

Message #2
Abraham: A Model of Faith

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DABBLING IN DECEIT
GENESIS 12:10-20

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

The Ninth Commandment declares, “**You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.**” The Apostle Paul updated that in the New Testament Book of Colossians when he said simply, “**Do not lie to one another.**” I doubt that any of us think of ourselves as liars, but a USC social psychologist by the name of Jerald Jellison claimed a few years ago that the average American tells two hundred lies a day, including half-truths, white lies, false excuses, exaggerations, and flattery. (*I’m Sorry, I Didn’t Mean It and Other Lies We Love to Tell*) More recently a UMass professor named Robert Feldman claimed that a typical ten minute conversation includes at least two or three lies.

Most of this, I suspect, is of a pretty harmless variety. But some of it is not. Business scandals like the FTX bankruptcy debacle cost Americans lots of money. FTX was a crypto-currency exchange run by this young guy Sam Bankman-Fried. He lied to investors and broke all kinds of rules by spending money on himself and investing it in very risky ventures.

Scandals like this have prompted university business schools to put a renewed emphasis on ethics courses. Their value, however, is questionable. A reporter for *Forbes* magazine sat in on an ethics class at Harvard Business School. He said that the professor and students avoided moral conclusions. Rather than developing moral principles, they merely “**develop skills enabling them to rationalize anything short of cannibalism.**”

I decided to see what I could find online about the ethics courses that are being taught at Harvard. I found one syllabus description of an Ethics in Justice course which listed the writers and thinkers who would be studied. They included Aristotle, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, and John Rawls. I don’t see anything wrong with including these famous guys. But it seems to me that there is a glaring omission in this ethics course in a major college in a Western democracy. There is no mention of Moses, of Jesus, of Paul, of Jewish law, or Christian ethics. If the professor does not want to talk directly about the Bible, then what about great Christian thinkers like Augustine and Anselm?

So what kind of students do we get coming out of a university like this? Many of you perhaps heard that 31 student groups at Harvard signed on to a statement last week which said that Israel is “**entirely responsible**” for the mass slaughter Hamas conducted a couple of weeks ago. Those poor Hamas fighters were somehow just innocent bystanders for the slaughter which took place in southern Israel.

The ultimate remedy for this ethically challenged environment is a system of moral absolutes rooted in belief in a personal, omnipotent, and holy God. Psychiatrist Scott Peck argues in his book *A World Waiting to Be Born*, “...**secular humanism is like a house built on sand. When the going gets rough--- when a business is bad or strife is abroad--- such humanistic attitudes may easily be blown away. For this reason, I do not believe that secular ethics--- ethics without theology--- can be adequate. They do not relate us to the larger system. They leave God out of the picture.**”

Fyodor Dostoevsky writes in his famous novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, “**Without God and the future life... everything is permitted, one can do anything.**” So it is that faith in God enters the scene.

Faith is the primary theme which we are tracing as we study the life of Abraham, the father of the Jewish nation. We began our study last Sunday in Genesis #12. I pointed out that Abraham was a city dweller who came from the pagan city of Ur (PROJECTOR ON--- UR MAP), in what is now Iraq. Joshua 24:2 indicates that he worshiped false gods. But God out of his sovereign grace chose Abraham, who for the first 99 years of his life was Abram, revealed Himself to him, and called him.

The Lord gave two commands to Abraham. Go to the land that I will show you, and be a blessing. If Abraham would do that, God said that six blessings (ABRAHAM'S SIX BLESSINGS) would result:

- 1) Father of a great nation
- 2) Blessed
- 3) Great name
- 4) Friends blessed by God
- 5) Enemies cursed by God
- 6) All nations blessed through Abe

Surah 4:136 in the Quran says that good Muslims should study the Scriptures which were written before the Quran. They could avoid a lot of trouble if they would study Genesis #12.

These were fantastic promises to make to any one individual and his descendants. But it took great faith on the part of the original recipient to believe that they would come true. (ABRAHAM'S JOURNEY) Abraham was about 75 when he approached the promised land, and he did not yet have one child. Furthermore, he found the land promised to him to be already occupied by thousands of Canaanites who had formidable cities. Yet Abraham believed God, and he expressed that faith by moving to Canaan and by worshiping God.

I.

Today we find out that Abraham's faith is tested and that he messes up. He dabbles in deceit. (I. THE TEMPTATION OF DECEIT) In vv. 10-12 of Genesis #12 we have a description of THE TEMPTATION OF DECEIT.

A.

Verse 10 of #12 describes THE PREDICAMENT. (I. A. THE PREDICAMENT) The narrator tells us: **"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."** Droughts and famines were common in the land of Canaan in ancient history. The land was dependent upon rainfall for economic success. If the rains did not come, the people suffered.

Abraham had lived in Ur and Haran for most of his life. (ABRAHAM'S JOURNEY) Both of those cities were in the Euphrates River valley. There was always water available from that river. Egypt to the south (NILE RIVER) had the Nile River. There were several sources of water in the interior of Africa for that river. It likewise was a reliable source of water. Long before Abraham's time the Egyptians had developed irrigation systems to use water from the Nile to water their crops. So when droughts came to Canaan, the people of that region would often buy food from Egypt. Sometimes they would even try to move to Egypt.

An Egyptian document called "Admonitions of Ipuwer" (ADMONITIONS OF IPUWER) comes from ancient times. The scholars are not sure about the exact time. In this document an Egyptian named Ipuwer complains about Asian immigrants who come from the direction of Canaan looking for food in a time of drought. The author says, **"Behold, he who had no grain is now the owner of granaries. He who had to get a loan for himself now issues it... So Lower Egypt weeps. The storehouse of the king is a (mere) come-and-get-it for everybody and the entire palace is without its taxes."**

So we have immigrants streaming across the border who settle down and take advantage of government benefits without having to pay taxes. We also have citizens who are resentful about it. It's hard to relate to these stories from Old Testament times, isn't it? (PROJECTOR OFF)

The famine in our story is a test for Abraham's faith. We saw the same kind of situation test the faith of Naomi and Elimelech in our fairly recent study of Ruth. God had promised this land to Abraham and his descendants. Not only is it occupied by other people, but also it is without enough water to sustain Abraham and his clan. What is he to do?

Abraham decides to join the Canaanites and become part of this immigration to Egypt. The text does not specifically comment on Abraham's decision to go to Egypt to avoid the famine. I am inclined to think that God's intention was for Abraham to stay in the land promised to him and to trust God to provide for his clan during the famine. There is

no indication that he consulted with God before making this move. Going to Egypt was the path of least resistance, but it would lead to problems.

When we are tempted by our own famines, the path of least resistance often looks most attractive to us. The danger is that we don't consider what the Lord might have to say about it. We are tempted to stretch our credit card debt, to resort to old addictions, or to fib on our taxes.

Notice the additional predicament in vv. 11 & 12: **“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.”**”

Sarah was at least 65 years old. But she lived to be 127. In the context of the longevity of the time, she was perhaps more like a middle-aged woman, and apparently she was very attractive. Given the society into which they were moving and their status as illegal immigrants, Abraham was concerned that he might be killed, and Sarah would be taken by someone else. It is unfortunate that his concern seems to be more for himself than for her. Such is the additional problem that arises from the decision to exit the promised land

B..

We come then to THE PLAN (PROJECTOR ON--- I. A. B. THE PLAN) described in v. 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.”** Notice again Abraham's focus on his own situation rather than the difficult position he is creating for his wife. This is hardly an example of chivalry, or of godly faith.

In Genesis #20 v. 12 we find out that Sarah was actually Abraham's half sister. They had the same father but different mothers. So the foundation of Abraham's plan was half true, but it was also half false. His intent clearly was to deceive. In the end this was a failure to trust God. It was a lapse of faith. God had promised to produce out of Abraham and Sarah a great nation. Abraham had no children yet. If God's promise was true--- if God is trustworthy--- Abraham could not possibly be killed.

But Abraham devised his own plan so that he would be treated well, and so that his life would be spared. An Old Testament scholar by the name of Cassuto thinks that Abraham's thinking was that when any suitors came along for Sarah, he could put them off for a time with the insistence upon a long engagement. But however we understand Abraham's reasoning, it was dabbling in deceit.

C.

Consider then OUR TEMPTATION. (i. A. B. C. OUR TEMPTATION) Sometimes the people of God seem to have more than their fair share of problems. We lose our jobs. We have family difficulties. We get a cancer diagnosis. Inflation squeezes our fixed income. The shadow of death crosses our path. The temptation in the face of such

challenges is to choose what appears to be the path of least resistance. Sometimes we are tempted to use a little deceit.

Psychiatrist Scott Peck says, **“The reason people lie is to avoid the pain of challenge and its consequences. ...Insofar as the nature of the challenge is legitimate (and it usually is), lying is an attempt to circumvent legitimate suffering...”** The easiest route to avoid pain and suffering and unnecessary complications often appears to involve deceit. Money is short. We will fudge a little bit on our income taxes. I need a new job. I will pad my; resume just a little bit. I just don't have time to study for the test, and everybody cheats. So I will just check with my friend who took the test in an earlier period to see if I can get a little help. Such is the nature of our temptation.

II.A.

(II. THE DANGER OF DECEIT) In vv. 14-16 we discover THE DANGER OF DECEIT. In vv. 14 & 15 we learn about THE COMPLICATION. (II. THE DANGER... A. THE COMPLICATION) The text tells us, **“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.”**

We find out that Abraham was at least partly right in his analysis of the situation. The Egyptians were impressed with Sarah's beauty. But perhaps Abraham did not consider that the pharaoh of Egypt and his officials might want her in his harem. That turned out to be the case. Government officials were always on the lookout for beautiful women. There were probably political and material benefits which came to them when they found women who pleased the king. So Sarah was added to the royal harem. Sarah is now separated from Abraham. The promise of God to make of this couple a great nation seems to be threatened.

B.

In v. 16 we find that Abe's plan did produce A PAYOFF. (II. A. B. THE PAYOFF) **“And for her sake he [Pharaoh] dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels.”** Perhaps Hagar was one of the servants who was gifted to Abraham. He derived a material benefit from the gift of Sarah to the harem of Pharaoh. Abraham could have regarded this stuff as a sign of God's blessing. After all, hadn't God promised to bless Abraham?

But there was another kind of payoff that was not so pleasant. There was absolutely no chance of making a family if Abraham was cut off from his wife. Sarah no longer belonged to him. He gave her up. In doing that he exposed her to the difficult position of having to give herself to another man. Furthermore Abraham had to live with his deceit. He had to deal with true guilt. He had to lay on his bed at night without his wife and worry about what was happening to her. How was the promise of God going to be affected now?

Therein lies the danger of deceit. It seldom has as good an outcome as it appears in the beginning. Things can get complicated. Sir Walter Scott once wrote, **“O what a tangled web we weave/ When first we practise to deceive.”**

King David provides the classic example of this course of action. A little adultery with Bathsheba gets complicated by pregnancy. David tries to deceive her husband Uriah. When that doesn't work he has Uriah killed. He arranges that murder deceitfully. He ends up with Bathsheba. But he has to deal with guilt and a broken relationship with God. His deceit is eventually exposed. God's punishment involves a messed up family and a divided nation. God's man gives God a bad name.

C.

Consider likewise OUR DANGER. (II. A. B. C. OUR DANGER) Fortunately we live in a country where we don't have to worry about our government ever deceiving us, right? Certainly we can find all kinds of examples in the news and the media and government about the dangers of deceit. Often deceit is exposed in these places, and the consequences are severe. Perhaps the worst consequences relate to a loss of faith in institutions.

Unfortunately deceit is a danger in churches. In the last couple of decades we have seen the danger of deceit in the Catholic Church where the misbehavior of priests has become a terrible scandal and a blot upon all of them. Much of the scandal is related to the fact that the church in many places was deceiving their own people about the nature of the scandal. But we have also seen it closer to home as it was exposed a couple of years ago that the Southern Baptist Convention had been covering up a number of churches and pastors who had been guilty of child molestation. There is the sin itself but also then the deceit of trying to cover it up.

On the level of us as individuals the danger is that we serve as ambassadors of Christ to family and friends and our community. All of these people observe our lives, and they know that deceit is wrong. When we choose the seemingly easy route of deceit, we are proclaiming a message that trusting God is not the route to go.

III.A.

(III. THE JUDGMENT OF DECEIT) Ultimately we encounter THE JUDGMENT OF DECEIT, which is described in vv. 17-20. Verse 17 tells us about GOD'S INTERVENTION. (III. THE JUDGMENT... A. GOD'S INTERVENTION) The narrator tells us, **“But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.”** Abraham acted improperly. He failed to trust God, but the Lord always keeps His promises. So He intervened.

In the New Testament we encounter this assurance in 2 Timothy #2 v. 13 (2 TIMOTHY 2:13): **“...if we are faithless, he remains faithful— for he cannot deny himself.”** God always keeps His promises, even when we mess up.

In this situation the Lord introduces some kind of plague or disease. We are not told about the exact nature of this problem. But we might have expected some kind of direct divine discipline upon Abraham because of his failure of faith. Instead it is the royal household which suffers. Instead of being a blessing, Abraham has become a curse to them.

This is one of the effects of the sin of deceit. Oftentimes others suffer because of our deceit. Here Pharaoh and his household are suffering because of Abraham's sin.

B.

In vv. 18-20 Abraham receives A REBUKE. (III. A. B. C. THE REBUKE) **“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.”**

Somehow Pharaoh finds out what lies behind these diseases. Perhaps Sarah is the only one who is not afflicted. Perhaps under questioning she confesses the truth about her identity. Then Pharaoh calls in the man of God and asks some hard questions. “What’s the deal here, Abraham? Why have you done this to me? Why did you lie” The Scripture does not record Abraham’s response. There is not much that he can say.

(MAAT) Maat was one of the gods of the Egyptians. She was the personification of order in the universe. Her ostrich feathers, representing justice and order and truth, were supposedly weighed against the heart of the deceased to determine their destiny. Her concern was for justice and truth. The pharaoh was obligated to uphold this order by promoting truth and justice. How humiliating it must have been for this pharaoh to have higher standards than did Abraham! What a rebuke to the man of God!

(PROJECTOR OFF)

Pharaoh kicks Abraham’s family out of the country. Persona non gratis. Person not wanted. Illegal immigrants. Abraham is not treated any more severely than this only because the pharaoh recognizes that the hand of a God is involved in the suffering which his household has experienced.

A pharaoh named Achthoes III lived about this time. It is possible that he was even the pharaoh of Genesis #12. He wrote something called “Instructions to King Meri-Ka-RE,” who was his son. It in the pharaoh warns his successor to watch out for the Asiatics, illegal immigrants, foreigners like Abram. They are treacherous and not to be trusted. How unfortunate if Abraham, the man of God, had helped to contribute to that opinion.

Nevertheless God did rescue Abraham from his predicament. He did it because of His promise to Abraham not because Abraham’s behavior deserved a reward. The Lord also kept Sarah from compromising her virtue. The ancient kings in that part of the world had large harems. As we see in the Old Testament Book of Esther, the women

sometimes had a long period of preparation before they actually spent time with the king.

C.

Consider finally OUR JUDGMENT. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. A. B. C. OUR JUDGMENT)

God often rescues us from situations of our own making. He graciously intervenes to help us out of messes that we have created. But He doesn't always do it. He is obligated to help us only to the extent of the promises that He has made. If we are unfaithful in marriage, He doesn't guarantee that everything will still work out with our spouse.

The lesson from vv. 17-20 is that judgment eventually comes for deceit. Unfortunately it sometimes comes from unbelievers. When I was a youth pastor, our church used a public recreation department gym monthly for a recreation night. I was in charge of the deal. On one occasion one of the kids got into an area of the building he wasn't supposed to enter, and he accidentally broke something. I found out about it from the boy's mother. She said that she would talk to the rec department official about it. It was the easiest course of action to keep myself out of it.

But about a week later I heard from the rec department official, and he wasn't happy that he had not heard about it from me. And he was right. The mom had talked to him, but I was in charge, and I should have made contact with him. It was easier to let the mother of the offender deal with him. But the end result was a kind of judgment from an unbeliever for my lack of following through.

Abraham was a man of faith. But there were times when he messed up. The thing that he had to learn through his failures was that God's promises can be trusted. God's Word stands forever. That was the lesson that his descendants would also have difficulty in learning. Years later Abraham's great grandson Joseph would bring his brothers and father to Egypt to protect them from another famine.

God would eventually deliver their descendants from Egypt through another set of plagues and through the miraculous parting of the Red Sea. He would supply the Israelites with manna and water. He would promise them safe deliverance to the promised land of Canaan. But again and again they would fail to trust the promises of God. When they would come to the edge of the promised land, they would fail to believe that God would help them conquer the Canaanites. So that generation was condemned to die in the wilderness. They learned that failure to trust God's promises can be costly.

That is the lesson which we also need to learn. God's Word endures forever. His promises can be trusted.

Last week I referred to William Carey (WILLIAM CAREY), the great British missionary to India, and to his motto: "Expect great things from God; attempt great things for God."

In 1774 when William Carey was 14 his father set him up to work for a shoemaker by the name of Mr. Nichols. A typical seven year contract was established by which William would be provided with room and board. He would work for the shoemaker and learn the trade. At the end of the time he would be qualified to be a shoemaker himself.

When Christmas time came around, apprentices could often look forward to tips from their customers. Mr. Nichols sent young William to a blacksmith to deliver a pair of new boots. The blacksmith held out a sixpence and a shilling and asked which he would like. A shilling was worth much more than a sixpence. So he gladly took the shilling. William decided that on the way back home he would use the shilling to buy a quill pen. When he went to pay for the pen, the shopkeeper quickly recognized that the shilling was a brass shilling rather than a silver shilling. The brass shilling was worthless. William had been tricked by the blacksmith. But William decided that he would switch this brass shilling with the silver shilling that the blacksmith had given him in payment for the boots. He hoped that his boss would not notice.

William brought the brass shilling back to his boss, but Mr. Nichols quickly noticed the counterfeit. William blamed the problem on the blacksmith. Mr. Nichols sent another apprentice to the blacksmith to deal with the situation. William knew that he was in trouble. The punishment for stealing a shilling was typically a jail term, a public whipping, or being sent to work on one of the king's plantations in the New World for seven years.

William later recalled that he prayed something to the effect: **“O God, if you get me out of this, I will never lie again. I’ll go to church three times every Sunday, and I will never steal another thing. Just get me out of this. I don’t want to go to the West Indies.”**

The blacksmith returned with the other apprentice, and the whole story came out. William apologized profusely. He begged for forgiveness. Mr. Nichols had mercy on him and did not turn him over to the magistrate. William in turn followed through on his promise to attend church three times on Sunday. As a result of that commitment he ultimately came to faith in Jesus. He also determined after this to have the highest standard of personal honesty that he could. He learned to reject deceit and to trust God in difficult situations.

The best motivation for avoiding deceit is an inner conviction that God is sovereign and that He will be with us in situations of temptation. Consider these promises which He has given us. (1 CORINTHIANS 10:13) 1 Corinthians 10:13: **“No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.”**

Philippians 4:6-7 (PHILIPPIANS 4:6): **“...do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be**

made known to God. (PHILIPPIANS 4:7) And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Romans 8:28 (ROMANS 8:28): **“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”** The question and the challenge to all of us is: In the face of the challenges and temptations of life, will we trust God, or will we rely upon our own deceitful devices?