



**FOOTSTEPS OF FAITH: THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM
WHEN FAITH TAKES A NOSEDIVE**

Genesis 12:10-20

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¹⁰ Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. ¹¹ When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, “I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, ¹² and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife.’ Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.” ¹⁴ When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. ¹⁵ And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. ¹⁶ And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.

¹⁷ But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. ¹⁸ So Pharaoh called Abram and said, “What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? ¹⁹ 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.” ²⁰ And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.

Introduction

In this series *Footsteps of Faith: The Life of Abraham*, we're journeying alongside Abraham to see what it means to live a life of faith.

And what we've seen thus far of the life of Abraham is pretty impressive: in a courageous act of faith, Abraham leaves everything in pursuit of the promises of God. He sets out from Ur of the Chaldeans to Haran, and from there to the land of Canaan. There he finds the Canaanites are still in the land, and yet he nevertheless builds altars and worships the Lord, confident in his promise to provide for him.

Yet we don't have to go on traveling with Abraham very far before we see his faith takes a nosedive. Merriam-Webster defines a nosedive as "a downward nose-first plunge by a flying object."

That's a pretty good description of what we see here in Genesis 12. He goes from a faith that soars in the first half of this chapter (12:1-9), to a spectacular nosedive into unbelief and sin in the second part (12:10-20).

Nosedives can come quickly, as they do in airplanes. You can be flying along at 30,000 feet and full of faith, when all of a sudden, circumstances change, and you plunge downward into a nosedive of unbelief.

I suspect most of us have been there. We thought we were doing well, walking by faith, then something happens and we begin a downward, nose-first plunge toward unbelief and sin.

My best friend in college took a nosedive his freshman year. It was relatively short-lived, but it left a lasting impression on him. What started out as a double-dare to do something silly turned out in the end to be not so funny, when he decided to streak across campus after dark but while students were still out and about. He got caught, and had to go have a long chat with the Dean of Students, who also called to speak with his dad.

I remember one of my own particularly pathetic nosedives. We were living in Cambridge at the time. I was in graduate school, and Katie was home mothering a super-active two year old in a tiny apartment, living in a foreign country, far away from family and friends. She was also newly pregnant, overtaken with pretty intense morning sickness, as well as homesickness. But, on top of it all, she was having really bad migraine headaches.

And where was I during all of this? I was off being a capital-L Loser. I was too self-absorbed with my studies to sympathize with Katie's challenges. And in fact, I found myself getting angry with her that she couldn't carry more weight. Regardless of the fact that she sometimes had to wear a belt around her head to alleviate the pain of the headaches, I couldn't believe she wouldn't get up with Ezra at 6:00AM!

Threatening Circumstances

Why does our faith sometimes take a nosedive? What caused Abraham's faith to nosedive? The same thing that can cause your faith or mine to nosedive: *threatening circumstances that call into question God's ability or willingness to provide for you.*

For Abraham it was truly a life-threatening situation, worse than a depressed economy or high levels of unemployment: "Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land" (Gen. 12:10).

Abraham thought he had the solution. *I'll go to Egypt!* Which is what he does. He leaves the land the Lord had given him by promise, in pursuit of a place he thinks will better provide for his needs (v. 10).

Of course, he could have stayed, and prayed, and waited for God to provide. Do you remember Elijah? That's just what he did. "Elijah was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years, and six months it did not rain on the earth. Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit" (James 5:17-18).

But that's not what Abraham did. Rather than trust in the Lord, he leaned on his own understanding.

This is not, of course, unique to Abraham. Typically, when circumstances look threatening and our faith begins to falter, we try to take things into our own hands, solve the problem in our own strength, and rely on our own ingenuity.

Yet it's my experience that this usually only makes matters worse! Notice how Abraham's first act of unbelief in leaving the land of promise leads to another act of unbelief as he heads toward Egypt. He realizes in going to Egypt he's got a real challenge on his hands. His wife is very beautiful, and he knows that down in Egypt, looks can kill.

When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake (Gen. 12:11-13).

And that's just what they do. With a little bit of deceit and betrayal, Abraham successfully pawns his wife off and pulls the wool over Pharaoh's eyes.

It's a dubious plan. But sometimes even dubious plans work, as it does in this case with Abraham.

When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram (Gen. 12:14-16).

Dragging Others Down

Perhaps we ought to congratulate Abraham! He's avoided two life-threatening situations: starving to death in Canaan, and getting murdered in Egypt. And more than that, he's come out on top. By trading his wife to Pharaoh, it's gone 'well' for Abraham. He's got everything he needs for a happy life in Egypt: "sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels" (v. 16).

Despite his nosedive of faith, Abraham's been able to secure blessing for himself. The only problem is that, in the process, he's brought down curses on everyone else. His unbelief has been very costly indeed.

First, of course, it's costly to his poor wife Sarah, who's pawned off in a most disgraceful fashion. But it's also costly to Pharaoh and his whole household. "But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife" (v. 17). And you'll note that Abraham has nothing to say to Pharaoh's stinging rebuke (vv. 18-19).

Notice then, the irony in this passage. While Abraham himself prospers in Egypt through trickery and deceit (v. 16), Pharaoh and his family are cursed, rather than blessed by

Abraham's presence. This is the *reversal* of God's design for Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 to be a "blessing" to the nations.

What To Do When You've Taken A Nosedive

This is the tragedy of nosedives. When we fail to walk by faith, we inevitably drag others down with us. Rather than blessing others, as we're called to do, we end up being a drain on others. Rather than revealing to others the presence of God through our lives of faith, we obscure God's presence through our unbelief.

Nosedives of faith aren't pretty. And yet nosedives are inevitable. At my previous church, the pastors sat on the platform for the whole service. It was, especially early on, always a never-wracking experience. You'd invite people to sit when they weren't supposed to sit, or stand when they weren't supposed to stand. One of the wise old congregants at my former church used to say there were two types of people: "Those who have, and those who are about to."

When it comes to nosedives of faith, the same holds true. *There are those of us who've had them, and those of us who are about to.* We're fickle and frail, and so is our faith. We're like Abraham, never more than a step or two away from a trip, a stumble, and a fall.

That's why, when it comes to learning from the life of Abraham, it's important to know not only how to follow in the footsteps of faith, but what to do when you *fail to follow* in the footsteps of faith.

God Justifies Even Those Who Nosedive

What should you do when your faith takes a nosedive? First of all, remember that the God of the Bible is a God who justifies even those who take nosedives.

When the New Testament mentions Abraham, it refers to him of course as a great example of faith. But that's not the most important thing it says of Abraham. In fact, the most important thing the New Testament says about Abraham doesn't have to do with his faith, but with his God.

In the book of Romans, when the Apostle Paul gets to the heart of what he wants to say about the gospel, he turns to the life of Abraham. But the point he makes is critical for anyone who's ever taken a nosedive of faith. For what does Abraham's life teach us more clearly than anything else? It teaches us this: God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5).

The God of the Bible is a God who never grants forgiveness (or justification) as a wage that can be earned through works. No, this blessing is given always and only to those who trust God for his mercy and unmerited love. The God of the Bible is a God who has reconciled the world to himself through Jesus Christ, not counting our trespasses against us (2 Cor. 5:18). We are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:24).

When our faith takes a nosedive, it's often hard to get beyond the guilt we feel. And yet here is where we need to walk in the footsteps of the faith of Abraham—for he was indeed a great model of faith. But he also took some spectacular nosedives along the way. And yet we see through it all, that God is gracious and merciful to him. So God will be to you as well. He is the God who justifies even those who nosedive.

God Works Even Through Nosedives

Secondly, remember that God uses even our own nosedives to strengthen our faith. Of course, if you've ever had a bad nosedive of faith, a time when you really blew it, you're quick to want to forget that it ever happened.

Yet don't forget this. *God uses our nosedives for our good.* In his perfect wisdom and sovereignty, he orchestrates the downward plunges of our faith to teach us how to trust in him more fully.

This is what God does in Abraham's own life. He allows him to take a nosedive at the end of Chapter 12. But by his grace God brings him out of the nosedive with strengthened faith as we head into Chapter 13.

There, once again, Abraham's faith is tested. But this time, rather than nosedive, his faith soars. He must part ways with his nephew Lot. Yet Abraham remarkably is willing to let Lot go wherever Lot wants. And Lot, in keeping with his character, chooses the best portion of the land for himself. "So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journey east" (13:11).

Abraham, however, is unflinching in his faith. He's learned to trust more fully in the Lord's gracious provision. And the Lord, seeing Abraham's faith, appears once again to Abraham and reaffirms his promise, to further bolster him: "The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, 'Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever'" (13:14-15).

You see, God's strategy is always the same, whether your faith triumphs or takes a nosedive. *He's interested in cultivating in you greater and greater confidence in him.* Sometimes he does that by enabling you to stand firm in your faith. Yet at other times he does that by humbling you, plunging you downward in a nosedive, to show you that you cannot live apart from trusting in him, ultimately to help you grow stronger and stronger in your faith.

God Heals You of Your Nosedives

Thirdly, remember that God gladly restores the brokenhearted from their nosedives. Israel's entire history as a nation was filled with one nosedive after the next. And yet God's invitation to them was always the same.

Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God, for you have stumbled because of your iniquity. Take with you words and return to the LORD; say to him, "Take away all iniquity; accept what is good, and we will pay with bulls the vows of our lips. Assyria shall not save us; we will not ride on horses; and we will say no more, 'Our God,' to the work of our hands. In you the orphan finds mercy."

And the Lord says: "I will heal their apostasy; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them. I will be like the dew to Israel; he shall blossom like the lily; he shall take root like the trees of Lebanon; his shoots shall spread out; his beauty shall be like the olive, and his fragrance like Lebanon. They shall return

and dwell beneath my shadow; they shall flourish like the grain; they shall blossom like the vine; their fame shall be like the wine of Lebanon” (Hosea 14:1-7).

Abraham’s God is rich in grace and mercy. And he’s able to restore us to himself, even when we’ve blown it big time. He will bind up the brokenhearted; he will heal them of their apostasy; he will love them freely. “For the LORD is good; his steadfast love endures forever, and his faithfulness to all generations” (Psalm 100:5).

Jesus Prays That Your Nosedive Isn’t Permanent

But, fourthly, remember this, especially those of you who are in the midst of a nosedive of faith even now. Jesus Christ, your merciful Savior and sympathetic high priest, is praying for you so that your nosedive won’t be permanent.

When we read the Gospels, we see that Jesus’ disciples were nosedive-kings. Peter swore he wouldn’t do a nosedive; Jesus knew better. They start nosedives when debating who gets VIP treatment. It gets worse in Garden of Gethsemane: prayer, arrest and scatter. Peter finally denies Jesus: threatens nosedive into ground!

And yet despite the nosedives of the disciples, we see the faithfulness of their Savior and ours, Jesus Christ. Jesus promises to sustain Peter: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32).

Conclusion

You see, when our faith takes a nosedive, it’s hard to get beyond the guilt we often feel. And it’s easy to underestimate the grace of God. And it’s tempting to think that the Lord is no longer at work in our lives.

And yet Jesus Christ shed his blood on the cross in order to forgive a million, million nosedives of faith. And he is at work even in our nosedives of faith, teaching us to trust more fully in him. But he’s also praying for us, that our faith might be sustained, make a recovery, and be brought back to him.

So, if you’re in the midst of a downward spiral, don’t continue with doubt or despair. *Trust in Jesus Christ*. Perhaps all you can do is cry out to him, like the father of that very ill child in the gospel story: “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

But that’s all you need to do. Because of the grace of God, that’s all any of us needs to do to recover from a nosedive of faith, or to continue walking in the footsteps of faith. “Lord, I believe, help my unbelief!”

It doesn’t take a perfect faith to lay hold of a perfect Savior. Even the hand that shakes can receive the medicine that gives eternal life.

Amen.