

Genesis, Part 13

With Chapter 12 we begin a new dispensation, The Age of the Patriarchs, which will extend through the rest of our study of Genesis and will end with Israel in bondage in Egypt. The first 11 chapters dealt with four great events: the Creation, the Fall of Man, the Flood, and the Tower of Babel. In all of these, God has been dealing with the human race as a whole. Now, with chapter 12, God will no longer be dealing with events.

After the fall of man, we saw the great sin of Cain: pride. Deep down in his heart, he was angry because he was proud of the offering he brought to God, while his brother's was accepted. His hatred led to murder.

At the time of the Flood, the sin was the lust of the flesh. God gave mankind 969 years to change his mind. But, instead of turning to God, the people were in open rebellion, asserting a will that was against God. Following the Flood, the Tower of Babel reveals that "none seeketh after God."

After the Tower of Babel, God turned from dealing with the whole race of mankind to one individual out of which He will create one nation, and to that nation, He will give His revelation, and out of that nation, He will bring the Redeemer.

When God chose Abraham, He chose a man of faith. Our story of "beginnings" continues with the account of Abraham's walk of faith. (His given name, of course, was Abram, "high father," which was later changed to Abraham, "father of a multitude".) God called one man to begin the fulfillment of His promise to send a Savior to the world. This man was of the line of Shem (11:10ff) and would become the father of the Jewish nation. From this one man, God would bless the whole world!

Meanwhile, the rest of humankind will continue to function under the divinely instituted principles of conscience and human government. Abram and his prodigy during this Age of the Patriarchs, however, will have additional and specific callings, as God focuses on those who are His own.

Gen 11:31 And Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot, the son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out with them from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to the land of Canaan; and they came to Haran and dwelt there. 32 So the days of Terah were two hundred and five years, and Terah died in Haran.

According to Stephen, the God of Glory appeared to our Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia before he lived in Haran, and said to him, "Depart from your country and your relatives, and come into the land that I will show you" (Acts 7:2–3). Genesis 12:1 also says the Lord told Abram to get out, yet Terah is credited with organizing the expedition in 11:31. Is this merely deference to the head of the family? Or did Terah's decision and Abram's instruction to leave Ur just happen to coincide? Did Terah move at the insistence of Abram, or did Abram join in Terah's migration only after he received divine approval in the theophany? In any case, Terah is represented here as having led his family out of Ur.

Terah "took" three members of his family: Abram, Lot his grandson, and Sarai his daughter-in-law. Terah was leading a larger group, his household, northward, and he invited the three above-mentioned family members to travel with him. This is why the text says, "They went forth with them" (11:31). In the course of time, Abram's other brother Nahor and his wife Milcah also left Ur to settle in Haran.

The group was bound for Canaan. That was the divine intention, at least. Abram did not know his ultimate destination, for the apostle declares in Hebrews 11:8 that "he went out, not knowing where he was going". He left Ur in faith that God would providentially lead him to that place which he would receive as an inheritance. The text is silent as to when exactly Abram was told that Canaan would be his final destination.

The journey halted in Haran about six hundred miles north of Ur. The people who lived in Haran were essentially the same racially, religiously, and linguistically as those who lived in Ur. Why Terah's company should stop there is not stated. Perhaps Terah's health was a factor. What is clear is that Abram, for whatever reason, stopped short of the Promised Land. His initial response to the command of God to leave Ur and his family had

only been half-hearted. Because of this, Abram lost precious time he could have spent walking with God in Canaan.

Terah died in Haran at the age of 205 (11:32). Abram was seventy-five at the time (12:4). How long the group had been in Haran before the death of Terah is unknown.

Gen 12:1 Now the Lord had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, From your family. And from your father’s house to a land that I will show you.

Genesis 12:1 indicates that the Lord had said (past tense) to Abram, “Get out” from his country, his family, and his father’s house. But 11:31–32 states that Abram did not fully obey. Instead of leaving his father behind, he took him along (NKJV); and the pilgrimage was delayed at Haran where Terah died. Often our halfway obedience becomes costly, both in time and treasure. Abram lost the time he could have spent walking with God, and he lost his father too. Abram took Lot with him on the next stage of the journey, but Lot also had to be taken away from Abram (13:5–14).

God did not call Abram because of his own merits. He had none. He was a citizen of the idolatrous city of Ur. Had not God revealed Himself to him, he would have died an unbeliever. From a human point of view, God’s choice of Abram and Sarai—who had no children—was a foolish one. but ultimately it brought great glory to God and great blessing to the world.

Hebrews 11:8–19 is a summary of the faith of Abraham. It can be said that Abraham believed God when he did not know where (Heb. 11:8), when he did not know how (11:11), and when he did not know why (11:17–19).

Heb 11:8 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

11 By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him

faithful who had promised. 12 Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude— innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

13 These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. 14 For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland.

15 And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them.

17 By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, 18 of whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called,” 19 concluding that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense.

The Abrahamic Covenant

Gen 12:2 I will make you a great nation;

I will bless you

And make your name great;

And you shall be a blessing.

3 I will bless those who bless you,

And I will curse him who curses you;

And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

God had called Abram in Ur of the Chaldees (Acts 7:2–4), but he had lingered at Haran until the death of his father (11:27–32). God demands total separation to Himself, even if death must accomplish it. This call was completely of grace, and the blessings of the covenant wholly from the Lord’s goodness. God promised to give Abram:

- a land;
- a great name;
- a great nation; and
- a blessing that would spread to the whole world.

It took a good deal of faith for Abram to respond to these promises for he had no children, and he and his wife were getting old (11:30).

The covenant God made with Abram was unconditional, meaning that its fulfillment rests entirely on God. Note the repeated “I will” from the lips of God. God would do it all if only Abraham would believe. Certainly, God has fulfilled His promises:

- Israel has her land (and will get more)
- Abraham’s name is revered by Jews, Moslems, Christians, and even unbelievers
- Israel is a great nation and destined for even more greatness along with believing Gentiles
- The Jews have blessed all nations by giving us the Bible and Christ

There is one key point to understand: the covenant was made with Abram and his seed. Ultimately that will be focused on Israel, specifically believing Israel and all those who are Abraham’s spiritual seed. That would include Gentile believers of the Church Age who will share in the blessings promised to Israel. What we see today is only partial fulfillment. Ultimate and full fulfillment will be realized in the Kingdom Age.

Gen 12:4 So Abram departed as the Lord had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. 5 Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan. So they came to the land of Canaan. 6 Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem, as far as the terebinth tree of Moreh. And the Canaanites were then in the land.

In 12:4 we read this simple and wonderful sentence: “So Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken to him.” No questions asked. He just got up from his place, packed his bags, and left “as the Lord had spoken to him.” Note that the Lord had not spoken to Abram while he was in disobedience in his pausing in Haran; this is a response to when the Lord spoke to him while he was back in Ur. With the death of his father, he “remembers” his instructions and moves on into Canaan.

“Lot went with him”—this was a mistake. Lot’s father was dead (11:28), so Abraham took the young man under his protection, only to have him create

serious problems. Abram had previously been instructed by God to leave his family and go (Gen 12:1). Later, God had to separate Lot from Abraham before He could advance His plan for the patriarch's life.

Their long journey from Haran to Canaan is not recorded, but it certainly took faith and patience to complete it. Travel in those days was difficult and dangerous. Because they were likely a large party that might have offered some safety. Abraham was a wealthy man, but his wealth was no barrier to his walk with God. The travelers came to Shechem, "the place of the shoulder." How wonderful it is for the believer to live in "the place of the shoulder," where "underneath are the everlasting arms".

Deut. 33:27 The eternal God is your refuge,
And underneath are the everlasting arms;
He will thrust out the enemy from before you,
And will say, 'Destroy!'
28 Then Israel shall dwell in safety,
The fountain of Jacob alone,
In a land of grain and new wine;
His heavens shall also drop dew.
29 Happy are you, O Israel!
Who is like you, a people saved by the Lord,
The shield of your help
And the sword of your majesty!
Your enemies shall submit to you,
And you shall tread down their high places."

For the Christian—the person who has come to know God in Christ—the problem is usually one of faith. We struggle to obey because we struggle to believe that God's way will work out for the best. So, like Abram, we need to listen to and trust God's promises! "Abram went forth as the Lord had spoken" because he believed that God would do as he said: that he would bless him; that he would care for him; that he wouldn't leave him wandering in the wilderness, but would truly bring him to "the land which I will show you."

"And the Canaanites were then in the land" (Gen 12:6). The Canaanites were uncivilized, barbarian, idol-worshiping heathens – not to mention

dangerous. This simple statement is designed to stress the threats to Abram and his group. Yet, the Lord appears to Abram and promised this very land to him and his descendants.

Gen 12:7 Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” And there he built an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. 8 And he moved from there to the mountain east of Bethel, and he 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. 9 So Abram journeyed, going on still toward the South.

This was only the second time the Lord appeared to Abram. The Lord had not appeared to him while he was in the place of delay, Haran. Now that Abram is obedient the Lord appears to him again.

At Shechem, Abram discovered a wonderful revelation, a wonderful promise, and a wonderful relationship. The Lord appeared to him there. The progeny aspect of the Promise was personalized. This childless man would have seed and that seed would possess the land where he sojourned. Hence a third dimension of the Promise emerged. Abram through his descendants would one day possess the land to which his faith walk had taken him. To commemorate this theophany, Abram built an altar and fellowshiped in worship with the God of Promise (12:6–7).

From Shechem, Abram moved his tents to the hills east of what would later be called Bethel. Here again, he built an altar. At Bethel, Abram experienced the wonderful privilege of public witnessing because “he called upon the name of the Lord.” No indication is given as to how long Abram remained in Bethel before he moved his tents into the Negev or southland (12:8–9).

In the Promised Land Abram found testing as well as blessing. First, he observed that the Canaanites were then in the land (12:6). The land that God had promised to the seed of Abram was already occupied by a proud, fierce, and exceedingly corrupt people. Furthermore, soon after his arrival, a famine broke out in the land (12:10). Abram must have reflected now and again on the fertile regions of Mesopotamia which he had left in obedience to the command of God. Why would he even want this land cursed by

famine and occupied by Canaanites? How could his present circumstances indicate any special standing with the Lord?

The Disappointment

Gen 12:10 Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land.

A famine in the place of God's leading! What a great disappointment this must have been to the pilgrims. God was testing their faith, to see if they were trusting the land or the Lord. Instead of remaining in Canaan and trusting God, they went down to Egypt, possibly at the suggestion of Lot (see 13:10).

Egypt symbolizes the world, the life of self-confidence; Canaan illustrates the life of faith and victory. Egypt was watered by the muddy Nile River; Canaan received the fresh rains from God (see Deut. 11:10–12). Abraham abandoned his tent and altar and trusted in the world!

Isa. 31:1 Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help,
And rely on horses,
Who trust in chariots because they are many,
And in horsemen because they are very strong,
But who do not look to the Holy One of Israel,
Nor seek the Lord!

Did God tell him to go to Egypt? Nope. And that human viewpoint decision will be costly.

The Deception

Gen 12:11 And it came to pass, when he was close to entering Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, "Indeed I know that you are a woman of beautiful countenance. 12 Therefore it will happen, when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, 'This is his wife'; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. 13 Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you."

One sin leads to another: first Abram trusted Egypt; now he trusted his wife's lie to protect him. Because of Sarai's beauty, he feared for his life in

Egypt. He requested Sarai to tell any who might inquire that she was his sister. Genesis 20:12 indicates that the “lie” was really a half-truth, for she was his half-sister. It seems that Abram was more concerned for his own safety than the safety of his wife—or the safety of the promised seed. Had Sarah been kept in that harem, God could not have fulfilled His promise! Abram was acting like the people of the world.

Ps. 1:1 Blessed is the man
Who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly,
Nor stands in the path of sinners,
Nor sits in the seat of the scornful;
2 But his delight is in the law of the Lord,
And in His law he meditates day and night.
3 He shall be like a tree
Planted by the rivers of water,
That brings forth its fruit in its season,
Whose leaf also shall not wither;
And whatever he does shall prosper.

Some have tried to argue that in the ancient Near East husbands adopted their wives as sisters to give them higher status. Others have excused Abram because Sarai was indeed his half-sister. In truth, there is no justification for the deception. The essence of falsehood is the intention to deceive others for one’s own personal advantage. Abram was willing to sacrifice the honor of his wife to protect himself.

The physical problem here of Sarai’s beauty at age sixty-five must honestly be addressed. Pharaoh’s officials saw that she was very “fair” and they praised her to Pharaoh. The Hebrew implies fairness of complexion, one likely to attract the attention of the darker Egyptians. Sarai died at the age of 127. At age sixty-five she was middle-aged, childless, and a woman who had lived a life of ease. That the Egyptians would find her attractive would not be inherently ridiculous.

Gen 12:14 So it was, when Abram came into Egypt, that the Egyptians saw the woman, that she was very beautiful. 15 The princes of Pharaoh also saw her and commended her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken to Pharaoh’s house. 16 He treated Abram well for her sake. He

had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys, and camels.

17 But the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. 18 And 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'? I might have taken her as my wife. Now, therefore, here is your wife; take her and go your way." 20 So Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they sent him away, with his wife and all that he had.

Now, sadly (but helpfully), Genesis 12 reminds us that Abram didn't always trust and obey. What he did was, of course, a lie because it was intended to deceive.

During the time of the premarital ceremonies and purifications common in eastern lands, the Lord intervened and brought diseases upon Pharaoh's house. These diseases forced Pharaoh to restore Sarai to Abram before she had been fully received as a member of his harem.

Verses 10–20 tell the devastating account of how he put Sarai, his wife, in an extremely compromised position. Abram lost his wife. She was taken into Pharaoh's house. He took Sarai to be his wife (12:19), that is he intended to make her one of the wives of his harem.

Look at the man of faith now, asking his wife to do this so that "it may go well with me" (12:13). This is a far cry from God's mandate that a husband love his wife and give himself up for her (Eph. 5:25)! And it is a far cry from the Abram we have been admiring so far! He traded in his wife in exchange for "sheep and oxen and donkeys" (12:16).

What had happened to Abram? He momentarily stopped believing what God said in 12:3: "I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse." Believing that would have taken care of any inappropriate advances made towards Abram's wife. But he forgot what God had said. When he arrived in Egypt, instead of trusting the Lord, Abram devised a plan: "Let's pretend you're my sister. That should make everything go much more smoothly."

Abram was out of fellowship with God because of his disobedience – he wasn't even supposed to be in Egypt. God took him to the land and said it would be his. If God put him there, then God is self-obliged to fully support him there – famine or no famine. God is not only the God of promise but also the God of provision!

Same with you and me. I remember the first time I got a sense that I was being called to teach the Word. My first thought was, "You gotta be kidding!" The unspoken reply was, "No, I'm not." I bet some of you have had the exact same experience. If you are born again, God will speak directly to you. I'm not talking about "whispering voices in your ears," but God does speak to you. There is a sense, a feeling, that you need to do such-and-such, or you are placed in a situation where it is clear that you are being called to some action. And when you follow that leading there is a sense of satisfaction and peace, but when you don't, your spirit is troubled about that decision. Abram tried to solve the problem God was perfectly willing to solve for him, but instead, Abram ignored God's leading and used human viewpoint to solve the problem – "Let's go down to Egypt." And that created more problems.

Isa. 31:1 Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help

Now, here is another lesson for us who wish to obey the Lord. If our obedience to God arises from our faith in God, then we are in big trouble the moment we stop trusting in God and start devising our own plans. This Abram did, to his great shame—and his wife's great hurt.

Can you imagine what the Egyptians might have thought of Abram after this episode? They'd have scoffed at his claim to be God's chosen one. "God is going to bless you? And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed? The man who treated his wife in this way? God is going to restore the world through you? Come on, Abram, get serious!" That seems like a logical conclusion, doesn't it? The ugliness of 12:10–20 seems as if it will undermine all the promises that have gone before.

"God is going to bless you?" That's a reasonable question, isn't it? It's one we all could ponder in light of our own sins. We know where we have been. We know what we have done. And when we allow those memories to flash

across the movie screens of our minds, we might ask ourselves the very same question: “Look at my life! Why would God pick me? Why would he bless me? Why would he care for me?” These very questions—not thrown at us by our enemies, but eating at us from within our guilty consciences—can be quite debilitating.

Abram brought pain and suffering on the house of Pharaoh. The Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Sarai (12:17). Abram was supposed to be a blessing to others, but here he brought, not blessing, but cursing. Once more Abram’s faith in the divine Promise was being tested.

Abram was rebuked by a pagan king. Just how Pharaoh came to realize that his problems stemmed from the taking of a married woman is not explained. In any case, he summoned Abram to his court and verbally chastised him. Apparently, the Egyptians thought highly of the marriage connection, for as soon as he ascertained who Sarai was, he restored her to her husband. Abram made no recorded defense of his actions (12:18–19). What a terrible humiliation when an unbeliever has higher moral standards than a believer!

Despite his conduct, Abram was blessed in Egypt. He experienced God’s grace. While Sarai was in the king’s harem Abram received many tokens of respect from Pharaoh. He was enriched with gifts of livestock and servants. He left Egypt with greater wealth than he had when he entered that land. God seemed to bless him despite his sin and stupidity. Yet while he was in Egypt, Abram lost time of fellowship with God in Canaan. He also lost his testimony to Pharaoh.

And the whole time he was in Egypt God did not speak to him.

Gen 13:1 Then Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the South. **2** Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and gold. **3** And he went on his journey from the South as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, **4** to the place of the altar which he had made there at first. And there Abram called on the name of the Lord.

Pharaoh gave Sarai back to Abram and ordered him to leave Egypt. He left Egypt with wealth, which proved to be a cause of dissension within the family. He left Egypt with his wife, though he had almost lost her there. Only by God's grace did he get her back from Pharaoh. He left with Lot, although Lot's heart remained in Egypt.

Abram retraced his steps. First, he sojourned in the Negev. Then he moved to Bethel where he had earlier resided. There he rebuilt the altar and renewed his public witness by calling upon the name of the Lord (13:3–4).

Christians enmeshed in the world cannot be happy with themselves. They must go back to the very place where they abandoned the Lord. This is repentance and confession: to change your mind, admit your sinful behavior, and make amends. Abraham could not have confessed his sin and remained in Egypt! No, he had to get back to the place of the tent and the altar, back to the place where he could call upon the Lord and receive blessing. This is a good principle for Christians to follow: Go nowhere in this world where you must leave your testimony behind. Any place where we cannot build the altar and pitch the tent is out of bounds.

It seems that Abram's restoration should have undone all his disobedience, but such is not the case. Certainly, God forgave Abram and restored him to fellowship, but God could not overrule the sad consequences of the trip to Egypt:

Lost time.

The weeks that Abram and his household were away from the Lord were lost and could not be regained. All believers must pray to avoid such losses, "Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12).

Lost testimony.

Could Abraham ever witness to Pharaoh of the true God, after deceiving him? Probably not. How sad it will be when we face God at the judgment seat of Christ and discover how many souls were affected because of the poor testimony of carnal Christians!

Hagar's place in the family.

Sarai's maid, Hagar, came from Egypt (16:1ff) and brought untold trouble to the family. Of course, the suggestion that she bear a child came from Sarai, but the presence of Hagar helped to bring about the carnal scheme.

Whatever we bring with us from "Egypt" (the godless world) will ultimately cause us trouble. We must be crucified to the world and make sure that the world is crucified to us (Gal. 6:14).

More wealth.

The increase in possessions helped to cause the later dispute between Abraham's herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen. Later, Abraham would refuse the world's wealth (14:17–24).

Lot's enjoyment of Egypt.

This young man developed a taste for Egypt (13:10), and though Abram took Lot out of Egypt, he could not take Egypt out of Lot! It is always tragic when a mature believer leads a younger Christian astray. In 12:8, Lot shares Abram's tent and altar, but when Lot comes out of Egypt, he has only tents, no altar (13:5). No wonder Lot gravitated toward Sodom—and ended up a moral and spiritual wreck.

Some have suggested that the Egypt trip is an example of a more mature believer (Abram) leading a less mature believer (Lot) astray. This is not a place a believer should ever be.