

Now There Was a Famine in the Land, and Abram Went Down to Egypt to Live

12: 10-20

DIG: When Abram comes to the Promised Land, only to find no food there, how might he feel about God's promise? Why? Sarai was Abram's *half-sister*; does that justify Abram's *half-truth*? Or does the end (Abram's safety) justify the means (a lie)? What if the end he had in mind was fulfilling ADONAI's promise? Or is such lying *never* justified? Why? Either way, could Abram's sin thwart God's plan? How does the LORD remove Abram from the mess he created?

REFLECT: What sure promise of ADONAI are you questioning? Where is it tough to be totally truthful with Him? Where might you be tempted to assist the LORD to fulfill His plan? What is your testimony to the world?

At this time, a particularly severe trial took place in Abram's life.

Now there was famine in the land of Canaan, and Abram, without calling on the LORD for guidance, went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe (12:10). This is the first mention of Egypt in the Scriptures and it symbolizes alliance with the world and reliance upon the flesh. Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help, who rely on horses, who trust in the multitude of their chariots and in their great strength of their horsemen, but do not look to the Holy One of Isra'el, or seek help from ADONAI (Isaiah 31:1). After wasting time and being stuck in Haran (11:31b), Abram experienced the second failure in his life. Here was a man who traveled from Ur of the Chaldeans to Canaan on the bare word of God, but now was afraid to trust Him in the time of famine. He was operating in the flesh (Romans 8:8; Galatians 5:17).

He left the Promised Land because it seemed that the Land could no longer sustain him, his family and his herds. At this point Abram's faith had not matured to the point where he knew he could trust the LORD under any circumstances, and hearing that the famine did not affect Egypt, he chose to go there until the famine in Canaan had passed. So he temporarily took things into his own hands and left the Promised Land to which God had led him. This lack of faith led Abram to lie, and this lie would lead to tragic consequences in his life.

This is the second of four tests where Abram fell flat on his face. First, he stayed in Haran when he should have gone to the Promised Land (11:31b). Secondly, here, he left the land of Canaan and went to Egypt. Thirdly, he listened to his wife instead of waiting on

the LORD, which resulted in the birth of **Ishmael** and untold problems (16:1-16). And fourthly, his lapse of faith continued as he refused to trust **ADONAI** for his and his wife's safekeeping when he lied *again* to **Abimelech** (20:1-18).

Compromise with the world often seems harmless, but in the end it is very damaging. And one of the most damaging results, at least to those who truly love **God** and desire to witness effectively for **Him**, is to discover that their compromise has destroyed their testimony. Worldly people, rather than being drawn to **God** through **His holy ones** (Psalms 16:3 and 34:9), are used by **God** to rebuke them. This is what happened to **Abram**.²³⁶

The **Egyptians**, like the Canaanites, were descendants of Ham. They were cruel, immoral, and they were notorious for their low standard of morality. He knew they wouldn't hesitate to kill him and his servants in order to get **Sarai** for themselves. Therefore, as he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife **Sarai**, "I know what a beautiful woman you are" (12:11). This is amazing to us today, because she was 65 years old at that time!

"When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live" (12:12). Egyptians during this period were famous for wife abduction. His reasoning was that if **Sarai** were recognized as his sister, they both would be treated with some respect and he would not be killed. While it was true that the Egyptians might approach her for sex, **Abram** reasoned that it would certainly be true if he were killed. Consequently his idea seemed the best solution to a bad situation. **Abraham** had some shining moments, but this wasn't one of them.

"Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you" (12:13). The fact was that **Sarai** was his half-sister (20:12). This was still in the early centuries after the Flood, and close marriages were still common and often necessary.²³⁷ But it was still a lie because the intent was to hide the fact that they were married. However, if he were perceived as her brother, he would be the one to negotiate for her in any marriage proposal. Like **Abram**, our fear can lead us to start living a lie and one sin leads to another. We've all been there.

Indeed **Abram's** fears were eventually realized. When **Abram** came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman (12:14). The rabbis teach that **Abram hid Sarai in a chest, but she was discovered at the border**. But **God** was behind the scenes protecting the line of blessing (see BI - **The Line of Seth**).

Instead of dealing with regular Egyptians, **Sarai** came to the attention of **Pharaoh** himself. And when **Pharaoh's** officials saw her, they praised (*hallal* which means *praise*) her to **Pharaoh**, and she was taken to his palace and ended up in **Pharaoh's** harem (12:15). Rather than taking her for themselves, they merely praised her to **Pharaoh**. This shows

that **Abram's** fear was reasonable. But by going to **Egypt** and having his wife end up in **Pharaoh's** harem, **Abram** put the promise of the **Seed of the Woman (3:15)** in danger because that **Seed** would come through **her** and no other.

Pharaoh followed the custom of the day and paid the bride price. The ancient laws said that if the father had died, the brother became the legal guardian of an unmarried **sister**. Because **Abram** was the supposed brother, **he** was paid the bride price. **He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels (12:16)**. These new acquisitions would lead to the conflict with **Abram's** nephew Lot in the next chapter. In addition, **he acquired maidservants** and one of them was an **Egyptian woman named Hagar (16:1)**. This in turn would set the stage for the conflict between **Sarai and Hagar (16:1-15)**, between **Isaac and Ishmael (21:8-21)**, and between the Jews and Arabs to this very day.

Abram's plan seemed to be working out quite well. **Sarai** was safe and was not only alive but being lavished with gifts. But what would happen if **Pharaoh** actually had sex with **Sarai**? Their own best thinking had put them in a predicament. They were helpless - but **God** was not. By taking **Sarai** away, **Pharaoh** had cursed **Abram**. **The LORD** had said *the one who treats you lightly I must curse (12:3)*. So here **ADONAI** inflicted serious diseases on **Pharaoh** and his household because of **Abram's wife Sarai (12:17)**. **The rabbis teach that it was leprosy**. But whatever it was, **Sarai** remained untouched by it.

On the one hand, what was **Sari** to think of all this? What part did **she** play in **God's** will with **her** husband? **She** agreed to **Abram's** plan because **she** loved **him**, but was **she** merely to be the object of **her** husband's protection? Was this **her** purpose in life? Or did **ADONAI** have something else in mind for **her**? Whatever it was, **His** silence toward **her** was deafening. On the other hand, **Abram** needed to learn that neither **he** nor **his wife** could survive by human strategy, but only by protection from **the LORD**; **He** is the one who intervenes to save **Abram** even though **he** had sinned. **God's** promises are unconditional.

Perhaps through the **serious diseases**, **Pharaoh** was able to discern the problem. Or maybe it was divine revelation as will be the case with **Abimelech** in a similar situation with **Abraham (20:3-7)**. Either way, **Pharaoh** summoned **Abram** and asked **him** three questions. First **he** asked: **What have you done to me?** **Pharaoh** had suffered greatly because of **Abram's** lie. Secondly, **he** asked: **Why didn't you tell me she was your wife (12:18)?** This was the truth that was hidden. Thirdly, **he** asked: **Why did you say, "She is my sister, so that I took her to be my wife" (12:19a)?** **Pharaoh's** intent was to make **her** a real wife, but through the providence of **the LORD**, the **serious diseases** struck before any sexual union actually took place.

Pharaoh now feared to harm either Sarai or Abram; but he did sharply rebuke Abram. ADONAI held Abram accountable for what went on between he and his wife (see Bf - **Your Desire Will Be For Your Husband and He Will Rule Over You**). Pharaoh had lost all respect for them, and of course was not attracted to their God. Because of their fearfulness and compromise, they had caused the house of Pharaoh to suffer greatly and the Egyptians had finally come to despise them. The only thing he could do was to tell them to leave his country, which they did, taking all the possessions they had acquired in Egypt.²³⁸

Pharaoh said: Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go (12:19b)! Under normal circumstances, Pharaoh could have executed Abram. But after experiencing the power behind Abram, he went no further than he already had. Abram was escorted and banished from Egypt. Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had (12:20). So Abram left Egypt a richer man than when he came. But the riches would prove to be very costly. They should have never gone to Egypt in the first place. But once there, they should have maintained their testimony at all costs. ADONAI would have protected them, indeed, He did protect them despite their compromise. While in Egypt, Abram never built an altar or called upon the name of the LORD.

The rabbis teach that this whole incident foreshadowed the future: Abram went down to Egypt because of the famine, the Egyptians robbed him of his wife for which they were punished with great plagues; Abram was then loaded with gifts, and Pharaoh charged men to see that he left the country. Similarly, the Israelites will go down to Egypt because of famine; there they will be oppressed and their wives taken from them; this being the purpose of Pharaoh's edict to spare the daughters. The Egyptians will be punished by great plagues (Exodus 7:14 to 11:10), and subsequently the Israelites departed with great wealth and were also hastened out of the country.

It is easy for us to criticize Abram for his actions. But given the same circumstances, we would probably have done the same thing. How many times do we take the easy way out in our lives? We compromise and then rationalize our actions. We also need to learn the same lesson he did and often we have to learn it in the same way, by being rebuked by the very unbelievers we would like to win to Christ. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall! 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 provide a way out so that you can stand up under it (Second Corinthians 10:12-13).