

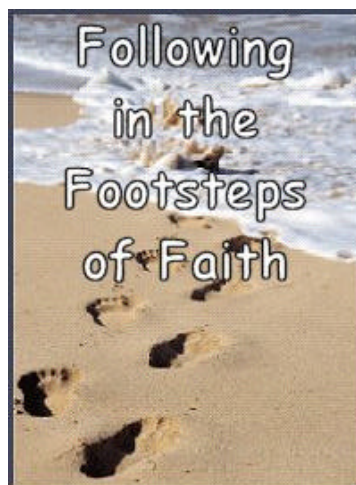
Heroes of the Faith: Abraham



“Following in the Footsteps of Faith”

Sermon Series Summary Booklet

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The Call to a Life of Faith - Genesis 11:27-12:3

Abram as a name means exalted father and indeed Abram would become that in time as we recall from the song we used to sing as children 'Father Abraham had many sons.' And another important fact about Abraham is given to us in the New Testament. And not from the list of the faithful in Hebrews 11 although a major part of that chapter is given to Abraham. But rather in James 2:23 where we read that Abraham was called God's friend. There are not many people in Scripture recorded so directly in this way. So I believe we can learn a lot about faith from this man of whom a major part of the first book of the Bible is devoted.

Abram's Past

And so begin by looking at Abram's past. We are introduced to him in Genesis 11:27 as we see the genealogy of Shem, one of Noah's sons come down to Terah who was the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. Terah was 70 years old when Abram was born - a remarkable age.

The Place

These boys were born in Ur of the Chaldeans. Now Ur was located in what we call Iraq today. It was in the southeast corner of Iraq, some 75 miles north of the Kuwaiti border. Right in the middle of the area where the Gulf War was fought in 1991. It was, at Abraham's time, located at the place where the Euphrates River emptied into the Persian Gulf. At that time, it was a bustling seaport, where trade was conducted with India and Africa. History also says that this city was a centre of intellectual activity. A large public library has been unearthed that contained thousands of ancient texts written in clay. That region was also well suited for raising flocks and herds. Ur was a prosperous place and would have been a good place for the family to grow up and learn trades and earn good money.

The Problems

But as with many places which on the face of it seem good, there were problems. Firstly and most importantly the people of the city and the land did not worship God. They worshipped the moon. The city of Ur was a centre for astrology where people worshipped not only the moon but the stars as well. They were an idolatrous people.

And this was a land which was not their own. At the beginning of chapter 11 we read the account of the Tower of Babel and the people attempting to build a tower towards heaven to make a name for themselves. God destroyed the tower and scattered the people across the earth. That is how Terah and his family have likely ended up in Ur of the Chaldeans. This place is not their own home, it is a popular and prosperous city but it is also an idolatrous place. Big problem indeed.

The Pain

Not only are there the problems of idolatry but there is also pain involved for Abram. The pain hits him firstly from the problem of moon worship but there is more pain. This land is where his brother Haran died. Now we have no idea how old Haran was when he died but we do know that he died before his father Terah. We rightly assume and hope that we will die before our children and not the other way round. But life is not always straightforward like that. I know my grandmother was deeply upset when my uncle died last year and that is due to the fact that she expected to go first and indeed felt that she should have died first. I'm sure some of you here can identify with this scenario. It is a painful place that Abram is in.

And yet there is more pain for Abram for we learn one more important fact in these few verses of genealogy and background which will be important for us in a few weeks time – verse 30. Now Sarai was barren; she had no children. Note that it doesn't simply say Sarai had no children and we are left to assume that the time has not yet come. It quite clearly tells us she is barren. She has no children and despite trying she still has not got any. The prospects of her having any seem remote now. It would appear she cannot bear any children. And this is painful for a couple to face. Abram experienced pain in that place called Ur of the Chaldeans.

We learn a lot about Abram's past in these few short verses. He lived with his family in a land of prosperity but also of problems and pain. The people did not worship God, they worshipped the moon. His brother died and his wife was barren. It was a painful place for them. And yet it was familiar to them for that is all they have known. And Abram had all that baggage which he carried with him.

Our past is also a mixed bag of good and bad. We have seen the plenty but also the need. We have experienced the joy but also the heartache. And we so often find our past life so familiar that we want to stay there and it is hard to break out from. But break out and follow God we must do if we are to follow in the footsteps of faith. We have to recognise the baggage we carry and be willing to lay it down and not let it hinder us.

Abram's Partial Obedience

We move on now to Abram's partial obedience. And it is here you are beginning to think to yourself, Hamish, we know the story; we know Abram was obedient to God. Indeed he was but to begin with there is only a partial obedience as he found it difficult to break free from the familiar.

The Call to Depart

There is firstly the call to depart. In verse 31 we read that Terah took his son Abram and his wife Sarai and also his grandson Lot (Haran, who died, son) and headed out

from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. The call to go to Canaan did not come for the first time in chapter 12 but actually came to Abram in chapter 11 and verse 31.

Abram knew from the time they began to plan to leave Ur that he was headed to the land of Canaan. And that is important for us to hold on to. In 12:1 we read that the Lord had said to Abram. He had said. We are not told when this occurred but Abram had been told to leave his country and his people and his father's household and head to Canaan.

The call came to depart and they did just that. They left Ur and headed up the Euphrates River until they reached a place called Haran at the north western end of the river. This was the best route for travellers to take to get from Ur to Canaan in order to avoid crossing the great desert with all their people and animals and possessions. It is interesting that they stopped at Haran which strangely enough has the same name as the son of Terah who died. A passing coincidence especially as I could not find anything to tie the two together in any way as I studied this week.

The stop may have been for a break and to take time out before the second stage of the journey but whatever the reason they ended up staying there for a time. Verse 31 concludes with the words 'But when they came to Haran, they settled there.' Why settle in Haran. Well in some ways it was not that different from Ur. Yes it was not quite as prosperous a place as Ur but it was a busy place, especially with travellers as it was a crossroads trading town. However, the people in Haran worshipped the moon. Similar to the people of Ur. It felt familiar to them. And so they stopped there for a time. They had listened to the call of God to depart but had only made it half way.

The Compromise in Devotion

Abram knew the call was to go further but here we see a compromise in devotion. He loved his father and he loved his family. Since his father presumably wanted to stop there that is what Abram did. His brother Nahor, although not mentioned in the verse was presumably also with them as we later read of Haran being described as the town of Nahor in Genesis 24:10. Abram was committed to his family and his devotion for them meant that he compromised on the call of God and stayed in Haran instead of travelling on to Canaan.

These were big steps for Abram remember. He has been called to a life of faith. He has been called to leave behind the region he lived in, the religion he was used to and perhaps even followed himself, and his family. Not that his compromise is an excuse for it is not but it does help us see the dilemma that faced him. The call was for Abram to leave and go to Canaan. No where does it mention his family were to go too. But Abram must have wanted to take them with him which is why they set off together and made it as far as Haran.

But here the familiar steps in. The past that he is trying to leave behind catches up with him and threatens to ensnare him again. The religion, the cult of moon worship is prevalent in Haran and he sees the familiar lure. His family want to stop there and he so wants to be with them. And so he stops and stays there until his father Terah dies.

Abram has been partially obedient to God. He has followed the first part of the call to leave Ur but he has not made it to the end. We must remember that partial obedience is simple disobedience to God. If we do not follow God 100% then we are not fully obeying him – we are being disobedient.

The Cost of Delay

And there is a cost to his delay in Haran. Precious years are disappearing as he lingers longer in that place. Look what God had promised Abram. God had promised Abram his best and Abram was missing out on it by remaining too long in Haran. God was going to give him a new land and bless him. He was going to be with him and he was going to protect him. Abram missed out on God's best – that was the cost of his delay.

We miss out on so much when we hear God's call on our lives and when we are only partially obedient. When we simply do not follow God 100% we disobey him. Our past tries to hold us back and we have to learn not to let it. We have to leave the baggage behind and go on for God. And yet it is so easy to slip back into the old way of life and to forget about God. Keep your eyes fixed on him and do what he calls you to do. Do not delay – for there is a cost involved – you miss out on God's blessing!

Abram's Prospects

The good news is that Abram will eventually commit to following God all the way. He is frightened of the unknown and who can blame him. But that is what faith is all about. It is about taking that step into the unknown and following God fully.

Reminds me of the story of Robert Chesebrough. He believed in his product. He's the fellow who invented Vaseline, a petroleum jelly refined from rod wax, the ooze that forms on shafts of oil rigs. He so believed in the healing properties of his product that he became his own guinea pig: he burned himself with acid and flame; he cut and scratched himself so often and so deeply that he bore the scars of his tests the rest of his life. But he proved his product worked. People had only to look at his wounds, now healed, to see the value of his work - and the extent - of his belief.

Abram went on to leave Haran at the age of 75 and head to the land God had called him to go to. The call to a life of faith was about to be committed to fully. And let us just glance at Abram's prospects quickly as we draw to a close.

To Walk in God's Presence

Abram was going to walk in God's presence. Chapter 12 verse 1 'The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.'" God was going to be with him. He was going to take him and show him this new land he was to settle in. God was going to direct him in the way he should go. God was going to be there by Abram's side. Just like the footsteps poem, God was going to be there every moment of the journey. What an immense privilege to know that you are going to walk in God's presence.

To Witness God's Providence

And Abram was also going to witness God's providence. God had chosen him from all the people on the earth to bless him and use him to father all the nations and to give his covenant to the people through. And in his providence he promised Abram so much - much more than he had ever had or could have hoped for.

God promised him a new home ('a land I will show you'), many children and grandchildren and great grandchildren ('I will make you into a great nation'), many blessings ('I will bless you'), a great name ('I will make your name great'), the knowledge that Abram would be a blessing to many others ('you will be a blessing' 'I will bless those who bless you'), his protection from enemies ('whoever curses you I will curse'), and the knowledge that all people will be blessed through him ('all peoples on earth will be blessed through you').

Abram has no idea how this will work out or how God will bring it to be, but he is being called to a life of faith and he is promised all of this by almighty God. Why should he doubt? He ought to simply get going and take that first footstep of faith.

To Wonder at God's Purposes

And finally Abram has the opportunity to wonder at God's purposes. God has called him, a nobody from Ur of the Chaldeans, a man who worships idols, a complete unknown to use as the channel of his blessing to the world and his covenant to the world. We will see the unfolding of that covenant throughout Scripture from this point on right through to completion in Revelation.

God chooses those whom he chooses to use for his divine purposes. We can only wonder at God's amazing purposes and give him thanks for a man called Abram, the friend of God and his call to a life of faith which he committed to. Next week we will see that commitment to a life of faith.

Conclusion

For now we recognise that God calls those whom he calls for his purposes and we have to take the steps of faith when they come. We all have pasts which frighten us, pasts which threaten at times to hold us back. But God can take us through those because

of Jesus' death on the cross for us and because of his mighty power. We have to ensure we follow completely and not compromise on the truth anywhere along the way or compromise on God's plans and call. And we should remember the prospects God has in store for us, to bless us and to use us in his service, and then one day to take us to be with him for all eternity.

The call to a life of faith came to a man named Abram who at first faltered but then went on to be greatly used by God. And it all began with one simple step of faith. Have you made that step of faith yet? Have you asked Jesus to be your Lord and Saviour? Have you accepted the forgiveness he offers? If not then make that step now before it is too late. Come to Jesus today in faith and come speak to me at the end so we can chat further on a one to one basis.

The call to a life of faith – take the step and keep following in the footsteps of faith.

The Commitment to a Life of Faith - Genesis 12:4-9

This morning as we continue looking at Abram's life we will see the commitment to a life of faith. Abram was the first pilgrim on the journey of faith who left behind everything to follow God and we can learn so much from his example.

Abram's Obedience

We begin by noting Abram's obedience. Last week we thought of his partial obedience as he heard the call of God to go and had started out on the journey. He had only made it out of Ur and up the Euphrates River to Haran. He had not yet made it as far as Canaan where God wanted him to be. This week we do see Abram's obedience though. Verse 4 says 'So Abram left as the Lord had told him.' Abram finally got the message and knew he had to move on. I say finally for Abram must have been in Haran for quite some time. In verse 5 we read 'He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran.'

Abram had accumulated a vast array of possessions and most of these would have come from his time spent in Haran. You do not accumulate a great deal of items and possessions over night. It takes time. And it takes time to get people on board as well – the people mentioned presumably servants for Abram and Sarai. The main point is that eventually Abram remembered the call of God to a life of faith and now we see his obedience – total and complete this time – as he leaves Haran (verse 4) 'as the Lord had told him.'

Our obedience is what God wants. 1 Samuel 15:22 reminds us of that as we read 'Samuel replied: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams."'

Involved His Separation

Abram's obedience involved his separation. The call of God that had come to him as recorded in v1-3 was to 'leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you.' Up until this point Abram had taken his family with him. Now he was to leave them behind with the exception of his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot. His father Terah had died by this stage but it is fair to assume his other brother Nahor was there in Haran with him with his wife Milcah. This time Abram left them in Haran and headed out on his own.

Not only did it involve separation from his family but also from the religion he knew. The moon worshippers of Ur and also of Haran were being left behind. Abram had been called by Almighty God – there was to be no substitutes from now on for Abram. He would worship only God and the only true God at that - the one who had made the heavens and the earth; the one who had made humanity in his own image.

Abram's obedience was to involve his separation from everything and almost everyone he knew. He was being led by God to a new land, among new people, with new customs and culture. God's call on his life was to separate him from everything that he knew and everything that hindered his walk of faith. His family and previous idolatrous religion remember had hooked him at Haran and stopped him on his walk of faith.

God calls us to leave behind everything that hinders us on our walk of faith as well. It might be family but remember God does not always separate us from our families. He does not want the ties severed. He wants us to win our families and to show the love of Christ to them. But our families may well reject us when we turn to the path of faith in God and follow it. But God does want us to leave behind the other things that hinder us – our previous way of life, our bad habits, our foul mouths, our bad jokes, our reliance on other things other than on God. Abram's obedience involved separation.

Involved His Substance

But it also involved his substance. I have just said that God wants us to leave behind the things that hinder us and sometimes that means our wealth and possessions and luxurious lifestyles. But it does not always. For God has blessed us with so much that he knows we will need on our walk of faith with him.

Abram had accumulated much in his time in Haran we read – this was both possessions and people. The people would be his servants. And this accumulation of people was not in the single or double figures. I'm guessing it was into the hundreds. In chapter 14 verse 14 we read that Abram sent 318 trained men from his household into battle. He would accumulate more servants during his time in Canaan and then in Egypt but he must have left Haran with a fair number of servants with him.

When Abram responded to the call of God on his life, it didn't simply involve him his self or just a little, involved all he had. And there is a lesson here for us – for when we come to God we come bringing him our tithe, our 10%, and there is nothing wrong with that, but God wants our all. He has in fact given us everything we have. We so often come thinking this is my commitment to God. But what about the rest? Is that God's or ours? And depending on how we live our lives will depend on the answer to that question. If we use the remainder to live for God then great, but if we use the remainder to fund our own happiness within the world then we are off mark. We don't need to bring all our money and possessions and put in the offering plate – but we do have to acknowledge it as God's and use it wisely.

And of course God does not simply want our possessions; he wants us - all of us. He wants our life in total devotion and service to him. That does not mean we mean to give up all our time to a life of ministry, leaving behind our jobs and families, but it does involve a willingness to walk a life of faith all day every day, acknowledging God in all that we do and allowing him to use as he will in his service.

Abram's obedience involved his substance. He took all he had and offered it to God.

Involved His Surrender

And Abram's obedience also involved his surrender. Verse 4 again reminds us 'Abram left as the Lord had told him.' As the Lord said, Abram obeyed. Abram surrendered himself to God's leading and guiding. He didn't partially listen to God as he had before, this time he completely listened to God. Abram learned the secret to pleasing God was following him completely. Listening to what he said and following it to the letter.

And is that not what Paul reminded the Romans in 12:1-2: 'Therefore I urge you brothers in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.' We are to offer our selves completely to God. We are to surrender our all to him. Abram learned that lesson and in his commitment to a life of faith we see his obedience.

Abram's Opposition

We should also note Abram's opposition. For a life of faith is not always an easy one. I don't for one minute want to pretend as many in some Christian circles will today that following God leads to prosperity financially and materially in this world. Following God does lead to prosperity in a full and abundant life with God and the assurance of heaven and all its glory in front of us. But the Christian life can be difficult and tough. Throughout Scripture you will read of people who followed God completely but

experienced great trials in their life – check out Job as a great example. But Abram is an example as well. For he faced opposition and not everything was smooth sailing for him.

The Days

Firstly the days were against him. The second half of verse 4 'Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out for Haran.' Abram was getting on in years and yes we acknowledge that in the days he lived people did live longer lives. But the fact remains the days were turning against him. Many at that age would be thinking of slowing down, of taking it easy, of letting others take over. But not Abram! Despite his age he was starting out on a great journey with God. He was following in the footsteps of faith. He was ready to journey into the unknown with God for that is what God was calling him to do.

So let that be an encouragement and reminder to you. You may feel too old to still be preaching. You may feel too old to still be working with the children. You feel too old to be making the tea or coming out to everything that goes on in the church. You do not have the freedom to sit down - you are not too old to keep serving God. There are other things you can do and other things God will call you to do. And that goes for the youngsters as well – you are never too young or too old for God to use you in his service. Be open to him and follow him.

The Darkness

The darkness was against Abram too. He has now set out for Canaan and as he travelled nearer we read in verse 6 'at that time the Canaanites were in the land.' Now we might be thinking that God has called Abram here for it is a great place where people follow God and worship him. Sadly that was not true at this point either. The Canaanites worshipped many gods; gods they believed owned the territories they were in. They did not acknowledge the Lord Almighty. They had no morality and decency.

Abram was heading into a hostile place. And yet he remained committed to following in the footsteps of faith.

The Distance

There was also the distance. The journey from Haran down to Shechem and then on to Bethel and Ai was close on 500 miles. Now today we think nothing of that. We're just back from the States and the great distance we travelled took us only 9 hours by plane. But there were no planes and cars and trains in those days. This was a long journey by foot. And not only was there the distance for walking but walking with a number of servants, flocks, herds, household goods and various other possessions. It would have been a thought to travel all that way with all that stuff.

But Abram let nothing hinder him now. He was committed to following in the footsteps of faith. He was committed to a life of faith. He was committed to going where God led him. So nothing that opposed him got in his way. He kept going. May that be a lesson to us as well; that once we commit to a life of faith we should let nothing get in the way of following God all the way. And that is where God wants us to be – in a place where we surrender everything to him, having no thought or concern for the fact he is leading us from the seen to the unseen, from the known to the unknown.

Abram's Opportunities

And from Abram's obedience and opposition, we turn now to Abram's opportunities. Abram may have left everything he knew behind; his family and his religion; but on his journey to the unseen and unknown he had great opportunities of blessing from God.

To Experience God's Promises

He had the opportunity to experience God's promises. God has promised to show him the land and to go with him into that land. He has promised as he thought last week to bless him and make him a blessing to many people. And in verse 7 God again reaffirms his commitment to Abram. 'The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land."' Abram's offspring were promised the land of Canaan. There is much fighting and debating and squabbling over the land of Israel at this time, but ultimately Abram's offspring will have it – for God has promised.

As Abram travelled across that great distance and into that land, he experienced the promises of God – he was blessed as he travelled and God showed the land to him.

As we follow in the footsteps of faith we have opportunity too – we have the opportunity of heaven and we will experience God's promise come true when we reach the pearly gates. We journey in faith through life knowing that is our ultimate destination. What a prospect.

To Experience God's Presence

Abram had opportunity to experience God's presence as well. God was with him as he travelled. It was God who showed him into the land of Canaan. It was God who appeared to him and reaffirmed his commitment to give the land to Abram's offspring. What a companion to have with you as you travel through life! Do you know him as your travelling companion? If not get to know him today. Ask him into your life. Come in to my life Lord Jesus, come in today, come in to stay, come into my life Lord Jesus.

And we read that Abram built an altar to the Lord there in Shechem (v7) and also in the piece of land between Bethel and Ai. He worshipped God wherever he pitched his tent. What a reminder to us to worship God wherever we happen to be. It didn't matter to Abram that he was in a hostile land where people worshipped a myriad of

other so called gods, he wanted to acknowledge God's presence with him where he was each step of the way. May we not be ashamed to worship God wherever we are.

And of course we are in a foreign land just now as well. We are out of the building as the work hopefully commences soon. And we are freely worshipping God where we are. We are not ashamed, we are not embarrassed, we are delighted to have the opportunity to worship God in this centre and then next week in the school. We worship God wherever we are and whenever we can.

To Enter God's Place for Him

And finally Abram had the opportunity to enter God's place for him. Abram had been called to the land of Canaan but ultimately he had been called to heaven. Abram was walking with God; he was journeying with him. He was in the land of Canaan but they were moving on to different places. God's place for him was this land but there were more journeys to be done. Verse 9 ends with the words 'Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.' The journey was not over, God's place for Abram was not where he was it was yet to come.

In Hebrews 11 we realise that Abram had in mind and was looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God. He was looking forward to heaven.

Conclusion

We learn so much from this man Abram about the commitment to a life of faith and following in the footsteps of faith. If we follow Abram's example we see his obedience that involved his separation from all that he knew and held dear, that involved taking his substance with him but surrendering it all to God as well as surrendering his very life to God. We note that the path of faith is not always easy for there is opposition – there are the days, the darkness and the distance but none of these mattered to Abram. And there are the opportunities – opportunities to experience God's promises, God's presence and God's place for us. May we be committed to a life of faith with our eyes fixed upward on heaven as we journey through this life on earth, following in the footsteps of faith.

God called a man like Abram to surrender everything to follow him – are you ready and willing to surrender everything to follow God in these days in Cornton despite the opposition we may face?

The Cost of Deviating from the Path of Faith - Genesis 12:10-20

You will remember we considered Abram's call to a life of faith and how he partially followed God but then stopped on account of his family and his longing for the religion and practices he was leaving behind. We then noted his commitment to the

life of faith as he left that all behind – all he was familiar with, and followed God into the Promised Land.

At this stage we think that Abram has got it sussed and he is ready to continue following God's leading and guiding all the time. But there is a hitch – isn't there always something in life that comes along and knocks us off track? This time it is a famine which strikes which causes Abram confusion and he wonders what to do. Instead of going to God though he decides he can handle this himself. And how like Abram we are at times as well. We think we can handle problems on our own. We think if we do this or that we can deal with the issue at hand. We believe if we take this job, or move to this area, or change church, or buy this new car or house, suddenly all our problems will disappear and everything will work out fine. And sometimes it does. But sometimes it doesn't and that is down to our own desire to sort the situation ourselves rather than listening to God.

I well remember working in the Bank in Crieff the town I had grown up in, the town I had married Morag in, the town I knew inside and out, and deciding one day that enough was enough. My career was not progressing as fast as I wanted. I was getting stale in the church and fed up with how things were working there. I was outgrowing Crieff. So I decided it was time for a change o job. I applied for many within the bank and outwith the bank. I was told I was too over-qualified for some jobs I applied for. No new job came along. We were trying to move out of our situation in our way and our time. Eventually I decided to give it all to God and say if you want me to stay I'll stay, if you want me to move on, show me the next steps. And he did and we moved to Livingston. Walking with God is the best way to go in life for he knows the plans he has for us – even when we do not see them.

Abram decided he knew how to handle the famine and today we will consider the cost of deviating from the path of faith. For there are consequences when we decide to leave God's will for our lives. There are problems associated with doing things our way, in our time and our strength. And Abram was about to see this. Today we will learn about the cost of deviating and hopefully see how important it is to keep following in the footsteps of faith and waiting for God's leading and guidance.

The famine came upon the land and Abram went down to Egypt to live. The famine was severe. Life was going to be a struggle. So Abram decided to act. No waiting for God for the answer or for direction. He knew what to do. Abram could have headed Northwards again and gone back to Haran or even back to Ur – places he knew and both on major travelling and commercial routes where supplies would be sufficient to survive the famine. Abram is at least sensible enough to know that God has led him away from these places into the Promised Land. But instead of waiting for God's voice, Abram decides to head south to Egypt. Egypt is always pictured for us in the Bible in a certain way. It is a place where God's people would be in bondage. For 400

years the children of Israel were held there and Pharaoh used and abused them. Even after they escaped, even after God led them out of the Egypt and all the heartache and pain they suffered there, they still longed to go back. How like us that is as well - always longing to go back to where we came from, to what we know, despite the way God blesses us in the here and now. But Abram has decided he can do this on his own so he leads his family down to Egypt.

It is Always a Downward Path

It is interesting that the word down is used here to describe the journey southwards. We often use that as well. I'm going down to Livingston. I'm going down South to England. And yet there is a great point being made here. Any journey that leads us away from where God wants us to be is a downward journey. It is always a downward path when we wander from God. Abram's journey was to be a downward path as well. He was walking away from everything God has promised and where God has led him to.

Away from the Land of Promise

He is going away from the land of promise. God has promised Abram that he will show him the land he was to settle in. He promised to make the nation great, to bless Abram, to protect Abram, to give them a land beyond their wildest dreams. And Abram had recognised this as he was led into the land. The Lord appeared to Abram at Shechem and said (verse 7) 'To your offspring I will give this land.' Abram built an altar to the Lord there and blessed the Lord. He knew where he was. He knew he was in the land of promise.

And yet as famine strikes, as lack of food comes, as the prospects begin to look grim, Abram walks away from the land of promise. He walks away from God's promise. The land of Canaan was God's best for his people, it was the place they were supposed to be. There is no place more precious than the one where God wants you to be. Joseph was able to recognise this at the end of his life - Genesis 50:20 'You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of lives.' His brothers had sold him into slavery, he had been caged in prison, and then he was able to help the Egyptians survive the years of famine. He became great in that place because it was where God wanted him to be. It was God's best for him and he recognised that despite the traumas along the way. God places us in the right place at the right time for his plans and purposes. Cornton in 2007 is where God has placed each of us. This is God's best for us. And yet at times we want to do things our way and sort our own problems out. When we follow God for a while and then hit troubled times and decide to sort things out ourselves we too walk away from the land of promise.

Away from the Land of Preparation

Abram was walking away from the land of preparation as well. Canaan was to be God's best for Abram and the people of Israel but when the test came he walked away. The

famine in the land was to be a test for Abram. It was to see how he would handle the situation and how much faith he would have in God. At this stage we see Abram failing the test. He is walking away from the land of preparation. He is ready to leave the uncertainty of Canaan – would the famine end, would the crops begin to grow, would they survive the famine – for the abundance of Egypt. Egypt was a land of plenty. The famine had not struck there. They would be safe. They would have food to eat. They would survive and live.

And yet Abram walked away from the test. He walked away from the land of preparation. Many things in life test us as well. Our faith is tested so that it can be proved good and real. We have been tested in regard to the building work with the delay in obtaining the building warrant. Yet we have stuck to following God. We believe wholeheartedly that God wants us to improve the building in order that we can reach the community better and have better facilities to use to spread the gospel. We have been tested with the whole VAT issue – an issue still to be resolved. And we stand firm with continuing the project because we believe this is where God is leading us. How easy it would have been to walk away and say well that's that then. That's what Abram was doing – for the best intentions I believe but still that is what he was doing - walking away from the land of promise and preparation.

Away from the Land of Provision

Abram was also walking away from the land of provision. God had promised Abram the land of Canaan. This was to be the land he would live in, the land in which the people would be made into a great nation, the land where Abram would be blessed and protected. This was the land in which God would look after him. Canaan was God's best for Abram and it was a land in which he would be provided for.

And yet Abram was ready to walk away from that because difficulty had struck. He was ready to walk away because he thought he knew best. He was ready to walk away for he thought he could handle the situation on his own. How often in life do we walk away from the land of promise, the land of preparation and the land of provision for we think we know best? I can do it all without God. I can do it in my strength. The cost of deviating from God's plans, from following him, is that we walk away from so much God has promised us.

It is Always a Dishonest Path

Not only is it a downward path but it is always a dishonest path as well. Abram was ready and willing to lie to save his skin. He was ready to put his integrity on the line and for it to be knocked to shreds in order to try and save his skin in his own way.

Abram Birthed a Lie

As they entered Egypt, verse 11, Abram looked at Sarai his wife and acknowledged how beautiful she was. He believed the Egyptians would kill him on account of Sarai

and take her into Pharaoh's harem. So Abram birthed a lie. He thought up a solution to that problem and situation. He so wanted to save himself that he thought of a way out. And so he said to Sarai that she was to pretend to be his sister. There was to be no holding hands, no loving looks and kisses exchanged, they were to act as brother and sister. Now the interesting thing about this lie that they made up is that it is a partial truth. Later in Genesis 20:12 we learn that Sarai was actually Abram's father's daughter. His father had remarried or something and this was the product of a second union. Sarai was not the daughter of Abram's mother so this made her his step sister. He had married his step sister. So the lie coming through here is sort of true. There is a half truth here.

But are these not just lies. Yes they are and in fact half truths are just as dangerous as lies or even more so for we believe them to be true and believe it is ok to use them. They are just lies. Anything that is not totally true is a lie. We have to watch our actions in life. We believe for the best it is alright to share a half truth - it simply isn't. The truth always works best.

Abram Became the Lie

Having birthed the lie Abram now became the lie. As they came to Egypt Abram explained Sarai was his sister. Pharaoh's people recognised the beauty in Sarai as Abram had predicted and she was taken into Pharaoh's harem. Abram was treated well because of her. He lived the lie. And living the lie things worked out well for him. He was looked after. He was protected. He became even more wealthy through it. Things were working well for him - but only for a time for the truth would come out.

Abram Believed the Lie

Not only did Abram become the lie, but he believed the lie. He believed he was Sarai's brother. And because of that everything worked out. For a period of time - and we don't know how long this was - things went well. And it must have been a reasonable amount of time for Abram acquired possessions and wealth. Verse 16 'Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels.' He believed the lie and came to believe it even more as things went well for him.

The danger for us is the same when we follow a dishonest path. It may only be a half truth but we come to believe over time that it is the truth. The way we live our lives change because we are living a lie and yet we believe the lie to now be truth.

It is Always a Disastrous Path

Not only was it a downward and dishonest path for Abram but it is always a disastrous path for him as well. Leaving the path of faith and trying to do it on his own caused him no end of bother - and bother for others.

Because of the Potential

It was a disastrous path because of the potential. Abram's sin had the potential to cause others to fall. If Pharaoh had really liked Sarai he could have taken her as his wife. Think of the implications of that. Abram's lies could have caused Pharaoh to sin. Abram's lies also had the potential to cause Sarai to sin – in fact she had sinned. For just like Abram she pretended to be his sister rather than his wife. He caused Sarai to sin before God. And let us not forget that he had forgotten all about Sarai in all of this. He was looking after himself. Sarai still ended up apart from Abram. She ended up still in Pharaoh's harem. She was in a place she did not want to be and in a place where there was potential for harm to come to her.

When we deviate from the path of faith it is always disastrous. We have within us the potential to cause others to sin and that is a major problem with our half truths and lies. Jesus said in Matthew 18 that if anyone caused a little one to sin it would be better for him to tie a millstone round his neck and drown. We have to watch our walk for we have the potential for good but also for disaster. Ghandi once said that he would not become a Christian on account of other Christians.

Because of the Punishment

It was a disastrous path because of the punishment. We have no idea what kind of man Pharaoh was at this point in time – he could have been good or he could have been bad – but either way he was punished because of Abram's sin. . Verse 17 'The lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai.' The Lord had had enough. He wanted to protect Sarai. He had thought for Sarai even when Abram didn't. So he brought punishment upon Pharaoh and his household even though it was not their fault. They were blameless in this situation. And yet punishment came upon them because of Abram's sin.

What a shame that our sin could cause a person to stumble or fall, or even worse condemn them to hell all on account of our wrong actions.

Because of the Profits

And it was a disastrous path because of the profits. Oh we might look at this and say it was a good sojourn into the land of Egypt because Abram left with more than he entered. And that is true. He had more possessions. But it is not always a case of profit. The prodigal son came back with nothing after frittering it away in his sin.

And yet we look and think what is so disastrous about Abram leaving with the profit of all these possessions. Let us just remember that one of the servants he left with was a little Egyptian girl called Hagar. And of course Abram would take things into his own hands again later when he slept with Hagar in order to get the son and heir he craved and that God had promised.

It is Always a Disappointing Path

And finally, briefly, it is always a disappointing path. Life never works out the way we want it when we deviate from following in the footsteps of faith. Trying to sort out my job prospects myself back in Crieff made me weary and heartbroken for a while. For Abram there was disappointment as well.

Because of the Testimony it Forfeits

His path was disappointing because of the testimony it forfeits. Abram lost his integrity. His servants would have been whispering to each other about how wretched their master was. He lied his way in Egypt to save his own skin. He put his wife at risk and God's wrath came upon Pharaoh all on account of Abram. He had the opportunity for a great testimony – he had followed God out of Ur and into the Promised Land. He was going to be the blessing to the world as all nations would be blessed through him. And yet there is a spot on his character now. A blemish on his testimony. He forfeited a great testimony due to his failure.

Oh his testimony is still good but Abram will be remembered for his deviation as well as his footsteps of faith. People remember our failures more than our successes. Think of Peter – preached the sermon of his life at Pentecost, was the only man to walk on water, and yet we remember him for his denial of Jesus.

Because of the Things it Forgets

It is a disappointing path because of the things it forgets. In Canaan, Abram had built altars to God. He acknowledged God's leading and guiding. He recognised and praised God for his presence with him. He lived with God and always remembered him. In Egypt Abram has left God behind. No altars are built, his name is not praised, in fact his name is not even mentioned. Abram has forgotten all about him. His desire to save himself has led him to deviate from God's path and to lie to save himself. He forgets all about God. That is the sad fact of this matter. And it is the sad fact of our lives when we decide to do things our way – we forget all about God and leave him out of lives. He is ignored and neglected. He is forgotten – his love and mercy are not remembered.

Because of the Tragedy it Fosters

And it is disappointing because of the tragedy it fosters. Abram was called to be a blessing to the world and yet he has brought shame and punishment instead. Instead of bringing light he has brought darkness. Instead of showing people God he has shown them sin and shame. Abram could have shared the love of God with the Egyptians but he hasn't. We are called to be salt and light in this world but when we deviate from the path of faith, when we ignore God and forget him, when we do things our way and bring our lies and half truths to the fore, we only bring shame on ourselves and lead others into sin as well. When we wander from where God wants us to be, we cannot be all that God has called us to be. And that is sad.

Conclusion

Abram deviated from the path of faith and there was a cost to that. It was a downward path that spiralled out of control. It was a dishonest path which led to dire consequences. It was a disastrous path as others were led into sin. And it was a disappointing path as Abram did not shine like God had called him to. When we wander from the pathway, when we leave God out of the equation, when we choose to do our thing, there is a cost involved. It costs us our happiness and our joy and it costs us our presence with God and his blessing on our life. A little compromise here leads us farther from God. Come back to him today and live for him. May we learn from Abram's mistakes and recognise the dangers of trying to do things our way - may we keep trusting in God and following in the footsteps of faith.

The Cost of Returning to the Path of Faith - Genesis 13:1-4

As we continue our series looking at the life of Abraham we see him having to come back to God to try and restore his relationship with him. You will remember well by now Abram's call to a life of faith and how he stopped short of following God fully before then committing himself completely to God and following God's leading and guiding into the Promised Land. Last week we noticed the cost of deviating from the path of faith as famine struck the land of Canaan and Abram took matters into his own hand and headed to Egypt. We noted the downward, dishonest, disastrous and disappointing path he took in doing so and the trouble it caused him and Sarai, and Pharaoh and his household.

Pharaoh sent Abram on his way with his family and his belongings and now as we pick up the story again he is heading up out of Egypt towards the Negev again. He is heading back to the Promised Land - the land God had promised him and all generations to follow him. Abram had forgotten about God whilst in Egypt. He had been trying to do all things himself and only ended up in strife. Now he is returning to the land of promise and to God with his tail between his legs. And there is a cost that is involved in returning to the path of faith.

And I want to share with you today what the cost is and what it involves so that if you are far from God just now you might be encouraged to take the first steps back on to the path of faith and that you might just see how good it is to be back walking with God once more.

It Involves Removing

It began for Abram in having to leave Egypt. It involves removing. Pharaoh had endured serious disease on himself and members of his household on account of Abram's attempts to save his own skin and his deceit in pretending that Sarai was only his sister rather than his wife. Pharaoh realised the problem was Abram. He learned of the truth of the matter and called Abram before him and challenged him about what he had done. We don't learn how Pharaoh found out. Perhaps Sarai was the

only one in the household not affected by the disease. Perhaps on seeing the disease Sarai spoke out. Or perhaps God told Pharaoh and that is how he came to know the facts. Either way Pharaoh found out and he wanted Abram gone. And so Abram left the area.

His Person from Egypt

It involved removing and the removal began with his person from Egypt. Pharaoh wanted rid of the man who had caused this terrible affliction. And simply out of his household and palace was not enough. In fact he wanted him out of his country not just his city. And so Abram had to go. In the midst of this we should recognise that Abram's sin being pointed out had the effect of turning his eyes back to God. He had forgotten about God. He had left this out of the equation the moment he decided to leave the land of promise in search of safety from the famine and the security of food.

When our sin is pointed out to us we are faced once more with God. Nathan came to David and pointed out his sin with Bathsheba to him and David was brought face to face with God Almighty again. Psalm 51 is that great penitential Psalm where David pours out his heart to God. He is begging God for forgiveness; asking him to wash away his sin; pleading with him to restore him in his relationship with God and with his standing in the kingdom.

We too might forget about God as we attempt to do things in our strength and in our own way, but when our sin is pointed out to us we are faced with having to stand before God again. We are faced with having to acknowledge before God our failure and our need for his forgiveness. Abram had to remove himself, his person, from the land of Egypt, the land of sin and shame for him, in order to return to where God was and where God wanted him to be. Abram had the sense to leave the place of sin to return to God. We too have choices to make in life and the most important choice we can make is to take ourselves away from places of sin and return to places where God is and where God wants us to be. Staying in a place of sin will only lead us into more sin.

His Possessions from Egypt

It also involved Abram in removing his possessions from Egypt. From Pharaoh's perspective he did not want a man and his family and household who were tainted because of sin and shame. He did not want a reminder of the serious afflictions he had suffered – and he certainly did not want to suffer anymore. So he wanted rid of Abram. For Pharaoh this meant getting shot of everything that belonged to Abram. Abram had left Canaan with all the possessions he had brought from Ur of the Chaldeans. He left Canaan with the wealth he had accumulated in Haran during his stop there. And he left Canaan with other possession he had gained during his time in the Promised Land. Abram had much with him. And Pharaoh wanted rid of it all.

Not only did Abram have the possessions he had taken with him on his downward journey but he had also gained much in Egypt we learned. Abram had been treated well by Pharaoh and his people on account of Sarai. Gen 12:16 'Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants and camels.' Abram owned a lot of stuff now. Gen 13:2 'Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.' And Pharaoh wanted none of it left behind. It was all to go.

Abram was blessed with so much despite his sin and sometimes that is the case with us but a lot of the time when we sin and move away from God's path our return to him involves us parting our ways with our possessions. It means leaving behind our wealth and treasures for a life walking humbly before God. And yet God allows Abram to take all his possessions with him. Why? One explanation is that he knew Abram would need them back in the Promised Land. The land had been struck by a severe famine and most of the crops will have perished. With little food for people, the animals would no doubt suffer as well. Abram returning with food and animals would help sustain life in Canaan and indeed help in the restoration of that land. Abram was blessed despite his sin because God had bigger plans.

His Potential from Egypt

Abram's removal also included the removal of his potential from Egypt. He could have had a big influence in the place. He was well liked by Pharaoh and treated well by him on account of Sarai. He could have made a big impact in the land of Egypt. But the potential for that had gone when he blew his integrity. When people discovered he had lied about his wife and brought the afflictions of disease on Pharaoh they would want nothing to do with him. It would take him years to recover that position of trust and be accepted in the land.

When we lie and act improperly, people recognise this and lose their faith and trust in us. When it comes to living our lives in this place we have to ensure we live lives worthy of God. We need to be above reproach. For when we let people down with our sin, we lose the potential to ever share the gospel with them. People will not listen to us when they see us with double standards. Abram's potential was gone.

And yet Abram actually removed his potential with him when he left Egypt. He was given Sarai back by Pharaoh and he took his wife with him on his journey back. Sarai you will remember is the real potential here. For God has promised Abram that all people will be blessed through him and we later learn that this means his offspring will be as numerous as the grains of sand and the stars in the sky. Abram needed a wife for this. The potential for God's promise was in Abram and Sarai as a couple.

The cost of returning to the path of faith for Abram involved removal. It involved the removal of his person, his possessions and his potential from Egypt.

It Involves Returning

It was also to involve returning. Abram was not only leaving Egypt but he had chosen to return to Canaan. He had chosen to return to God. He had decided to go back to the land God had promised him and to be in the place where God blessed him. And that is a big step. It is one thing to have our sin pointed out. It is another thing to recognise it and do something about it. And it is another thing still to return to the place where it all began.

To the Place of God's Worship

The cost of returning to the path of faith involved Abram's return to the place of God's worship. As he came up out of Egypt he wandered back with his family and possessions towards Canaan. After crossing from Egypt he would first come to the area in the south of Israel which was called the Negev. From here he would move northwards back towards Bethel and Ai. He wandered from place to place as he made his way homewards again. And this wandering is nothing unusual of course for Abram at heart was a shepherd who owned large flocks of sheep and herds of cattle. Shepherds during this time would move from place to place following the seasons of the year.

The end goal for Abram though was back to Bethel and to the place he had pitched his tent before (3:3). This place meant a lot to Abram. This was where he first built an altar to God and was the place where he worshipped God. So his return involved him going back to the place of God's worship. To the place he had built an altar to God. He was returning to praise God once more and to thank him for looking after him despite his sin and despite his deviating from the path of faith. And no doubt involved in this was his confession of his sin. Verse 4 tells us 'Abram called on the name of the Lord.' He knew where he was and he knew God was there. And he needed to and wanted to seek God's forgiveness and have his relationship with him restored.

To the Place of God's Working

He was also returning to the place of God's working. God had led Abram into Canaan and down to Bethel. He had shown Abram that this was to be his land; the one God would give him, the land in which God would bless him and all future generations through him. This was the place where Abram had left God to wander into Egypt. This was the place he knew God was and where God had been working in his life.

When we wander away from God the best place to find him again is in the place where we last saw him at work in our lives. He is waiting there to be found again by us; he is waiting just as the father was waiting at home for his prodigal son to return. Abram in returning to Bethel was going back to the place where he left God behind.

To the Place of God's Will

And it also involved returning to the place of God's will. God had called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldeans and had called him to go to the land he would give him. Abram left all he knew behind, including eventually his family, and followed God's leading and guiding and ended up in the land of Canaan. This was where God wanted him to be. This was God's best for Abram. And yet Abram had not recognised or remembered this when the famine had struck. He wanted to save himself rather than waiting on God. And yet as he left behind the trauma of Egypt, he returned to the place of God's will. He returned to the very place God wanted him to be. And there is no better place to be than in the centre of God's will.

I can assure you from my own life that being where God wants you to be is fantastic but wandering where you want to go yourself is not pleasant. God leads us into certain places at different times in our life in order to bless us and use us in his service. However, he gives us our minds so we can decide what to do ourselves. When we are where God wants us to be – in his will – he will bless us. When we wander from that place and from God's will the blessings do not come.

Abram had realised this and wanted to return to the place of God's worship, God's work and God's will. He knew where he had left God behind and he headed right back there again!

It Involves Reviving

The cost of returning to the path of faith involved removing and returning, and it also involved reviving. Abram had gone back to the place where he had left God behind but that was simply not enough. He may have thought he could just pick up the pieces and carry on but that is not the case. He had to restore his relationship with God. He had to get it back on track again. He had to revive it.

His Devotion to God

And the revival began with his reviving his devotion to God. Abram wanted to be back where he last encountered God. He wanted to return to the altar he built and to the place he worshipped God last. He so desired to restore his devotion to God. He so desired to worship God. The altar at Bethel was the place for Abram to begin reviving his devotion. It was the place where he could get his life back in order again. It is the place where he recognised God's goodness and God's blessing.

Abram wanted to worship God again. There is something wrong friends when we do not want to worship God. There is something wrong where we would rather be somewhere else than worshipping and praising God with his people. There is something wrong when other things take priority over us being in Church. Abram revived his devotion to God.

His Dependence on God

He also revived his dependence on God. He had attempted to do things in his own strength. Perhaps he had recognised how well things were going in Canaan for him before he left. He probably remembered how God had blessed him; how God had led him; how God had guided him; how God had protected him. He was ready again to revive his dependence on God. He recognised he needed God in his life. Verse 4 again 'Abram called on the name of the Lord.' He knew who to call on in his time of trouble. He knew who to call on when he wanted to sort things out. Hopefully now he would remember to call on God every day of his life in the good as well as the hard times. Hopefully now he would depend on God all of the time.

His Dedication to God

And he revived his dedication to God. Abram had wandered away from God – whatever had caused him to do that has obviously now been resolved. He is back where he ought to be. He is back where God wants him to be. And Abram is reviving that dedication and commitment to God. He is renewing that first love experience. I think some of the terminology used in verse 3 and 4 describing where his tent had been earlier and where he first built an altar to the Lord were drawing Abram back to his first love. Is that not what John wrote in Revelation to the church in Ephesus as he challenged them to remember their first love and get their lives sorted again? Abram was getting his life back in order. He was putting God first in his life again. And he was reviving his first love – his dedication to God.

Conclusion

Abram had wandered away from God. He had deviated from the path of faith. Unfortunately there are times in our life when we are tempted to or we actually do the same. We think we can handle it ourselves and we wander off. There comes a point where we need to wander back again. We need God in our lives. We cannot live this life without him. He loves us and longs for us to love him and walk with him.

That means there will come a time to return and there is a cost in returning to the path of faith as we discovered this morning. It involves removing, returning, and reviving. Abram had gone back to the place where he had left God behind but that was simply not enough. He may have thought he could just pick up the pieces and carry on but that is not the case. He had to restore his relationship with God. He had to leave the past behind. He had to remove himself and his possessions and his potential from Egypt, from the ways of the world. He had to return to the place of God's worship, work and will. He had to revive his devotion to God, his dependence on God and his dedication to God.

It all began with calling on the name of the Lord and seeking his forgiveness. We are so blessed that God started the work of restoring our relationship with him through Jesus. There was nothing we could do on account of our sin and shame. We had

removed ourselves so far from God and his plans for our lives that we were lost forever. But God did not let us go too far out of his sight. He loved us and sent Jesus to suffer and die on the cross in our place. And he did this to save us and restore us in our relationship with him. It does involve us in recognising what God has done through Jesus and accepting the forgiveness he offers. It also involves us turning from our life of sin and turning back to him. It involved us leaving our sin behind and living for him. It involves us staying on the path of faith. The costs may be big but the rewards are eternal.

I don't know where you are today spiritually. I pray that if you have wandered from God then perhaps today you will have heard enough to encourage you to return to God. I know he longs to forgive and restore you and I know that he loves you – he loves you. If you need to come to him today for forgiveness he is there waiting for you. If you need to come to him to pray for a loved one to return to the fold then he is there to meet you. Whatever it is you need, he is there waiting for your return and your request.

May our desire be to leave behind the world and constantly seek to go back to God – there is no more obvious solution!

Crisis along the Way on the Path of Faith - Genesis 13:5-18

This morning as we come to the next instalment in the life of Abraham and look at following in the footsteps of faith we see Abram reaching a crisis along the way on the path of faith.

This of course is not the first crisis we have seen hit Abram as we considered during the last 2 weeks the dreadful famine in Canaan which forced Abram to make the choice in his own mind to leave and head for Egypt. We remembered the disaster that was and the trouble it caused. And last week we saw the cost that was involved in returning to the path of faith. We are all hoping by this point that Abram's troubles are over and that everything will become smooth sailing for him now. He has partially obeyed God before fully obeying him. He has left God out of the decision making and realised his mistake and come back to God. Now you feel he will walk with God and all will be well – at least if this was a film you were watching you hope it would now be the scene of Abram and Sarai wandering off into the sunset happy and secure in their relationship with God and all is well.

Naturally of course life is not always that simple. Walking with God is great and nothing beats it but just because we are walking with God does not always mean life will be plain sailing. The sin of humanity is all around us and causes us no end of trouble and strife as we journey through life. Abram is no different. The great thing is having God on our side helps us through these trying and difficult times. We have to be prepared for entering life's storms by having and using our faith. Abram has

now hopefully learned enough about the walk of faith and about God that he will fully trust him at all times.

Conflict Arises

Let's see what happens as a crisis along the way hits Abram on the path of faith. As we continue on in verse 5 of chapter 13 we are reminded that Lot is still with Abram. Lot is Abram's nephew and he has been by Abram's side ever since his own father Haran died in Ur of Chaldeans. Abram has become the father figure Lot required growing up and going through life with. Wherever Abram has gone Lot has been there too. Lot was with him as he journeyed to Haran and dallied there for a while. Lot was with him as they entered the Promised Land and no doubt watched on as Abram built the altar to the Lord at Bethel. Lot was with him as he left Canaan for the safety of Egypt during the famine. And Lot is still with him now.

And we learn that not only did Abram have many possessions and much livestock – but Lot had as well. He had flocks and herds and tents. And here is where trouble comes and where conflict arises. The part of the land they were at in Canaan could not support them both. It is like 2 farmers trying to eke out an existence in one small corner of the land. It wasn't working. They were both suffering for their possessions, their livestock, was so great. There was not enough grazing ground for them all and there were likely not enough watering points either.

This leads to conflict arising. Verse 7 we learn that arguing and bickering arose among Abram's herdsmen and Lot's. They both wanted the same thing – the best grazing ground for their master's animals and the best watering holes for them. But there simply was not enough to go around. This was the conflict.

And the conflict arises not out of anything particularly bad among them but because they both had too much. The Lord had blessed them both richly. Abram had been blessed richly despite his sin and wandering from God. Sometimes having too much causes us conflict as well. And here I want to be careful for there is nothing wrong with having much – although we should remember that to he or she whom much is given, much is expected! Many a child has been spoilt and ruined because parents have too much. Perhaps as well as blessing the child with much, there is a case for giving sacrificially away and showing the child a better way.

Confrontation Comes

The conflict arises and so confrontation comes. Something has to give. Something has to be done. A solution has to be found. And here we see how much Abram has learned and grown during these past days. Instead of taking matters into his own hands and doing things in his own strength for his own sake, Abram wants to deal with this fairly. And his thoughts are on his nephew. He wants the best for him and wants to do his best by him. He has after all been like a father to him.

Note the directness Abram shows. He doesn't let this matter drag on for ever. He doesn't leave it in such a way as the herdsmen keep quarrelling. He deals with it directly. He approaches Lot and says in verse 8 'Let's not have any quarrelling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers.' It hasn't been stated yet that there was disagreement and bickering between the two of them although Abram knew this would inevitably come. There was growing animosity between their herdsmen and Abram did not want this to overflow into his relationship with Lot. We are brothers he says to Lot. He knows they are family. He knows they are friends. He doesn't want any grief.

So in a bold move he speaks to Lot to confront the situation and deal with it. He does not want this to cause problems between them and he does not want it to smoulder away for a while before exploding. He quickly and gently confronts the situation at hand. He says to Lot I don't want any quarrelling because we are brothers. I love you too much to fight with you and fall out with you.

In verse 9 he says 'Is not the whole land before us?' If you were to stand on the hills outside Bethel you would see for miles. It is like walking up Dumyat and seeing the hills to your North, the Trossachs and the hills along to your West, the Hillfoot villages to your East and Kincardine bridge and beyond to your South. You can see for miles and see the land and how great and lavish it is. Abram says look - there is all this place, why should we fight over this small corner. Let's look at the bigger picture here.

Friends just before we move on let me use this point to remind us that sometimes rather than letting things fester, rather than letting situations annoy us, rather than quarrel and bicker, why not confront trying and testing situations that are before us? Let us approach brothers and sisters who have annoyed us and deal with the matter at hand. They may not know they have offended us. Do it gently as Abram has here and do it in love. Offer forgiveness and receive forgiveness and let us move on together in love.

Choices Decided

As Abram confronts the situation and speaks with Lot he shows them the whole land before them and he drops the bombshell verse 9 'Let's part company.' For the sake of peace and our relationship and for the benefit of our herds let us move on and separate. The land is big. Let's go find a better spot separately for our animals. And here we see choices being made and then choices decided.

And note how Abram goes about his stage of the crisis before him. He offers choices to Lot and he stands back and let's Lot choose. This man has grown in stature since his downward detour to Egypt. He is no longer as self-centred as he was before. He no longer looks out first for his own interests - he is considering someone else first.

In verse 9 he says to Lot 'Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left.' The decision is an easy one for Abram – we need to separate if we are to survive and avoid a bitter family feud. So he lays the choices before Lot and allows him to choose. Perhaps this did much to restore Abram's standing and integrity and reputation before his servants after he had destroyed that integrity in Egypt.

And what a choice Lot has! He looks out and sees so much. Perhaps he should have taken a little longer to decide for our choices often decide our destiny for the next few years.

During World War II on an island in the Pacific, the only tracks in the mud were those made by the trucks and jeeps. Before a person started down one of these, he saw a sign put up by the soldiers that read, 'Choose your ruts carefully. You'll be in them for the next ten miles.'

Lot had some choice to make. Perhaps what he should have done was defer the choice back to Abram. Abram was his uncle after all. He was the elder statesman. He was the father figure he looked up to. And yet in verse 10 we see Lot looking up and seeing the whole plain of Jordan before him. He saw that it was well watered like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt. There is an interesting side note put in brackets here that Lot probably would not have known about so we need not be too harsh on him. This land was home to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. And we learn in verse 13 that the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord.

Lot did not know this, all he knew was he saw a land in the distance that was green and lush and well watered. It was land that attracted him greatly. Lot looked on the outward appearance and saw what he thought was the best place to be. As we will find out in time it was not a great choice because of the dangers of Sodom and Gomorrah. And Lot made a selfish choice here as well for this lush land could have been for his uncle Abram. But he saw the good and wanted it himself. He saw the good and was attracted instantly to it. His choice has been decided.

How like Lot we are at times – looking out for number 1; seeing that when we are given a choice we make it and make it for our good. Oh that we were more like Abram, willing to let the other choose, ready to let the other's needs and preferences come before ours. And how like Lot we are when we decide the choice based on the outward appearance. How many times in Scripture are we reminded that God looks not at the outward but at the heart?

Confirmation Given

Having made the choice, Lot departed to live among the cities of the plain and he pitched his tents near Sodom – that wicked city. Abram lived in the land of Canaan – the land that God had promised him way back at the beginning. The land which God led him into and said was to be his and all generations after him. Abram is a changed man and let Lot decide what land to choose. Abram was willing to let him make the decision and he would abide by it. He was willing to put Lot's needs before his own.

And on account of this confirmation was given to Abram. Verse 14 'The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west.'" See what is out there. See how good it is and how vast it is. This my boy is yours. And here God gives confirmation to Abram once more that this land is his and will be for all generations after him. He reaffirms his promise of blessing to Abram which he gave back at the start of chapter 12. And he reminds Abram that his offspring will be numerous. In fact this time in describing Abram's offspring he says they will be as numerous as the dust of the earth. If you could count the dust then your offspring could be counted. God is not only blessing Abram with the land but also with many offspring.

Abram has learned so much and despite putting Lot's needs before his own he has gained what God was always giving to him anyway – the land of Canaan. God has confirmed once again what blessings Abram is about to receive.

It is always good to receive confirmation because you know you have done well or are on the right track or that things will go well for you. Emails were exchanged recently saying what my marks were for my last year at college. A printed sheet was then sent out as confirmation of the pass marks. And then final confirmation came with the certificate coming through the post saying I had graduated. Each little step of confirmation added to my sense of ease that the work was complete and the end goal achieved. We like confirmation for everything we do in life.

The great thing is God has confirmed time and again his promise of eternal life to all those who have put their trust and faith in Jesus. Go through the New Testament and you will find verse after verse giving you confirmation.

Matthew 25:46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

John 3:36 "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him."

John 5:24 "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."

John 6:40 "For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day."

Romans 5:21 "so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

1 Timothy 1:16 "But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life."

1 John 5:13 "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life."

Commitment Follows

After the confirmation was given to Abram from Almighty God we see the commitment that follows. Abram is committed to God. He has been half heartedly there before but now we see a full commitment again to following God and doing as he commands. The Lord's final words to Abram in verse 17 are 'Go walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you'. It's all yours. It's mine to give and I want you to have it and all generations after you. And Abram goes and walks through the land. He is committed to doing what God wants and so he goes.

Verse 18 'So Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron.' He goes and wanders through the land. And notice what he does once he settles at Hebron - he builds an altar to the Lord and worships him there. As Abram had been taken into the land of Canaan the first time he build altars to God and worshipped him so after his downward detour and this crisis along the way, he commits to following God and he again worships him and honours him by building an altar.

Having received confirmation of God's love, Abram can do nothing more than commit fully to God and worship him. When we see God at work in our lives in the good times as well as the trying times, when we see God giving us confirmation of his love for us and his plans for our lives, we too should worship him and commit fully to him once more. We confirm our love for God by committing to him.

Conclusion

Along the way on our path of faith crises will come. Things will happen that challenge us and our thoughts and our faith. It is at these times we need to stand firm and keep our eyes fixed on Jesus. When conflict arises we should confront it head on rather than shirk away from it - although at times we need to go canny in doing so. We have to lay the choices out before others and ourselves and decide which is the best way forward. And we do this by praying for some time first seeking God's will for our lives and situations. And we do this by putting others before ourselves as well. We consider the needs of others. Then we look for the confirmation that is given by God and then commit fully to him.

We have seen this with the building work and we have seen the confirmations God has given at various stages and we are committed to following him one hundred percent. Let's learn from Abram how to deal with the crises that happen along the way on the path of faith.

Walking with Integrity on the Path of Faith - Genesis 14:1-24

Integrity is a big thing in our world today. People are happy to tell little half truths here and there, and to take what is not ours if we can get away with it, to take credit for ideas that are not our own and such like. Many people lack integrity and yet it is a characteristic that we should be striving for as Christians. God wants us to be people of integrity; people who are above reproach; people at whom no-one can lay any claim of doubt about our actions and motives - for we constantly strive to live for Jesus and be like him.

As we continue with Abram we reach an interesting passage in Genesis 14 where there is another crisis hitting Abram and his family. And in Abram's actions we see his integrity and he models it well for us. So let us see what it means to be walking with integrity on the path of faith.

Integrity in Warfare

You will recall the last episode with Abram was a crisis. There was not enough grazing ground for his herds and flocks and those of his nephew Lot. So Abram confronted the situation head on and laid a choice before Lot. Lot decided to head for the land that looked lush and grand, and Abram was led by God once again into the land of promise. God confirmed his covenant with Abram and Abram committed himself to following God again. Lot has headed to land near the city of Sodom - a place of wickedness and sin.

As we begin chapter 14 we read of various kings being in control and heading into war. In this situation we will come to see Abram's integrity in warfare.

The Setting

Let's picture the setting. Amraphel, Arioch, Kedorlaomer and Tidal, kings of various neighbouring regions have joined forces together. They are heading into battle with kings of other lands who did not want to be invaded and become subject to them and others who had been subject to them long enough and wanted their land back.

We read that the kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Siddim had had enough. They had been under the rule of Kedorlaomer for 12 long hard years. When a king invaded the land he would allow the people to stay in the land and care for the land on the condition they paid him a tribute each year. They became his vassals. If the money was paid, the invading king would leave them alone. If they failed to pay he

would route the land and take the men away as captives and place people loyal to him into the land.

These kings were now rebelling. They had not paid their tribute for the year and they were sitting waiting on Kedorlaomer and his men coming to force them into giving the tribute. They were ready to do battle to break free from this hard taskmaster. The trouble is, they are not as prepared as they could be and not as strong as they need to be. They fled from the invading, ruling kings and some fell into tar pits whilst others escaped to the hills. The ruling kings had won again.

And since they had won again we read in verse 11 that they seized all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food, taking them back to their own land. And since Lot was living in the vicinity of Sodom, he too was taken along with all his possessions. Lot was taken into bondage for being in the wrong place. It is interesting that because he looked for the lush land he had wandered away from Abram and no doubt the Lord as well. And being away from the Lord he was not under the Lord's protection and was swallowed up by these evil men.

There are always evil men around us who will try to take us away from the Lord and from following him and doing his work. These are the devil's men. And the devil will do anything to stop us from telling others about Jesus. He will stop at nothing to ensure we don't tell others of their sin and their need for forgiveness, and of Jesus the only one who can offer that forgiveness. He will stop at nothing in his bid to prevent us from encouraging people to have their lives transformed and changed by Jesus.

Into this setting comes Abram. In verse 13 we read that one who had escaped the disaster came to tell Abram all about it. He came to report that Lot had been captured. Abram was a wealthy man with large flocks and herds and many possessions. He will have been well known by this stage on account of his standing. And so this escapee would have had no difficulty in finding him.

On hearing the news Abram decided to go and rescue his nephew whom he loved dearly. He had with him allies and also 318 trained men born in his household.

The Success

The success of this rescue shows forth the integrity of Abram. His integrity in warfare is shown because he has just reason to enter and do battle. He is not battling for the sake of it. He is not going to war for the spoils of war. He is not entering the fray for fame and fortune and to rule the land. He goes to war to rescue his own nephew. That is all that interests him. Lot has been unfairly picked on for he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Lot has not been part of the king's plans to not pay tribute and try and break free from the shackles of the ruling king. And yet Lot has been captured. Abram's integrity is intact here for he has just and right reasons to enter the battlefield.

The success that comes to him comes because of his integrity. It comes also because he was prepared. Verse 14 tells us that Abram had 318 trained men born in his household. These men have been prepared and are ready for battle. We have to ask ourselves why Abram had trained men, why he had been teaching them how to fight and battle. Because of the situation of the day with kings wanting to conquer and rule the land, Abram probably wanted to be able to defend himself and his household and possessions. In order to do this he would need trained and qualified men. These men were ready when the time came.

In the Christian life we have to be prepared for doing battle as well. As people of integrity we have to enter the battlefield for the right reasons at the right time. Our battlefield is the battle for gospel. It is the war against evil and the devil. It is the fight to win souls for Jesus and to help save people from hell. And we have to be prepared to live our lives on earth for we will face battles all the time. In Ephesians 6 we read of the uniform required for spiritual warfare in our day and age. We need to be reading and praying and growing spiritually each and every day.

Abram's men went into battle with some of his allies and they succeeded in defeating Kedorlaomer and his men. They were successful in rescuing Lot and his possessions as well as the goods of the others. Abram was successful because God was on his side. He fought with integrity and remained true to a just cause.

Integrity in Worship

We also see Abram's integrity in worship. After the battle is over Abram returned with his men and his allies and the king of Sodom came out to meet them. At this time Melchizedek came out to meet them as well. He blessed Abram and Abram worshipped God in that place at that time. Abram now knows who God is and whatever he does he worships God as well. He knows God is looking after him. He knows God is leading and guiding him. He knows God is protecting him. He knows God is blessing him.

Facilitator of Worship

Let's pause to think about this facilitator of worship. Abram's integrity allows someone else to lead him to the throne of God. He is able to let someone else lead him in praise and worship. He lets someone else direct his thoughts to God. There is nothing better than praising God. The chief end of man after all is to glorify God and enjoy him forever.

But what of this facilitator. Who is Melchizedek? We learn that he is a king - the king of Salem. Where is Salem? Salem is an ancient name for Jerusalem. It means peace. Melchizedek also means king of righteousness. Jesus was the prince of peace and also the king of righteousness. Melchizedek was also a priest - a priest of the most high God - El-Elyon. Melchizedek knew and worshipped the king of creation. He worshipped no Canaanite deity but only Yahweh. Twice he refers to El-Elyon, God

most high. He worshipped the same God as Abram as Abram too uses the title El-Elyon in verse 22. Many believe Melchizedek is an early Old Testament representation of Jesus. Let's be clear though, Melchizedek was a mere man who lived and died although details of his life are sketchy at best. The one thing we know is he worshipped God and paints a picture of who Jesus would be and what he would be like. The letter of Hebrews reminds us that Jesus is a priest in the order of Melchizedek. He is the prince of peace and the king of righteousness.

And to top all of this when Melchizedek comes out to Abram he brings bread and wine – elements Jesus would later take and use as symbols for his broken body and shed blood on the cross of Calvary. Melchizedek was to be a facilitator of worship – pointing Abram to God Almighty, God Most High. At times we need others to help point us to God. We need others to help us worship God in spirit and in truth.

Faithfulness of Worship

And note Abram's integrity in worship for not only does he allow others to help him worship but he has a faithfulness in worship as well. Abram worships God in everything and with everything. He could have come in front of Melchizedek and simply praised God for helping him win the battle and rescue his nephew Lot. And that would have been great. That is what Melchizedek reminded Abram of as he spoke to him.

Melchizedek said in verse 19 as he blessed Abram 'Blessed be Abram by God most high, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God most high who delivered your enemies into your hand.' He is reminding Abram that the God of all creation has blessed him and helped him. He refreshes his memory that God delivered him from his enemies. It is God who has rescued you.

And Abram recognises this too and praises God. And he remembers God's faithfulness to him. Abram could so easily have taken all the credit himself. He could have stood with the King of Sodom standing there greeting him accepting all the plaudits. He could have taken the credit for his fighting prowess and for winning the battle over the evil vassal lord. But Abram knows whose he is and who it is that has helped him. And he gives God the glory. Oh that we were like him and were quick to give the credit, the honour, the praise to Almighty God.

And note that as Abram gives praise to God he also brings in worship to God his tithe. This is the first mention of giving ten percent in the whole bible. This was a purely voluntary act by Abram. Melchizedek did not mention it that we know of. No-one else has said anything about it. But Abram in worshipping God wanted to give him something back. Giving to God is part of worship. We read of that in 2 Corinthians 9:7. Tithing is part of our worship. Paul speaks of setting aside our tithes weekly in 1 Corinthians 16.

As God has been faithful to Abram so Abram is faithful to God. He recognises where his wealth comes from and wants to return part of that to God in worship. We ought to do likewise. In fact I preached on this passage last year before our Church Conference to encourage us to think about our giving – and our attitudes to giving. If you want a reminder of that I can give you a copy of those sermon notes.

Abram showed his integrity in worship as well as he gave praise and honour to God for his victory and as he gave a proportion of his wealth to God as well. God wants our all in worship not just a part. He wants our time, our talents and our tithe.

Integrity in Wealth

And finally we come to integrity in wealth. Abram is a wealthy man and he has just gained even more. He has gone into battle to rescue his nephew Lot but as part of the victory he has the spoils of war. He has recovered all the goods (verse 16) that had been taken by Kedorlaomer and his men. He now has even more. But here we see his integrity in wealth as well.

The Temptation

There comes a temptation – and the temptation comes from the King of Sodom but in reality the temptation comes from the devil. Verse 21 we read the king of Sodom saying to Abram, give me my people back and keep the goods for yourself. He recognises a responsibility on his part to bow to the new vassal lord – but Abram did not want that title and or position. On account of Abram defeating Kedorlaomer he should rightfully be the new ruling king. There is a temptation here for Abram to become that.

There is also the temptation to keep all the spoils of war. Keep the possessions says the king of Sodom. You can have the wealth and the fortune. What a temptation. Many of us would be tempted to keep that as well. In the story at the beginning the man could so easily have kept the money. The chicken shop would not have known he had it. A big temptation.

The devil likes to come and tempt us with things that are appealing to the human eye. He longs to see us slip up on the path of faith. He longs for us to sin against God. And the area of money is one of the biggest temptations for us. We all want to have enough to survive. We want enough for our fancy houses, big cars, and lavish holidays. We want to balance the books well at the end of the year. We will drive a few extra miles to save a penny or 2 on a litre of petrol. We will not mention the pound coin extra given by mistake in our change. We take a box of paper clips from the office to save us buying any of our own. And so it goes on. Stewardship of our money is one of the biggest threats to our walk with God. Give it all over to him – after all did it not all come from him in the first place.

I'm not saying we are not to have our houses and cars and holidays – of course we are. But its important that we remember to give to God the praise and glory for the wealth we have and to give to him not only our tithe but all that we cheerfully set in our hearts to give for his work.

The Testimony

The temptation came to Abram but the testimony this man now gives is even greater. Real integrity comes through here. Abram had set out to rescue Lot – not to become the new ruling king and not to gain great wealth and possessions from winning. He had rescued Lot and that was enough for him. The temptation was great to keep all the possessions but he wanted none of it. If he had taken the money he would have allowed the wicked king of Sodom to claim that Abram's wealth came from him and his generosity. Verse 23 'I made Abram rich.' He would be in debt to an evil man. He would have a testimony whereby he relied on evil men for his wealth in this world rather than on relying on God for all things.

Abram replied to the king of Sodom that he had lifted his hands to Yahweh El-Elyon, the Lord, God most high maker of heaven and earth and vowed to take nothing that did not belong to him. He reclaimed Lot and Lot's possessions but that was it. Abram went on to say that the only recompense he would take was for the food his men had eaten and also the fair share for the other kings and their men who had gone into battle with him.

The temptation was great but Abram exhibited great integrity as he took none of what was on offer. He was relying on God for all his needs. God had helped him win the battle and he had given his tithe in worship back to God. He did not want the king's money or possessions. Abram is now building up his character and testimony again after failing before – after sinning against God by leaving him and heading to Egypt. This is not a conscience thing to make himself look good but rather doing the right thing before his God.

If we show integrity in how we handle our wealth and possessions, how we handle the resources we have, then the Lord will always bless us for that and watch over making sure we have all that we need in this life.

Conclusion

Walking through life is a tricky thing at times. People are always seeking to see us slip up. The devil is always prowling around to see if he can ruin our character and in so doing destroy our witness. We have to walk with integrity on the path of faith. We do that in these three main areas with others beside. Abram exhibited integrity in warfare and we can do that on the spiritual battlefield. We can do that as we live this life on earth showing other show to live and how a man or woman or God acts. Abram showed it in worship as he was faithful to God giving God the praise and glory he

deserved rather than taking credit for things himself. And he gave willing to God of himself and all that he had and was in worship. A lesson there for us as well. And Abram demonstrated his integrity in wealth as well as he resisted temptation and gave a clear testimony to his character and to his walk with God.

May we do likewise as we live our lives on this earth – being people of integrity, above reproach acting like Christ in all we do.

Hearing God's Word on the Path of Faith - Genesis 15:1-21

The Lord often talks to us on the path of faith but do we hear him and understand him. In our latest encounter with Abram today we see Abram receiving a vision and hearing the word of God. And yet Abram is distracted as well by other matters closer to his heart and doesn't catch straight away the Lord's road sign for him. Today let us consider hearing God's word on the path of faith.

Abram has just routed Kedorlaomer's army and then been tempted by the king of Sodom as he was praising God for giving him the victory. Abram has been strong to resist the temptation and show his integrity not just during the battle but also in worship and wealth afterwards. And now in verse 1 of chapter 15 we read 'After this the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision.' God came and spoke to Abram. He knew what Abram would be feeling and thinking at this time and he wanted to reassure him.

A Word about Fear

This first word to Abram is a word about fear. 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.' Abram has not shown any fear in his last battle. He has marched into battle with Kedorlaomer and his allies and beaten them and rescued his nephew Lot and all his possessions. He was willing to dive right into battle with his men prepared for war for just reasons and with God on his side he won. He was not afraid.

And yet now he must be showing fear and feeling afraid. For God comes to him and offers him a word about fear. What is Abram fearful of? Well any man in his right mind would be afraid of Kedorlaomer and his allies. Oh yes Abram and his men have defeated them with their surprise attack at night but all this will have served to do is infuriate Kedorlaomer. This man was the ruling king who received his tribute from these people every year. He would not give up on that easily. He would revenge and seek that from Abram. And Abram knew this. He knew that Kedorlaomer would return at some point possibly to gain that revenge and regain control of the land of Sodom and Gomorrah.

God's Peace

Into this situation the Lord comes with a word about fear. And we see firstly God's peace. The Lord says to Abram, 'Do not be afraid.' Chill out. Relax. I am your God. I am with you. No need to panic or be afraid. I am by your side.

When men come and say that to us it doesn't tend to make much of a difference. And yet when God comes and says that we should take note and let fear disappear from us. This is the first time in the whole bible that the words 'Do not be afraid' or 'fear not' are used. As you read your bibles you see that they occur time and time again as God tries to calm his people down and to remind them that he is in control.

In Matthew 1 God comes to Joseph and tells him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. In Luke 1 the angel of the Lord comes to Zechariah first and then later Mary saying 'do not be afraid.' God is with you. In John 6 Jesus is walking on the water to the disciples at night and they are afraid and Jesus says 'Don't be afraid.' And of course at the end of the gospels as the women go to the temple looking for Jesus' body the angel says to them 'Do not be afraid.' Throughout Scripture we see God coming to his people and telling them not to be afraid for he is with them. He brings them his peace; a peace that passes all understanding.

God's Protection

We also see God's protection being offered. The Lord says to Abram 'I am your shield.' I will protect you from all harm. A shield is there to defend you from attack. Warriors used to carry shields to stop the arrows hitting them or to protect against swords. Now a days we build shelters to hide in and take refuge in from battle. In recent times we even heard of evil dictators taking human shields to protect them from attack.

Abram is worried that Kedorlaomer will come back for him. God is saying to him fear not for I am your shield. I will protect you from all harm. I will protect you and your family and your possessions. You are mine and I will look after you.

It was the Lord after all who had helped him win the battle in the first place. It was the Lord who had protected him as he fought with Kedorlaomer. And the Lord would do it again if Abram just trusted and believed.

Psalm 18 talks of the Lord being our shield and salvation. These words are words David used before in 2 Samuel 22 to tell of the Lord's help in delivering them from the hand of their enemies and from the hand of Saul. God is always there to calm down his people and to remind them of his care and protection.

God's Prize

And Abram is reminded of God's prize. 'Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward.' God has been with Abram since the very beginning. It was the Lord who called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldeans, the Lord who went with him to Haran, who then led him into the Promised Land and all of its blessings. And in spite of his detour to Egypt Abram has gained many possessions – silver and gold, cattle and sheep, and servants. Some would say he already has the prize.

But Abram does not know the half of it. The best is yet to be. He does not know the full extent of the blessing God has bestowed upon him. He does not have the slightest hint of the promises God has given him. 12:2 'I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.' 13:14 'Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted.'

Abram might think he has lots materially on earth but the Lord is now coming by Abram and saying to him I am your shield and I am your very great reward. Whoever has the Lord on his side is blessed beyond measure. And we know don't we that he who believes in Jesus and has had his life transformed by him, has a restored relationship with God and there are many blessings that come with living that life. What earthly treasure can compare with God's love, grace, mercy, forgiveness, peace, patience, kindness, protection, power and hope of eternal life? God's prize for Abram was his very presence with him always.

A Word about the Future

In his fear Abram still has questions though. He is afraid he and Sarai will never have children. He struggles to think that a servant on his estate, one called Eliezer, will inherit all he has. He questions God to say you have given me much but the one thing I want more than anything else in all the world is a child. And here again we see in Scripture someone pining for children. And if we remember the reasons why in those times we understand their frustrations and heartbreak – a family was not complete until a child was born preferably a male child to carry on the family name. Without one people were looked down on in the society in which they lived. Abram and Sarai wanted a son more than anything else. And people today want a child for so many reasons – all of them good and proper – and sometimes they remain childless. We don't know why. But this I do – the example of Abram and later of others is there to encourage us. We can question God. We can ask him repeatedly why we don't have children and ask him to bless us. God does not mind us questioning him if our questions are honest.

Abram's question was honest. It was not necessarily coming from a position of doubt but it was coming from a position of not understanding. You say my offspring will be numerous and I believe you but I just can't see how this will happen. I'm getting on in years and so is Sarai and still we see no sign of children. We are anxious about this and we simply do not understand. And as Abram worries about the future God comes with a word about the future to him. v.4 'Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir."

God's Promise of a Son

Here we see God's promise of a Son. God is saying to Abram I know the future, I hold the future in my hands. Don't worry about an heir - I've already told you before that you will have many children. I will give you a son from your own body. And from him there will be many for offspring as well.

Note how simple this promise is from God. 'A son coming from your own body will be your heir.' God's word is simple and clear. It always is. He has informed Abram before about this promise. And here he reiterates it in simple terms.

Oh that we too would take God at his word when we hear it. When God says something and promises something it will come to pass. You can go through the Scriptures and note every promise God makes and you will see from the Scriptures that every promise has been fulfilled. The only outstanding promise in God's word is the promise of Jesus Christ returning in the clouds to take us to be with him for ever and ever in heaven. We can rest assured that God will keep this promise too. He has never failed yet. And so Abram should have taken him at his word the first time but he certainly will this time.

God's Promise of Many Offspring

As God gives his word on the future to Abram we now hear God's promise of many offspring. Not only will Abram have a son and heir but he will have many offspring. Back in chapter 13 God said Abram's offspring would be like the dust of the earth. Now God uses another metaphor to show just how numerous the offspring would be. Verse 5 'He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them". Then he said to him "So shall your offspring be."

The future is bright Abram. It's not orange but it will bright and full of blessings for you. I have chosen you to be my servant. I have chosen you to father the nations. I have chosen you to be a blessing to all generations after you. I know you are getting on in years and I know I will have to defy the laws of nature to allow you to father children but I am able. God is able. God is able to do anything and everything. He is the one who created the earth and the one who sustains the earth. Grasp that this

morning as we think about the future. God is able to keep all his promises and do whatever he wills.

God's Promise of Land

In giving his word on the future we also see God's promise of land for Abram. Verse 7 'I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.' God was reminding Abram that not only would he have a son and many offspring but that he would own the land God was placing him into. This promise came whilst Abram was in Ur and has been reiterated before. Here God reminds him again that this land is his and he will take possession of it.

Again Abram doesn't doubt as much as have questions. How can I know says Abram. And then the Lord asks him to make sacrifice which Abram does before he falls asleep and sees a vision from the Lord. And then to complete it all, the Lord comes in verse 18 to make a covenant with Abram - he promises him that his descendants will have all the land round about.

A Word about Faith

A word about fear and about the future and lastly a word about faith. Abram has followed God for some time now. He has had his ups and downs. He has sinned against God and forgotten about him. He has tried to do it on his own and failed. And each time God has picked him and led him back to the right path. And God does that for us as well doesn't he. Every time we fall, every time we sin, he picks us up and puts us back on the right path. It involves us seeking forgiveness and admitting our sin but God is faithful and true.

Abram Believed God

The word about faith is not so much a word from God but a word on Abram. Abram believed God. Notice those words in verse 6. Abram believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness. Abram knew God by now. And he had experienced how faithful God was. He experienced God's faithfulness to him despite his sin. And he experienced God's faithfulness in the battle with Kedorlaomer. Abram knew this time that when God said something it was good and true. And it would come to pass. So Abram immediately believed God.

He didn't take time to think about it. He didn't need to phone a friend. He didn't need to do 50-50 and he didn't need to ask the audience. He knew and he believed.

And notice that he did not believe in the word God gave. That's what he did before - he believed what God said and the promise that God made. This time the word tells us that Abram believed God. Isn't it far better to believe God and not simply God's word or promises? Oh yes God's word and promises are good to believe in as well and to put

trust in for they will come to pass. But it is about believing God. Or if we read the King James – believing in God. Trusting him for everything.

Abram Believed in Spite of the Difficulties

And notice that faith goes beyond all boundaries. Abram believed in spite of the difficulties. He couldn't grasp how any of this would come to pass. How could he father a child at his old age? How could he and his offspring have all the land God talked of? How would it happen? Abram didn't need to know. He trusted God and he believed God in spite of the difficulties. Oh that we were like him.

God Blessed Abram on Account of His Faith

And then notice that God blessed Abram on account of his faith. Abram believed the Lord and he credited it to him as righteousness. The Lord blessed Abram for being faithful to him and for believing him. Abram was seen as righteous because of his faith and trust in God. And remember that none are righteous not even one the Bible says in the New Testament. We can only be saved and seen as righteous through the blood of Jesus. We cannot achieve this in our strength by doing our own thing trying to please God. Abram was seen as righteous here before God not on account of anything he did. Not because he was circumcised – for that is yet to come – not because he has done everything God's way – for he hasn't he has failed God and sinned against him. Abram is counted as righteous before God because of his faith and his belief in God.

Conclusion

So today we have considered hearing God's word on the path of faith. Abram heard God's word about his fear. God knew he was afraid. We cannot hide anything from God. God reassured him and gave him his peace, his protection and reminded him of his prize. We need fear nothing if we believe God and have faith in Jesus. Our God is an awesome God who can do anything.

We heard about God's word concerning Abram's future. God told him not to worry about it – for he was in control. God gave him his promise of a son, of offspring and of the land. The promise of a son was a simple straightforward word. The offspring and land were reminders for promises already given.

And then we saw Abram's response and faith. Abram believed God. Full stop. In spite of the difficulties Abram believed. And God counted him as righteous on account of that faith.

We need fear nothing in life certainly not the future. If we have put our faith and trust in Jesus we are saved and we will spend eternity with him. We need to listen for God's word and believe it. We should watch for distractions and listen for God. Hear him and obey him.

Forgetting God on the Path of Faith - Genesis 16:1-16

As we pick up the epic story of Abram and Sarai we discover today that they forgot God was with them and decided to do things on their own - and boy what trouble that caused them. We think time and time again that Abram has it sorted out - that he has come to learn that God is God and he is with Abram wherever he goes. In the last chapter we saw Abram hearing God's word and trusting it. Genesis 15:6 'Abram believed the Lord.' But today it is all about forgetting God on the path of faith. Let's see what we can learn in order that we keep following God and don't forget him.

The Reasons

The first thing we discover are the reasons for forgetting God. Abram and Sarai have lived in Canaan for 10 years now we learn in verse 3. They have seen God's hand at work in their lives in the return to Canaan and the settling in the land after Lot parted company with them. Abram has experienced God's powerful hand in battle against Kedorlaomer and then heard God's voice to him in a vision reminding him of the covenant he had made with him. God had promised Abram a son and heir from his own loins. He had promised him countless descendants. And he had promised him the land he was living in for all generations to come.

And yet despite all these promises from God, Abram and Sarai have doubts and are forgetting God.

Abram and Sarai's Impatience

The first reason for this is their impatience. Abram and Sarai are impatient. They want an heir. They want that son they are craving. Remember we thought last time about the culture of the day when children were expected from a marriage and particularly a son to carry on the family name. Husband and wife without children was a disaster in the day and people would look down on them for that fact. This worried Abram and Sarai.

It is now 10 years since God's promise to them, longer if you go back to the initial promise given in Genesis 12 as they prepared to leave Ur of the Chaldeans for the journey to the Promised Land. It has still not happened! They want a child more than anything. God even promised this to Abram again in chapter 15. They are getting fed up waiting. They want it to happen. This always reminds me of going on a journey with the kids - 5 minutes out of the Stirling and the question comes 'Are we there yet?' 'How much longer?'

Abram and Sarai's Incredulity (Doubt)

Not only are they fed up waiting but another reason for the problem now besetting them is their incredulity. Abram and Sarai are doubting God's promise. God promised us children but they haven't come. We have tried but it isn't working.

And Sarai says in verse 2 to Abram 'The Lord has kept me from having children.' He promised us kids but he is keeping me from having any. I doubt he will now.

And this incredulity comes despite the knowledge that God has helped them in the past, led and guided them in the past, blessed them richly in the past, and remained faithful to all his promises to them in the past. They have a loving God who has led them to the land he has promised them and who has blessed them with many servants and much livestock and goods. And yet they now doubt God will give them a child.

And this impatience and doubt is now giving them the excuse to try it on their own. We have waited long enough. There is another option here for us. And notice it is Sarai who comes up with this and Abram follows. There are shades of Adam and Eve here. And yet again both are culpable for the actions they are about to take. Verse 2 'The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her.'

And this was a done thing in the culture of the day as well. It was commonplace for a wife to come up with a surrogate mother for children and heirs if she herself could not fall pregnant. And so Sarai says enough is enough. I can't wait any longer. Let's get on with it.

Abram and Sarai's Incumbrance

And here we see another reason for the disaster brewing. Abram and Sarai's incumbrance. On that awful downward journey to Egypt - a previous occasion when they tried to sort things on their own - they returned with the tail between their legs but with more servants and livestock in tow. And one of those servants gained in that land was Hagar. And this incumbrance had remained with them and was serving Sarai as her maidservant. Sarai took this bit of baggage from that detour from God's path and was going to use her as their means of having children. Poor Hagar has been dragged into this awful scenario and we will see the result that has on her in a moment. The results of sin against God remain with us for time to come.

For now we see the reasons that helped Abram and Sarai forget about God. They have grown impatient in having children and are beginning to doubt he will even do it for them. And they also have baggage with them from Egypt in the shape of the maidservant of Sarai's.

Abram agreed to what Sarai said we read in verse 2 and he took Hagar and slept with her and she conceived. The very thing Abram had longed for years to happen has now happened. Hagar is pregnant with Abram's child. And notice the finger of blame almost point to Sarai here for rushing matters. The text reads that Sarai came up with the idea and spoke to Abram and that Abram agreed with what she said. Yes Sarai is impatient and yes she doubts God but Abram could have said no. He could

have taken his place as head of the household and told her they were going to wait on God. But he doesn't. In his desperation for an heir he takes Hagar and sleeps with her.

Abram rushed in to try and sort the problem rather than trusting in God's promises and waiting for God to work. God always keeps his word – we see that time and time again in Scripture. God is also a God of order who doesn't run to our timetables and schedules. He works things out in his time and in his sovereign plan. And God doesn't need our help to accomplish his will. He does at times use us and he calls us to be equipped and ready to fight the good fight, but he can and will do it on his own. God is able.

The Reactions

Those were the reasons for forgetting God but what of the reactions that follow. Hagar conceived a child. You would think that this would now be a happy time for everyone. But it isn't. Doing things out with God's time and plans, and taking matters into our hands is sin against God. And sin causes more problems rather than solutions.

Sarai Became Unreasonableness

Let's begin with Sarai. Sarai became unreasonable. Hagar had come to despise her mistress we read at the end of verse 4. There is more to it than this. Hagar is pregnant and has Abram's heir within her womb. She has one up on Sarai – she has become pregnant by Abram.

This gives her bragging rights and also a special place in the family circle. And she has no doubt realised this and begun to wind Sarai up. She may even be saying she doesn't want to be the maidservant any more but rather she should be looked after for she is with child. She may well despise Sarai for having her sleep with Abram. She may have had her eyes on her own man.

The upshot of this of course is that Sarai becomes unreasonable. She has had enough. She does not like the way her servant is treating her. And so she comes and moans to Abram. She blames him for the manner in which Hagar is responding to her. Has she really got such a short memory that she has forgotten it was she who went to Abram and suggested that he sleep with Hagar?

She also blames Hagar for all the problems – forgetting again that it was she and Abram's sinful detour to Egypt that resulted in them having Hagar in their household. She blames Hagar for having a boastful and despising attitude toward her. The truth is Sarai will be feeling upset for she could not conceive a child with Abram and this woman could.

And then Sarai brings God in on this as well, having forgotten all about him until now. May the Lord judge between you and me. Let's lay some blame on him as well. He hasn't kept his promise. We are very quick to lay the blame at someone else's front door rather than at our own – even when we are the ones in the wrong.

And this unreasonableness then turned to mistreating her servant Hagar – the end of verse 6. She had had enough. She wanted Hagar out of her sight and her life. She could not handle it any more.

Abram Became Unaccountable

And then we see Abram's reaction to all this. Abram became unaccountable. What has it to do with me he says? In verse 6 he says 'Your servant is in your hands, do with her whatever you think best.' She is your maidservant says Abram. He is blaming Sarai now. You get on with it. You sort it out.

Abram could have taken charge of the situation. He could have calmed Sarai down and explained the benefits of the events that occurred. He could have spoken with Hagar and reminded her of her place in the household and asked her to treat her mistress with more respect. He could have – but he didn't. It was nothing to do with him so he thought. I am not accountable for any of this. I think Abram forgot that he had taken Sarai's advice and slept with Hagar. I think he was forgetting he too has rushed God's plans and tried to do it on his own.

How many times do we plead unaccountable? That sin was nothing to do with me – blame him or her. It is the old Pilate syndrome – washing his hands and saying that Jesus' death was the responsibility of the crowds.

Hagar Became Unavailable

And what of Hagar? Well Hagar became unavailable. At the end of verse 6 we read that 'Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.' Hagar had had enough now. She had been asked to sleep with her mistress's husband which she dutifully did and she had fallen pregnant – just as her mistress and her husband had wanted. Now she was being badly treated. She was being blamed for all the problems. So she took off.

Hagar is found by an angel of the Lord on the road to Shur. Shur is between Canaan and Egypt. There is no doubt this lady was trying to get home to Egypt. She wanted to back to where she had come from. Some commentators reckon she was at least 7 days journey from Abram and Sarai's residence at this point. Pregnant and rejected she was making herself unavailable. You wanted this child – tough.

When we sin against God and against others we try blaming others. We become unreasonable and unaccountable. Then we try and hide to keep our shame from the eyes of others. These are all reactions to sin and forgetting God.

The Result

We have seen the reasons for forgetting God and the reactions to that, but what of the results.

A Son was Born

The angel of the Lord met Hagar on the road to Shur and blessed her. He extended God's grace to this woman and she humbly accepted it. Verse 9 'Go back to your mistress and submit to her...I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count.' I know the situation you find yourself in says the Lord but I am going to bless you through that. This angel even tells her the name she is to give to her son.

And so a son was born to Hagar and Abram. This would be one of his descendants. The son was born when Abram was 86 years old. And they named him Ishmael as God had directed. And notice the new title for God used by Hagar in verse 13 - El Roi - the God who sees me.

A Family was Burdened

Not only was a son born but a family was burdened. Ishmael and his descendants would cause problems for many years to come for Abram and Sarai and their other descendants. Sin has a way of permeating down through family lines and causing problem. Sin that is not dealt with, sin that is hidden away will go on causing heartache and pain for years to come.

I would just remind you that your sins, no matter how small and insignificant you may think them to be, always affect you and those around you! They poison your spirit, they sabotage your family and they hinder your walk with God. Many families are burdened this evening by the so-called hidden sins of those in that family! The answer to sin is to drag it into the light and to deal with it before God.

A Plan was Boosted

But God can bring good from every situation if he so desires. And so a plan was boosted. Even though this sin was accomplished by the will of men, it was going to be used for the glory of God. God would still bring a son and heir to Abram through the womb of Sarai. But his plans for future times would be boosted through this encounter.

The Arabs, descendants of Ishmael's, will feature heavily in God's plans for the end times. We do not know how that will happen but God has it all planned out. He had it all planned out thousands of years ago.

You see, nothing, even our sins, catches God by surprise. He can take the worst of our failures and use them for His glory. That is not an excuse for evil, but a reason to get

up and go on after we fall. Therefore, when sin is committed in your life, do not run from it. Rather, run to the Lord and find the cleansing and forgiveness He offers through grace.

Conclusion

We have covered much today from this passage and I suspect many of us have been hit by God's word this morning. We have seen a man and his wife forgetting God and trying to go it alone – again. Our sins catch us out time and time again. The devil knows our Achilles heel and will try to exploit that whenever he can. It is time to take our habitual sin and deal with it properly. Come to the foot of the cross and lay it before Jesus. Allow him to forgive you and then to give you the strength to say no to temptation next time round.

We have seen the reasons for the sin and then the reactions to it – bad reactions. And we saw briefly the results from that sin. Friends our sin and our reactions to it do not have to mark out our lives. We can rise above that through the grace of God. Come to Jesus this morning and lay all on the altar. Give him your sin and shame and let him rebuild your life. Let him mark you out as one who has forgotten God but one who has been restored and revitalised. Let us be like the boy and live for Jesus giving our best because we have not forgotten him.

A Covenant with God on the Path of Faith – Genesis 17:1-27

As we continue our journey with Abram we come to chapter 17 where God again makes a covenant with Abram. He is renewing the promises he made earlier and firming them up. He explains to Abram the covenant again, talks of his blessings and then of what he expects in return from Abram and his descendants. This morning we will consider a covenant with God on the path of faith. Let us be encouraged today that God has made us a promise he will keep as well – forgiveness of sin and eternity with him – and to be challenged to keep following him all of the time.

We begin chapter 17 learning that Abram is now 99 years old. The Lord appears to him again and introduces himself by a new title – El Shaddai – God Almighty. This divine name appears forty-eight times in the Old Testament, most often in the book of Job. It carries the idea of "Nourisher; Strengthener; Satisfier." It identifies God as being the "All-sufficient One". There is a tenderness in this name because the word "Shaddai" comes from the Hebrew word for "breast". Just as a baby receives strength and nourishment from its mother's breast, so the children of God receive all they need from the hand of the "Almighty God". I want you to note what this name reveals to us about God – the God of the covenant. It tells us that God is more than able to fulfil the covenant and keep the covenant promises because He is El-Shaddai, because He is God Almighty. The one making the covenant with Abram is the Lord God Almighty.

He goes on to say 'Walk before me and be blameless.' This is a key verse for us and I could linger on this all day but I want to cover the whole of the text so I won't - but I may come back to it one day. It is a key verse for as God gives the covenant to Abram again, reminding him of the promises he has made before, he explains to Abram what he wants in return. His longing is that Abram walk before him always and be blameless. He desires that Abram walk with him and talk with along life's narrow way. He longs for Abram to live such a good life that he will be blameless before him. And we will pick this up in the challenge near the end.

God Provides Abundant Blessings

God says to Abram in verse 2 'I will confirm my covenant between me and you and will greatly increase your numbers.' Here we see that God provides abundant blessings to his children. God wants the very best for us. That is why after all he created a perfect world - a world where he saw that everything was good. Unfortunately we have marred that world and it is no longer the way God wanted it to be. But that is why God has also created heaven - a perfect place where we will go and dwell with him forever and ever. And that place cannot be contaminated for when we enter heaven we will be made perfect for we will see Jesus as he is and be like him. God wants the best for his children so he abundantly blesses them.

In these first few verses we see that God provides abundant blessings for Abram. In verse 2 he has said 'I will greatly increase your numbers.' But he goes on to say an awful lot more. On hearing these first words and the new name of God - El Shaddai - Abram falls face down before God. He is in awe and wonder that the God of creation would want to speak to him and bless him. When we come before the God of all we too should be drawn to bow down before him.

That first blessing is reconfirmed in verse 4 'You will be the father of many nations.' I will give you children and off spring Abram. I will give you that son and heir you crave through Sarai. I will make your descendants as numerous as the grains of sand. I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. And alongside this blessing we see a name change for Abram. Verse 5 'No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations.' This is another confirmation that God is going to bless Abraham with offspring. So many offspring in fact that he will be the father of many nations.

El Shaddai goes on to say 'I will make you fruitful'. Again I think he is referring to the fruit of his loins - to many children. And yet there is the dual promise here for being fruitful he will grow many crops and harvest much. He will grow in stature and standing in the land. He will have all he needs to survive - and more beside. God is blessing him abundantly.

God continues by saying that this covenant he is making now with Abraham will be for all generations after Abraham. It is an everlasting covenant. And it is a covenant that says I will be your God (verse 7). There is nothing better in life for us than to realise that the God of the whole universe, the God who created all things, the God who holds the world in his hands, wants an intimate relationship with us individually. 1 John 3:1 reminds us to 'Behold what manner of love the father has bestowed upon us that we be called sons of God.' We are his children and he is our father. He longs to be our God. And so he says to Abraham here, having given him a new name, and renewing his promises to him, I am going to be your God. Abraham must be completely bowled over by now – I know I would be. But there is more!

God provides abundant blessings and so he goes on in verse 8 to remind Abraham of his covenant to give him the land of Canaan; this land where he is a stranger and alien in. This whole land is your possession now and indeed it will be for all your descendants after you. This is the land I told you about when you were in Ur of the Chaldeans. This is the land I led you into. This is the land you wandered out of trying to escape the famine. This is the land you returned to. This is yours Abraham. And it will be for all generations after you.

As God continues to remind Abraham of the covenant we skip a few verses and come to see Sarai getting a new name as well. Verse 15 'You are no longer to call her Sarai; her name will be Sarah. I will bless her and will surely give you a son by her. I will bless her so she will be the mother of nations; kings of people will come from her.' God's abundant blessing now is to fall on Sarah. She will bear the son and heir Abraham and Sarah crave and desire. God has promised this before and he is again reminding Abraham of that promise. My blessing will be upon her. And a reminder of the abundance of that blessing – she will be the mother of not just an heir but of nations; she will bear not just one king but kings of peoples. I will bless her abundantly.

At this we see Abraham falling face down before God again but this time he laughs as he falls. I'm a hundred and Sarah is 90 he says – how on earth can we have children at this age. Get serious. What Abraham forgets and does not realise is that he is talking to the God of all creation – to El-Shaddai, God Almighty who is able to do all things. And as he says all of this Abraham in his doubt asks that his son born to Hagar, Ishmael, might live under God's blessing.

God reminds Abraham again that he is the Lord Almighty and that he will give Abraham and Sarah that son. A name is mentioned here for them to call the son. He is to be called Isaac. And God says to Abraham that this covenant will be established with Isaac after Abraham and will be an everlasting covenant. All generations after you will be blessed.

God provided abundant blessings to Abraham. And he provides abundant blessings to us. He watches over us and guards our lives. He gives us all we need to survive in life: food, clothes, shelter, and a reasonable measure of health. But there is more besides. God blesses us with new life through his son Jesus. He blesses us with salvation – full and free – through the blood of the lamb on the cross of Calvary. And he will bless us with eternal life through the resurrection of his son into glory. One day soon we will live in a place where there is no more pain or sorrow, mourning or sadness. We will be with God in heaven for all eternity – what a prospect – what a blessing!

God Requires Complete Devotion

In the midst of reminding Abraham of his covenant and his promises, we learn that God requires complete devotion from Abraham in return. If we skip back to verse 9 we learn in this mid section of the text what it is requires and how he sets things up so that people will remember. 'As for you, you must keep my covenant.' What I am about to tell you I want you to keep. This is a sign of your promise to live for me and to walk before me and to be blameless.

And notice this is not simply for Abraham to keep, it is also for all his descendants after him. I am setting my covenant up for you to bless you and all generations after you. In return I would like you and all of them to walk before me and be blameless. I love you greatly says the Lord and I would like you to reciprocate that love. I long for us to have a deep and close relationship.

The promise from Abraham is not simply to walk before God and be blameless – although that is going to be hard enough to keep. With the temptations that we face in life it can be hard to keep on the straight and narrow path all of the time. Yet that has to be our desire. Abraham had already given into temptation before. He had wandered off to Egypt trying to sort his own problems, leaving God out of the equation. Then again in the previous chapter he listens to Sarah and sleeps with Hagar – once more trying to sort the problem of an heir himself. Abraham is not blameless as we have seen and will see again before the end of his life. And he didn't always walk with God. But he did come back. He recognised his need of God and he had a desire to walk with him.

Here in verse 10 we are introduced to circumcision. This is to be a sign of their relationship with God. This act done to every male will be a sign of the promise between God and them. This practice is to be the sign and seal of the covenant that God is making. The act of circumcision was to become a physical expression of faith which distinguished those who belonged to the Lord from those who don't. If Abraham and his descendants were to believe in God and to trust him to keep his promises they were to act on faith and use this sign to show that.

And notice this is not some racial marker either as some would suggest. Yes it does mark out those who belong to God from those who don't in the time period we are looking at but it is not a racial thing. For we notice in verse 12 that this act is to be done to all generations to come from Abraham but also anyone born into his household or bought with money from a foreigner. Any servants Abraham has – including those brought from Ur and then from Haran, and then also from Egypt, as well as any more he will acquire – fit into this bracket as well. They are to be circumcised. It is not a marker made because of race but is a physical sign showing faith in the promises of God. And the command to have this done is strong for in verse 14 we learn that any male not circumcised will be cut off from his people for he has broken God's covenant.

The complete devotion God required from Abraham was to be in the sign of circumcision as well as in walking with God and being blameless. We no longer need worry about the sign of circumcision for we have a new sign of God's promise and covenant. We have the sign of the cross. When Jesus died on the cross of Calvary he replaced every sacrificial offering system in place. Jesus died once and for all that we might be saved. That we might be rescued from our sin and that we might enter back into a right relationship with God. The cross is our reminder of God's promise of forgiveness – complete and free. But a reminder also that we should give our all in devotion before him.

God's desire is that we all walk before him and be blameless. His desire is that we are completely devoted to him and live for him 24/7. He wants our whole life to be one lived in worship before him. As we sleep, as we eat, as we work, as we play we ought to be living for him. Giving him our all. Are you completely devoted to God?

God Fulfils His Promises

God provides abundant blessings yet he requires complete devotion. In all of this talk of covenant and promises we ought to remember that God fulfils his promises. Abraham has already been blessed with much. God promised him he would lead him into a new land – and God did. God has promised Abraham a son and heir – and numerous descendants besides. Abraham already has a son in Ishmael but he will have one via his wife Sarah in one year's time. That's what God promises Abraham in verse 21. And as we will learn in a couple of weeks God kept that promise and Abraham got his son and heir and called him Isaac as God commanded him.

We have discovered already God's faithfulness but we will discover more of it as we continue this series 'following in the footsteps of faith'. God keeps his promises to Abraham. And we know since we have the Scriptures that God's promises are fulfilled for Abraham. He does indeed have many descendants – more numerous than can be counted. And he does inherit the land that God has given them. Yes there are problems down through the years but God's promises are fulfilled.

And there is the encouragement for us. God always fulfils his promises. That means that he has forgiven us through the blood of Jesus. Salvation is ours. And more than that – heaven awaits us and God will fulfil that promise too.

God Expects Your Faithfulness

And so we move from God fulfilling his promises to learn that God expects your faithfulness. God's desire is that we live with him and for him. In this passage he has expressed his love to Abraham and reminded him of his covenant. In return God has shown Abraham what he requires of him – complete devotion. And the promise is there that God fulfils his promises. Now to conclude the chapter we see Abraham being faithful to God.

On the very day he received this reminder and these instructions we read in verse 23 that Abraham and every male in his household, those born into it and those bought into it, were circumcised. Abraham was 99 when he was circumcised. God expects our faithfulness and he got it that day from Abraham. Abraham did as God asked. And he would go on to live for God and walk before him. He was not always blameless though. As we will see temptation came and he would fall again. The great reminder here is that we all fall as well – we all sin. But is faithful and just to forgive us when we confess our sins before him.

God expects our faithfulness. He wants us to walk with him and to live for him. He has given us all his love – and he has given us it in the most dramatic fashion through his son and his death on the cross. All he wants in return is our love back. Do you love him? Are you living for him?

Conclusion

A covenant with God on the path of faith. We have been reminded that God blesses us abundantly, that he requires our complete devotion, that he fulfils his promises and that he expects our faithfulness. SO what about this as a commitment statement.

I am part of the "Fellowship of the Unashamed." I have Holy Spirit power. The die has been cast. I've stepped over the line. The decision has been made. I am a disciple of His.

I won't look back, let up, slow down, back away, or be still.

My past is redeemed, my present makes sense, and my future is secure.

I am finished and done with low living, sight walking, small planning, smooth knees, colourless dreams, tame visions, mundane talking, chintzy giving, and dwarfed goals!

I no longer need pre-eminence, prosperity, position, promotions, plaudits, or popularity.

I don't have to be right, first, tops, recognized, praised, regarded, or rewarded.

I now live by presence, learn by faith, love by patience, live by prayer, and labour by power.

My face is set, my gait is fast, my goal is heaven, my road is narrow, my way is rough, my companions few, my guide reliable, my mission clear.

I cannot be bought, compromised, detoured, lured away, turned back, diluted, or delayed.

I will not flinch in the face of sacrifice, hesitate in the presence of adversity, negotiate at the table of the enemy, ponder at the pool of popularity, or meander in the maze of mediocrity.

I won't give up, shut up, let go, or slow up until I've preached up, prayed up, paid up, stored up, and stayed up for the cause of Christ.

I am a disciple of Jesus.

I must go till He comes, give till I drop, preach till all know, and work till He stops.

And when He comes to get His own, He'll have no problems recognizing me. My colours will be clear.

That's the consecrated life! That's living in covenant with God! Before El-Shaddai, within the context of grace and blessing, does this describe you?

Walking with God on the Path of Faith - Genesis 18:1-33

As we begin Genesis 18 Abraham is found sitting outside his tent near the great trees of Mamre. It is a hot day and right in the middle of the day – the hottest point Abraham is having a breather by his tent. He is no doubt sheltering by the entrance to the tent, trying to avoid the sun. You and I know what that is like if we have been on holiday. The middle of the day is the hottest time and it is not pleasant to be sitting in the sun at this stage. You want to be inside in the shade and hopefully in the air conditioning and cool. You may even if you are like me want to be resting at that point of the day – taking time for a little siesta. That is why many of the Mediterranean countries have siesta time.

As Abraham is there resting and sheltering he hears movement or perhaps sees something moving. As he looks up he sees three men standing nearby. And note what

he does. He doesn't ignore them like the church folk in the story at the start. He doesn't simply talk to them from where he is. He doesn't simply carry on with his rest in the shade. Abraham gets up and hurries out to meet them.

A Servant Who Gives His/Her Best

And here is where we learn our first lesson this morning. Here we have a servant who gives his best. And that is what the Lord longs for all of us who are his – that we be servants who give our best.

Abraham leaves behind his shelter and heads back into the sun and the heat of the day. He hurries out to meet these visitors. And then notice what he does – he bows low to the ground to greet them. He goes out of his way to welcome them and to make them feel at ease. He shows them respect by bowing. Now I think it is fair to say that Abraham has no idea who these men are. He comes to recognise over the time that they are present with him that the Lord is speaking to him. This is a case of theophany in Scripture. A time when there is a divine manifestation or appearance before a human being. God is present in human form before Abraham. But at this early stage Abraham does not know this.

And notice Abraham's next move. He addresses them as 'my lord'. This is a customary respectful address given to a visitor during this time period. Abraham welcomes the guests and wants to serve them and give his best for them. He offers them hospitality. He doesn't do this grudgingly or out of a sense of duty, but because he wants to. He has received much from the Lord now he wants to give to others as they have need.

Abraham says 'If I have found favour in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by.' He wants to serve them. He wants them to spend time with him. He longs to bless them with his kindness. He desires to share what he has with them. The Lord has blessed him greatly; he longs to bless others in return.

Abraham offers them hospitality. He offers them water to wash their feet – a custom in the day as their feet would be dirty and sandy after walking in the parched lands in either bare feet or open sandals. He also offered them rest in the shade under the tree. He recognised how hot it was and that shelter from the sun was important. And then he offered them food. All of these designed to bring them refreshment before they resumed their journey. Abraham was offering hospitality and giving of his best to them.

And notice it is his best he gives to them. The men accept Abraham's offer and rest under the tree. Abraham rushes in doors, well into the tent anyway, and asks Sarah to bake some bread for the visitors. He suggests she use the fine flour – probably the best flour they had to bake the bread. Abraham then runs outside and selected a

choice, tender calf to be slaughtered and used for the meal. Notice he does not choose just any old calf – there is a temptation always to grab the first one that comes in the rush to prepare for the visitors. He could also have chosen the worst in the herd because it is only visitors he is feeding. But not Abraham. He wants to give his best. In order to do that he chooses the calf that looks to be the most tender and gives it to his servant to prepare. Abraham also chose some curds and milk to set out before the guests as well.

Abraham acts as a servant before these visitors and gives them his best. His desire is to bless them and let them get on their way. Here is a question for us – do we always give of our best? When someone appears on our doorstep what is our response? In Edinburgh it would be a statement along the lines of ‘You’ll have had your teat then.’ Whereas in Glasgow you will more likely get ‘You’ll be staying for your tea then.’

And when we do invite someone unexpected in what do we offer them – the leftovers from yesterday’s dinner – or the best we have out of the cupboard, fridge or freezer? The message in this passage is that we should be giving our best.

And being a servant and giving our best does not just rest with giving away our food or our money – it must involve giving the best of our time as well. The Lord is looking for a servant who gives his/her best.

God Who Gives the Grace You Need

It is at this stage in the encounter with these three visitors that Abraham begins to hear God speaking to him. One of these men is the Lord. And in this next part of the text we learn that it is God who gives the grace you need. Abraham watched as they ate and then after eating they asked him where Sarah his wife was. Sarah had obviously not come out to greet the guests. Even although she baked the bread and probably oversaw the preparation of the meal, she remained in the tent. This I find quite strange. You would have thought she would have wanted to greet the guests as well. Yet the culture of the day may have prevented that.

Abraham informs them she is in the tent. And it is here we hear the Lord speaking. He comes and reminds Abraham of his promise to him of a son and heir. Verse 10 ‘I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah your wife will have a son.’ God gives Abraham the grace he needs to keep going and not lose hope of a son and heir. He reminds him again of his promise. Abraham recognises he is getting on in years and so is Sarah and he struggles to comprehend they can conceive a child. Yet the Lord gives him grace to endure the situation they are in.

Sarah, being a good wife, is eavesdropping at the entrance to the tent. She may not have wanted to go out and meet these guests but she was interested to hear what

they were saying. And so she heard the words to Abraham about a child. Despite a promise here clearly reminiscent of God's word to Abraham previously, Sarah reacts with the same incredulity as her husband has done. She laughs to herself and thought 'After I am worn out and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?'

Sarah was not thinking of a divine miracle here but more of the normal working of life that said she was too old now to bear children. So just as Abraham laughed so did Sarah. But God's grace was at work and was about to be given to Abraham and Sarah. Verse 13 'The Lord said to Abraham "Why did Sarah laugh and say 'will I really have a child now that I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord? I will return to you at the appointed time next year and Sarah will have a son.'"

God's grace is shown in the response. Nothing is impossible for God – all things are possible. I am the one who made the heavens and the earth. I am the one who sustains the world. I am your God. I can and will do this for you. Notice that this is not so much a question as a rhetorical statement. Of course everything is possible for God. And here he promises once more, this time with a specific time frame, to come and give Sarah and Abraham a son.

There are many situations that we encounter in life when we think there is no way out of them or that nothing can be done to improve things. We are so wrong. With God all things are possible. He can cure that incurable disease. He can find that job that is so hard to find. He can restore that relationship that has gone so far off the rails. He can pick us up out of the deepest pit and restore our feet on to solid ground.

But remember this – he may not take us out of every difficult and trying situation, and he may not stop temptation from coming our way. Life is not always easy. But he will give us the grace we need to endure every situation and circumstance.

God Who Requires Obedience to His Word

We have noted already that God is looking for a servant who gives his/her best and that it is God who gives us the grace we need. The next lesson to learn from this encounter is that it is God who requires obedience to His word.

The men, having been refreshed and fed, get up and move on in their journey. Abraham wanders with them as they head towards Sodom to see them on their way. It is at this point we get an insight into the Lord's mind. He is going to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah on account of their sin. And yet he is not sure about hiding it from Abraham. He has promised to make Abraham a great and mighty nation. And notice these words in verse 19 'For I have chosen him so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just, so that the Lord will bring about for Abraham what he has promised.'

The Lord has called Abraham to teach and direct his children – to bring them up well. He has implored him to teach him the Lord's ways. He has called him to tell them what is right and what is wrong so that they might walk God's way. He has called him to teach them about him and his love for them.

And notice this is not simply for his children but also for Abraham's whole household. He is to direct them all to live God's way – to do what is right and just. And God requires obedience to that word. He expects Abraham to do this for he has chosen him.

And we are called today to be obedient to God's word as well. We are called first to live for Jesus ourselves. Individually we are expected to obey God's word and apply it to our own lives. And I want to encourage you, as I regularly do, but maybe more explicitly today. Keep reading God's word and learning from it. Keep coming to church and learning together as we worship him as well. And once you have heard the word on a Sunday go home and read the passage again. Take what you have heard and make sure it does come from the text. Check it out for yourself. And then allow God's word to churn over in your heart and mind. Ask him to show you how to apply it to your life and then get on with following God's word.

We are also called to be obedient to God's word by directing and teaching our families as well. We are to bring up our children in the way of the Lord. We are to teach them about his love and goodness. We are to teach them about his commands and instructions for good godly living. We are to share together as husband and wife from God's word. God requires our obedience to his word.

A Servant Who Shows Concern for God's People

And notice that disobedience to God's word either by wilfully doing the opposite or by ignoring what God is saying brings with it punishment. The Lord decides to tell Abraham what is on his heart and what he is about to do. Verse 20 – The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous. God is going down to check it out and deal with it. And Abraham picks up from this that if their sins are so bad that God will destroy them and wipe them away. It is important to be following God's word.

But notice that Abraham picks this up and we see a servant who shows concern for God's people. The men turned and headed for Sodom but Abraham remained standing before God. He approaches God – that is he goes closer to God so the two of them can talk closely. And in these coming verses we see Abraham showing concern for the good people, for the righteous people who may be left in that city that God is about to destroy. Abraham wants the best for them. He longs that they be saved and not suffer. He is sufficiently concerned to plead with God.

There is a reminder here for us that it is right and proper to come before God in prayer and plead for God's people. To plead for safety, for health, for strength, and for help in times of trouble. As we see Abraham's concern here we should note that his prayer before God is four things.

Prayer that is Reverent

The prayer is reverent. He addresses God respectfully. He acknowledges that God is God and he is the righteous judge. It is up to him what he does and what he does will be right. And yet Abraham pleads for the people before God. Verse 25 'Far be it from me! Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?' He knows God is in charge and is reverent before him.

Verse 29 'Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord, though I am but dust and ashes.' Abraham recognises his condition and position before God. He is nothing but a created being. And God is the creator of the universe and everything in it. And yet still he comes reverently before God. And Abraham continues his pleading and as he pleads he remembers his position before God and how great God is.

Prayer that is Specific

Abraham's prayers are also specific. He is not being general here. He is not beating about the bush. He has something on his heart and he longs to share it with God. He has concern for God's people and he wants God to know that specifically. Verse 23 'Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? What if there are fifty righteous people?' And then getting an affirmation from The Lord that he will save those fifty, Abraham is specific again in verse 28. 'What if the number of the righteous is five less than fifty?'

And Abraham's keeps going specifically until he gets down to ten righteous people.

Prayer that is Persistent

His prayer is also persistent. He keeps going and on showing his concern for others and pleading before God for them. What if 50? What if 45? What if forty? What if thirty? What if twenty? What if ten? Abraham is not one for giving up. He genuinely wants to help others so nothing is going to stop him. He is persistent in praying for them.

Prayer that is Bold

And notice that is prayer is also bold. He recognises he is speaking to Almighty God – to El-Shaddai. He knows he has been bold – twice he says 'Now that I have been so bold as to speak to the Lord.' Sometimes it requires boldness to go before the God of the whole universe to pray and plead for something that is close to our hearts. Abraham was bold enough to ask God to change his mind about destroying Sodom and Gomorrah on account of a few righteous people being found there.

A good servant will show concern for others and will do that primarily by praying to God on their behalf. When we come praying we should come reverently, remembering we are coming before Almighty God, the maker of heaven and earth, king of the whole universe. We should come nevertheless praying specifically for people and situations that trouble us. God wants to deal with the specifics. Name the problem, name the people. We ought also to be persistent in our prayer life – don't just ask once and give up. Keeping asking and asking, pleading with God for people. He doesn't mind and he will listen. And we must remember to come boldly before God. Be bold and be strong said God to Joshua when he called him to take over from Moses. We have to be bold when approaching God and asking for others.

A servant shows concern for others and not just for him/herself. There are needy people all around us here in Cornton. Those struggling with life. Struggling to cope with situations out with their control. Fighting to stay in their homes. Fighting to find a home. We can stand beside them and help them. There are those struggling with the pain of loss, deeply missing a loved one who has passed away. We can comfort them and be near them. There are those coping with illness and pain. We can stand with them and help them. We can make meals for them. We can do their shopping for them. We can clean up for them. We can visit them and cheer them up. There are lots of needs – and lots of ways for us to show genuine concern for others.

Conclusion

To walk with God on the path of faith we have to give our all for him. Abraham learned to give his best in service and we learn that from him. We can give our all and our best in serving others and helping others. We learned that God gives us the grace we need to deal with situations and life. Abraham received grace to keep going for that child he longed for. God gives us the grace to live life. We also noted that God requires obedience to his word. May we be a people who read, study and learn from his word and then live by that word. And lastly let us be reminded that we should show concern for God's people. God longs for us to help others and to stand alongside others. Our best example of that today is the kids at the school who wanted to stand with us a church in the face of vandalism. They showed concern by raising money to help. May we walk with God on the path of faith, living for him in all we do.

The Battle with Sin on the Path of Faith – Genesis 20:1-18

Déjà vu. Same day all over again. Same thoughts and feelings. Same bad attitude. In life we endure the battle with sin. And unfortunately we end up having a sense of déjà vu sometimes for we commit the same sins time after time. We don't learn our lesson. We give in to the same temptation every time it faces us. And it is that battle with sin – with habitual sin in particular that we have to deal with.

Abraham has a problem with déjà vu. He has a problem with sin as well. We well remember the account of Abraham and Sarah leaving Canaan – the land of God's

promise – during the famine to head to the well watered grounds of Egypt. He decided to go it alone and sort things out himself.

On that downward path Abraham and Sarah agreed that they would tell everyone they were brother and sister – not a total lie we learned but a lie none the less. Here we are over twenty years later and Abraham is about to commit the same sin all over again. As we read the passage before us we get a sense of déjà vu. We have read it before. We have encountered it before. The important lesson today is to realise that there is a battle with sin on the path of faith. Abraham came across this battle and we do as well. Abraham was now nearly one hundred and yet still he is a sinner. Abraham has been walking with God for over twenty years and still he sins. I am glad that Abraham is a little like me – he sins over and over. He falls with the same sin time after time. I'm sure you are not any different to me. We try our hardest but we still sin. Let's see what we can learn together from God's Word to aid us in our battle with sin on the path of faith. And let us take encouragement today that there is hope – we can get through this – but we have to learn to rely on God.

Temptation to Sin is Always Around Us

The first thing to note is that temptation to sin is always around us. It doesn't disappear. As we begin chapter 20 Abraham and the family have moved on. They are now in the region of the Negev – between the Promised Land and Egypt. They are in a city called Gerar. This is a Philistine city around ten miles south of Gaza. For a while Abraham stayed there. He is in a different place now but the temptation is still the same. The temptation is always around him.

As they have come to a new place Abraham doesn't want to be killed or have any trouble so he encourages Sarah to pretend to be his sister again. We remember of course that this is not totally untrue for as we will read in verse 12 of this chapter she is actually the daughter of his father although not of his mother. He married his half-sister. And so Abraham said of his wife Sarah 'She is my sister.' He told the people in Gerar that's who Sarah was.

The same temptation came back to Abraham. He was scared of what would happen. So what does he do? He sins again. He lies again. He deceives again. Oh how like him we are at times as well falling for the same temptations over and over. Satan knows our Achilles heel. He knows our weakest spot – and so he tempts us in a similar way all the time.

And notice too that this has happened to Abraham after walking with God for over twenty years. He still has not learned to totally depend on God and to avoid temptation and to say no to sin. And one of the reasons for this is this habitual sin. We read this passage and very quickly say 'he's at it again' thinking of course that this is the second time he has done this. And yet there is a little clue in verse 13 that

this is not simply the second time this has happened although it is only the second occasion we have read of it. Verse 13 'And when God had me wander from my father's household I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me "He is my brother.'" Everywhere new they went to it would appear they carried out the same routine. Sarah would call Abraham brother and the two of them would act like brother and sister. This way no trouble came upon them... Well it did sometimes. Like here today.

Habitual sin gets us down time after time as well. If we do not deal with it properly Satan uses it to attack us and invariably we fall time and again. In order to begin to deal with habitual sin we must recognise that temptation is always around us.

Never Stop Trusting God to Take Care of You

From there we remember to never stop trusting God to take care of us. This was Abraham's problem. Back in chapter 12 living in Canaan – the Promised Land God had led him into a famine struck. Abraham did not believe that God was going to take care of him so he hatched a plan of his own. Instead of trusting God he headed with his entire household down to Egypt. He walked away from God and did things in his own strength. Hence the need for the first lie, the first sin. As he entered Egypt he found need to lie about Sarah.

And now twenty odd years later he has moved to a new area and he goes to repeat the sin from before. We are not told why Abraham left the land where he was. Perhaps though it was because of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Perhaps he thought that the whole area would be burned up as the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. And indeed in the previous chapter we learn in verse 25 that the entire plain including those living in those cities were overthrown and destroyed. I doubt it reached the place Abraham had been staying and yet we don't know. If Abraham thought this then once more we see him not believing that God will save him. He didn't trust that God would keep him safe in the place he was.

At this point Abraham again has given up on trusting God. The important lesson for us with regard to the battle of sin is to never stop trusting God to take care of us. He provides us with everything we need. He gives us shelter, food and clothing. He provides for our every need. In Matthew 6 we read the whole passage talking of worrying about food and clothes and shelter. Read Matthew 6:25-34. Jesus is saying that God will take care of us so we should simply trust him.

And God knows how much temptation we can handle and he will step in and help us out. He will give us the strength to fight through temptation. In 1 Corinthians 10:13 we read 'No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are

tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.' It is important to never stop trusting God to take care of us.

Never Put Yourself in the Place of Temptation

The next thing to remember is to never put yourself in the place of temptation. Abraham had walked away from the place where God had him stay. Back at the end of chapter 13 as Abraham and Lot separated God led him to the land he was giving him. He told Abraham to lift his eyes and to look. And the land Abraham saw was the land God was giving Abraham and all his descendants. And Abraham settled under the great tress of Mamre at Hebron.

And yet after the visit of the Lord and the angels, and the knowledge that came that Sodom and Gomorrah would be destroyed, Abraham took fright and wanted to run. So he left the place which God had given him and headed towards Egypt. Abraham was putting himself in the place of temptation all over again. He was moving away from God and when you move away from God your focus moves from God to something else. And at this Abraham faced terrible temptation.

Once he placed himself in the place of temptation the inevitable happened. He succumbed to temptation and told the same lie all over again. 'She is my sister.' Abraham sinned against God once more. If we are ever to break the habit of sin we have to recognise that temptation to sin is all around us. And to deal with that we have to learn never to put ourselves in the place of temptation. Run from it. Run to God and keep our eyes fixed firmly on him.

For a man with a problem before of pornography he must watch when he walks into a newsagent. The place of temptation is the top shelf! He must keep his eyes away from there. For the woman whose problem is foul and abusive language at the girl's night out, the best thing to do is avoid the girls night out. Go somewhere else with one friend who is not like that.

We should avoid the place of temptation. We should be like Joseph - Genesis 39. Potiphar's wife was making advances towards him. He kept saying no. When she trapped him one day he ran away 39:12. Friends, we must never let down our guard! May we never come to think that we have arrived at a place where we cannot sin, or where we are free from the temptation to commit a particular sin. As sure as you let down your guard, you are headed for trouble.

A Sinful Choice Harms Others

We have to recognise when it comes to sin that there are consequences to our sin. A sinful choice harms others as well as us. A sinful decision made by you and I can cause other people all kinds of trouble. Abraham wanted to protect himself and Sarah. He

did not want to die in strange place. He lived in fear of his life. So he made a sinful choice. And that sinful choice affected him but it also affected others.

You Could Cause Others to Sin

Making a sinful choice you could cause others to sin. And this was true of Abraham's choice. Abraham said Sarah was his sister so the king of Gerar, Abimelech, sent for her and took her to his harem. This king Abimelech was probably the father or grandfather of the Abimelech encountered by Abraham's son Isaac later on in chapter 26. This king thought Sarah was Abraham's sister, thought she was unmarried, so thought he was able to take her into his harem. He was acting in good faith. And yet he was about to sin because of Abraham. Abraham had lied to him and deceived him. Abraham had made him believe Sarah was his sister rather than his wife. This king was about to sleep with Sarah and commit adultery. Abraham's choice could cause him to sin.

And this was the same back in chapter 12 as Pharaoh took Sarah into his harem after a similar conversation with Abraham. The cause of his sin was Abraham. And he too was innocent yet became afflicted because of Abraham's lies and deceit. Abraham's sinful choice caused him harm.

And here in chapter 20 Abraham's sinful choice could cause this king to sin. And yet this king is innocent and has been deceived. When God comes to him at night the king pleads to God that he is innocent and has a clear conscience (verse 5). And God recognises this and says in verse 6 'Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her.'

You Could Cause Others to Die

Not only could we cause others to sin but you could cause others to die. Sinning against God brings with it a penalty. Here in the passage God comes to the king in verse 3 and says 'You are as good as dead because of the women you have taken; she is a married woman.' Now of course you good biblical scholars will know that the sin of adultery with its specific punishment is not detailed until later in the Bible. At this stage there is no written commandment or law detailing the sin of adultery. The people know it is wrong and do not practice it but we have not heard of the penalty should they. But the penalty later detailed is a stoning to death. We thought a few months back of the adulteress woman in John's gospel who was brought to Jesus by the religious leaders who were trying to trick Jesus. They wanted to stone her to death for her sin. And according to the law this was the correct course of action.

And death is the result of sin. It is the punishment for sin. Jesus died on the cross of Calvary bearing your sins and mine. He died on account of those sins. Romans 3:23

'The wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus his Son.' Jesus died that we might live.

But here is the problem. If our choices cause others to sin they will die. Sinners who have not come to confess with their lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in him will die. They will not enter heaven to spend eternity there. They will descend to hell and die. Our actions can have grave consequences on other people. In the battle with sin we should consider others and what will happen to them when we make sinful choices.

A Righteous Choice Helps Others

Let us not simply consider the negative. Let's consider the positive. A sinful choice harms others but a righteous choice helps others. A righteous choice can keep others from sinning and it can also point them to God. When we make righteous choices we have the ability to point people to Jesus when they too can be saved.

You Must Confess Your Sin

To make a righteous choice you must confess your sin. After God had spoken to Abimelech at night, the king woke the next morning and sent for Abraham. He was deeply concerned about the goings on and so were his officials. They were very much afraid we read in verse 8. What have you done to us? Why did you do this?

And Abraham then tried to offer his excuses. Isn't that what we do when we are caught out? It wasn't my fault - it was his! Abraham explained that he was afraid they would kill him on account of his wife. He also explained that they were really step brother and sister as well as husband and wife. He made his excuses. Again perhaps not a righteous choice.

But after the king brings gifts to Abraham and offers Sarah silver to cover the offence against her (verse 16), Abraham prays to God for the king and his household to be healed. We are not told what the words of the prayer were but they will have involved confession of sin. Abraham realised he had done wrong. He realised he had sinned against God.

In making righteous choices we first come and confess our sin before God. He knows what we have done wrong but he has promised to forgive us if we confess our sins before him. He will forgive us because of Jesus' death on the cross in our place. Jesus paid the penalty for our sin. We are called to come and confess our sins to God though.

You Must Correct Your Influence

In making righteous choices you must correct your influence as well. Abraham has influenced the king and the people around him in a wrong way. He has sinned against

God and caused them all kinds of problems because of that. The king's wife and his slave girls had all had their wombs closed on account of Abraham's lies (verse 17-18).

Abraham corrected his influence by confessing his sin and then by praying for the king. Correcting his influence caused the Lord to open the wombs of these girls again. The king was cleared and allowed to live. Correcting his influence helped others. Correcting his influence also helped Sarah. God had promised them a child and this would not happen whilst they lived as brother and sister. They were back together now as husband and wife. Correcting his influence allowed Sarah to go on to conceive and bear Abraham the son he craved.

When we sin it is good to deal with it and correct it. We do that by confessing our sin and asking God to forgive us and rebuild our lives. And then we start to influence people correctly. We live for Jesus and point others to him. We walk with God and are blameless before him. Instead of putting people off with our double standards and sinful lives, we can show others God's grace and mercy by living fully for him.

Conclusion

This is some passage. We see clearly Abraham's habitual sin problem. And we notice the trouble it caused others. The battle with sin on the path of faith is a real one and a troublesome one. It affects each one of us - and the one who says it doesn't I'm afraid is only deceiving themselves.

We have to recognise that the temptation to sin is always around us. Satan loves to trip us up and make us fall down. He loves to make us sin against God. And he knows our weaknesses. That is why the same is trips us up time and again. In order to deal with sin we should never stop trusting God to take care of us. He loves us and we are his children. He will look after us and he can and will give us the strength to overcome temptation. We should also never put ourselves in the place of temptation. When we know there is something or somewhere that always causes us to sin we should avoid that like the plague. We should seek to stay well clear.

In dealing with the battle with sin we must also recognise that our sinful choices harm others. Our choices cause others to sin and ultimately that means it would cause them to die if they haven't come to put their faith and trust in Jesus. And here it is important to emphasise again that God can deal with our sin and indeed he already has. His son Jesus died once and for all to save us. All we need do is put our faith and trust in him. Have you confessed your sin and confessed Jesus as Lord of your life? Do it now.

And of course we can recognise that a righteous choice helps others. We must confess our sin and correct our influences. When we walk blamelessly before God we show others a great example. When we fall foul to sin along the way we can cause

them all sorts of harm. Let's recognise that temptation is always around us and let us make every effort to accept the forgiveness Jesus offers, confess our sins, and live for him all day every day. Let's break the cycle of habitual sin.

Trusting God on the Path of Faith - Genesis 21:1-34

Trust is always the question. In Proverbs 3:5-6 we read 'Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.'

Trust. Abraham and Sarah have trusted God and then they have not trusted God and then they have trusted God again. Last week we remembered the battle with sin we face on the path of faith and saw how once more the temptation to sin drew Abraham away from trusting in God. This week we are about to see the results of trusting God in their life on their walk of faith.

Trust God's Word

It begins for us with the reminder that we ought to trust God's word. God always keeps his word. He never promises something and then does not keep it. We see that time and again in Scripture. And so we learn that we can always trust God's word.

Now this had been difficult for Abraham and Sarah. So much has happened to them during these last twenty odd years. At God's request they left their home land and headed towards the land God was going to give them. They trusted that God, whom they probably hadn't known up until this point in an intimate and close way, would take them to the place he had promised them. They got half way and arrived in Haran. And there they stopped. Trusting God's word meant they should go on but they stopped there.

Eventually they moved on and God led them into the Promised Land. They settled there for a while but then a famine came. Now did they trust God's word that this land was there's and for all their descendants after them. It seems not for they left and fled to Egypt trying to escape the famine. They did not trust God's word. They came back out of Egypt and settled in the land God had planned for them.

God made promises to them - promises about a son and heir and many offspring besides, and so many descendants that they would not be able to count them. Did they trust in God's word? Not entirely for Sarah eventually said this isn't happening Abraham, go sleep with my maidservant Hagar and have a son and heir by her. And he did and they did have a son Ishmael. And yet God came back again and reiterated his promise of a son and heir via Sarah. And this time a specific timescale - one year from now. Trust God's word - maybe.

Then there was the trouble with Sodom and Gomorrah and Abraham was tempted once more to forget about God and God's word to him and he fled to the land where

Abimelech was king and we noted last week the struggles with the battle of sin on the path of faith. Trusting God's word. It sounded easy to do but we see how hard it has actually been for Abraham to do. And if it is hard for Abraham, then it is surely hard for us as well. Abraham had the benefit of God keeping his word to him and we have so much more for we have the Scriptures which show us how time and again down through the ages God has given his word and kept it. We can trust God's word. And Abraham and Sarah were about to see again that they could trust God's word.

He Always Does as He Says

Why could they trust God's word? For he always does as he says. He has promised Abraham and Sarah sons and heirs. He has promised many descendants. He has promised Abraham a son within a year. Sarah has heard God say she will bear a son within a year. They both laugh, regretting that afterwards. And here a year down the line comes the fulfilment once more of God's word and promises. He always does as he says. Verse 1 'Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah'. Note he was gracious. She did not deserve it. She and Abraham had tried to take matters into their own hands. They had even laughed when God said it would happen within a year and they both well on in years. Yet the Lord was gracious to her.

And he is so gracious to us as well. We didn't deserve anything but punishment for our sin and for the way we lived our lives. We ignored God and we tried to do things on our own. We laughed when we heard of God and Jesus. And yet God in his grace sent Jesus to the cross to save us 'whilst we were still sinners. That's what the New Testament teaches us in Romans 5:8 'But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.' God was gracious to us and paid the penalty for our sin. His own son died that we might live. That is grace.

And God has always been gracious to his people and most of the time we just cannot understand why. He does it because he made us and he loves us.

Back to verse 1 'Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised.' As he had said and as he had promised. God kept his word. He always does as he says. We can trust God's word. What had he said and promised? He had said she would have a child within a year. He had previously promised Abraham and Sarah many offspring, so many we couldn't count them. And here he comes to fulfil that promise and to keep that word.

Verse 2 'Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.' God had promised Abraham as well a son within a year. And here he keeps his word. God always does as he says.

Abraham and Sarah should have known this and remembered this. This is not the first time. We have already thought of the Promised Land – a new home and dwelling

place for Abraham and for all his descendants after him. Now we see the kept promise a son and heir.

He Always Gives What You Need

Not only does he always do as he says but he always gives what you need. And this is the important thing to remember here. He gives what we need, not always what we want. Abraham did want a son and heir, but he did also need that son and heir. He needed that son and heir for God's promises to be fulfilled and for God's plans to be outworked.

Abraham had needed previously to this that new land – and God led him to it. Abraham had needed help in defeating Kedorlaomer and his allies in order to save his nephew Lot – and God helped him win the battle. Whatever Abraham needed God was able to provide in accordance with his good purposes and will.

And we always receive from the Lord what we need when we need it. Not what we want but what we need. I so remember the seal on my path to college. A week before starting college, having given up my job with the bank, I went to buy books that I needed for college. Unsure how wise it was to spend the money but knowing I needed the books. I spent just short of £50. No-one knew I was going that day for books, no-one knew how much I would spend, no-one knew we needed that cash – all except God. When I got home and walked into the house there was an envelope on the doorstep from a friend. In the envelope was a card wishing us well on our journey and £50 in cash. God always gives us what we need.

There may come times when we think we need something and we do not get it that does not mean God is not listening and not watching and not interested. It simply means we might not actually need it as much as we think we will.

Abraham and Sarah discovered they would trust God's word for he always does as he says and he always gives what you need. God is always there for his people and he always keeps his promises. We can trust God's word.

Trust God's Plans

We can always trust God's plans as well. We have just seen this with the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah. We see this with the plans for Abraham both in the lead up to this event and also in the event. We see it also in the next part of the text as well with Hagar and Ishmael. Let me tidy up the Abraham part first.

God's plan was for Abraham to settle in the Promised Land and to have a son and heir, and then many descendants also – as numerous as the grains of sand and the stars in the sky. And God stuck to his plan. Here in the opening verses of chapter 21 we see the arrival of Isaac, that son and heir. Abraham gave him the name God had planned

for him to have and he had him circumcised as was God's plan that was given to Abraham a few chapters ago symbolising the covenant between God and Abraham and all his descendants after him.

He Always Protects His Plan

We notice as well that God always protects his plan. God's plan was for Abraham to be the father of nations. So he protected that plan by taking Abraham firstly to the Promised Land, but then by bringing him safely back out of Egypt. He protected his plan by helping Abraham defeat Kedorlaomer and rescue Lot. He protected Abraham and Sarah in the last chapter as they battled with sin and gave in once again. He protected Sarah from sleeping with King Abimelech and kept her pure for Abraham. He kept them both safe in Abimelech's kingdom. God always protects his plan.

His plan was for Isaac to be born to Abraham and Sarah and sure enough we see that plan coming safely to fruition. God has plans that he protects and keeps. And we see that as we move on in chapter 21. Abraham holds a great feast to celebrate this son born to him and Sarah. Sarah spots Hagar mocking them and calls for Abraham to get rid of her. Abraham has doubts for he has a son by Hagar. God came and spoke to him and told him not to worry for he had plans and would protect those plans. He would watch over Hagar, the maidservant and her son. And he would make him into a nation as well because he was Abraham's offspring.

And so Abraham gives Hagar food and water and sends Hagar and Ishmael on their way. They wander into the desert of Beersheba but the water is soon gone. She hides the boy under a bush and walks away for she cannot bear to watch him die of starvation and thirst. She sits and cries and God comes to her by an angel in verse 17. 'Do not be afraid' he says 'God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.' God was protecting his plan again.

He Always Protects His People

Not only was he protecting his plan but he was also protecting his people. As Hagar opened her eyes she saw a well of water. They drank and filled their skin and wandered on. And notice verse 20 'God was with the boy as he grew up.' God watched over that boy and his mother. God blessed them and protected them. For he had plans for Ishmael just as he had for Isaac.

As God has protected Abraham and Sarah, so here we see him protecting Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham has been protected from Pharaoh in Egypt. He has been protected from Kedorlaomer and his army. He has been protected from Abimelech. God protects his people. His people are foundational to his plans. And so he protects them.

We can always trust God's plans for they are always good plans. Jeremiah 29:11 'For I know the plans I have for you declares the Lord, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.' And God always protects those plans and his people. Psalm 33:11 'But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations.'

Trust God's Help

And finally in this passage we see that we can trust God's help. God is always there to help his people. His desire is not that we perish and struggle but that we spend eternity with him. He longs for us to enjoy life and to enjoy eternal life even more. Abraham has experienced God's help before. He has experienced it in the journey to the Promised Land. He has experienced it in battle with enemies. He has experienced it in having a son and heir. And Abraham is about to experience it again. He can trust God's help for it is always there.

He Always Makes Connections

He can trust God's help for he always makes connections. Abraham was introduced to Abimelech when he wandered off on his own again. Now after the birth of Isaac Abraham comes face to face with Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his forces. These people recognise that God is with Abraham. Verse 22 'God is with you in everything you do.' They are a little frightened and ask for Abraham to extend to them the same kindness they have shown him. The connection is made. They recognise that God is by Abraham's side.

And this connection that is made allows Abraham to ask about a well and to make a treaty with Abimelech, the king of that land. To be able to deal with each other a connection had to be made. That is the same in life for us. We make connections with people and how those connections come about determine how well we will be able to deal with one another. When the connection involves recognition of God at work, the connection is well founded and stands firm.

The connection made shows God's help in Abraham getting water but more than that it allows him, verse 34, to stay 'in the land of the Philistines for a long time.' God's help in making the connection allows for a healthy relationship to last for a lengthy period. Abraham recognises this and knows he can trust God's help.

He Always Makes Positions

Not only can he trust God's help in making connections but he recognises that God always makes positions as well. Abraham is granted a position and standing in the land on account of his relationship with God. The position Abraham is able to have before Abimelech allows him to challenge him about a well which Abraham built and Abimelech's men have seized. Abraham brings sheep and cattle and offers them to

Abimelech. He has seven ewes set aside and offers them to Abimelech as a witness that he had built the well himself.

In this position before Abimelech, Abraham gets the well and gets to stay in the land without fear and without retribution. Abraham is left to get on with living his life there as Abimelech and Phicol leave them alone. God's help makes a position for Abraham there, a position of good standing before the king. And the position allows him to remain in the land unhindered.

Abraham learnt he could trust God's help as he had received it in many circumstances now and here again he had watched God help him make connections and a position before the king.

Thank God Always

And notice all that Abraham has been reminded of. He has been reminded that he can trust God's word for God always does as he says and always gives what you need. Abraham received the son and heir God promised. He has recalled how he can trust God's plans – for God always protects his plan and his people. Abraham saw how God's plan for him to have a son was protected and how he received that son. We noticed too that Hagar and Ishmael were protected by God for they were part of his wider plan as well. And we saw Abraham learn to trust God's help as well for God always makes connections and positions. Abraham had a good standing before the king on account of his relationship with God.

And finally notice that we should thank God always. Abraham learned this time and again. Verse 32 and 33 'After the treaty had been made...Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and there he called upon the name of the Lord, the eternal God.' He came to thank God for being with him and for helping him once more. Abraham as we have seen previously built altars to thank God and here he plants a tree. He always wants to thank God for his goodness even when he, Abraham, has let God down.

For us we ought to remember that we can trust God on the path of faith as well. We can trust his word – for he always does as he says and gives what we need. God has planted the vision in our hearts to extend the church and to be a more community orientated church. He is seeing that through already with the progress of the work and he is giving us what we need to finance it. We will need more before the end but I know God will provide for his people. Let's keep trusting God's word.

We can trust God's plans as well – plans for our hope and future. Heaven awaits us one day but before then he has much for us to do in the church and in Cornton. He always protects those plans and his people. Let's keep trusting God to do that.

And we can trust God's help. He always makes connections and positions. I am amazed at the connections I have made in Cornton already and the position I have within the community. God is at work and he is helping us. Let's keep trusting God's help.

And let us remember that trusting in God is the only path to follow on our journey of faith and as we journey we should thank God always for he is with us every step of the way. Keep trusting his word, his plans and his help as we thank him always.

Testing to Further Your Faith - Genesis 22:1-19

My greatest fear is the fear of losing one of my children. We expect to lose our parents at some point in life. About half of us who are married will lose a mate in death. But we assume that our children will be around when we die. Our hopes are bound up with our children. And so the loss of a child hits us with greater force than perhaps any other loss.

Because of this, God's command to Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac, is one of the most moving stories in the Bible. If we could approach it as if for the first time, it would hit us with shock, confusion, and perhaps even anger toward God. It would be hard enough if God took Isaac from Abraham; but it seems inconceivable that God would command Abraham to kill his own son! It seems opposed to God's loving nature. It seems like an impossible, unreasonable, and illogical demand. And Abraham's unquestioning response staggers me! How could he obey without a word of protest?

Abraham's obedient surrender is the high point of faith in all history. It stands like Mt. Everest above where most of us have been. I can only stand below and point up to its heights, aware of how my own faith falls far short.

Here in this passage before us we see the testing to further your faith. Abraham has done so much in his life and yet here we see God testing his faith once more. Why is this necessary? It is necessary because of the covenant God was giving to humanity. Abraham was the one who was chosen to be the recipient of that covenant. Abraham needed extraordinary faith since the entire redemptive covenant would be based on faith in God's promises. Abraham had shown great faith by leaving his home land and moving toward the Promised Land God had promised him. He had slipped and fallen along the way and struggled with sin in his life. But he still had faith in God. This test of offering Isaac was used to refine his faith further and to make him more useful in God's purposes. Sometimes in life God tests us in unusual and hard ways to further our faith and our usefulness to him. Let's see what we can learn about testing to further your faith from Abraham.

An Unreasonable Command (vv. 1-2)

As we begin chapter 22 we come across an unreasonable command from God or at least what seems to us as an unreasonable command. After the birth of Isaac,

Abraham made a treaty with Abimelech, king of the land where he was, and he stayed in the land of the Philistines for a long time. Some time after this God came to Abraham and tested him. This is an interesting word to use. Let's be clear what is going to happen here. This is not God coming to tempt Abraham. God does not tempt any of us to do wrong. He does not place temptation in our path. That job belongs to Satan and he does it so well!

But God comes to test Abraham. In testing, one is testing some value, quality or attribute in that person. When we test God we generally test his patience or his faithfulness. When we test each other we test something such as the other's wisdom or knowledge or character. Whatever is being tested is usually stretched to the limits. When God tests, he tests some value, quality or attribute by stretching it to its limits. In most cases he is testing faith and faithfulness of individuals by expecting them to obey in difficult circumstances. Nowhere else in Scripture though is this accomplished by giving a command that is rescinded before it is carried out. God is testing Abraham here. He is checking out just how strong his faith is. He is seeing how obedient Abraham will be. He is sussing out just how committed to him Abraham is. So God has come to test Abraham.

He comes now and speaks to Abraham. We need to remember this is the same God who Abraham has referred to as the eternal God or enduring God in 21:33. Abraham responds to God's voice and call by saying 'Here I am.' These of course are words echoed by Isaiah in Isaiah 6 when God asks whom shall I send and Isaiah responds 'Here am I, send me.' I'm here Lord says Abraham. I'm listening. I'm ready to hear from you once again.

I doubt Abraham expected what came next. He had been through so much in his life and we get the impression (once more!) that he is stable in his relationship with God now. But what is to come must have been a shock to him. God says 'Take your son, your only son, Isaac whom you love.' We need to remember at this stage what Abraham and Sarah have been through. They have craved for a son and heir for a long time. God had promised Abraham that he would make him into a great nation and that he would give him the Promised Land for him and all generations after him. He promised him descendants as numerous as the grains of sand and the stars in the sky. Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah ninety when Isaac was born to them. They had waited a whole lifetime for this son. He is their only son. There is some confusion here for Abraham has another son at this stage - Ishmael - born out of the night Abraham took Hagar Sarah's maidservant and slept with her. They had tried to do things on their own; they had tried to get the son and heir they craved in their strength instead of waiting on God. But this only son Isaac was the one and only son at this stage they had as a couple. And since they had waited so long in having him, they loved him - they loved him deeply. They will have loved him beyond measure.

When we get something we have waited on for a long time it becomes so precious to us that we do not want to let it go – no matter what it is.

So God says take your son and go to the region of Moriah. Moriah was a mountainous region and was the mount Jeremiah would later be on. And here comes the unreasonable command – the out of the world request! ‘Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains I will tell you about.’ Sacrifice my own son. Kill my only son. Kill the son I have longed for all those years. Sacrifice the son of promise I have been given. And remember that Isaac will have been around 20 by this stage. Abraham has enjoyed this only son for all these years and now God says sacrifice him. What must Abraham have felt? And of course what of God – he is totally against human sacrifice so why ask for it here?

Here we see a totally unreasonable command from God. From Abraham’s perspective he must now be thinking what is going on. I have finally received the son of promise and now he is to be sacrificed. Isaac is still unmarried. He has no wife and no children of his own. If I sacrifice Isaac then what happens to the promise of numerous descendants? Where will they come from? How will this happen?

You and I at various times in our life come across what amounts to unreasonable commands and requests from God. We do not understand them and we may even question them. There is no doubt God tests our faith at times to further it. But it is hard and difficult and we do not always face it well.

An Unconditional Obedience (vv. 3-10)

Abraham has so many questions no doubt but we do not see them being asked here. He takes God’s word and God’s command and gets on with it. Now we see an unconditional obedience. Verse 3 ‘Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his servants and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about.’ Abraham slept on it – which is always a good thing to do. And with no questioning or complaining he got up the next day and started out to do as God asked.

This is unconditional obedience. He doesn’t ask God how it will all work out – how he will have numerous descendants if his only son is gone. He simply gets up and goes towards Moriah. And notice Moriah is three days journey away. They have travelled together for 3 days and will have talked. Isaac probably asked where they were going and what they were doing. And Abraham will have said wait and see – or he may even have said we are going to offer a burnt offering to God.

And notice the unconditional obedience meant that Abraham not only set out on the journey but he took his only son and he took the wood for the burnt offering. He was

waiting to find wood when he got to the destination – he took it with him. He was all prepared. He unconditionally accepted God's word and went with it.

How seldom we are like that in life though. We always want to know reasons for why we are doing something. When our kids were younger – and I can't remember which of the two it was – whenever we said something to them they would say why. Why am I to do that dad? Why do I have to wear this mum? Why do I have to go there? We always want to know what is going on. We always want to question the most basic of instructions. And yet here is Abraham given the most unreasonable command and he does not answer back, he does not ask why, he does not try and get out of it – he simply obeys.

Perhaps we think as human beings Abraham was hoping to get to the mountain range and discover that he had it all wrong. And yet here again we see the unconditional obedience. As they reach the spot and see the place in the distance, Abraham leaves his servants there and he and Isaac head off on foot. Isaac had the wood placed on his back and Abraham carried the fire and knife.

By this stage Isaac is a little confused and wants to ask a question. We have the wood and the fire but where is the lamb? If we are going to offer a sacrifice to God we need a lamb for the burnt offering. And with that unconditional obedience Abraham answers him verse 8 'God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering my son' He still believes and trusts in God despite the nature of the unreasonable request. And of course in clear parallels with later events God will indeed provide the lamb for the sacrifice – his own son Jesus would come and die on the cross as the ultimate sacrifice for sin.

An Unexpected Provision (vv. 11-14)

After an unreasonable command came the unconditional obedience from Abraham. He worshipped God with all he had now. He obeyed him with everything – even his own son. And thankfully we now see an unexpected provision. Isaac has questioned where the lamb is. Abraham has said God will provide. And sure enough God does – but not before Abraham has shown some more of that unconditional obedience.

Verse 9 tells us that when they reached the spot God had told Abraham about, they built the altar up and had all the wood laid on it. Then Abraham took his son Isaac and bound him up and laid him on the altar. Note there is no word spoken by either of them at this stage. Despite the fact his father is tying him up and laying him on the altar we read that Isaac said nothing. He may have said something here and it hasn't been recorded for us or perhaps he trusted his father implicitly and did as his father asked.

It must have broken Abraham's heart to tie his son up – his beloved son, the one he adored and loved so deeply. And yet he does it without question. And then having bound him and laid him on the altar, Abraham takes the knife to slay his son. Was his hand in the air by this point ready to come down heavily onto his son? We will never know. But at that moment the angel of the Lord called out to him from heaven. An unexpected provision was coming.

Abraham! Abraham! The angel called. Only ten times in Scripture do we encounter name duplication like this. Only ten times do we see the emphasis being made. These name duplications always introduce matters of special importance. Seven of the ten are spoken by God to man: Abraham, Jacob, Moses, Samuel, Martha, Simon, and Saul. Abraham! Abraham! Don't do it! Don't lay a hand on the boy. And notice Abraham again uses that phrase in verse 11 as in verse 1 'Here I am.' He hears God calling to him and he is obedient enough to answer.

The angel of the Lord tells him not to harm Isaac. And notice the words in verse 12 'Now I know that you fear God because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.' God was testing Abraham to see just how much faith he had; how much did he trust God. God looks for our all in worship and service. He is not interested in our half-hearted attempts to praise him or our weak efforts to serve him. He wants our best. He desires our all. He commands our all! He is not interested in our Sunday worship when we then don't give him another thought for a whole week. He is not interested in our service on a Sunday as we make the tea or serve communion, or on a Wednesday at kids club, or a Tuesday as we chat to friends. He is looking for our every day service to him. Our lives as we read later in Romans should be a living sacrifice to God.

And having heard the words not to lay a hand on Isaac Abraham looked up, perhaps because he heard a noise or perhaps because the Lord had caught his attention. And as he looked up he saw a ram caught by its horns in the thicket. Here we see the unexpected provision of God. Abraham expected to sacrifice his son and God provided something else for the altar. We often in life see the unexpected provision of God; often when we least expect it. And it always comes in response to an act of faith on our behalf.

An Unequivocal Blessing (vv. 15-18)

From an unexpected provision to an unequivocal blessing. The Lord has tested Abraham in the most outlandish way we can imagine. He has asked him, no commanded him, to sacrifice his own son. The son whom he had been promised and the son through whom the many other descendants would come. And Abraham had obeyed without question. He did as God asked. And in the end God provided the lamb for the sacrifice and Isaac was not slaughtered. God never intended for Isaac to die on the altar – he was testing Abraham to see how far he would go. And Abraham was willing

to lay it all on the altar for God. Are we that willing and whole-hearted in our obedience to God?

On account of this the angel of the Lord spoke again to Abraham and explained that due to his unswerving devotion to God his son was safe. And the blessing came again from the Lord. Verse 17 'I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore...through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed.' Here we have the unequivocal blessing of God on Abraham and all generations after him.

Nothing would get in the way of God keeping his promises to Abraham. And on account of his obedience he was going to bless this man richly. And notice it is on account of that obedience. The angel of the Lord says in verse 18 about the blessings 'because you have obeyed me.'

The blessings of God are all around us. He blesses us even when we do not deserve it – and that is so true with regard to salvation. Jesus, the Lamb of God, was sacrificed on the cross to save us – while we were still sinners.

But God blesses us richly at other times as well – and especially when we are obedient to him and are willing to lay all on the altar before him. Abraham was willing to give his only son and God blessed him unequivocally.

Conclusion

This is one of the most difficult passages in the entire Bible. Why would God ask something so horrible and terrible of a man who has been following him faithfully? Oh yes Abraham has failed him and sinned against him and forgotten him during his lifetime but he has also followed God faithfully. And yet God wanted to test him more in order to further his faith. Abraham's faith in God was now so complete and strong and true that he would do anything for God and believe that God could do anything for him.

We often encounter situations in our life and wonder what is going on. We should take encouragement today that God sometimes tests us in unimaginable ways in order to further our faith. It might not be pleasant and it might not be easy – but God is looking for our 100% commitment to him.

We have seen today the unreasonable command and from that we noted Abraham's unconditional obedience. On account of this total and complete obedience we saw the unexpected provision of God and then the unequivocal blessing of God. Friends, how is our faith in God? Is it complete and true? Sometimes he will give us great gifts and then ask for them back – when we offer them back to him without question he comes and blesses us even more richly. What an amazing God! Let's keep our faith in him.

Live All The Days of Your Life by Faith - Genesis 25:1-11

All of us - from the greatest to the ungodliest - will some day face death. In Hebrews 9:27-28 we read 'Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.' Abraham lived a long time - 175 years the Scriptures tell us - and did many things, mostly good but some not so wise. The time finally came for him to face the fact that he would not live forever on the earth. And so in these days he began to make plans. And often in life that is what happens to us as we near the end of our earthly life - we make plans for our families and their futures and we tidy up our affairs. Let us look at Abraham's life after Sarah died until the time he too passed away and notice that we can live all the days of your life by faith.

The last time we met with Abraham he was up the mountain of the Lord in the region of Moriah. God was testing him to further his faith. We noted the unreasonable command from God to sacrifice his only son - the son he had longed for and waited for all those years. And yet we saw the unconditional obedience of Abraham - he willingly followed the instructions of the Lord. Just at the last minute we saw the unexpected provision of the Lord and also his unequivocal blessing on Abraham once more. Abraham had come through the test trusting completely in God.

Developed a Plan for Posterity

Since this time some major events have happened in the life of Abraham. The first of these is the death of his wife Sarah in chapter 23. Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty seven years old. And she died in Hebron in the land of Canaan. This was the land God had led Abraham and Sarah into. This was the land he declared would belong to Abraham and all his descendants after him. This was the Promised Land for Abraham. But now his wife was dead. The wife he loved and cared for. The wife he had travelled with all these years and on all those journeys. The wife he had lied about and pretended was his sister. The wife he had listened to and slept with her maidservant in order to gain a son and heir. The wife he had his son Isaac by eventually. She was gone. And now we see Abraham developed a plan for posterity.

Like many of us Abraham had not thought of death before. It was still a long way off. He still had so much more life to live. He had not bought a plot of land. He had not thought of a burial site. He had no plans for a plot at the cemetery. And so now he has a decision to make. Sarah is dead and she needs buried. In similar situations some would take their family back to their home land and make arrangements to bury them there. I have taken several funerals for folk in Livingston who wanted to be buried or cremated in their home town. So we held their services in Glasgow. Abraham though makes the decision not to go back to Ur of the Chaldeans. He is developing a plan for posterity.

Instead he spoke to the Hittites (23:3-4) and asked to purchase a burial site for his family. Abraham was well respected in the land by this stage for the way he lived his life. As he asked the people for a burial site they said he could have whatever place he desired. He asked for a certain cave – the cave of Machpelah. And after some discussion he was offered the site and he paid the full price for the field and the cave. And we learn in 23:17-18 that the whole field and the cave were deeded to Abraham as his property. He bought that piece of land and now owned it by title deed.

And this is important for us for Abraham was developing a plan for posterity. He has now purchased a piece of land in Canaan – we learn in 23:19 that the piece of land Abraham has bought is near Mamre (which is at Hebron) in the land of Canaan. God has promised Abraham this land of Canaan for him and all his descendants after him. Abraham is now setting down a marker for his family and all his relatives who will come after him that this is their land. He has legally bought a piece of land within Canaan and has clear title to it. He has remembered God's promise to him and is living out his life by faith.

There is also a second way we see Abraham developing a plan for posterity. He sets out in chapter 24 to find a wife for Isaac his own son. And he is very careful how he develops his plan for this. He wants Isaac to have a wife. Isaac, remember, is now older than me – he is 37 years old. He is unmarried and has no girlfriend or fiancé. How on earth will Abraham have descendants as numerous as the grains of sand and the stars in the sky if he has no daughter-in-law and Isaac no wife? Abraham then decides he must make plans for his posterity by finding Isaac a wife.

But note he does not just want any old wife for Isaac – he wants the specific person. So he brought his chief servant before him and tasked him with going and finding this wife. He is quite clear that he does not want a wife from the Canaanites, the land in which he is living now. He asks the servant to go all the way back to his own people and own relatives and find a wife there. The chief servant understandably is a little worried by this (24:5) 'what if the woman is unwilling to come back?'

And notice Abraham's response. No longer is willing to make his own decisions in life and take matters into his own hands. He recognises God in everything he does – he lives all the day of his life by faith. In verse 7 and following we see him explaining to his servant that the Lord who brought him out of his homeland and away from his father's household, and who has promised him this land for all his descendants will go with the servant and the Lord's angel will direct him to the right woman.

Abraham has developed a plan for posterity and it comes to pass here in both these ways. The piece of land was bought to show his family that this was their land, the

land God was giving to them. And the chief servant returned with a woman called Rebekah and she and Isaac were married.

Declined to Give Up

Not only did Abraham develop a plan for posterity but he also declined to give up. I don't know how many times in life I have seen a loved one give up after their lifelong partner has died. Men struggling to live all alone after their wife of many years has passed away, and woman not knowing what to do after their husbands have died. They give up the will to live. They sit back and just struggle through the remaining days with no hope and no desire to keep going.

Abraham was not like this. Oh he could have been. He was one hundred and thirty seven years old and his wife of many years has died. The love of his life has gone. The one he shared so many times with – both good and difficult – is no longer with him. He has buried her in the cave of Machpelah. But Abraham declined to give up. He wanted to keep living life. He desire was to enjoy the rest of his days and to keep following God.

And in chapter 25 and verse 1 now we discover that he married again. Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. And he had sons by this lady as well. And this is quite remarkable. For we remember how old Abraham is. And he was old when the Lord intervened and Sarah became pregnant with Isaac. They were both past child rearing. In fact in Romans 4 we read some stunning and blunt words to describe the state Abraham and Sarah were in when she conceived Isaac. Let's turn there for a moment:

read Romans 4:18-22

His body was as good as dead. And that was thirty seven years ago – how much more dead is it now!!! God didn't suddenly heal his body and make him younger again regenerating his body – although I believe God can do that. Abraham is still old – very old, and his body is still as good as dead. God has come in a similar way as he did to Sarah and Abraham and he has helped Abraham and Keturah have children. He wants Abraham to have the descendants he promised him. And this is another way of that happening. Abraham declined to give up after Sarah died.

And let us recognise that it is not only after we lose a loved one that we desire to give up but often after some event in life or some failed goal or dream has not come to fruition. Abraham could have given up because Sarah died and he didn't have all the descendants he craved. But he didn't.

Abraham declined to give up. He kept his eyes on God and his faith was as strong as ever. He lived all the days of his life by faith – even these last days.

Divided His Estate While Still Living

In those last days as he prepared for death Abraham kept living by faith. He developed plans for posterity and he declined to give up. We also notice that he divided his estate while still living. In verse 5 we read that Abraham left everything he owned to Isaac. And this of course was the right thing for him to do. Isaac was his only son born to him and Sarah. And there were no others. Yes he had a son Ishmael born to Hagar the maidservant and now we have learned in this chapter that he married Keturah and had children via her as well. But none of them were his true family. Abraham laid down a marker here at the end of his life that this is his true family. Isaac is his dearly loved son, and the one through whom God's blessing would continue for future generations. And by doing this he ensured everyone knew that Isaac was the one and no-one else had claim to the major parts of Abraham's estate – nor any claims to the covenant God had made to Abraham and through Abraham.

And not only the blessing of God but also the true family through whom God's redemptive purposes would be outworked. And this is an important message to remember here – and especially as we come to the Christmas season. Ultimately God would bless the world through his own son Jesus Christ. Jesus would be born as one of us and live as one of us yet live without sin in his life. And then he would die on the cross of Calvary to save us and redeem. God's redemptive plan for his creation was for this all to happen. And it all began with Abraham and then Isaac. Go to Matthew's gospel and the first chapter and as we start the genealogy of Jesus we notice that it begins with Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac. Abraham declared in his dividing up of his estate that his true family were special to God and would be used by God down through the years.

But it is interesting that although the major part of his estate went to Isaac as we would expect, Abraham also divided up his estate while he was still living and gave to the others as well. Verse 6 'But while he was still living, he gave gifts to the sons of his concubines and sent them away from his son Isaac to the land of the east.' He gave them all gifts. It is interesting that Keturah, who in verse 1 is declared as Abraham's wife, is now referred to as a concubine.

Now this I believe simply fits in with the culture of the day. Sarah was Abraham's primary wife – they spent most of their long lives together. She takes precedence in the family tree. And rightly so. Keturah became Abraham's wife after Sarah died and so is subordinate to her in the family tree. This I think is why she is now referred to as a concubine – she does not have the same status as Sarah. In 1 Chronicles 1:32 Keturah is referred to as Abraham's concubine as well.

In any case, the important fact for us to be considering here is that Abraham provided for each member of his family in his death and estate. While he was still living he gave enough to each of the sons of his concubines to give them financial

security and to allow them to move to the east and settle there. But the majority of his estate went to his son by Sarah, Isaac. Abraham divided his estate while he was still living. A wise man or woman makes plans before they die for their family and for the dividing of their estate. This saves so much trouble for the family and each family member gets exactly what the father and mother wants them to have.

Died and Was Buried with Dignity

As Abraham lived all the days of his life by faith we have noted in these last days that he developed a plan for posterity, he declined to give up, and he divided his estate while still alive. Finally we come to the sad part of the story and yet the inevitable part – especially in light of the opening illustration. Abraham died. Like you and me and every other person on this planet our time on earth is limited. There is a time to be born and a time to die says Ecclesiastes 3:2. In the great circle of life it was Abraham's time to die. We notice here that Abraham died and was buried with dignity.

Verse 7 'Altogether Abraham lived a hundred and seventy five years. Then he breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people.' Why the fanciful language and the repetition here. He died. And as we thought of earlier in the list of people in Genesis 5 – they died! And yet this language tells us that Abraham lived his life and was satisfied at the end. He had done all he could in life. He had followed God. Yes he had mucked up along the way but he learned to live all the days of his life by faith in God. And he ended it all by knowing God would keep his promises and his covenant to Isaac and to all generations after him. He saw many of the promises come true. His son Isaac was now seventy five years old and married to Rebekah. And this is where we need to piece other bits of information together for the writer does not always keep things chronological. When Isaac was forty he married Rebekah. When he was sixty twin boys were born – Jacob and Esau. Abraham will have seen and enjoyed his grandchildren for fifteen years before he died. He knew Jacob and Esau. And so he was fortunate to see the promise of God come true in the son Isaac and in Isaac's son's Jacob and Esau.

And with dignity he was buried. Abraham himself had bought the land near Mamre – the cave of Machpelah – and buried Sarah there. Now he would be laid to rest with dignity in the family plot. And also being buried with dignity his 2 sons were there as well. In death they could have remained separated forever but they have come together to say farewell to their father. Isaac, the true son born to Abraham and Sarah, and Ishmael the son born to Abraham and Hagar the maid servant whom Abraham had not wanted to sleep with but did at Sarah's request. Together they stood and buried their father.

Ishmael could have felt unfairly treated in life thus far but he chose to stand in unity with his half brother Isaac and to pay his respects to an illustrious father. Together

they buried their father Abraham. Abraham was not without fault in life – none of us are. But he was a genuinely dedicated man. He lived his life by faith and followed God. And God blessed him richly. Abraham died and was buried with dignity.

Conclusion

And so this morning we have come to the end of the life of Abraham. We have discovered again what it means to live all the days of your life by faith. As he approached the end of his life Abraham developed plans for posterity. He wanted to ensure that his family after him knew this was the land God had promised him and all generations after him. That is why he bought the burial ground for Sarah and then ultimately for him. He developed those plans for posterity by finding a wife from among his own people for Isaac his son.

We can develop plans for posterity by living the lives God calls us to live. What better legacy to leave your children than a life lived for God. Plan for posterity by sharing your faith with your children and your grandchildren. Your children are never too young to hear about Jesus. Read them the stories of Scripture from a young age. Pray with them and pray for them. Set them great examples in life by the way you live and act. Teach them the importance of gathering every Sunday with God's people to worship and praise.

We are developing a plan for posterity just now as we extend the church. For some of us we will only spend a short while in it before we either move on or move home to heaven. But the legacy will remain. The church we are building will be there for years to come meeting the needs of the community. Let's make sure we keep developing plans on how to use it best for work in the community – and for how to use our gifts to the best for the community as well. Develop plans for posterity.

Abraham declined to give up. Even after Sarah died he kept on going. He could have stopped. He could have given up. But he chose not to. He decided to keep living a life of faith. When loved ones die we feel like giving up. When difficulties come in life we feel like giving up and sitting back. In the service of the Lord there is no space for people to sit back. From the youngest to the oldest we are needed in the Lord's army. Maybe you can't be running the kids club or delivering leaflets round doors but you can be praying for these events and people. We all have a job to do. So let us decline to give up as well. Let's keep fighting on and sharing the love of Jesus with a needy world.

Abraham divided his estate while still living. I'm not asking you to do that – ultimately that is between you and God, and you and your family. But think about it carefully. This is a very practical point. Write a will, plan for what you will do with your estate however little or great it is. This will make it easier for your family when you do eventually pass away. You can decide to give some to your family and some to the

church or to some other Christian charity. There are options and you can plan that now. If you need a little help with this let me know and I can help you find the right people to speak to or the right form to fill out. Divide your estate while you are still living – use what you have wisely for God.

And Abraham died and was buried with dignity. We will all die one day – it is inevitable. But death on earth is simply passing from earth to our heavenly home for all eternity. What a thought. What a prospect. The important thing is to live all the days of your life by faith. Abraham did this and we are left with the example of a very godly man. Next week we will tie the life of Abraham together as we look at the marks of genuine faith in his life. I have learned so much these past weeks and I'm sure you have as well. Let us remember to live all the days of life by faith.

The Marks of Genuine Faith – Hebrews 11:8-19

Over these past fourteen episodes in the life of Abraham we have learned much about faith and following in the footsteps of faith. As we conclude our time with Abraham I simply want to draw it all together with this passage from Hebrews 11 and see the marks of genuine faith in the life of Abraham and notice that we too should have these same marks of genuine faith in our lives if we are followers of Jesus Christ.

Abraham is described in James 2:23 as 'God's friend'. And we have seen this over the weeks. In the beginning as Abraham obeyed God's call and left his homeland in Ur of the Chaldeans we would have said 'There goes a man of God.' Abraham was following God and obeying him. And yet later as we saw him lying to Pharaoh, and then later still lying to Abimelech, and in between sinning by sleeping with Hagar, we would cry out that he is a phoney – that he is not a genuine man of God. The truth is Abraham was like all of us. He had great moments when he walked closely with God and yet at other points he fell into sin and let God down. We do exactly the same. Does that make us any less a Christian? I would argue not as long as we have the genuine marks of faith in our life. What are they? Well this morning let us discover that from this passage in Hebrews and what we have learned over the weeks from Genesis about Abraham.

The Experience of Faith

In Hebrews 11:8 we read 'By faith Abraham.' Firstly there is an experience of faith. It didn't just happen. Abraham came to know God and followed God. And as he followed he learned more about him and followed him ever closer. Faith is an experience for us as well.

An Irresistible Call

It begins with an irresistible call. Abraham was living in Ur of the Chaldeans. This was where his family were from. This is where he had grown up. This is where everything was familiar to him. It was a prosperous place. Ur was located at the end of the

Euphrates River just as it empties out into the Persian Gulf. It was the main trade route into the country and people could learn many trades there. But it was a pagan land. They worshipped the moon. The city of Ur was a centre for astrology where people worshipped not only the moon but the stars as well. They were an idolatrous people. Because of this Abraham too was headed straight for hell. He didn't know God, the one true God, the creator and sustainer of the world.

And yet somehow God broke into his life as only God can do. Abraham didn't know who God was but God came and told him to leave his country, his people and his father's household (Gen 12:1). In Hebrews 11:8 we read 'By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.' God spoke into Abraham's heart and life and Abraham listened and obeyed. He heard that irresistible call of God and obeyed.

This is how faith comes to everyone who has it as well isn't it? No-one wakes up in the morning and suddenly says 'I'm going to find out all about Jesus and follow him.' We can't do that in life for we are sinners – sinners who are lost and dead in our sin. Ephesians 2:1-3 'As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.'

We were dead and far from God as well. Romans 3:10-12 'As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one."

There is no way we could wake up one morning and think 'I'll get sorted with God today.' We couldn't do it for we were so far away from him. And yet God in his amazing grace, mercy and love comes to us and calls us to him. It is an irresistible call. John 6:44 the words of Jesus 'No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.' God calls us and draws us to his Son. He tells us we are sinners. Romans 3:23 'For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.' He reminds us of the penalty and his grace in Romans 6:23 'For the wages of sin is death but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ his Son.' We come under conviction of our sin and wrong doing. And under the conviction we are then ready to hear the call and make a choice.

An Individual Choice

The experience of faith involves that irresistible call of God and it also involves an individual choice. We have a choice to make. It's one thing to hear the call but

another to follow it and obey it. Back to Abraham again in Hebrews 11 'When called...he...obeyed and went.' Abraham heard the call of God and followed. He could have stayed where he was with all that was familiar and with his family. But he heard the call of God, came under conviction and made the choice to go. He followed God even although he did not know where it would lead him. Oh yes he had ups and downs along the way but he made that individual choice to follow God.

In our lives as well when it comes to faith we are first called and then we have to come. It's not enough to hear the call. It's not enough to come under conviction. It's not enough to know you are a lost sinner. It's not enough to know you will die on account of your sin. It's not enough to know Jesus died to save. You have to come and accept that for yourself. You have to come and make that individual choice to accept the forgiveness Jesus offers and to follow him. You are the only one who can decide to give your life to Jesus, to repent from your sin and turn and follow him.

And get this, if you respond in faith - and God will give you that faith, Ephesians 2:8-9 'For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast.' If you respond in faith Jesus will not turn you away. John 6:37 'whoever comes to me I will never drive away.'

Do you know the moment in your life when you came and accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord? That moment when you confessed with your lips that Jesus was your Lord? It's not enough friends to come to church, to sing the songs, to say the prayers, to read the bible, to listen to the sermon. It's not even enough to get baptised and try and not sin in life. We all have to come and make that individual choice to follow Jesus - our parents can't make it for us. You can't say my Dad is a Christian so I am. You have to make that individual decision. And when you make that decision that is the day that genuine mark of faith is in your life. Do you have that mark in your life?

The Expression of Faith

From the experience of faith to the expression of faith. Abraham is a great example to us of living all the days of your life by faith. His are some good footsteps of faith to follow. Abraham expressed his faith by the way he responded to God and followed God - even though he did not know where he was going. He lived all his days by faith and we can see that as we trace his life.

Living in God's Path

The expression of faith for Abraham was living in God's path. He was called to leave Ur of the Chaldeans and go to the land God was going to show him. Abraham obeyed and went we read in Hebrews 11:8. In verse 9 we read 'By faith he made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country.' By living in God's path he was led out of Ur all the way into Canaan. Abraham did not know where he was going. He

did not know where God would lead him. But by faith he obeyed and followed. He trusted God to look after him and provide for him and guide him. What an expression of faith.

We often in life try to work everything out ourselves. My life was all planned out at 18. I had started work in the bank. I wanted a wife in the next few years and then some kids. I wanted to climb the ladder in the bank and be an assistant manager by 25 and a manager by 30. I wanted to reach senior management heights by my forties and for my kids to do well and go to university. I was trying to work my life out just right. I even had God planned in there somewhere. I would keep going to church and running the youth work and maybe I'd become a deacon and do a little preaching for I was ready to start that. And for a while it looked rosy in the garden. I married Morag, we were blessed with Andrew and Rebekah, I got my assistant managers job in Edinburgh – hey presto it was all working out. Except these were my plans and not God's. And before long he revealed his plans to me and life changed – for the better I have to say. There is no better place to be than in the centre of God's will. Abraham knew this despite mucking up along the way – and I know it too.

God is not looking for people who have got it all sussed and life all worked out. He is looking for people who will follow him and trust him to direct their path. Proverbs 3:5-6 'Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.' Sometimes the paths God leads us into are hard paths, but they are always the best paths for our lives.

Romans 8:28 'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.' Job 23:10 'But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.' God knows what is best, he simply wants us to trust him and follow him. Abraham did this and we see him living in God's path. A man and woman of faith will express their faith by living in God's path as well. And that's exactly what we are doing as a church as we extend the building to better serve this community.

Looking for God's Promises

More than that Abraham was looking for God's promises. When Abraham arrived in Canaan it was not the perfect land he thought it might be. The people there did not follow and worship the one true God either. And yet God had promised Abraham in Genesis 13:14-17 'The LORD said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you."

Abraham trusted in God and followed him. He had failed him just before this encounter when he slipped down into Egypt to escape the famine. And he would fail again later when he left the land scared after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. But Abraham did look for God's promises. He wandered through the land and settled in a spot in his tents looking for God's promise of land and descendants. And he trusted God. He didn't take land himself. He didn't force himself on anyone. Everywhere he went the Lord blessed him and he accumulated wealth and possessions. And last week we noticed that he even got legal title to a piece of land in Canaan to use as a burial ground. This set a marker that this was there land – the land God had promised to Abraham and all his descendants.

And as he looked for God's promises he gained that son and heir he craved, even in his old age, even though he and Sarah's bodies were as good as dead, God gave them a son, Isaac. And Isaac too was heir of the same promise.

Genuine faith believes God will do as he says. Genuine faith lives looking for God's promises to be fulfilled, trusting that they will. Abraham lived by faith trusting God for land and descendants. We too can trust God to keep all his promises. Every promise in this book has come true apart from the one still to come. Heaven lies in front of us and I know I can trust God to keep that promise too. Hebrews 11:1 'Now faith is being sure of what we hope of and certain of what we do not see.' Abraham recognised this and trusted God all the days of his life. He fell but when he did he picked himself up and followed God even more closely. His life is a great example to us.

The expressions of faith are living in God's path – following his leading and guiding, trusting in him – and looking for God's promises – for they will come to pass.

The Expectation of Faith

Abraham's faith has already shown us some genuine marks but there is one more. There is the expectation of faith. Abraham lived all his days following God and trusting God. His faith looked beyond the here and now to the future and to a land of hope. Hebrews 11:10 'For he was looking forward to the city with foundations whose architect and builder is God.'

Heavenly Hope

Abraham had heavenly hope. Even as he wandered around Canaan, pitching his tent and living among the people there, he was looking for somewhere else. Even although he looked for God to fulfil his promise and give he and his descendants the Promised Land, he was looking for another land and another city. Abraham was looking to heaven even then. As he left Ur and travelled he lived with the hope of the land God was going to give him. Even after he had dallied in Haran he hoped for the land God was going to give him. Even after he left Canaan for Egypt to escape the famine he

hoped for God's blessing. And once he had settled in the Promised Land and saw his son and heir grow up and marry, he hoped for something more. He hoped for another city and land – he hoped for heaven.

As believers in this world we walk through life with hope as well. We hope that the struggles of this world will end. We hope that there is more to life than this. We hope that heaven will be our reward and that we will spend eternity with our Saviour. And we hope it will happen soon. That is our living hope as Peter describes it. In this land we are but strangers and aliens – 1 Peter 2:11. But we have in the words of Paul in Colossians 1:27 'Christ in you, the hope of glory.'

Our heavenly hope keeps us going when struggles and troubles come. Life is not easy – no one said it ever would be. We have so many trials and temptations, troubles and sorrows but we also have heavenly hope. One day we will be with our Saviour for all eternity.

Heavenly Home

Abraham not only had heavenly hope and the expectation of his faith meant he was looking forward to a heavenly home. He was looking not simply for the Promised Land for his people on earth but he was looking beyond that to the city whose architect and builder is God. Abraham wandered through his earthly life pitching his tent here and there and taking off his sandals in each place. But he was looking forward to a heavenly home with his maker as well. He was looking for that place he would spend forever in the presence of God.

Friends we too have that heavenly hope and heavenly home. Heaven is that place all of us who trust in and follow Jesus will go one day. And what a perfect place it is. In Revelation 21:4 we read it is a place where there is 'no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.' Let's live by faith with these expectations.

Conclusion

Abraham was a great man of God. He was God's friend. Yes he failed in life at times but God picked him and dusted him off again. He learned lots during his life about following God and we have been privileged in these last weeks to learn so much from him. There is a booklet available with summaries of all the messages we have looked at together in case you have missed any or so we can all go through them again to remind ourselves what it means to follow in the footsteps of faith.

To conclude this morning we have seen how Abraham had the marks of genuine faith. He had the experience of faith – he heard the irresistible call of God on his life and he made the individual choice to follow. He had the expression of faith as he lived in God's path and looked for God's promises. He followed God all his days and trusted

him. And he had the expectation of faith - Abraham had a heavenly hope and a heavenly home to look forward to.

Friends this morning as we conclude this series I want to ask us all. Do we have the genuine marks of faith in our life? In these next moments before I pray I want us all to examine our lives and see if we can see the marks of genuine faith. Have we heard the irresistible call of God on our lives? Have we recognised that Jesus died to save us on the cross and have we repented and turned to follow him? Have we made that individual choice? If not I urge you to make it now and come and speak to me at the end.

Are we living in God's path or are we doing things on our own? Are we following Jesus fully or just partially and by that I mean not at all? Are we looking to God's promises and expecting them to be fulfilled? Do we have heavenly hope and are we looking forward to our heavenly home? Do we have these marks of genuine faith in our life? Abraham did and died content - by faith. By faith do you have the marks?

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