

GOD'S INTERVENTION (1)

A Meditation on Genesis 12:9-13:4

Life as we know it post-Genesis 3, following the Fall and curse, doesn't look like a Thomas Kinkade painting. Every flower we plant doesn't bloom. Pesky weeds take up residency in our garden like an unwelcome guest. All our streams are not sparkling blue; many are a slimy green, thanks to the algae. And when the neighbor's dog comes in our yard and squats down...well, I think you get the picture. In the real world, we do the best we can, but at times our best isn't good enough. We work hard to provide for our family, and still get laid off. We watch our diet and exercise, and still become ill or get cancer. We weed and feed our lawn, and the Creeping Charlie persists in taking over the yard like an invading army. And, it's inevitable that no matter how carefully you navigate the mine field in the back yard, you always end up stepping right where the neighbor's dog squatted.

This is the bad news in a fallen world. The good news is that we get to witness the love and intervention of God. When we're between the proverbial rock and a hard place, as the Israelites were when they were sandwiched between the Red Sea and the Egyptian army, we get to observe the miraculous intervention of our Almighty God with our own eyes. And in these terrible, yet precious, moments we learn about the faithfulness of God in a way that would not have taken place in Thomas Kinkade's idyllic world.

In the passage before us, the providence of God is going to purposefully place Abram and Sarai in a position where they are powerless to save themselves. They will do the best they can, but they will quickly discover that their best isn't good enough. However, they will experience the miraculous intervention of God, and will learn about His faithfulness, which will strengthen their faith.

The stage was set for our narrative in the first half of Genesis 12. The call came to Abram: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you" (vs. 1). Abram promptly obeyed (vs. 4). In return, the LORD had promised, "And I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (vv. 2-3). Since this hasn't happened yet we read on in the life of Abram with anticipation and excitement to see how God will be faithful to His promises. We will not have to wait very long.

"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" (vs. 10). The commentators are divided here, some blast Abram for going down to Egypt, while others just see this as an effort to provide food for his family. I hold to the latter perspective. Those who criticize Abram often quote Isaiah 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 do not look to the Holy One of Israel or consult the LORD!" This is an anachronistic criticism. In other words, it's premature at this point in redemptive history to apply a rebuke that will come some 1300 years later. In fact, two generations later when Jacob goes down to Egypt, *because of a famine in the land*, God says, "Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again" (Gen. 46:3-4). If Abram were returning to Ur of the Chaldeans, then I might be more critical.

Some commentators insist that Abram should have trusted God to give him the land He promised. Let's be clear, God didn't promise Abram the land. He said, "To *your offspring* I will give this land" (12:7). And at this time Abram has zero offspring. He doesn't know how this is all going to turn out. For now he's simply looking for food.

"When [Abram] 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'" (vv. 11-13). The commentators lay into Abram here, one calling his behavior "debase and despicable," another surely crossed the line referring to the patriarch as "a pimp, trading his wife for wealth." This criticism is totally unfounded. Notice, for starters, that Abram is absolutely correct in his assessment of the situation, including the ruthlessness of Pharaoh, who uses his tyrannical powers to—literally—*seize* Sarai, with Abram being in no position to stop him.

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Next, let's ask, "Should Abram be criticized for being deceptive?" In certain life and death situations, absolute truth-telling is not required. A few biblical examples make this answer clear. First, the Hebrew midwives were told by the king of Egypt to kill all the Israelite sons they delivered. "But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live" (Ex. 1:17). So the king confronted them, and asked why they let the boys live. "The midwives said to Pharaoh, 'Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them'" (vs. 20). Simply put, the midwives were big, fat liars—*because they feared God*. "So God dealt well with the midwives... And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families" (vv. 20-21).

Also, look at James' use of Rahab. In the context James is showing "that faith apart from works is useless" (Jam. 2:20). James argues that true faith is always accompanied by works. He uses Abraham and his willingness to sacrifice Isaac as an example, and then he uses Rahab as another example. But what makes Rahab so interesting is the "work" that James mentions. He writes, "And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?" (vs. 25). Rahab's faith-validating work was that of *lying*. Her faith was demonstrated, when she sent the spies "out by another way"—a way that was different from the lie she told the officials.

Finally, consider 1 Samuel 16:1-5, where *God* tells Samuel to lie about his real intentions in coming to Bethlehem. If we're going to say that all lying or deception is sinful, then we had better be prepared to lay this charge at the feet of God Himself. Are our standards of morality higher and more holy than God's? Lying and deception are biblically acceptable ways of dealing with ruthless tyrants.

Moreover, is Abram thinking only of himself, with this deceptive scheme of his? No, he's thinking of Sarai. As a brother, Abram has the lawful right to negotiate his sister's marriage (see Gen. 24:29-33, 50-51). Consequently, Abram could buy time by negotiating the marriage, that is, if the king of Egypt is an honorable man, who respects the customs of the culture. But of course he isn't and doesn't.

Abram has done the best he can, but it is insufficient to protect his wife. Now we wonder, "Will God intervene, so His promises can be fulfilled?" Before the LORD formally enters the narrative, we see blessings upon Abram: "he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels" (vs. 16). These are ancient symbols of wealth; more importantly, they represent the blessing of God. So Genesis 12:2 is being fulfilled in the midst of this difficult trial.

"But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife" (vs. 17). If Abram is in the wrong, with Pharaoh being an innocent by-standard, then why does God afflict Pharaoh? This is an example of Genesis 12:3: God is cursing Pharaoh who has dishonored Abram. God is intervening and protecting the couple, so that His promise to make Abram a great nation will be realized. This is the climax of the passage.

"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? 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'" (vv. 18-19). This is Pharaoh's attempt to shift the blame to Abram. He knows perfectly well why Abram said what he did, and doesn't wait for an answer. He orders men to send Abram and Sarai away, so they went up from Egypt (vs. 20-13:1). One commentator referred to this as an expulsion. I would not use such a negative word. This is an *Exodus* in the fullest sense. Abram didn't leave with his head hanging in shame; he left rejoicing.

Before we apply this to ourselves, let's remember that Genesis was first written for the Israelites who were delivered from Egypt themselves. The parallels would have been plain to them; they would have identified very well with Abram's plight in Egypt. Like Abram they went to Egypt due to a famine. They too were blessed while they were there. And they were severely treated by Pharaoh. They couldn't save themselves either, so they waited for God's intervention, which also came in the form of plagues upon Pharaoh. After the plagues, they too were told to "go." Like Abram, they left with great wealth (13:2), and now they too should worship their Deliverer as Abram did (vs. 4).

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