

Abraham: A False Step

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon 'Abraham: A False Step' highlights the dangers of materialism, deceptive words, and the importance of trusting God's timing, even in the face of trials and tribulations.

Duration: 42:14

Scripture: Genesis 12:10

Topics: "Abraham"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes that all genuine saints are flawed individuals who rely on the grace of God. He uses the example of Abram, who, like everyone else, had a fallen nature and needed God's grace to be saved and remain in a relationship with Him. The preacher then focuses on a specific event in Abram's life, a famine in the land of promise. He highlights how Abram, despite being called by God and brought to the land, becomes fearful and runs away from the situation instead of trusting in God's timing and seeing it as a test of his faith. The sermon encourages listeners to be aware of unrecognized discipline and to trust in God's timing and faithfulness.

Transcript

A passage beginning with verse 10 and proceeding as far as the fourth verse in chapter 13. May I say, I am hoping that as many as possible of you will be joining us here tonight. It's going to be a very happy occasion for us as a congregation, and we would dearly love to have your presence with us for this solemn yet joyous occasion of induction.

Mr. and their family are among us already and are busy at their work. But this is the official setting aside of Mr. McLeod in his capacity here. Pray for us if you can't be here.

Pray if you can as well, of course. But we hope that there will be a very goodly representation of the congregation present tonight. Now let us turn then to Genesis chapter 12 verse 10 over to chapter 13 and verse 4. A passage to which we've given the title, A False Step.

Ever made a false step? I wonder whether some of us are in danger this morning of doing exactly that. Well, I believe that if you come courageously and honestly and look at this episode that we have before us, it really can be the salvation of your soul and of your life. It's as precious as that.

Now the path that leads to spiritual maturity is never smooth, never flat, never easy. This is not due to any lack of grace in God, but it is rather due to the fact of sin in us. Sin is so entrenched in our minds, in our natures, in our characters, that for a holy God to expunge us and to transform us into His likeness requires that at times we should have to face trial and even tribulation.

If sin were superficial, we could be given summer weather all life through. But because it is not, because it is the hideous, damaging, damning thing it is, we need--and I know it's hard for us to take this in--I need sometimes, you need sometimes, to be put through a furnace of affliction, so that the sufferings of the Lord's people are said to be working together for a good that is in God's mind. Now this being the case, we are not to be surprised that there has only been one man whose life was one perfect straight line.

Sin being what it is, there has only been one who has overcome sin at every point, and that was God's only begotten Son, our blessed, adorable Lord Jesus Christ. Every other man has failed. Every other saint has failed.

The greatest of the saints have failed. Now I'm not saying that this morning to excuse myself in doing wrong or to excuse you, dear people, in doing wrong. And it must not be interpreted in that way.

But I am saying it because it is true, and we need to be reminded of this. All the genuine saints have been men of clay in the first place, men who carried with them to their dying day a fallen nature, and who at every turn of their life needed the grace of God. And it was only by the grace of God that they were originally brought into a saving relationship with him, and only by the same grace were they kept in that saving union with God that will ultimately bring them to glory.

Now looking at Abram, Abram was a man of clay like the rest of us, no better, no worse, apart from God's grace. Two or three things I want you to notice. We're going to look at the picture as it were this morning, taking a bird's-eye view.

We're going to look at two or three of the main features here. The first thing I want you to notice is the unrecognized discipline. Look at verse 10.

It starts off, Now there was a famine in the land. So what? So what? Abram is a man that has been brought into the land by God. So what do you expect? Oh well, you're going to read your Bible, rightly so, but wait a moment.

Take your eyes off the Bible. There was a famine in the land. So what will Abram, the man of faith, do? The man was called by God a thousand miles back, and who's been brought safely for nearly a thousand miles with his family, with his cattle, and is now in the heart of the land of promise, and God has made covenant with him.

What will Abram do? What should a man of faith do? Well listen, I hope it shocks you as it shocks me. And Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while, because the famine was severe in the land. The previous passage ends with a most telling picture of Abram, and if we were left with that passage, verses eight and nine, we would have a beautiful picture of Abram.

May I read them to you? From there, from Shechem, he went toward the hills east of Bethel, and pitched his tent with Bethel on the west, and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord, and called on the name of the Lord. Then Abram set out and continued going toward the Negev.

Now the picture we have there is this. It's the picture of Abram building altars for God, whilst he himself was satisfied to be a tramp, a pilgrim, living in a tent, in all its simplicity. Altars for God, tents for him and his family, and he was happy.

This passage before us today points to a gathering storm at the change of spirit and of attitude. For some reason or other, Abram seems to forget the glory of the God who revealed himself to him in Ur of the Chaldeans, who brought him by the hand along the Euphrates Valley to Haran first, and then into Shechem and into the land that his posterity was to possess. Abram seems strangely to forget everything about that, and there's almost a total eclipse.

And rather than look to his God, or pray to his God, or trust in his God, he makes a quick exit from the land of promise to go to some place where he thinks because of the waters of the Nile there will be plenty of food. Oh the blindness that has come over this man of faith, and I want to stress that, this man of faith at this point. He was blind for example to the significant timing of this famine.

I guess if we were able to look at our own lives objectively and see the timing of events, we should be able the better to assess them and to see their significance. But you see Abram was not able to do that. Perhaps you and I are not able to do it as often as we ought.

Let me repeat, and I must repeat this, the timing is very significant. Abram has only just arrived in the land of promise. Where did he come from? A thousand miles away.

Why did he come? The God of glory called him. How was he able to make that long journey? The God of glory that called him brought him. He was kept safely.

He was provided for, he and his people. And here they are in the land of promise, and then when they've arrived there, the same God of glory that appeared to him back home in Ur of the Chaldees, appears to him again in all his splendid majesty right there in the heart of the promised land. So he knows that the God of Ur is the God of Canaan.

Surely a God who brought him all that way and revealed himself to Abram at the beginning and at the end, is a God who will have something to say about a famine that he permits. Abram had even been told about God's promise to his descendants and God's purpose for his descendants in the land. Yet Abram goes swiftly down to Egypt, leaves the land.

Now in the light of all this, and as sure as God is the Lord, this famine that the Almighty God allowed to take place could hardly have been an evil omen. And the right thing to have done, of course, would be to have asked, well, Lord, I don't understand all this. You called me.

You brought me here. And when I came here, you spoke to me and you confirmed your covenant with me and my children, my descendants unborn. Now I don't understand this famine that's come, but if you are the God of glory still, then well, I'm going to trust you.

But you see, God was obliterated out of the mind of the saint. It's amazing how a tiny speck of dirt in the eye can make you oblivious to the whole sky, the whole world. Some dust has got into Abram's eyes and he doesn't see, and the very God of glory has become almost an unentity in his thinking.

Put bluntly, this famine should have terribly worried the pagan Canaanites all around him, because they knew not God as Abram did. Do you know the picture that we get here if we read brightly between the

lines? The pagans are going on with business just as before, aching out an existence which wasn't very much. But Abram, the man of faith, is frightened stiff and he's running away from it.

Abram was blind to the significant timing of things. How often can we be so oblivious of its significant timing? Abram simply did not consider the possibility that it was a strategic testing of his faith. Nothing was further from Abram's mind that this should indeed be a testing of his trust in God.

So he decided somewhat swiftly and most thoughtlessly to run away from it, to fend for himself. As the pagans go along with business as usual, Abram runs away and tries to do everything for himself. I don't know whether the crazy notion ever came to him, that somehow or other the God of glory that appeared to him and brought him into the promised land was now in difficulties and needed Abram's ingenuity and Abram's assistance to get out of trouble.

Of course we wouldn't put it like that and Abram wouldn't, but we often think like that. We need to help him and if we don't do everything we can, poor we God is going to have a bad time of it. There's a carnal way of thinking.

Now if I go on too far like this somebody will say to me, well what really is the use of being a man of faith at all if things are going to turn out like this, that really I lose my vision of God perhaps a short time after I have been given it and I act inconsistently. What's the meaning, what's the value of being a Christian, of being a man of God or a woman of God at all? Well what I want to stress of course is this, that this is a man in the making and this is something that we often forget about ourselves, that we are still in the making, in the process of becoming by the grace of God and every believer is. Whatever we have today, wherever we've arrived spiritually, my friend you and I are still in the process of becoming.

You heard of the two men who met, they had been chums in school and chums in college, one of them had become a Christian. He'd lived such a blatantly sinful life that his mate said to him after being with him for a few hours, well look he said, you say you're a Christian but frankly he says, I don't see very much difference in you from the days when we used to be friends and we used to do this and we used to go there and we used to do that. I don't see very much difference.

Oh he said but you wait a minute, you wait till the Lord has finished with me. He hasn't finished yet. He's got an awful lot to do but he's busy and you wait until he's finished with me.

Now we need to remember that. I find it's a tremendous thing to say to oneself occasionally and to say to friends who are downcast and who are puzzled because some of the saints make terrible slips and sin but you wait until God finishes with them. We must wait for the last chapter to be written before we know what the book is all about and God's last chapter is to bring out of this vacillating man of faith a man whose name goes down into history not only as the father of the faithful but as the friend of God but at this point please let us get it at this point somehow or other something has obliterated the God of glory from his vision.

He can't see him and when the storm comes in in the form of a trial he simply does not know what to do with it, not what to make of it. An unrecognized discipline. Let's take that a little stage further.

Let's look next at the unheeded danger. Abram we're told not only went out of the land but he went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. Abram now seemed to become so utterly obsessed by the prospect of the famine in Canaan that he appeared to be oblivious to everything else.

Everything else seems to recede into the background and the one thing that becomes an obsession is this famine. How am I going to be saved through it? How am I going to be kept and my people and my cattle? Now I want myself to offer what I think is an explanation here. You may disagree with it and you are quite at liberty to do that because it's only my own hunch.

But I have a feeling that Abram was never the same again when he came out of Haran. There was a deterioration that set into Abram's spiritual life at Haran. And if I had the time I think I could prove that.

You may say to me well what was it that significantly happened to Abram at Haran? Well there were a number of things. First of all he had to say goodbye to his father Terah. Terah had to die.

Either metaphorically he had to reckon him dead and leave him there in order to go on with God or physically he actually died. Whichever is the correct understanding. But Abram had to leave his father behind there in Haran.

The other side of the Euphrates. Abram crossed the Euphrates and moved out with God and he left his father behind. And he couldn't go on with God without leaving his father behind.

Yes that's one thing. But there's something else. Abram became quite rich in Haran.

Now you read the story. Read it for yourselves. And you will see that however rich he was coming away from home and he had much cattle.

He had many things bringing with him that he brought with him from Ur of the Chaldees. In Haran his riches accumulated. And it was very difficult for him to get out of Haran.

And I want to hazard the guess. And I do it on the basis of what I know for a fact. The itch for possession makes of men.

I believe that coming out of Haran Abram had caught the bug of materialism. And he got it there. And with a bug of materialism raging in his system.

Now look at the change of values that has come upon him. These are not the values of Ur of the Chaldees. These are not the values of Canaan to which he's gone.

These are not the values of Egypt where he is now located. You say what am I referring to? This. In consequence of the moral change that has come over this man.

And the elevation of material things at the expense of the moral and the spiritual. He is now prepared to suggest to his wife that in order to save his own skin. She should make herself a member of the Egyptian Pharaohs Haran.

And become another woman added to the multitude there already at the disposal of the king. Because she was a beautiful woman. Whilst he the man of faith enjoys the food and the plenty of Egypt.

I say to you something has gone terribly wrong. Now what I want to stress is this. That's not the morality of Ur of the Chaldees.

Pagan though it was. That's not the morality even of Canaan. Pagan though it was.

That was not the morality of Egypt. Pagan though it was. Where did it come from? It came from the soul of a man who's caught the bug of materialism.

And in order to get what he wants and multiply his cattle and his goods. He is prepared to forfeit the purity and virginity of the woman at his side. He goes right into the teeth of danger.

And doesn't see it. Because he's obsessed with his own safety. Nothing else.

Plus safety. Plus plenty. Getting rich.

Oh I wish this were not so solemn. I really find myself quite incapable of saying what I want to say about this. Because you see my friends.

We don't like it. I don't like it. I wouldn't like you preaching to me about this.

And you don't like me preaching to you about this. But you know the itch for materialism is something that comes like a cover over our eyes. And we just don't see clearly when we've got it.

We've got an unholy distemper. That affects our thinking. Affects our hearing.

Affects our seeing. Affects our speaking. And everything else.

We're absolutely topsy-turvy. We'll call black white. We'll call white black.

And we'll excuse ourselves out of every holy argument. In order to get just what we want. I hope you haven't got this bug in your system.

Abram too was of course impervious to the danger of indulging in deceptive words. One thing leads to another. Can I just mention this.

Verses 11 to 13. We've referred to it already. But let me just make real positive note of it now.

You imagine Abram the man of faith telling his wife. Look. You're a beautiful woman.

Well that's a good thing to tell your wife of course. Perhaps some of us should say that oftener. Okay take the hint.

But that's not my point this morning. Abram at an ulterior end in view. You're a beautiful woman and everybody knows it.

And when they see you they're going to want you for Pharaoh. What are they going to do with me? Well they're going to kill me. To get you.

Now he said to Sarah. Oh the cruelty of it. Oh the carnality of it.

Oh the satanic spirit of it. The hellishness of it. You say that you're my sister.

Of course you see. She was his sister. She was a half sister.

So it was only a half truth. Half lie. And these are far more dangerous than the very black ones.

The very positive ones. But put them off by half a lie. Half a truth.

Which is always a lie. Now I want to suggest to you and especially to young people here. That the most dangerous success in life is the danger that I get when I lie or deceive.

That success is a failure. I'll tell you why. Because if I succeed through lying and deceiving.

I will invariably try it out again. The best thing that could happen to us men. The best thing that could happen to us people.

Is this. When we deceive. When we lie.

That we should flop. And be exposed for all the tragedy of it as we would say. Of being exposed.

But I say to you. It's the very best thing. Because if we are not.

Then we will get it into our system. That we can do this kind of thing. And get away with it.

And we'll expect God to bless us. Despite our inconsistencies. And despite our sin.

Do you know. Do you know. Abram had the same temptation over 20 years after this.

And he did the same thing over again. Chapter 20. He catches you you see.

Indulging in deceptive words. Making his wife a cover for himself. But most important of all in one sense.

Abram was heedless of the danger of exposing his dutiful wife. To the passions of this pagan king. Provided he got food for himself.

For his group. And for his cattle. I wonder whether you've got the picture of this.

Abram was her husband. But however much Abram loved Sarai. He didn't really.

However much Abram said he loved Sarai. He really didn't love her very much. He's less than sensitive to her danger.

As a member of the harem of an Egyptian pharaoh. Of that bygone age. Her purity meant less to him.

Than his own skin. And food for his cattle. True he was living in pre-Christian times.

But the selfish concern for self-preservation. And the preservation of his company. And his cattle.

Had surely gone out of bounds. When it had no consideration for God's glory. Or for Sarai's purity.

Or for the fulfillment of God's purposes for his posterity. Abram doesn't think of his posterity any more than he thinks of his wife. Any more than he thinks of God.

Now poor blind Abram. That's really a false step. And the most dangerous one.

His whole future was precariously poised. As he rushed thoughtlessly toward Egypt. He was no longer living by faith.

But by sight. He was no longer concerned for God's glory. But for his own safety and prosperity.

Far from being concerned with God's plan for his posterity. He is now engrossed in an obsession with the present. Man of.

Yes but in the making. And a very poor specimen of faith at this point. But my friends I want to bring good news to you.

This is the kind of man that God saves. This is the kind of person that our God is able to transform. Our God is able to come into life such as this.

And make them other than what they are. By their own natures and according to their own tendencies. He is able to save to the uttermost.

In that sense. That brings me from the unrecognized discipline. And the unheeded danger to the undeserved deliverance.

Will you notice a point that comes out here very evidently. God delivers them. That's the background to it.

But the point I want to make is this. Abram's salvation. From first to last.

Is due more to the faithfulness of God than to Abram's faith. This shook me this week again. We talk about the faith of Abram and rightly so.

By faith Abram went out not knowing hither he went. Paul speaks of him as. Believing against all odds.

As one of the translation has it. And he was doing that. But I want you to notice my friend.

That ultimately it was more God's faithfulness. Than Abram's faith. That got Abram into the promised land.

Got him back there from Egypt. And got him back spiritually. On to a level that meant he could have communion with God.

It's God's faithfulness that is the most important thing. Now let me let me. Enlarge upon that a little.

It was because of God's faithfulness that. We find him interfering in the life of Pharaoh the pagan. To open his hand and let Abram free.

And Sarai free again. God plagued Pharaoh. Verse 17.

But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house. With great plagues because of Sarai Abram's wife. Now that's a shorthand statement.

One wonders what it means altogether. Probably it means this. God plagued not only Pharaoh and his wife.

Pharaoh himself and his house. His relatives. His children.

But God plagued. A whole community around them. At least the whole family.

And they knew the reason for the plague. They knew that somehow an unseen God. An unknown God was doing something to them.

Making them unhappy. Because of something that Abram had done. How? I can't tell you.

But that's necessary for an understanding of this passage. Oh it is good for you and for me to know that God has a way of communicating even with pagan rulers. I've been thinking about our missionaries this morning.

We certainly need to remember it in this context. Our God is able to communicate with Khomeini. Our God is able to open the hand of a tyrant when it's his will.

And here he comes through to the pharaoh of Egypt. The reigning pharaoh at this given time in history. And he makes him uncomfortable.

And he comes to Abram and makes the suggestion. Abram quit. Get back home as quickly as you can.

You and your wife and everybody else with you. You also see the same blessed sovereignty in the second place in God's protection of Sarai. She remained apparently unharmed.

A sovereign protector surrounded her. So it would appear. In that very precarious situation in which she found herself.

There was a God who cared more for her than her own husband did. He sent her there. But God protected her there.

He allowed her to be taken there. But he protected her. And he planned the means for her release.

Her exodus. God is on guard when men have forgotten us. And when those nearest and dearest to us may have become intoxicated by self-seeking pursuits or in some other way.

My friend take this to your comfort this morning. Our God is on guard. And if he's called you by your name.

And you're his this morning. He will never let you go. If you don't have this vision of God.

You'll be heartbroken a thousand times before you come to your grave. But our God never gives up. He dealt with Pharaoh.

He protected Sarai. And he got an exodus for them. Before the great exodus of course.

Out of Egypt. That brings us face to face with God saving grace. In all its splendid glory.

Yes it was in grace he secured the release. But not only the release. The grace that secured release from Egypt.

Also procured their return into the land. And to the altar of earlier days. Now I want to read these verses to you.

And we're nearly through. But I want you to notice here. How this simple narrative.

Tells us something of the profoundest significance. So Abram went up from Egypt. He and his wife.

And all that he had. And Lot with him. By the way can I interject.

You see. If Abram hadn't gone to Egypt. And taken Lot with him there.

It's more than probable that Lot would never have thought of going to Sodom and Gomorrah later on. If saints insist on introducing their children to wicked evil questionable things. Now they may find that it is difficult to dissuade their children from going into the teeth of Sodom tomorrow.

More about that again. And Lot with him into the Negev. And he journeyed on from the Negev as far as Bethel.

Now we're coming back into the sacred territory. Bethel. To the place where his tent had been at the beginning.

Between Bethel and Ai. Ah yes. But we go further.

Not only to the place where he pitched his tent. Hallowed as that was. But to the place where he had made an altar at the first.

And there Abram called upon the name of the Lord. Now I have to summarize this. Can you see it? Abram's been in Egypt.

Spiritually as well as physically and geographically. He's been down in the depths. It was a sad lapse.

But somehow he's been brought back again. And in coming back out of Egypt. What's he making for? Simply some corner in the land where there's plenty of food for his cattle and his family.

No he's not thinking so much of food now. There's no mention of the famine now. Perhaps it was exaggerated a little bit too much before when he went down to Egypt.

I don't know. But there's no mention of the famine. Where does he go to? Bethel.

The place where he pitched his tent. Near to the place where he pitched his altar. And when he got to the place of the altar.

Dear old Abram began to call on the name of the Lord. What Lord? Who appeared to him in Ur of the Chaldees. Who brought him all that long way.

Who spoke to him in Shechem. Who allowed him to go down into Egypt. Who made Pharaoh uncomfortable.

And got him out of Egypt and brought him back. And God is still by the altar to commune with him. Oh wondrous God.

I'm through. Save this. Are there those here this morning who are out of the land of promise? You're not where God meant you to be.

Where he's called you to be. You've run away. And God called you there is beyond question.

That he put you there. And then he allowed some little storm to come. And you said well if I'm in the will of the Lord there should be no storm.

You were ignorant of the truth. And you too tried to fend for yourself as Abram did. And you went down to your own little Egypt wherever that may be.

And you left the place where God said I will bless you. And bless your posterity. And you ran away.

And this morning if the truth were only known. You were actually in Egypt. My friend I want to ask you to come back today.

Turn your back on Egypt in that sense. Get back into the place to which God originally called you. Don't be a dislocated saint.

A dislocated member of the body is a tragedy however you look at it. Come back. Pray God to open the hand of the Pharaoh that is holding you.

And to release you. Oh that you will come back with me this morning to Bethel the house of God. And to the altar that you built in earlier days.

And there start to call upon God out of a heart's repentance and faith again. Oh I wish there was one other man in the pulpit this morning. A man that I know reasonably well.

His name is Hosea. Oh that Hosea the prophet could come into this pulpit this morning and say to you dear people what I would like to say. Oh Israel thou has fallen by thine own iniquity.

Return unto me and I will return to you. Return. A man who is called of God and who has received the covenant promises of God has no place in this kind of Egyptian.

His place is near the altar where is God communes with him. In the land of God's promise. Let us pray.

Our heavenly father we thank you for this your day. That you've given us a day. One day in seven when we should turn aside from things.

Not only things that are improper but even from the legitimate things of life. And devote our energies and our thoughts exclusively to holy things. So that the Sabbath day is veritable a fore gleam of heaven.

The eternal Sabbath. And we would turn our eyes upon yourself our holy almighty all gracious God this morning. And we pray that as we look away from men and from ourselves.

In our sin and wickedness. As we look away to you. You will communicate with us.

And communicate likewise with those who are influencing us for evil. That we may be free indeed. Bring all of us to the place of continued communion with you.

In your will. That will have an impact not only upon our own lives but will lead ultimately to the fulfillment of your promises. To the third and fourth generation nay to thousands of generations of them that love you.

And keep your commandment in Jesus name. Amen.

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