

GENESIS 12:9 - 13:4

Introduction

Someone once asked a Christian how he was doing. He replied, "Not too badly under the circumstances." The questioner then asked, "What are you doing *under* the circumstances? You're supposed to be on top of them!"

How are *you* doing in the circumstances of your life? Are you on top of them as you are supposed to be? Or are you struggling to remain faithful under them?

It might encourage you to take a look at Abraham, the man in the Bible most noted for his faith. He was struggling to remain faithful under certain difficult circumstances:

- ^ His wife, Sarai, was barren and they were without child.
- %o His father, Terah, had recently died.
- ^ The land he had journeyed to, the Promised Land, was inhabited by Canaanites - the idolatrous enemies of his God.
- %o Abraham's arrival in the land coincided with a severe famine.

Struggling under these circumstances, Abraham found it difficult to remain faithful. The challenge of these circumstances seemed too great for his faith and, so, he chose to change his circumstances. The result was a disastrous excursion into Egypt during which he compromised his testimony, his marriage, and his integrity.

As with Abraham, difficult circumstances are often an arena in which *your* faith is being tried. The challenge of your circumstances can seem great. In those times you may be tempted to choose to change your circumstances. The result is an Egypt of compromise affecting your testimony, your marriage, and your integrity.

Abraham would learn that all of the circumstances of his life were sovereign circumstances. The God who had called Him was controlling the circumstances of Abraham's life. He need not struggle under them, nor seek to change them.

All of *your* circumstances are sovereign circumstances! Having called you for eternity, your heavenly Father controls the earthly circumstances of *your* life. You need not struggle under them, nor seek to change them. Often your victory over difficult circumstances comes precisely at the point at which you realize this important truth.

Your faith will often be tried in sovereign circumstances. When it is, remember two things from this episode in Abraham's life:

- #1 You Can Remain Faithful When Your Faith Is Tried In Sovereign Circumstances
- #2 God Remains Faithful When Your Faith

Is Tried In Sovereign Circumstances

#1 You Can Remain Faithful When Your Faith Is Tried In Sovereign Circumstances

I don't want to leave you with the impression that you can never, ever change your circumstances. That is both untrue and a tremendous burden to bear. What I am talking about today are those circumstances in your life that you know to be God's sovereign circumstances for you but that you would rather see changed on account of the difficulty of remaining under them.

How do you know when your circumstances are a trial to remain faithful in? Go back to God's last instructions to you. If Abraham had done that, here's what he would have discovered:

Genesis 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 12:7 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.

God's last instructions to him were to go to the land that He had promised him. The difficult circumstances he faced in the land were by themselves not a sufficient

reason for Abraham to move in a new direction. Going down into Egypt to avoid the famine was not a part of God's leading. It was a natural choice on Abraham's part in order to get out from under the difficult circumstances he found himself in.

What were God's last instructions to *you*? It's important that you remember them! You may soon find that the land that seemed so promising has a famine in it. Difficult circumstances are not a sufficient reason in themselves for you to move in a new direction. Whether you remain faithful in difficult circumstances or take a disastrous excursion into Egypt can depend upon your confidence in God's last instructions to you.

Genesis 12:9 So Abram journeyed, going on still toward the South.

As we have seen, Abraham was already enduring several intense circumstances:

^ His wife was barren

% His father had recently died

^ There were Canaanites occupying the land God was giving him

Yet for all these trials, he is described as "journey[ing], *going on still...*" He was God's pilgrim - a wandering stranger - but willing to "go on still" despite the challenging circumstances he found himself in.

Genesis 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 barren wife...A death in the family...Surrounded by godless idolators. Abraham was holding up in all these troubles. "Now there was a famine in the land..." "Now" - while Abraham was already being tried, there came another trial. It is a word of precise timing - of God's precise timing. In God's dealings with Abraham, "now" was the ideal time to test him with the famine.

Abraham would stumble in this trial; his faith would fail. There is no mention of his seeking the Lord on the decision to sojourn in Egypt.. There is no mention of a tent or of an altar the whole time he is in Egypt - two objects that are symbols of Abraham's walk of faith. Abraham was acting on his own - choosing to change his circumstances without God's clear leading to do so.

The Psalms had not been written yet or Abraham might have turned to Psalms 37 for comfort and encouragement. Listen to these excerpts with his situation in mind:

v Psalms 37:3 Trust in the LORD, and do good; Dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness.

v Psalms 37:16 A little that a righteous man has *is* better than the riches of many wicked.

v Psalms 37:19 They shall not be ashamed in the evil time, And in the days of famine they shall be satisfied.

Abraham exercised his own judgment and left the sovereign circumstances of Canaan for what seemed to be better circumstances in Egypt.

Genesis 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.

Genesis 12:12 "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.

Genesis 12:13 "Please say you *are* my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you."

The custom in those times was to negotiate a dowry with the father or brother of the woman you wished to take as a wife. If the Egyptians saw that Abraham was Sarah's husband, he reasoned they might murder him. As her brother they would perhaps approach him with hospitality rather than homicide! He may have supposed that he could drag out the dowry negotiations until the famine in Canaan was ended, thereby protecting both he and Sarah.

Genesis 12:14 So it was, when Abram came into Egypt, that the Egyptians saw the woman, that she *was* very beautiful.

Genesis 12:15 The princes of Pharaoh also saw her and commended her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken to Pharaoh's house.

Genesis 12:16 He treated Abram well for her sake. He had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys, and camels.

Abraham didn't take into account that Sarah might catch the eye of the Pharaoh himself. There would be no lengthy negotiations prior to Pharaoh's taking her; he had the power to take her and the prosperity to compensate her brother afterwards.

Before moving on in the narrative, we have to say a few words about marriage! While this is not a marriage study, there are a few insights we can glean:

^ Abraham got rich at the expense of his wife.

%o Abraham put his wife in a place of jeopardy.

^ Abraham's lack of spiritual leadership created a spiritual crisis for his wife - Would she lie to submit to him?

%o Abraham's love for Sarah didn't represent God's love.

Genesis 12:17 But the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.

Genesis 12:18 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?"

Genesis 12:19 "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."

Genesis 12:20 So Pharaoh commanded *his* men concerning him; and they sent him away, with his wife and all that he had.

The unbelieving Pharaoh acts better than the believing pilgrim! Regardless of their respective works, Abraham is saved by grace through faith and Pharaoh is not. People often compare their works of righteousness with those of Christians and come out looking better. Salvation, though, is not a matter of comparison; it is a matter of conversion. Your salvation is not a matter of works of righteousness; it is a matter of grace.

The challenge of his circumstances seemed too great for Abraham's faith and, so, he chose to change his circumstances rather than remain faithful to the Lord's last instructions to him. The result was a disastrous excursion into Egypt during which he compromised his testimony, his marriage, and his integrity.

The challenge of *your* circumstances is often great. How can you tell if you are contemplating a disastrous excursion into Egypt? How can you tell if you are in Egypt right now? Ask yourself the following six questions:

1 - If I choose to change my current circumstances, will I be acting on instructions from God's Word?

Pastor and author Sinclair Ferguson makes the following observation:

"God's guidance...[is accomplished by] His sovereign controlling of the circumstances of our lives, with the word of God as our rule."¹

God was controlling the circumstances of Abraham's life; they were sovereign circumstances. If he had applied the word of God as his rule, he would have waited in Canaan.

God is controlling the circumstances of *your* life; they are sovereign circumstances. The word of God is your rule to discern your circumstances.

2 - If I choose to change my current circumstances, will I be able to remain in worship?

3 - If I choose to change my current circumstances, will I be afraid of what men might do to me?

4 - If I choose to change my current circumstances, is it because I am thinking more of myself than others?

5 - If I choose to change my current circumstances, will I be compromising with sin?

6 - If I choose to change my current circumstances, will I be able to maintain my testimony?

You should not be under your circumstances. Your circumstances should be under your careful scrutiny. The decisions you make in difficult circumstances, as well as all of your decisions, should be more a matter of *thinking* than of *feeling*.

It is all too possible for you to choose to change sovereign circumstances. There is always an Egypt. When you do find yourself in Egypt, take heart: Though you have stumbled, God remains faithful!

#2 God Remains Faithful When Your Faith Is Tried In Sovereign Circumstances

¹Ferguson, Sinclair. Discovering God's Will, p. 34.

God intervened on behalf of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham failed; God remained faithful.

Genesis 13:1 Then Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the South.

Genesis 13:2 Abram *was* very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold.

Abraham avoided the famine and came out of Egypt far wealthier than before. Excursions into Egypt can seem profitable but they are costly!

^ They can seem profitable in that they alleviate the struggle of your circumstances for a time and cause you to prosper.

% They are costly: The price can be your testimony, your marriage, your integrity.

Genesis 13:3 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,

Genesis 13:4 to the place of the altar which he had made there at first. And there Abram called on the name of the LORD.

Abraham returned to the place where God had last instructed him. The tent and the altar are the two great symbols of his life. The tent is the symbol of his attitude toward the world he was journeying through; the altar is the symbol of his attitude toward the world he was journeying towards.

God brought Abraham to an understanding of His faithfulness. You could describe this episode in Abraham's life by quoting 2 Timothy 2:3

"If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself."

When you fail in the trial of your faith, God remains faithful and can overrule your circumstances for your good and for His glory. You can and you should remain faithful when you are tried by sovereign circumstances. You should not knowingly choose Egypt, thereby tempting God's faithfulness to overrule your disobedience. But the truth is that you and I sometimes *do* choose to change our circumstances without God's leading. Recovering from these disastrous decisions is helped by the certain knowledge that God remains faithful!

Conclusion

Circumstances alone are a dangerous guide - *but you are never alone in your circumstances!*

Today you find yourself in a variety of circumstances. You are at one of two places. You are either at Bethel or in Egypt. Either remain at or return to your altar at Bethel - to the place where God last instructed you. Worship Him there; wait upon Him there.