

**July 26, 2020**  
**When It All Goes Sideways**  
**Genesis 12:9-20**

My friend, Dave, and I went camping in Manning Park, east of Vancouver. Being young, adventurous, and fancying ourselves decent climbers, we chose not to return from Thunder Lake along the trail; we would climb the cliff and come back along the ridge. So we began climbing. The rock was poor – it crumbled away beneath our fingers and toes. We got about halfway to the ridge and, with the rock being so brittle, we could go no higher. We had to go back the way we'd come. Easier said than done! Have you ever tried descending a rocky ridge that crumbles beneath you??? It was a harrowing, painful experience.

God commands Abraham to go on a journey, leaving his family (an unheard-of thing in that culture) and following Him, ending up in Canaan, 800 kms south (Lethbridge to Kamloops). *"Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you."*

This was on foot, of course, with livestock, so it probably took at 4-8 weeks. At Shechem, the centre of Canaan, Abraham built an altar. The Lord appeared to him and said, *"I will give this land to your offspring"* (12:7). Perfect. Journey over. Stop.

But Abraham doesn't stop. He goes about 40 kms further south to Bethel, pitches his tents and builds another altar. OK. He's checking out his new digs. This is OK. Abraham is still in Canaan, the Promised Land. He can put on the brakes and settle down. Stop.

But then, Abraham sets out and continues toward the Negev – the desert region further south (12:9) ... The land around Shechem and Bethel is well-watered, good grazing land – the perfect home for a man like Abraham with his flocks of sheep and goats. Further south, the Negev, is desert – wilderness – an inhospitable wasteland fit for neither man nor beast.

***Why would Abraham go into the wilderness?***

Perhaps he was afraid. People already lived in Canaan: towns like Shechem, Bethel, and Ai already existed (12:6). Maybe Abraham was worried that they would attack him or steal his livestock? However, before he had even left Haran, God had promised his blessing and protection, *"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you ... and you will be a blessing ... All peoples on earth will be blessed through you"* (12:2-3). Based on that promise, Abraham had travelled 800 kms.

At Shechem, God had said to him, clearly, *"I will give this land to your offspring"* (12:7). That's about as clear an invitation to trust God and settle down as you can get. But Abraham doesn't do that. He drifts into the wilderness. Why? Was he afraid? We really don't know.

Why do WE end up in the wilderness? It's usually not intentional. Sometimes circumstances in life push us into hard places (Covid-19?). Sometimes other people's decision negatively affect us. Sometimes we just make mistakes and take the wrong path (like Dave and I in Manning Park). Sometimes, we feel God leading us in a particular direction, but we lack a bit

of faith, and choose another way. However it happens, we end up in the wilderness.

A "wilderness experience" is a tough time of trial and discomfort. Think of the Israelites escaping Egypt, lost and wandering the wilderness for 40 years, trying to sort out their faith in and obedience to God. Jesus spent 40 days fasting in the wilderness, where he was tempted by the devil. In our wilderness experiences, we may feel lost, confused, tempted, or spiritually or emotionally empty. It can be a time of drought when we feel separated from God. It's not that God has left us – He never left Abraham, the Israelites during the Exodus, Jesus in the desert, or Dave and I – but, stuck on the cliffs of life, we can feel that way.

For whatever reason, Abraham is in the wilderness. And a famine happens. He should return to Canaan, but Abraham drifts further and further from his Promised Land, ending up in Egypt. *"As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are."* (That's a great thing to say to your wife – way to go, Abraham!)

This is where the story gets a bit weird: *"When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."* (That's a bit odd)

Then things get really strange: *"When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that Sarai was a very beautiful woman. And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace"* (implication to be part of his harem). This is a concern. But Abraham says nothing. *"Pharaoh treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, male and female servants, and camels."* So ... Pharaoh takes Abraham's wife into his harem. Abraham says nothing. He's rubbing his hand in delight, getting filthy rich. This is all very disturbing.

Thankfully, someone intervenes. But it's not Abraham! ***"The Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. So Pharaoh summoned Abram. 'What have you done to me?' he said. 'Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, "She is my sister," so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!' Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had."***

The crazy footnote to this story is that Abraham does the exact same thing AGAIN, several years later. Read all about it in Genesis 20. Once is bad. Twice is ... really bad.

Can you imagine the conversations Abraham and Sarah must have had? *"But ... but ...."* A major "marital," I suspect.

Can you imagine what the conversation/prayers with God must have been like? Abraham could have tried to justify himself. Or he could honestly confess his sin.

King David was at least as despicable as Abraham. David lusted after a beautiful woman bathing. He seduced her. He had her husband killed. When David was confronted by and convicted of his sins, David prays an honest, powerful prayer of confession (Psalm 51):

*Have mercy on me, O God, because of your unfailing love.  
Because of your great compassion, blot out the stain of my sins.  
Wash me clean from my guilt. Purify me from my sin.  
For I recognize my rebellion; it haunts me day and night.  
Create in me a clean heart, O God. Renew a right spirit within me.  
Do not banish me from your presence, and don't take your Holy Spirit from me.  
Restore to me the joy of your salvation and make me willing to obey you.*

**SONG: Create in me a clean heart**

Some moments in our lives are highlights. We look back on them with joy, satisfaction, and pride. There is a healthy pride that comes from doing the right thing well. These can happen during our wilderness experiences. It is very possible to go through tough times to do right and to hear God's affirmation, "*Well done, my good and faithful servant*" (Matthew 25:21). In fact, some of our most satisfying victories can come when we're facing the most difficult trials. The fact that we're struggling isn't the problem. How we handle can be.

How about this story? Is this a highlight? Do you think Abraham is proud of his actions?

On the one hand, Abraham is a man of tremendous faith: when he leaves Haran, he steps out boldly to go where no one had gone before.

On the other hand, Abraham is a man with a tremendous lack-of-faith. We may think **doubt** is the opposite of faith. But our doubts, when we approach them honestly and constructively, can encourage us to seek for deeper answers; they can help us grow closer and closer to God. We can grow deeper in our faith as we struggle through difficult questions. For me, for instance, some of the challenges I faced in (way too many) years of public university, motivated me to seek more satisfying, deeper answers to tough questions. Public university never undermined my faith, in fact it helped my faith grow by leaps and bounds.

I'm convinced that **fear** is actually the opposite of faith. **Fear** is what happens when we look at challenges and panic. We don't really trust God, so we can only trust in ourselves. We pull back. We withdraw. We retreat. Some of the Christians I know who are afraid of hard questions end up withdrawing from the places they're needed most – like public universities.

**The opposite of Abraham's faith is not doubt, but fear.** Abraham doesn't doubt God exists. He is willing to trust God will lead him in the wilderness, and yet fearful that God will protect him in Canaan and Egypt. He is a paradox. He is human. He is just like each of us.

- Can you identify times in your life you look back on with (legitimate) pride? You handled them well? They bring you joy to recall? They showed genuine trust in God?
- Can you identify times when you were afraid or you doubted? Yet you sought out good friends, good answers, and grew through that experience?
- Can you identify times in your life you look back on with shame? You didn't handle them well? They didn't bring joy? They showed a lack of faith in God?

Welcome to the human race. The good news is God understands. He forgives us. And He can still do incredible things in and through our lives (just ask David).

This is the good news: *"The Lord is compassionate and merciful, slow to get angry and filled with unfailing love. He will not constantly accuse us, nor remain angry forever. He does not punish us for all our sins; he does not deal harshly with us, as we deserve. For his unfailing love toward those who fear him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth. He has removed our sins as far from us as the east is from the west."* (Psalm 103:8-12).

### ***Building a better house***

Life is a journey. Sometimes there are mountain tops. Other times there are deep valleys. Sometimes there are wilderness experiences. Sometimes we find ourselves stuck on a cliff above Thunder Lake, with the rock crumbling away beneath our feet.

Abraham is stuck in Egypt. What is his option? He's going to have to admit his mistake – the Bible calls this confessing your sin – and make his way home to Canaan. It takes humility to admit you blew it. Narcissistic people can't do that – it's always someone else's fault. Really strong people can admit their mistakes and turn the caravan around.

This is what Abraham ultimately does. He traces his steps back – this is called repentance – back into Canaan, the Promised Land, to Bethel where he had built an altar (13:1-4).

Are we stuck somewhere? We can face dark valleys, wilderness experiences, and crumbling cliffs with fear – or with faith. None of those options changes the reality of where we are – Abraham is still dealing with a famine, we are still dealing with Covid-19, family problems, employment/unemployment issues, health problems ... We can treat the valleys and wilderness experiences with fear – or with faith. They can break us. Or they can make us.

C.S. Lewis writes, *"Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of – throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself."* (C.S. Lewis)

Perhaps the knocks, bangs, and changes we're going through can help us grow in our faith? Maybe God is building our lives into something deeper, bigger, and more beautiful.

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