

## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ABRAHAM

### Week Two: Fear and the Grace of God

Genesis 11:27-12:9

Good morning Lake Wylie. If you have a copy of God's Word begin turning to Genesis 12. If you would like to use a Bible found in the pew rack in front of you the passage today is found on page 9.

I recently heard the story of one sophomore in college who stressed all semester in anticipation of the notoriously difficult final exam in his ornithology class.

(You know ornithology? The study of birds.)

Having made what he regarded to be the "ultimate effort for this final exam," he was dismayed when he walked into the classroom to take the test because instead of the multiple choice, essay-based questions on bird he had been expecting, there were no test materials at all—just 25 pictures on the screen.

Not photos of different birds in all their resplendent color, just pictures of birds' feet. The test was to identify all 25 species of birds by their feet.

"This is insane," the student protested.

"It must be done," said the professor. "This is the final."

"I won't do it," the frustrated student said. "I'm walking out."

"If you walk out, you fail the final."

"Go ahead and fail me," said the boy, heading for the door.

"Okay, you have failed. Tell me your name," the professor demanded.

The boy pulled up his pant legs and said, "You tell me, professor, you tell me!"

Nobody likes a test that is unfair. **Tests are supposed to accurately reveal what you know.**

Last week we saw Abraham pass a test with flying colors—God told Abraham to "Get out and go to the land that God would show him." And Abraham, with tremendous faith, responded to the call of God! He got out!

This week we are looking at another test. Another opportunity to accurately reveal what is in Abraham. And we'll see that this test also reveals what is in us as well.

Let's begin reading at 12:10.

*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.*

So that is the test that Abraham went through. Let me show you three truths this test reveals about Abraham and us:

REVELATION #1: OBEDIENCE TO GOD DOESN'T MEAN THE ABSENCE OF SUFFERING. (12:10)

Look back at verse 10 with me:

*10 Now there was a famine in the land.*

The first truth this passage reveals is that just because someone is obedient to God and his call does not mean their life will be absent of suffering.

Think back to last week. God calls Abraham—it's this radical, unconditional call: "Abraham, get out of your father's house. And go to a land that I will show you. I'm going to make you a blessing. I'm going to bless the world through you!"

And Abraham shows tremendous faith! He packs his family up and starts walking. Now, here's what we naturally expect to read next:

"So Abraham followed God and settled in the promised land and God grew his family, and increased his flocks, and God blessed the world through Abraham."

But that's not what we read next. After Abraham has followed God, after he has moved his family, after he has said goodbye to his father and his homeland—he's stepped out in faith and here's what we read, "Now there was a famine in the land."

Famine was one of the three scourges of the ancient world.

**Pestilence**—either in the form of invading armies or swarms of insects that would destroy food supplies.

**Plague**—disease.

**Famine**—drought that would destroy crops.

So, Abraham has done all that God has asked. He left his home—he followed God—into famine.

Obedience to God doesn't mean the absence of suffering. We see this theme played over and over in the Scriptures. Consider:

- Abel offers an acceptable sacrifice to God in Genesis 4 and his brother in envy murders him.
- In Genesis 39 Joseph is put in charge of Potiphar's house. Potiphar's wife tries to seduce him and he refuses. Joseph ends up serving jail time for a crime he didn't commit.
- In the New Testament Paul is one of God's most prolific preachers—and he's constantly persecuted.
- The most famous example of all is that of Jesus—here is someone who was completely obedient to God and his obedience led him to his death.

If you are here today and you aren't a follower of Jesus we want you to have a true perspective on what God is and is not offering you: by trusting your life to him, God is offering you a better life—but please don't confuse that with having an easy life.

Let me put it this way:

If you could only have one or the other: a life full of comfort and no God, or a life full of misery and God's close presence the Christian says—bring on the suffering and give me God.

You need to reject any version of Jesus that claims you'll have an easy life. You need to reject any religion that claims obeying God will result in an easier life, better health, more money, or success.

From cover to cover the Scriptures want you to see that obedience to God doesn't mean the absence of suffering.

To you in the room who know and trust Christ—you need to have a category in your theology for suffering—and you need to reject and so-called Christian preacher who has no category for suffering, persecution, or pain.

Abraham is completely obedient to God, and this obedience leads him into famine.

True Christianity is not, "Trust God and everything will go your way."

True Christianity is, "Trust God and when things don't go your way your life won't be built on how things go—but something supremely above and beyond the circumstances of this world!"

**Spurgeon put it this way:**

"Because I happen to be prosperous today, I must not fancy that I shall be in my high estate tomorrow. As in a wheel, the uppermost spokes descend to the bottom in due course, so it is with mortal conditions."

In fact, most Christians throughout history have understood that you cannot be a completed and mature Christian without passing through suffering. Consider these words by the missionary Amy Carmichael:

No wound? No scar?

Yet, as the Master shall the servant be,  
And pierced are the feet that follow Me.

But thine are whole; can he have followed far  
Who hast no wound or scar?

2 Timothy 3:12-

*"Yea, and all those who walk godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution."*

Don't have a martyrs complex, but at the same time, read the Scriptures and you'll see this theme played over and over, following God doesn't mean the absence of suffering.

REVELATION #2: TRUSTING GOD DOESN'T MEAN THE ABSENCE OF FEAR. (12:10-13)

*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."*

In the last chapter we saw Abraham follow God with incredible faith and security. God says, "Go!" and Abraham starts walking!

Now in this chapter it seems like Abraham is messing everything up! Why? I thought I was supposed to be like him! Well, yes, and no.

I want you to see this- **The Old Testament isn't given to us as a tale of morality as much as it's given to us a mirror of reality.**

Many people come to the Old Testament and read it the same way they read Aesop's Fables—you remember those from kindergarten?

In other words, they read the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David as if God gave us these stories as picture perfect models of morality—but there's one problem:

As you read this story there is nothing commendable in Abraham. In this passage Abraham is cold and callous not only to his wife, but to God and all of the world.

Back at the beginning of chapter 12 God made a series of promises to Abraham:

1. I'll give you a land.
2. I'll make you a great nation.
3. I'll bless all of the nations of the earth through your offspring.

And 10 verses after those promises Abraham turns his back on all of it.

1. He leaves the land of promise. Instead of trusting God to provide for him in the land—he leaves the land.

2. He abandons his wife to Pharaoh. This is the woman Abraham had promised to love and protect, and through her would come a nation of people—and now she is brought into Pharaoh's harem.

**3. Worst of all Abraham places his own preservation above the salvation of the world.** What do I mean by that?

Well, God's promised Messiah was to come through Abraham and Sarah's offspring (through you I will bless the nations). By having Sarah lie, and enter Pharaoh's harem he has jeopardized the very covenant of God!

He's placed his own survival and preservation over the mission of God, and the salvation of the world!

Abraham isn't given to us as a morality tale. The moral of the story cannot be, "Be like Abraham." Because, frankly, based on how he acts in this passage we wouldn't let Abraham serve in our kid's ministry.

So what **is** happening here? Here's what's happening:

**Abraham's story isn't a model of morality, it's a mirror of reality.**

Abraham isn't given to us to show us how we should be, as much as he is given to us as a mirror to show us how we are.

Only a few verses ago, we saw last week that Abraham was a man of **incredible security**. God told him to leave his homeland, something no one would have done. And Abraham left!

God called him out of the gods of his family to worship the one true God and, without hesitation, Abraham left his family idols and trusted the one true God.

Abraham is a mirror. He shows us exactly what we are like. One moment we are resting in the security we have in God, the next we're cowering in the grip of fear.

We aren't given the life of Abraham so we can be like him—we are given the life of Abraham so we can accurately see ourselves. “When I get honest, I admit I am a bundle of paradoxes. I believe and I doubt, I hope and get discouraged, I love and I hate, I feel bad about feeling good, I feel guilty about not feeling guilty. I am trusting and suspicious. I am honest and I still play games. Aristotle said I am a rational animal; I say I am an angel with an incredible capacity for beer.

To live by grace means to acknowledge my whole life story, the light side and the dark. **In admitting my shadow side I learn who I am** and what God's grace means.

Do you hear what Manning is saying?

Until you are able to see yourself like Abraham—someone who has moments of incredible security, moments of controlling fear—and admit that's who you are you will never truly learn who you are, and you'll never truly understand God's grace.

Listen, church, what God wants most from you isn't your strength—what he wants most is for you to depend upon him for your every need.

And if what God wants most is dependence upon him then honesty about your fears is a strength.

As Thomas Merton put it, "A saint is not someone who is good **but who experiences the goodness of God.**"

Abraham wasn't good. If being good makes one a Saint then none of the saints are good.

**God doesn't love us because we are beautiful. He loves us to make us beautiful.**

Abraham isn't our model of morality—he's a mirror showing us the reality of who we really are. Trusting God doesn't mean the absence of fear.

REVELATION #3: FAILING GOD DOESN'T MEAN THE ABSENCE OF GRACE (12:17-20)

*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.*

*So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb. 2 Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold.*

At this point in the story you should be totally baffled. Think of what we've seen up to this point:

1. Abraham has left the promised land.
2. Abraham has lied about who Sarah is.

3. Abraham has let the wife through who the promise was to come go into the arms of another man.
4. Abraham has effectively jeopardized all of the human race because he has threatened the line of the promised Messiah.

And the story ends with God plaguing Pharaoh, and sends Abraham out of Egypt a rich man.

You are meant to read this story and be baffled. There should be questions you are asking as you read what happens here. Questions like:

1. What did Abraham do to deserve God's blessing?
2. What did Pharaoh do to deserve God's plagues?
3. Where is the fairness and justice in this story?

First, when you see Abraham leave Egypt as a rich man you are not to think that God is rewarding evil behavior. The Scriptures are replete with examples of God hating and condemning sin. The most obvious example is the cross of Jesus Christ. He crucified sin in his body on the tree, Paul says.

What God is doing is maintaining his promise. He had promised to make Abraham a great nation. If God abandons Abraham—if he throws him off—then he is also throwing off his own word. Now he is breaking his own promise.

Secondly, you shouldn't see the plagues as punishment on Pharaoh. Rather they serve two purposes:

- God is protecting Sarah from Abraham's sin. Abraham has broken his covenant with his wife and God is acting in care and concern for Sarah.
- God is preserving Pharaoh's house from worse judgement.

Having said all that—this story still doesn't really sit well. We get that God is keeping up his end of the promise. But--- how can Abraham get away with this—and come out richer because of it?

If we are honest, the blessing of Abraham in the midst of his sin doesn't just strike us as odd—it actually makes us angry. Angry because we know he doesn't deserve this kind of outcome. What has Abraham done to deserve God's love, and the king's wealth?

And the answer is, nothing.

Thank God. You see, if God treated us the way we would have treated Abraham he would have no use for you and me.

God doesn't treat Abraham as he deserves to be treated. God does not treat you and I the way we deserve to be treated.

God was able to overlook the sins of Abraham not because he sweeps sin under the rug. He could overlook Abraham's evil because he knew that Christ—the offspring of Abraham would pay for the sins of his father.

And God has overlooked our sin—he has treated us as Christ deserves to be treated because Christ was treated as we deserved.

In the Ragamuffin Gospel, Brennan Manning says,

“Because salvation is by grace through faith, I believe that among the countless number of people standing in front of the throne and in front of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palms in their hands, I shall see the prostitute from the Kit-Kat Ranch in Carson City, Nevada, who tearfully told me that she could find no other employment to support her two-year-old son.

I shall see the woman who had an abortion and is haunted by guilt and remorse but did the best she could faced with grueling alternatives; the businessman besieged with debt who sold his integrity in a series of desperate transactions; the insecure clergyman addicted to being liked, who never challenged his people from the pulpit and longed for unconditional love; the teen abused by his father and now selling his body on the street.

'But how?' we ask.

Then the voice says, 'They have washed their robes and have made them white in the blood of the Lamb.'

There they are. There *\*we\** are - the multitude who so wanted to be faithful, who at times got defeated, soiled by life, and bested by trials, wearing the bloodied garments of life's tribulations, but through it all clung to faith.

My friends—this is the gospel according to Abraham—how God's mercy extends to us not because we are secure in him—but precisely because we are weak and afraid.

Let's pray.