

When God's Plan A Becomes Abram's Plan B - Genesis 12:10-20¹

Before the Lesson: There is no handout or special equipment needed for this lesson.

Fellowship Question: (Use one of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

What is the latest experience you've had with needing to make a sudden change of plans?

If you have to bargain with the world's most powerful person, what do you have for collateral?

Information

We've been learning about how faith grows by looking at the faith journey of Abram.

Today, we will look at Abram as well as his wife, Sarai.

God made promises to Abram. These were conditional promises – “If you do this, I will do that.”

In this case, God calls Abram to leave his land to go elsewhere – TBA. If Abram will do that, God will bless him. Let's hear the word from God to Abram again.

- Have a class member read Genesis 12:2-3.

Keep in mind that we are talking about a culture from 3000 or so years ago. The ancient Mediterranean culture was different politically, socially, and linguistically – in many, many ways. Even so, there were cultural norms that Abram and Sarai would have been expected to keep.

Abram leaves Haren with his wife, Sarai, his nephew, Lot, and all of Abram's possessions. They get to Canaan. God promises this land to Abram and his descendants. Abram worships God.

Then, a crisis happens. This land that God gave Abram will not support him and his family.

- Have a class member read Genesis 12:10-20.

We know that Abram is a man of faith – of a fledgling faith, at least. Now, he faces a famine. He decides to go to Egypt. Was God involved in this decision? (No.)

Abram uproots his family, gathers his belongings, and heads south to Egypt.

As he approaches Egypt, he must be considering how he can negotiate a deal with Pharaoh. What does he have to offer Pharaoh in return for safe lodging and food? There are some animals, some slaves, some material wealth – ah, and there is this most beautiful woman, Sarai.

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What is the problem with this plan? (Abram was only interested in saving his skin; Abram was only interested in how this would better his situation; Sarai is treated as property, etc.)

“12:10-20, quite in contrast to 12:1-9 presents Abraham as an anxious man, a man of unfaith. He is ready to secure his own survival because he does not trust exclusively in the promise... The text indicates that the temptation of unfaith comes immediately after his best resolve to faithfulness.”²

On the other hand, if Pharaoh kills Abram, seeking to marry Sarai, what happens to the promise?

What is the problem with this plan as it relates to the arrangement Abram has with Sarai? (How can Sarai bear Abram’s child if she is now Pharaoh’s wife? How long will Abram stay – what about the land God promised him and his descendants?)

“This is the plot’s single greatest complication, the most serious threat to God’s intentions of making Abram and Sarai a blessing to all nations through offspring and land.”³

“Abram had few options, none of them perfect. He chooses to enter into a situation fraught with danger and ambiguity and devises a careful strategy, albeit imperfect, self-serving, and dishonoring of Sarai.”⁴

Isn’t Abram doing the best that he can? A famine occurs through no fault of his own. He wants to preserve his family, his wealth, and his life. Yet to do this, there must be compromises, half-truths, and risks. Abram is not perfect and does not make the best decisions one-hundred percent of the time. We look back on heroes and saints in admiration – which we should do. The Bible also reminds us that these icons were also real, fallible human beings.

There is a sudden, serious disease that somehow causes Pharaoh to realize that Sarai is not Abram’s sister, but his wife.

Abram’s faithlessness has dramatic implications.

“The strange calculus of the narrative is that Abraham’s shabby action does bring curse. However, the curse is not on himself (as we might expect in a good moral lesson), but on the innocent others.... The faith and/or faithlessness of Israel matters not only to Israel. It is decisive for the nations.”⁵

² Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 126.

³ Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven’t Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 42.

⁴ Terence Fretheim, *Genesis, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume 1* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 429.

⁵ Brueggemann, 129.

How would you describe the current partnership of Abram and God? (Abram is taking the lead with no conversation with God)

“Perhaps Abram was counting on God to intervene on Sarai’s behalf. If so, he conveniently found it easier to trust God for his wife’s fate rather than for his own.”⁶

We know that God told Abram that he would become the father of a great nation. Has God said that Sarai is to be the mother of a great generation? (not specifically)

As far as becoming a father of a great nation, Abram had options, then. What were some of Abram’s options?

1. Sarai
2. A different wife
3. Lot (his nephew, claimed as an adopted son)
4. A slave (Since the slave is the property of Abram, the child of a slave would be as well.)
5. Other options?

Abram is a man of faith; he is also a man of action. That action may or may not meet the moral standards of the day, so long as the means serve the ends. In the course of our story, he will experiment with each of these options, with or without consulting with God.

“The ancestral narratives that comprise the vast majority of the corpus of Genesis address a central concern: the ability of God to fulfill the promises made to Abraham of an abundant family that will bless the world. Far from being exemplars of moral behavior in model family units, a close reading of the ancestral sagas reveals numerous flawed characters and persistent familial dysfunction. Characters like Abram/Abraham, who twice profits from the sale of his wife and takes sexual advantage of his wife’s enslaved Egyptian woman...epitomize the kinds of skeletons found in many of our familial closets.”⁷

What does this story tell us about our humanity?

What does this story tell us about being faithful (or not)? (Fathers of our faith failed – mothers of our faith, too; God is gracious; God doesn’t give up on us; God doesn’t always speak clearly or preemptively, etc.)

Without a prayer or maybe a thought of God, Abram’s God takes the lead. Sarai is released to Abram. Abram receives blessings from one who felt cursed because of him. He regains his wife and he gains wealth.

⁶ Borgman, 43.

⁷ Rodney Sadler, s.v., “Genesis,” *The Africana Bible: Reading Israel’s Scriptures From African and the African Diaspora* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 69f.

“Without Yahweh’s intervention [this] narrative might make a good story. But it would not be the shape of faith and faithlessness it now is. ... The decisive intrusion of Yahweh is at the point where the promises are greatest and the risks the highest.”⁸

Transformational Exercise

Abram lies (that is, he forces Sarai to lie) to Pharaoh. He puts his concerns ahead of his wife’s life. He risks breaking his side of keeping the covenant with God.

Morally, who is on the higher ground – Abram or Pharaoh?

We would not suggest Abram’s type of behavior to someone trying to grow in their faith. Yet, Abram’s faith must have grown through this experience.

How do you think this experience shaped Abram’s faith?

I recently attended a writer’s workshop. The teacher was helping us discover that the damage that we have had in our lives makes excellent fodder for story-telling. “Take your pains and put them into your characters. In this way, the curse becomes a blessing.”

How can Abram and Sarai’s story shape our faith for the better?

In the next moments of silence, reflect on a time when a mistake or an outright sin that you committed became a means to strengthen your faith. I will not ask you to share this event with the class. This is between you and God.

As you remember, present this story to God, knowing that God loves you, forgives you, and wants the best for you. Thank God for God’s mercy and for God’s hope in you.

[After a minute of silence, close in a prayer something like this: *Holy God, we are not often holy. We make mistakes. We commit sins. We let others and ourselves and you down. Yet we trust that you love us. We believe that you forgive us. We hope to be better and to do better. Give us the faith to follow you as you call us to do. Amen.*]

⁸ Brueggemann, 126.