

"Life can be difficult" ... (wrote Amy Carmichael, missionary to India.)

"Sometimes the enemy comes in like a flood. ... But then is the time to prove our faith... **and**..." (now get this)... "**live our songs.**"

... ..

"When sorrows like sea billows roll; **whatever my lot,** Thou hast taught me to say, 'It is well, it is well with my soul...'"

Earlier this morning... you and I sang these powerful words: "Your Name is a light that shadows cannot deny... Jesus... Jesus... You make the darkness tremble... You silence fear..."

... ..

"Life can be difficult. Sometimes the enemy comes in like a flood. ... But **then** is the time to **prove our faith**... and... **live our songs.**"

... ..

A faith that can't be tested... can't be trusted.

Peter compared the Christian's trials... to the testing of gold in the furnace (1 Peter 1:7)... and over in the Old Testament... Job... (a man who knew something about trials)... used the same image:

Job 23:10 (ESV)

But he knows the way that I take; when he has tried me, I shall come out as gold.

God's purpose in allowing trials... is not only to **verify** our faith... but also to **purify** it... and remove the dross. ... Of course **God** knows what kind of faith we have - but **we** don't know... and the only way to advance in the

"school of faith"... is to take examinations. ... Troubles test our dedication to God... and too often they expose that the dedication we sometimes boast about... is actually weak (at its best.) ... *"When sorrows like sea billows roll; **whatever** my lot, Thou hast taught me to say, 'It is well, it is well with my soul..."* ... - Really...?

This morning... as we continue to study the Life of Abraham... we will watch Abraham... as he progressed in the "school of faith." Over the course of the next few weeks... we will see him face three special tests: #1) he will be tested with **circumstances**... #2) he will be tested with **people**... and #3) he will be tested with **possessions**... The first two examinations we will begin to see this morning. ... But isn't this exactly what God will test you and I with...? Our examinations involve **circumstances** we find ourselves in... as well as **people** we are dealing with... and how we handle the **possessions** that He entrusts to us.

You might be taking one of these tests right now. ... But here is the good news. Your test... is an open-book exam! ... You can look and find answers... in our Bible passage this morning.

Last week... as we opened Genesis chapter twelve... we saw how Abraham travelled to an unknown land... which was a **giant** step of faith. We have to be very impressed with the faith that Abraham displayed. ... And once he arrived... he built alters and worshipped in plain sight of the Canaanites. He even **preached** to these barbaric... mean... and cruel people. God then spoke to Abraham and basically said... *"Abraham... you have indeed arrived. This is the land that I told you I would show you. And*

*now that you have arrived in it... I will **now** tell you why I brought you here. Abraham... I am giving it to your descendants. This is your family's land."*

Oakie dokie... then... Abraham and Sarah probably expected to just settle down and enjoy their new home. ... (Wouldn't you...?)

Everything seemed to be going well in this new land for Abram until another one of life's unexpected obstacles interfered. ... There were two things in Canaan that Abram surely did not expect to find there — the Canaanites and a famine (which we find today.) ... Both were there to test him. Last week we saw how Abraham passed his first test.

The path of following God's will... is always littered with **obstacles** that the Lord has allowed... so that we will learn to trust Him... to remove those obstacles... or to help us overcome them. ... Now a famine was in the land of Canaan... that the Lord had allowed. ... What should Abram do now? Can God take care of him now?

The second half of Genesis 12 gives us a different picture of Abraham than the first half. This second half will show Abraham in defeat ... whereas the first half of Genesis 12... showed Abraham in victory. ... This morning... the second half will be a record of disobedience. ... The first half was a record of obedience.

One of the enemies to the life of faith is pride. ... When you win a victory... you may feel overconfident and start telling yourself that you can defeat any enemy at any time. ... You start depending on your past experience and your growing knowledge of the Word... instead of depending wholly on the Lord.

God did not want Abraham to become proud and self-confident... so He put him and his faith into the furnace of testing.

After you have won a great victory of faith... expect the enemy to attack you... or the Lord to test you... or both. ... *This is the only way you can grow in your faith.* ... God uses the tough circumstances of life to build the muscles of your faith... and keep you from trusting something other than His Word. ... Faith cannot be developed and made stronger on a peaches and cream diet. You do not build muscles in the physical body by weight lifting marshmallows. In the exact same way... faith grows and becomes strong through strenuous trials. ... Without difficult times... our faith will be flabby and weak.

Don't try to run away from the problem. It won't work.

Genesis 12:10

Famine was always a possibility for those who lived in the part of Canaan where Abraham was. ... But certainly this is not what we would expect after such a stellar display of faith by Abraham. ... We would *expect* some tangible rewards... or at least a pleasant relief (some breathing room... perhaps.)

After believing in Christ and exercising your newfound faith... maybe you expected nothing but blue skies from then on. ... But that didn't happen... did it...? (You see)... this is not God's way with us... or with Abraham... (the great "Father of our Faith")... and it was not the case for **anyone** we read about in God's word... or **any** follower of Christ today... who wants to grow in faith. ... We learn in today's passage... and many other passages

of Scripture... that faith is regularly followed by famine... even severe trial.
That is God's way.

Faith is always tested. The tests may not be as immediate as Abram's... but they always come.... Experience and God's Word taught James... (the Lord's brother)... to advise...

James 1:2-4 (ESV)

² *Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds,*

³ *for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness.*

⁴ *And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*

To face troubles... while we are clearly in the will of God... causes the best of us to wonder... if we really are in the will of God. ... We have a tendency to judge everything on the basis of outward success. ... So if troubles come... when we think we are in the will of God... we immediately question our being in the will of God.

But (LISTEN!)... Success is not determined by outward circumstances. ... It is determined by the Word of God. ... It is **not** famines... but God's Word that determines the will of God. ... Abraham had gone to Canaan as a result of God's Word. ... The famine did **not change** that fact.

We need to know the Word of God well... and to cling to His clear promises to us in it... so we will not leave the will of God... because some trouble comes to us.

God had promised to bless Abraham (Genesis 12:2). ... But the famine did not look like a blessing. It looked like a curse. ... So the famine challenged the promises of God in Abraham's life. ... However (Be assured of this!)

Troubles do *not negate* Divine promises. ... Promises for blessings are often best fulfilled through trials. ... Consider (once again) that Peter described the trials of our faith as "*being much more precious than of gold*" (1 Peter 1:7). That does not sound like a curse but like a great blessing. On the surface... trials may seem to mock promised blessings. ... But trials are often the only way some of the greatest blessings can come to man.

One of the ways in which God is glorified is in the display of his power. The greater the power displayed by God... the more glory there is for God. ... So the more severe the situation for His people... the better the opportunity for Him to show His great power in delivering His people.

Those who complain about God making us suffer so that He might be glorified need to remember that God in Christ suffered greatly on Calvary... that we might be glorified as the children of God. ... So our suffering famines or other trials for God to be glorified is not an unfair situation.

Here faithful Abram... who had left all... to follow the plain and simple Word of God... who had been outstanding... in his 800-mile trek to the promised land... and in his tour of inspection... got whacked! ... Really wacked! ... He was literally starved out of the land.

He was facing the possibility of starvation... of losing great herds of livestock... and perhaps a number of his laborers. ... We can imagine the pressure upon Abram. ... Some of the laborers would have put pressure upon him to move the herds to some nearby country... where fertile land was available. And most of the laborers... before they would starve or allow their families to starve... would have quit Abram's employment and moved

to a nearby land... where food was available. ... If this had happened... who would have tended his herds and looked after his property?

Abram was facing a crisis... a severe crisis. ... God had called him to *the promised land*... meeting his every need both along the way... and within the land. ... God had even met him face to face to assure Abram of His great promises. ... Abram knew that he was to inherit the promised land... and all enemies who stood in the way of his inheritance... were to be defeated and removed by God Himself. ... But what about now... between now and then?

This terrible crisis had arisen. Should Abram stay in the promised land and trust God to meet his need... or should he leave the promised land for a more fertile country where food was plentiful?... Should he stay where God had called him... or move to a place where he felt his needs could be met?

True... the place would be out of the promised land... (back into the world.) Abram would be turning away from God's promise... seeking once again the provisions and supplies of the world. ... But it all seemed so reasonable and necessary... and he could make it a temporary journey... just long enough to make sure his herds and laborers were saved. ... When the famine was over... he could return to the promised land... return to the promise of God.

Such thoughts as these would consume any believer's mind facing such a crisis as starvation. ...It is often some great trial or temptation that strengthens or weakens a person's faith. ... A person either stands against the trial... thereby strengthening his faith... or he caves in to the trial... thereby weakening his faith.

Abram did the natural thing... and herein the problem lies. ... There is no mention that he sought God's will in the matter. ... The famine had created the fear of starvation... and Abram then instinctively moved to calm his fear... without reference to God's will. ... Abram's going to Egypt was not so much an intentional sin... as it was a reflexive turn to his own devices. He did not **deny** God. ... He simply **forgot** Him. ... He forgot how **great** God is.

How like Abram we are! ... Trials come... and we automatically go into survival mode. ... We scheme... we predict things that we think will happen... we run through the "what ifs"... we shore up our position... we pile sandbags. ... And God? ... *"Oh yeah! Come with me... God. Oh! And... God(?)... would you bless my decisions here...?"* *"Follow me... here God... as I work things out..."* We forget how great God is. That we need to join Him... not ask Him to join us!

There is no divine command... or divine initiative telling Abram to leave the promised land. ... Furthermore... Abram reacted in a way that demonstrated **fear** rather than **faith**.

Instead of remaining in the land and trusting the Lord to help him... Abraham went "*down to Egypt*" (Gen. 12:10). ... In the Bible... Egypt is a symbol... of the world system and its bondage... while the land of Israel is a picture of the inheritance of blessing God has for you. Several Bible passages make this very clear (Deut. 11:10-12... Numbers 11 and 14... Isaiah 30:1-2... 31:1... and Jeremiah 42:13) ... And also... all through the Scripture... God's Word depicts this. ... When people went to **Jerusalem**... they went **up** ... But when they went to **Egypt**... they went

down. ... Spiritually speaking, "going down to Egypt" means doubting God's promises and running to the world for help.

When circumstances become difficult and you are in the furnace of testing... *remain where God has put you until He tells you to move.* ... Faith moves in the direction of peace and hope... but unbelief moves in the direction of restlessness and fear. (Look at this verse found in Isaiah.)

Isaiah 28:16 (ESV)

therefore thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: 'Whoever believes will not be in haste.'

Isn't that a great verse...? Isaiah is saying that a belief in Christ will slow us down. ... Satan always wants us to rush into our decisions. But God wants us to wait on Him.

In times of testing... the important question is not, "*How* can I get out of this?" but, "*What* can I get out of this?" ... God is at work to build your faith. ... And God alone is in control of circumstances. ... Stop and consider this:

... ..

"The will of God will never lead you where the grace of God cannot keep you."

... ..

Abraham failed the test of circumstances... and turned from the will of God. ... But do you know what...? ... Many people try to excuse Abraham... (and themselves)... for such failures.

There are two main excuses advanced for Abraham's failure in the famine... and amazingly... they are the same... for failures of believers today... in similar circumstances. But these excuses are all without validity.

- ***The situation ethics excuse.*** A favorite excuse for Abraham's sin and for our own is circumstances. Letting circumstances be our guide rather than the Word of God... is what situation ethics is all about. Situation ethics... is the judging of conduct by circumstances... instead of by principles. ... Abraham saw Egypt as a place which would provide food for his group. ... Egypt was at that time a flourishing nation... and the fertile valley of the Nile supported a considerable population.

While circumstances are not to be ignored when determining the will of God... the Word of God is the final authority on deciding the will of God. ... Abraham failed to let the Word of God determine his actions.

- ***The self-preservation excuse.*** Another very popular guide in our conduct... is self-preservation. This would be prominent in Abraham's going to Egypt. If he stayed in Canaan... he risked certain death... but in Egypt... his clan could survive. ... Self-preservation is very important in life... but it is not to replace the Word of God... as the guide for our life. ... If Jesus Christ based His actions on self-preservation... there would have been no Calvary and... therefore... no salvation for sinners.

Abraham was safer in Canaan in the midst of the worst famines than in Egypt in the midst of plenty. (LISTEN!) You are safer in a famine

(*in His will*)... than in a palace (*out of His will.*) ... And as we will note shortly... when he got to Egypt... he ran into another self-preservation peril that caused another failure. It caused him to lie about Sarah. Self-preservation must not have priority over the Word of God in being our guide. ... When self-preservation is our guide... our faith and our whole character diminishes.

Genesis 12:11-13

When you leave the place of God's will and go some other place... you are inviting trouble. ... Any place outside the will of God will encourage sin. What we see in Abraham is... the sin of leaving Canaan lead to more sin... And here is a general truth that we see here... sin begets more sin. (One sin results in other sins.)

Genesis 20:13 reveals that Sarai actually **was** Abram's half-sister. They had the same father... but different mothers. So Abram proposed a "half-truth" be told. But half-truths... are whole lies! ... Even if she was Abraham's whole sister... she was still primarily his wife... and it was still a lie to conceal the real situation. ... If what you are doing requires deceit... you are doing the wrong thing. ... "Faith is living without scheming." ... When you stop trusting God's Word... you start leaning on man's wisdom... and this leads to trouble. ... And when you find yourself scheming in order to escape problems with people... beware! ... Worse trouble is coming!

When Abraham came to Egypt... he suddenly began to fear the place. Abraham is no longer trusting God for protection. ... Abraham trusted God for protection from the evil Canaanites... but when he left the will of God

and got out of the place where he was supposed to be... he no longer had much faith in God.

When you are in the place of God's choosing... you don't ever need to be afraid... because faith and fear cannot dwell in the same heart...

Isaiah 12:2 (ESV)

“Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has become my salvation.”

Mark 4:40 (ESV)

He said to them, “Why are you so afraid? Have you still no faith?”

God had repeatedly said "I will" to Abraham... but now Abraham was saying "They will". He took his eyes off the Lord and started looking at people.

The lack of faith by a lot of people has more to do with their disobedience than anything else. Some pass off their lack of faith as an intellectual problem (not enough evidence, etc.)... but much lack of faith... is generally a result of a lack of obedience.

Egypt looked like such a good place to go when the famine came. ... But now once he gets near Egypt... he suddenly sees Egypt in a different light. Instead of being a life-**giving** place it appears to be a life-**taking** place.

Sin looks so good from a distance... but once you get close to it... it does not look so nice. ... He had been so strong in his faith... and now he is unfaithful and overcome by fear.

There is a tendency to become too secure and overconfident in the areas where we are strong... and that is when Satan makes his move. ... Moses was a meek man... but fell through his anger. ... Solomon's folly destroyed his wisdom.... Elijah was known for his boldness... courage... and faith... yet... he weakens in fear and ran for his life. ... Peter was very bold... but stumbled in cowardice. ... Abram (the Father of our Faith) worries, hurries, scurries, and deceives.

Poor Abram! He had said to Sarai, "*Now look here, Sarai. You carry your years well. You are so good-looking I fear for both of us in Egypt. The fact that we're married will make no difference. Wives can soon be made widows where we're going...*"

Sarai's beauty has perplexed many people... because she was 65 years old when they went down into Egypt. ... But two things need to be remembered. She may have been 65... but she lived to be about 127. In other words... in the eyes of men at the time... she would probably be like a modern woman of about 35. ... Secondly... if she and Abram had come from a noble family... as the Bible suggests... she would have been very well groomed and very regal in her person. One would be surprised if the Pharaoh did not take an interest.

So... Abram acted selfishly... thinking only of himself. He thought only of himself - not Sarah. ... In order to save his own head... Abram was willing for Sarah... to be sexually abused... to commit adultery... to be dishonored... to be endangered if she displeased Pharaoh. ... Abram felt he had to lie to save his skin... just like we often feel we have to lie to save

face (our honor, image, reputation, standing). ... And what must Sarai had to have been thinking...? How defiling!!!

Genesis 12:14-16

That sudden accession of wealth might have delighted Lot. "*I say, Uncle Abram, here comes another flock of sheep. And, wow! You should see the herd of milk-white cattle. And come and look at these gorgeous women slaves!*"

But with each such exclamation poor Abram would simply groan afresh. He had lost Sarai... he had denied the relationship... he had played the fool. He had lost Sarai. Riches acquired at such a price bore a very high price tag indeed.

(You know)... there are many people in the church today... who are willing to get rich on such terms — even at the price of denying the Lord... at the price of spiritual bankruptcy and ruin. ... But such a gain - is a real loss. Wealth acquired on such terms is tainted at its source.

A casual observer of this episode might conclude, "*What happened to Abraham wasn't all bad. Pharaoh gave Abraham a lot of wealth. Sarah was given her own maid – Hagar. ... God forgave Abraham's sin... we are about to see that Abram got to keep all these riches... and he started over again. So, what's the big problem?*"

The "big problem" is that *everything Abraham received in Egypt later caused trouble*. Because of their great wealth... Abraham and Lot could not live together and had to separate (we will see next week in 13:5-6).

Hagar... the Egyptian maidservant, brought division and sorrow into the

home (we will see when we come to Gen. 16). Having had a taste of Egypt (the world), Lot started measuring everything by what he saw there... and this led to his downfall and the ruin of his family. There are no benefits from disobedience.

But most immediate... must have been the personal turmoil Abram was going through. ... Abram willingly accepted the gifts from Pharaoh... gifts that were given because Pharaoh was pleased with Sarah. ... Abram was deceiving Pharaoh by lying and stealing from him. ... Abram had slipped into terrible sin.

Abram was in a mess that seemed impossible to escape. ... From all appearances... he had lost his wife. ... There seemed to be little hope that God would still bless him and fulfill His promises to him. ... They had heaped sin upon sin... and thereby dug a pit so deep that it seemed impossible to escape.

Genesis 12:17-20

God graciously watched over His servant and brought him out of a difficult situation. If Sarah had become one of Pharaoh's wives... what would have happened to the promise of the Redeemer? ... When we don't let God rule in our life... He overrules and accomplishes His purposes... but we pay dearly for our disobedience.

No failure is permanent in "the school of faith." Abraham went back to his tent and altar and the life of a "pilgrim and stranger." ... But do not use Abraham's deliverance as an excuse and encouragement for your sin. ... God does not always deliver His followers from their sins... as He did

Abraham. ... Many times... God allows us to suffer all the evil consequences of our sin. ... Sin extracts a high price. It did for Abram.

If we wonder why Pharaoh did not punish them but rather sent them off with their new riches... it is because Pharaoh was still suffering the effects of the plagues. ... He never again wanted to be on the receiving end of the power behind Abram. ... Significantly... those new riches were no blessing to Abram. The ill-gotten gain caused huge trouble in the following years.

.....

Abram started his path of faith so magnificently... but stumbled in disgrace... because he did not expect the famine... the trial that came after his experience of faith. ... But famines are God's way. Trials are what produce perseverance and maturity... so that we may become complete... not lacking anything.

When testing came... Abram forgot God. ... He did **not disbelieve** in God. He forgot how great God is. ... And forgetting God... he resorted to his own devices... his stealth... and manipulation.

Earlier I suggested that some of you may be facing a test in your own life right now. (If you aren't right now... you soon will be.) ... I also told you that it is an open-book test. ... So... here is the answer for test question number one: When trials come... as they must... do not turn to your own resources but turn to Christ. ... Ask Him what you are to do and then wait on Him - do not act in haste. Remember Who God is. Don't forget Him. He will sustain your faith.

And here is the answer for test question #2... Keep your eyes on God's promises... and remember that your trial does not cancel His promises... nor does it necessarily mean that you are somehow out of His will.

Test question #3's answer: when you find yourself scheming in order to escape problems with people... beware! ... Worse trouble is coming!

And the answer to the final test question is this: God has purposes to fulfill in you and through you... and He will do all that is necessary to make you succeed.

Once in Egypt... Abraham faced a new set of problems. (You see)... if you run away from one test... you will soon face another. That's because... once you enroll in "*the school of faith*"... you are not allowed to "drop out" just because of one failure. ... God has purposes to fulfill in you and through you... and He will do all that is necessary to make you succeed.

Philippians 1:6 (ESV)

And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

These are the answers... may we all pass Magna Cum Laude...

