protect him. This is quite opposite of what was previously experienced at Shechem.

Q: How do we know that Sarai is equally at fault?

A: Gen. 20:13 will make it clear that she was a willing party to this fraud.

Q: First Abram ignores God’s promise of the land by going to Egypt, then the promise to have his own name by living under Pharaoh, but what is the even greater promise which he endangers by this ruse?

A: Sarai, as a member of Pharaoh’s harem, could become impregnated, and this would not only affect the promise of a nation to come, but the Messianic seed line itself.

Q: How are Abram’s living conditions in Egypt so obviously different from those in Canaan?

A: His life no longer revolves around the tent and altar—the life of someone who lives exclusively for God, but is setting down roots in the very same manner as the rest of the world.

Application: *Sin always leads to more sin; a single, unaddressed compromise in the direction of our old life ultimately returns us there completely.*

¹⁴It came about when Abram came into Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵Pharaoh’s officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh; and the woman was taken into Pharaoh’s house. ¹⁶Therefore he treated Abram well for her sake; and gave him sheep and oxen and donkeys and male and female servants and female donkeys and camels.

¹⁷But the LORD struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife. ¹⁸Then Pharaoh called Abram and said, “What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹Why 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.” ²⁰Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they escorted him away, with his wife and all that belonged to him.

[Read v.14-20]

Q: What was the result of Abram’s plan?

A: While it provided the personal protection from this world which he sought, it destroyed his personal witness and testimony as a believer.

Q: How might this ultimately be contrasted to what we know will inevitably come in Lot’s life?

A: Whereas we will see Abram pursue a path of recovery back to the Lord, Lot’s continued foray into the world will result in his complete loss of impact on those around him. In addition to losing his wife, sons-in-law and neighbors, even his two surviving daughters are going to provide a legacy of sin through their incest which produces the nations of Moab and Ammon.

Q: What did Abram seem to use to replace “faith”?

A: Something along the lines of scheming or conniving.

Application: *Biblical faith trusts and believes God regardless of the circumstances and never resorts to human conniving or worldly craftiness. It not only wreaks damage upon us personally, but in our Christian witness to the unsaved, who are often more diligent in these things than we are.*

¹So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, he and his wife and all that belonged to him, and Lot with him.

²Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold. ³He went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, ⁴to the place of the altar which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the LORD.

⁸By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; ¹⁰for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. ¹²Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE.

¹³All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. ¹⁵And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they

[Read v.13:1-4]

Q: Of what is this a greater picture?

A: A backslider returning to the Lord. It's a picture of repentance and confession.

Q: What is significant about the place he returned to and the things he does?

A: He goes back to the very place where he began to abandon the Lord and does not engage in anything new, but reestablishes what he was supposed to be doing all along.

Q: Did God forgive Abram and restore him to fellowship?

A: Yes.

Q: But did that dismiss all the results of his disobedience?

A: He will still have to deal with the consequences in Lot now being enamored by Egypt, and Sarai bringing along Hagar the Egyptian maid.

Point: *Perhaps another casualty is how difficult it will be, if not outright impossible, to restore his witness to Pharaoh and the Egyptians.*

Application: *Forgiveness and restoration do not automatically erase the consequences of our choices, especially those involving sin.*

[Read Hebrews 11:8-19]

It has been observed that the summary and legacy of Abraham's faith is...

- (v.8) *He believed God even though he did not know where...*
- (v.11) *...believed God even though he did not know how...*
- (v.17-19) *...and believed God even though he did not know why.*

This was born out of the viewpoint which was not merely a doctrinal statement, but something he lived, "having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth...they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one". (v.13-16)

Q: What is significant about the statement that for such "strangers and exiles" that God "has prepared a city for them"?

¹⁰*And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great and high mountain, and showed me the holy city, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, ¹¹having the glory of God. Her brilliance was like a very costly stone, as a stone of crystal-clear jasper. (Revelation 21:10–11)*

³*There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bond-servants will serve Him; ⁴they will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads. ⁵And there will no longer be any night; and they will not have need of the light of a lamp nor the light of the sun, because the Lord God will illumine them; and they will reign forever and ever. (Revelation 22:3–5)*

desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

¹⁷By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; ¹⁸it was he to whom it was said, "IN ISAAC YOUR DESCENDANTS SHALL BE CALLED." ¹⁹He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type.