

What if I Fail

by Peter Maiden

God is committed to failure and can work through imperfect people, as seen in the story of Abraham's life.

Duration: 41:27

Scripture: Genesis 11:31, Genesis 12:1, Matthew 16:13, Matthew 16:17, 1 Corinthians 10:12

Topics: "Failure"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the story of Abraham and how his faith was tested. The preacher highlights how Abraham's faith faltered when faced with pressure and uncertainty. Abraham made a questionable decision to protect himself and his wife by claiming she was his sister. The preacher emphasizes the importance of learning from Abraham's mistakes and being cautious not to let our own faith fail in times of difficulty. The sermon concludes with a reminder that every forward move in faith will be tested, and encourages listeners to trust in God's promises and remain steadfast in their faith.

Transcript

Thank you, Mike. I don't know how I managed to slip up there in organising the programme to have Mike introducing me. It was a major failure, which proves that I'm utterly qualified for the talk this morning.

Now there's one thing which I believe in very strongly and that is the public reading of scripture. Do you remember how the Apostle Paul told Timothy to occupy himself with a couple of things until Paul came? One thing he said, I want you to occupy yourself with, Timothy, is the public reading of the Word of God. So I'm not going to apologise for reading three passages of scripture this morning, as we look together at failure in the life of Abraham.

And I want you to turn first of all to Genesis chapter 12, and we'll commence to read at verse 1. Genesis chapter 12, verse 1, my reading again from the new American Standard Bible. Genesis 12, 1. Now the Lord said to Abraham, go forth from your country, and from your relatives, and from your father's house, to the land which I will show you. And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, and so you shall be a blessing.

And I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So Abraham went forth as the Lord had spoken to him.

And if we follow the passage down we'll find that eventually he arrives in Canaan. Pick up the story in verse 10. Now there was a famine in the land, so Abraham went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.

And it came about when he came near to Egypt that he said to Sarah his wife, see now, I know that you're a beautiful woman. And it will come about when the Egyptians see you, that they will say this is his wife, and they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say that you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may live on account of you.

And it came about when Abraham came into Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful, and Pharaoh's officials saw her and praised her to Pharaoh, and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. Therefore he treated Abraham well for her sake, gave him sheep and oxen and donkeys and male and female servants and female donkeys and camels. But the Lord struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

Then Pharaoh called Abraham and said, what is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say she is my sister, so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her and go. And Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him, and they escorted him away with his wife and all that belonged to him. Then it crossed to chapter 16, chapter 16 of Genesis.

Now Sarah, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. So Sarah said to Abraham, now behold, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Please go into my maid, perhaps I shall obtain children through her.

And Abraham listened to the voice of Sarah. And after Abraham had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abraham's wife Sarah took Hagar, the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abraham as his wife. And he went into Hagar and she conceived.

And when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was despised in her sight. And Sarah said to Abraham, may the wrong done me be upon you. I gave my maid into your arms, but when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her sight.

May the Lord judge between you and me. But Abraham said to Sarah, behold, your maid is in your power. Do to her what is good in your sight.

So Sarah treated her harshly and she fled from her presence. Now the angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, Hagar, Sarah's maid, where have you come from? Where are you going? And she said, I'm fleeing from the presence of my mistress Sarah.

And the angel of the Lord said to her, return to your mistress and submit yourself to her authority. Moreover, the angel of the Lord said to her, I will greatly multiply your descendants so that they shall be too many to count. The angel of the Lord said to her further, behold, you are with child and you shall bear a son.

You shall call his name Ishmael because the Lord has given heed to your affliction. And he will be a wild donkey of a man. His hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand will be against him and he will live to the east of all of his brothers.

Then she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, thou art a God who sees. For she said, I have, have I even remained alive here after seeing him? And then finally, just three verses in chapter 20 of Genesis. Chapter 20, verse 1. Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev and settled between Kadesh and Shur.

Then he sojourned in Gera. And Abraham said of Sarah, his wife, she is my sister. So Abimelech, king of Gera, sent and took Sarah.

But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night and said to him, behold, you're a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken for she is married. In 2nd Chronicles chapter 20, Abraham is called the friend of God. He certainly was a man of amazing faith and trust.

The Apostle Paul tells us that he was justified by faith. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews tells us that by faith he left his home area. And when he left, he had no idea of where he was going to.

He had no specific idea of what God had for him when he arrived at this place, which he did not know. But trusting in God and trusting in the promises of God, Abraham left. Later, he considered that the barren womb of his wife was no obstacle to God fulfilling his promise to give him first a child from which would come a nation from which every nation on earth would be blessed.

Later again, he was willing, to plunge a knife into that promised child if God said so. And the writer to the Hebrews tells us he was willing and ready to do that because he believed that God would raise the dead. Amazing man and leader par excellence.

But a life which as we have seen is littered with failures. Failures in faith which led to lies, deceit, cowardice and many other things. And this morning at the end of this communion service, I want us to look at these three incidents of failure in Abraham's life.

I want us to look at the causes of his failures, the consequences of his failures and the divine response to Abraham's failures. So let's start in chapter 12 and you'll see that Abraham made a bit of a faltering start to his life of faith. In verse 1 we read, the Lord had, notice that word, the Lord had said to Abraham, leave your country, your people, your father's household and go to the land I will show you.

I'm going to make you into a great nation and so on. The Lord had said that to Abraham. Now Stephen in his speech to the Sanhedrin gives us an explanation in Acts chapter 7. He tells us that the God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he left Ur of the Chaldees, before he even lived in Haran.

God said leave your country, leave your people, go to the land which I will show you. So you can see that right at the very beginning of this life of faith, Abraham's obedience was less than complete. If you look back to chapter 11 and verse 31 you'll see that they knew the general direction in which they should have gone.

They knew they should have gone to Canaan. They set out from Ur of the Chaldeans, we are told, to go to Canaan. Now they didn't know specifically in Canaan where they should settle, but they knew the general direction, but they didn't make it even to Canaan.

They settled in Haran. Now Terah's, Terah, Abraham's father would probably have had the dominant voice in that decision. But chapter 12 and verse 1 shows that the command had come to Abraham and Terah

shouldn't even have been there at all, should he? The command was to leave his country, his people and specifically his father's household.

He had to leave those things behind and he had to go to Canaan. An inauspicious start to this great leader's life of faith. Eventually however, they arrived in Canaan.

But what a shock they got on arrival. Initially things looked good. The Lord reconfirmed his promise in verse 7, to your offspring I will give this land.

And in verse 8, Abraham responds as we, I trust, have responded in our hearts this morning. He responds with worship. He builds his altar there to the Lord who appeared to him.

But the honeymoon period in the new land was not to last long. Look at verse 10, now there was a famine in the land. Famine in Canaan of all places.

What a challenge. Here's Abraham in a land of unknown, potentially hostile people. He's got his family, he's got his slaves, he's got growing flocks of sheep and he'll be entirely dependent on the generosity of others in this time of famine.

Doesn't take much imagination, does it, to see the questions which must have arisen in Abraham's mind. Had he got his guidance singles wrong somehow? Had he moved out of the will of God? Here he is putting his own life and the life of so many others in jeopardy. Or maybe questions about God himself were arising in Abraham's mind.

Could God really deliver? He'd heard the promises. But could God deliver? Could God really be trusted? So often in a new project, you'll meet this kind of major test of that project in its early days. Every forward move in faith, whether it's a forward move in your own life, maybe in response to this very weekend.

Every forward move you make in the ministry that God has appointed you to, I assure you that forward move will be tested. Think of poor old Moses, so reluctant to do what God wanted him to do, to be the deliverer of his people. He just didn't want the job.

But eventually he goes right into the palace of Pharaoh. This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says, Pharaoh, let my people go. You can imagine Moses turning to Aaron and saying, we did it, Aaron.

We obeyed God. We brought his message. Now watch things happen.

After all, obedience will be honored, Aaron, won't it? Pharaoh said, who is the Lord that I should obey him and let Israel go? I don't know the Lord and I won't let Israel go. And you possibly remember the practical result of Moses' obedience. Pharaoh considered their approach the height of impudence and he gave orders to greatly increase the burden already upon the Israelites, Pharaoh's captive people.

And the captives say to Moses, their so-called deliverer, may the Lord look upon you and judge you. You've made us a stench to Pharaoh and to his officials. You've put a sword in their hands to kill us.

You ever felt like Moses felt at the end of that wonderful day? Listen to his prayer at the end of the day. Oh Lord, I, why have you brought trouble upon my people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I obeyed, ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he's brought trouble on this people and you haven't even begun to rescue them. You see, the test had come that anyone in that position this morning, you've made some move of faith in your own life or in the ministry that you're involved in leading and the test has

come.

You're struggling with it in your heart and mind right now. You'll need nerves of steel. You'll need trust in God and you'll need real assurance of your calling and of that vision that we talked of yesterday morning.

Those things are so important when the time of testing came. Well, back to Genesis 12, the time of testing has come. The famine and Abraham falters again.

He made a faltering start. He falters at the first hurdle. We read in verse 10, Abraham went down to Egypt.

Now that seemed the logical thing for him to do. As family head, he was responsible to provide for his family and there was food in Egypt and there wasn't any in Canaan. You would probably have done the same thing in his circumstances and I'm pretty sure I would have as well.

But you know, people of faith and more especially leaders of faith must learn to stay where God has put them until they get a clear call to get up and go. How often have you seen a project commence by some enthusiastic visionary, but when the test comes, as it will come, they can't be seen for dust. I'm getting very cautious in O.M. about people with great visions.

I want to know where they're going to be 12 months after the initial vision is beginning to be implemented. I want to know where are they going to be five years after the initial vision is implemented. How will they respond when the test comes? How do you interpret the present difficulties in your own job? Do you see that as an automatic divine call to change? How often we come across those who interpret difficulty in their job or even boredom in their job as a call to the mission field.

Abraham's faith failed as the pressures increased and a slide down a very slippery slope indeed began. Courage was the next thing to go and this extraordinary arrangement with his wife is entered into. You're so good-looking, darling, that my wife or my life, sorry, will be in jeopardy.

They'll want to kill you or kill me so they can get you. So it's easy. You just say you're my sister and everything will be fine.

There's great faith for you. God had said to Abraham, I'm going to give you a son from the Son of Nation. From the nation, every nation on earth will be blessed.

And Abraham said, I'm going to die. I'm going to die. Sarah, unless you say you're my sister, I'm going to die.

Great faith indeed. Of course, it was a half-truth for Abraham and Sarah to make this arrangement because actually Sarah was his half-sister. See, Abraham had begun to rationalize.

He'd begun to scheme. He'd begun to trick when God was simply asking him to trust. Now look at the four consequences of Abraham's failure.

Number one, materially, he didn't do badly at all, thank you. Look at verse 16. The king treated Abraham well for her sake.

And Abraham acquired sheep, cattle, male and female, donkeys, men's servants, maidservants, camels. You know, material success or the pleasantness and the ease of your circumstances is by no means always a sign of God's blessing. It can in fact be part of the very purpose of Satan to keep you far outside

of God's will for your life.

Secondly, spiritually for Abraham, it was an utter disaster. Abraham could build no altar in Egypt. There was no walk with God.

There was no worship of God in Egypt. Thirdly, his cowardice, his spinelessness brought others into trouble. Can you imagine how Sarah must have been horribly compromised by his lack of leadership? And eventually the Lord has to inflict serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abraham's wife, Sarah.

The simple consequence and the great responsibility of leadership. Your actions or your failure to act will affect the lives of so many people. But look fourthly, God's commitment to Abraham, God's commitment to his promises remain unaltered and unchanged through Abraham's failure.

Abraham drifts down into Egypt, loses faith and courage, brings disaster upon himself, his family, and on this point at least, innocent victims. But God will just not let Abraham go. He will make him the man he intends him to be.

He will fulfill the promises that he has chosen to fulfill through him. The message of Abraham is that God is committed to failure. It's that God loves failure.

And I can tell you that's the only reason I'm here this morning. Because God is committed and loves failure. He has endless patience with failures who want to learn.

So Abraham is not scrap-heaped by God. And the purposes of God are in no way thwarted. There will be consequences because of Abraham's faithlessness.

The outworking of God's plan will now be more difficult for Abraham, but his covenant with him will be maintained, even though there has been such tragic failure. I'm sure you can't help but think of our Lord's dealings with a man like Peter at such a point. It's easy to be too hard on Peter, isn't it? But he did seem to have an immense ability to put his foot in it, didn't he? Or both feet.

Jumps out of the boat to walk on the water and almost drowns. Couldn't keep his mouth shut on the Mount of Transfiguration. Couldn't keep his activist nature in check.

And God actually has to open heaven to beg silence from Peter. This is my beloved son Peter. Listen to him.

But slowly, gradually, patiently, forgivingly, Jesus gets a hold of Peter. And through wonderful honesty, through daring to confront this man, through endless patience, he brings him to the point where his nature is as good as his name. Peter the Rock.

The kind of man who can be so useful in the founding of God's church on this earth. You know, I get so excited by this because there's hope for me. When I look at Abraham, when I look at Peter, when I look at God's patience with them, there's hope for me.

And there's hope for you if God can take raw material like Abraham and make him his friend. If he can take raw material like Peter in all his weakness and make him rock solid. Maybe I'm not beyond the pale after all.

Turn over to the second incident of failure in Abraham's life. Chapter 16. Abraham and Sarah had been living in the promised land for ten years at this point.

But there's no sign of a sun and air. The whole move from his home, of course, all the sacrifice of moving, all the difficulties they had to endure, was dependent upon this child. Without a child, what a waste.

Had God forgotten? Maybe he needed some assistance. So in verse 2, Sarah utters truth, but tragically truth with the wrong purpose and probably in the wrong spirit. She says, the Lord has kept me from having children.

Quite right, Sarah, quite correct. He has to this point. But he's promised to give you a child, Sarah.

Obviously the time hasn't come, so keep trusting, but not Sarah. Go and sleep with my maidservant, Abraham. I can build a family through her.

Now we don't want to be too hard on Abraham and Sarah at this point. We don't really know what Abraham understood about marriage at this time. Probably polygamy would not be considered to be too dreadful by him.

We do know that the accepted custom of the day was that if a wife was unable to have a child, she could choose to give her maid to her husband, that he might produce the all-important heir of the family through the maid. But Abraham must have known that this was compromise. He must have realized that yet again he was rationalizing as he agrees to Sarah's proposal.

Again, look at the consequences. One sin leads to numerous others. Look at the pride in Hagar.

She will be the heir, verse 4, and so she begins to despise her mistress. In Sarah, that first sin breeds jealousy, anger and violence, verse 6. Sarah ill-treated Hagar, so she fled from her. It's a bit of a dreadful picture overall, isn't it? There's Hagar, forlorn, lonely, forsaken at a spring in the desert.

Back home, there's Sarah, angry and bitter with her husband. And there's Abraham, who I can only describe as utterly weak. Weak to agree to Sarah's suggestion in the first place, but utterly weak, surely, when in response to Sarah's anger, he says to her in verse 6, She's your servant.

Do with her whatever you think best. Now, by this time, she was Abraham's wife. He'd married her.

But he says to Sarah, she's your servant. Just do with her what you please. Where is this man's sense of justice? Where are his leadership qualities? He doesn't even seem to be able to face up to his own responsibilities, never mind the responsibilities of fathering the whole nation of Israel.

But look at God at work. Look at God at work in this scene of utter failure. Sarah must have thought it was easy to get rid of Hagar, but she hadn't taken God into account.

Hagar may be a young Egyptian slave girl whose beatings by her mistress and mistreatment by her master would have been considered totally inconsequential, but there is a God who sees. There is a God whose eyes don't even miss a forsaken slave girl in a desert. Look at verse 13.

Hagar gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her. You are the God who sees me. So Hagar returns to Abraham and Ishmael is born.

Now the name Ishmael means God hears. Hagar had met the God who sees and the God who hears. Ishmael was to live in that household for many years to come and every time Abraham and Sarah looked at him, there was a constant reminder to them of their failure.

There are two clear lessons about failure for me in this 16th chapter. Yes, God is the lover, the forgiver of failures, but the way to deal with failure is not to turn away, not to seek to push the failure away from you. God brings Hagar back.

Abraham and Sarah must face up to their failure. They must face up to their responsibility. Think again of our Lord dealing with Peter.

Do you remember Matthew 16, verse 13, Jesus poses the question, who do people say the Son of Man is? And they give their various replies. And Jesus then asks, what about you? Who do you say that I am? And Peter has the inspired reply, you're the Christ. You're the Son of the living God and Jesus confirms that Peter has been greatly used of God in that expression.

He says, flesh and blood didn't reveal that to you Peter, it was revealed to you by my Father in heaven. And then Jesus goes on to tell them how he must go to Jerusalem. He's got to die.

He tells them all about the events ahead and Peter takes him aside and he begins to rebuke Jesus, Lord, never, never, that's never going to happen to you. And Jesus turns to Peter and he says, get behind me, Satan. You're a stumbling block to me.

That appears so harsh, doesn't it, at first reading from the lips of Jesus. Get behind me, Satan. The man who's just been used to bring that revelation from God, Jesus is now saying to him, get behind me, Satan.

Surely Peter was only trying to help. He was only expressing his shocked concern. Liberal scholars have suggested actually that Jesus lost his temper at that point.

What was the most common and the most difficult temptation that Jesus had to face on this earth? The most difficult temptation was quite simply, avoid the cross, Jesus. There must be an easier way. Surely there's a way without pain, there's a way without tears, there's a way without death.

Avoid the cross. So he shows him all the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them. He says, you can have all that, Jesus, all the kingdoms of the world.

Think of the good you could do if you were the ruler of all the kings of the world and it's yours on a plate. No cross, just bow the knee once. And everything you came to earth to receive is yours for the taking.

That was the temptation. There's an easier way. Avoid the cross.

And when Peter says, the cross will never happen to you, Lord. At that point, he is the mouthpiece of Satan in the life of Jesus. And Jesus pulls no punches.

He tells it as it is. He wants Peter to honestly face up to the situation, to honestly face up to his failure. And as Hagar is brought back to Abraham's household by the God who sees, surely God is saying to Abraham and to Sarah, face failure.

You can't just pass it away. I'm a lover of failure, but I want you to learn the lessons of failure. I want to work in your life through that failure, if only you'll face it.

Again, I wonder if there's someone here this morning who needs to do just that in response maybe to our communion service. In your personal life or in your leadership ministry, you've been avoiding the facing of failure. And you know exactly what I'm talking about.

I don't, but you do. Maybe it's a relationship problem with a fellow leader. You've gone through another communion service with that relationship still wrong.

Maybe it's personal sin. Maybe it's fear, running away from something you know you should have done. The lesson of Hagar is this.

Face your failure. Face up to your responsibilities. But there's a second lesson from this incident, isn't there? And surely that's just the marvelous picture of God that we have here.

The God who is concerned with the fleeing slave. The God who sees her. The God who hears her in her distress.

Our leaders need support. It's great to have a team around leaders, praying for them and advising them. It's so helpful.

But here's the ultimate support. God who sees and hears. Leaders are often misunderstood.

They can become isolated and lonely. But God sees and hears. Leaders can be taken for granted, unappreciated.

God sees and hears. Leaders obviously can fail. The leader who never failed, never attempted anything.

But God knows our hearts. He sees and he hears. There's a challenge here also.

God sees and hears. He knows your motivation in leadership. He sees and he hears the secret things and it's to him that I one day will have to give an account for my leadership.

The lessons of Hagar are quite simple. Be honest about your failure. You can afford to be honest because the God who sees and hears cares.

He cares for failures who are ready to face up to their responsibilities. I've only time just to point your attention to his third failure. Just flick across finally to chapter 20.

This incident took place after God rained down fire and brimstone on Sodom and Gomorrah. Now maybe that destruction so affected Abraham that he just couldn't stay in the area any longer. Whatever his reason, he travels west down from the hills to the coastal plain and into the area where the Philistines reign.

It's potentially a dangerous situation again. Almost unbelievably, Abraham falls into exactly the same trap of chapter 12. Look at chapter 20 and verse 2. For a while he stayed in Gerar and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, she is my sister.

It's been so difficult for some people to contemplate Abraham failing so similarly. Some critics have tried to suggest that there's confusion here and these are confused records of the same incident. But they're stretching it, stretching it, if you look at least at the geography.

Abraham, great leader of God's people, the friend of God, really did have feet of clay. And I say again, this is the kind of raw material that God can take a hold of and make great leaders from. Think of the petulance of Moses, the adultery, the murder of David, the suicidal depression of Elijah and of Jonah, the faithlessness here of Abraham, the impetuosity of Peter, and on and on and on you can go.

Men, and there are women too in scripture, with feet of clay. Men and women from whom God was able to fashion great leaders. We haven't got time sadly to look at the specific lessons from chapter 20, but you can discover them in your own time.

As we rise at the end of this communion service, in a couple of minutes, let's rise with this assurance in our hearts. God loves failures. And our failures don't trip God up.

God isn't knocked out of step by our failures. If some of you this morning are smarting in your heart because of some failure in your life and you wonder, is everything going to be devastated because of your failure? You trace through and see what God did through all the failures of Abraham. He wasn't knocked out of step.

And as long as Abraham was willing to face his responsibility, to repent and turn, God moved on. He moved on with Abraham and he moved on fulfilling his covenant promises to that nation. God loves me, a failure.

God loves you. You can put your life, you can put your leadership into his hands. And you can rise from this communion service rejoicing in the love of God.

You sought out an Egyptian slave girl, discarded in the desert. It's the same God whose trust and faith, my trust and faith, is placed in this morning. And I trust that's where yours is also.

Let's pray together. Let's just take a minute to respond to this whole communion service and to God's word through Abraham's life to us. The New Testament tells us that these Old Testament incidents were written down for our learning.

We're to look at characters like Abraham and we're to learn from them. That same chapter tells us that if we think we stand, we must take heed lest we fall. Maybe just in a moment one or two of you want to face failure in your life right now.

If you're running away from it, you want to face it. You want to confess before God your failure. Maybe you want to write down in your mind or even on a piece of paper some action you have to take to face that failure, to deal with that failure, and to come clean before God and before your brothers and sisters.

Father, we thank you this morning for your incredible character, your righteousness. You won't push failure, sin under any carpet. You'll bring it out.

You'll bring it back. You'll make us face it because you love us and because you're righteous. Lord, we love you and we thank you for your love for us.

We thank you for this communion service. We thank you that we renewed our covenant with you this morning. We thank you that we can go from this service, whatever the past may look like, we can go rejoicing in your love and in your patience, in your righteousness.

We can go loving you because you love us. We worship you in Jesus' name. Amen.

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