

## The Journey of Faith- Double Trouble

10 Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. 11 As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. 12 When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. 13 Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."

14 When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman. 15 And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. 16 He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels.

17 But the LORD inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. 18 So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? 19 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!" 20 Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.

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1 Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. 2 This is what the ancients were commended for. 3 By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible... 8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. 9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. (Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-10)

Abraham was a great man, and we can learn lessons from great men. Even from their mistakes. This morning's passage is an amazing one, as it portrays great weaknesses in Abraham's character. In a way, this is very good news for us, in that we see in Abraham's story the transforming power of God in a human life.

It is easy to see the heroes of the Bible as extraordinary people. Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Elijah, John the Baptist, the Apostle Paul. And yet, again and again in the Bible, we are shown that they are imperfect human beings, just as we all are. And yet, by embracing the gracious call of God, their lives are transformed, not instantly, but over time. Often what we look back on in the Bible is a nearly completed product. Our tracing Abraham's story will help us see his growth as a spiritual man.

We do this for our own instruction. We do not do it to make ourselves feel superior. I will admit that once in a very long while, if I am on vacation or with nothing to do, I have watched portions of TV shows like the Jerry Springer Show. It is an admittedly guilty pleasure, but I always feel like I need to take a shower after watching. I am not interested in bettering my own life, rather, I seem to be utterly fascinated by how awful other people can be. And so, instead of being sympathetic and pray for them, I feel smug and superior.

When we read Abraham's story, we read it not only for its historical value, though there is some. We read it not only for its entertainment value, though there is some. We read it not to compare ourselves to the great Abraham, as with some guests on the Jerry Springer Show. We read it that we might see ourselves in the story, and be changed by it. If we do not allow the Spirit of God to use the Word of God to shape our lives, it is of very little use to us.

I want to look at Abraham's story today through the lens of procrastination, as it illustrates some of the destructiveness of procrastination. To procrastinate is to delay or avoid doing what needs to be done. There are many reasons for this, which we do not have time to get into deeply. Fear of failure is one reason. Children often learn to procrastinate in response to overbearing and authoritative parenting styles.

There's more than one flavor of procrastination. People procrastinate for different reasons. Dr. Joseph Ferrari, associate professor of psychology at De Paul University in Chicago identifies three basic types of procrastinators:

- arousal types, or thrill-seekers, who wait to the last minute for the euphoric rush.
- avoiders, who may be avoiding fear of failure or even fear of success, but in either case are very concerned with what others think of them; they would rather have others think they lack effort than ability.
- decisional procrastinators, who cannot make a decision. Not making a decision absolves procrastinators of responsibility for the outcome of events.

Are you a procrastinator? Do you ever delay getting to work on things by paying attention to other distractions? Think the time you spend answering e-mail, and trolling Twitter doesn't have an impact? Think again. A recent study by research firm Basex puts the "cost of unnecessary interruptions" in terms of lost productivity and innovation at a shocking \$650 billion. It is estimated that just the little beep of an incoming email costs the United States \$70 billion a year in lost productivity. Procrastination is a huge problem.

Did you know that forty million people don't file their taxes until the very last week (April 8th to 15th) before the tax filing deadline? When you consider the average tax refund will be around \$2,975, that's \$119 billion in refunds sitting in the Treasury until the very last minute. And by waiting until the last week, it is estimated that the lost earnings on the refund per person is about \$400. By waiting, we are not saving ourselves from dealing with taxes, we're costing ourselves a lot of money!

Did you ever wonder why the tax deadline is April 15th? When the 16th Amendment was ratified by the states in 1913, March 1st was the date specified by Congress. In 1918, Congress pushed it to March 15th. In 1954, the date was pushed even farther back to April 15th. The reasoning was: 1) The IRS has more time to handle the work as returns trickle in, and, 2) they get to hold onto your money just a little bit longer!

Research by Professor Piers Steel from Calgary University indicates that the incidence of chronic procrastination has risen dramatically in recent decades, from one person in 20 to one in four, as new technology has come to dominate our lives. Dr. Ferrari, however, is less convinced that new technology is to blame for time-wasting. 'People have wasted time for centuries,' he said. Still, procrastination is a huge problem.

Lets see how Abraham procrastinates in this text, and what we might learn from it. I think there are five things to learn, if you are keeping score.

## **Not Inactivity**

When Abraham enters the promised land, the text says that there was a famine in the land. This is obvious trouble if you have people to feed. So Abraham took his traveling party and journeyed to Egypt.

We often think of procrastination as a lack of action, and avoidance of activity. But Abraham seems quite decisive here. As soon as they were in the land, as soon as they saw there was a famine, they left for Egypt.

I often joke with my APU students that a student's apartment or dorm room is never cleaner than when there is a paper due or tests to study for.

We all know this behavior, don't we? I have to do my taxes, so I sit down to do them, I gather all the material, I get organized. And then I notice that the dishes are not washed. So, since no one can possibly do taxes with dirty dishes, I do them. After that, I return to my return, and feel hungry. No one should do taxes on an empty stomach, so I get a sandwich. While I eat lunch, I read the paper, or email. And then I update my Facebook status, and find a really interesting article on Portuguese Water Dogs. You know this tune, don't you?

Procrastination is not about inaction, it is about investing in the wrong actions. Or rather, it is about being lax towards important priorities, and being urgent about relatively trivial matters. One can be super busy, and still procrastinate.

## **Expecting a Trouble Free Life**

Why did Abraham go to Egypt? Canaan was the land God was going to give to Abraham and his descendants. Why leave? Though the text does not say, I think Abraham was afraid. He did not know much about God at this point, and he might have been about a 5 on the trusting God scale.

But there is something deeper, perhaps. And that is that Abraham might have expected the spiritual journey he was on, responding to God's call, would be trouble free. After all, he left his father's house, his homeland, his people, most like his job. Didn't God owe him something in return?

Even though one of the few promises Jesus made was that his followers would have trouble in this world, many of us still act surprised when trouble comes.

We don't expect trouble because we have made a deal with God. We think if we are good people, and we do good things, then God will spare us from trouble. I have heard people say, quite seriously, that they got caught in traffic, or had a bad day at work, because they didn't pray that morning. When faced with sickness, many of us wonder what we did to deserve this.

So when we encounter difficulty, we protest by procrastinating. We delay dealing with the trouble, thinking that God somehow owes us a trouble free life.

Listen, friends, trouble is the normal condition of life. It is abnormal when things are easy, calm, predictable. To expect an easy life, to expect always that things will go according to plan, simply does not square with reality.

The irony here is that Abraham exchanged one sort of trouble, the famine, for another sort of trouble, fear for his life. When they went to Egypt, Abraham was afraid for his life, because of the beauty of Sarah. People would see how beautiful she was, and then kill him because of her.

### **Self-Centered, Others Pay the Price**

When we procrastinate, when we avoid work or decisions, we do so out of self-centered concern. And yet, it is other people who suffer for our procrastination.

Because Abraham would not face the troubles in the promised land, he went to Egypt. And there, to save his own skin, he essentially sacrificed his wife, Sarah. Somehow, he got her to agree to tell people she was his sister. It is hard for me to imagine how that conversation went. And it is harder for me to see Sarah going along with this plan.

The text says, "[Pharaoh] treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels." But what a trade! Abraham sacrificed his wife's well being and honor so he would live, and become rich!

For years, as the cartilage in my hips wore away, my ability to stand, and walk, were greatly diminished. But I avoided the doctor, because I was afraid. I was afraid of the pain. The irony was that I was already in pain! And so, I slowly stopped doing things that I loved. I stopped being a soccer

referee. I stopped going on walks with my wife. I stopped volunteering at school. In one shameful moment, when a friend of mine was pleading with me to join him and his daughter at a father-daughter dance, I said quite forcefully in front of my own daughter, Rachel, "I don't dance!" I remember that moment as clear as anything, with deep shame and embarrassment. I was so concerned about my own pain that I hurt my own daughter more than I hurt myself. This is what procrastination can do, it leaves us solely concerned with ourselves, no matter who else is hurt by it.

## **Double Trouble**

Genesis 13:5-7 intrigues me.

5 Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. 6 But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. 7 And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time.

Notice that after running away to Egypt, Abraham came back a wealthy man. So wealthy had he become, that he now had the trouble of quarrels with family and servants. And, notice that last phrase: "The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time." Interesting bit of historical detail, but why mention it?

Old Testament scholars link this verse with the last part of Genesis 12:6, "At that time the Canaanites were in the land." What seems to be the reason? To show that in avoiding dealing with the Canaanites the first time he was in the land, they did not go away. In fact, there was another people group who had come to settle in the land, the land that God had promised to give to Abraham and his descendants.

When we avoid decisions, when we avoid actions, when we avoid conversations, when we avoid going to the doctor, do things usually get better? When things on my desk pile up to the point I can no longer see wood, will that paper just go away someday? When I do not weed my planter box in my back yard, will the weeds simply go away? When I pulled my hip flexor muscle in 2001, did avoiding dealing with it make it disappear? Not really, but I do have two brand new titanium and ceramic hip joints now as a result.

This fact alone ought to scare us and motivate us to do whatever it takes not to procrastinate. Listen, friends, avoiding or putting off addressing a problem will not make the problem disappear. The problem only becomes larger. And you know what, addressing the problem will make you feel much better, and less guilty, and less anxious.

## **Need Other's Help**

One of the more fascinating insights from this passage is this: in order to overcome our tendency to procrastinate, we need help from other people. Notice in the story, who is it that discerns what is really going on with Sarah? Notice who it is that tells Abraham to "go". The first command to "go" in Genesis 12:1 was given by God, but who gives this command to "go"? Surprisingly, it is Pharaoh! Pharaoh is the messenger to Abraham of God's call to return to Canaan!

Why did Abraham need Pharaoh to tell him? Abraham was quite content. He had become very wealthy, though his wife now belonged to Pharaoh. There was no incentive for Abraham to leave Egypt and return to Canaan. But there was incentive for Pharaoh to send Abraham and Sarah away, as his family was suffering because of Sarah. Again we see that Abraham's procrastination, avoiding dealing with the hard issues, caused suffering for someone else, namely Pharaoh and his family, and for Sarah.

This is one of the hardest things to do, to ask for help. Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, it is actually a sign of maturity and strength. When we procrastinate, we may need to ask someone for help, or we may need to just pray for someone to observe and listen and to suggest help.

## **Implications for CPC**

So, what are the implications of procrastination for CPC? In the next year or so, this church and its leadership will need to face some tough issues. Who are we? What has God called us to do? What sort of person do we need to lead us in that calling? After Pastor Thorp left, there was a sense of loss, but also a sense of getting the right person to help in the process. After six months, you have a new pastor on board, and there is a real temptation to think, "Whew, I am glad that waiting is over." You will be tempted to procrastinate, to avoid the hard discussions, because they are hard. And in avoiding those hard discussions, the ones that will suffer are the people in the area that God has called us to share Christ with. And the longer we wait, the harder it will become. Avoiding the hard work, the hard discussions, will not make the difficulties go away. Avoiding them will only

make the troubles get larger. And so, there are people who can help in this process, and I am one of those people whom God has called to help you.

I think we can learn and grow together, and I think we can have some fun together. There will be times of laughter a joy, and times of anger and sorrow. There will be times of absolute confusion, and times of penetrating clarity. There will be times of difficult conversations, and times when we will miraculously pull together and understand the will of God for us. God has called you on this journey. In spite of the apparent difficulties, do not do an Abraham.

## **The Gospel**

Finally, as I prepared for this, I kept asking, where is the good news here? I have to suggestions.

First, God did not judge Abraham for going to Egypt, nor lying about Sarah. In fact, God seems so intent on blessing Abraham, as he promised, that Abraham left Egypt a wealthier man than when he went there. Although I wonder if the increased wealth would have compensated for some of those hard discussions with Sarah. God's blessing is not due to Abraham's obedience nor getting it right. God's blessing is based on God's sovereign decision to bless Abraham, so that Abraham might be a blessing. We will get things wrong in the coming year, I can almost guarantee that. And yet, we are God's people, He has called us and we are His. And God will bless us because that is who He is. There is comfort in that.

Second, Jesus Christ did not procrastinate. Jesus did not avoid becoming a human being, but came at just the right time, according Paul in Galatians 4:4. Jesus did not avoid the hard conversations. And Jesus did not shrink away from that horrible death on the cross. Instead of being selfish, and allowing other people to pay the penalty of his procrastination, he became a servant, and he paid for our procrastination. Paid dearly with his life, on the cross.

And the results of Jesus not procrastinating are evident today, as millions of people across the planet bow to worship and adore him, freed from their sins, given the hope of heaven, and having peace with God.

If we are to stop procrastinating, as individuals and as a church, we will need the help of Jesus, and to rest secure in the blessing of God. If you feel guilty of all the procrastinating you have done, Jesus Christ has taken away your guilt and shame. And by His Spirit, Jesus can give you the strength you need to do what He has called you to do.