

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: It seems that this a classic bit of TV. Sesame Street. 1975. “Little furry Grover.” “*This is near.*” He runs backward till he’s small. “*This is far.*” Runs back, huffing and puffing. “*Near.*” He does that six times till he collapses in exhaustion. “*Near... Far...*”
- B. The Bible has some Near and Far lessons too. Adam and Eve walking with God in the garden. *Near*. Then hiding from God after their sin. *Far*. Or Peter saying, “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*” *Near*. Then “*I don’t know the man!*” *Far*.
- C. We have one of those Near and Far situations in the passage we’re going to look at today from the life of Abram. Turn to Gen. 12. Last week we saw how God promised Abram the richest blessing in the Bible: **vv.1-3...** So Abram, his wife Sarai, and his nephew Lot, along with all their people and belongings headed into Canaan, the land God had promised.
- Their arrival was a kind of vanguard of the holy. Vv.6-7... To the Canaanite pagans, the great tree of Moreh was a kind of talking tree where they thought the gods would speak in the whispering of the leaves. So God actually *appears* to Abram at that spot in a kind of defiance to that idolatry and promised that very land to Abram’s descendants. So there Abram built the first altar to the LORD in the land of Canaan. Then Abram moved on and did it again: **v.8....**
- That’s a *Near* story. In that spiritually alien territory Abram was *near* to the LORD.
- D. Abram was exploring the land God had promised him so **v.9** says “*Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.*” The wilderness. Then **v.10** says, “*Now there was a famine in the land...*” That’s not good! Especially if you’re in the Negev!

What would you do if there was a famine in the land? Terrible harvest. No food. In the land of Canaan where God had promised to bless and prosper you? What would you do? What would you do if you heard that there *wasn't* a famine in Egypt, 200 miles away. Well, I'll tell you what Abram did: **v.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.*" What had the LORD said in **v.1**? "*Go... to the land I will show you... and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.*" But there was a famine. And Egypt had food. **Far.**

I puzzled over why this was a bad idea. I even tracked down Dr. Younger and asked him again, just to be sure. "*It was bad,*" he said. "*They should've stayed in Canaan and God would've met their needs because he'd promised to bless them there.*"

This very same thing happened years later during the life of Abraham's son Isaac and God made explicit why they shouldn't go to Egypt. Listen to **Gen 26:1-3**, "*Now there was a famine in the land—besides the previous famine in Abraham's time... The LORD appeared to Isaac and said, 'Do not go down to Egypt; live in the land where I tell you to live. Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you.'*" Abram also had the promise of God's blessing in Canaan, but not in Egypt.

Maybe you've noticed that God is in a habit of doing this kind of thing. He took the Israelites out of Egypt only to run out of both food and water. Or remember the crowds listening to Jesus who ran out of food. Sometimes you obey God—do what he commands, go where he sends you—and then things get worse. And somewhere inside of us this klaxon warning goes off—*aa-oo-gah! Aa-oo-gah! Abandon ship! Head for the hills.*"

Of course, Abram was going from an empty frying pan into the fire. He thought he might be killed in Egypt unless he did something. Listen to **vv.11-16**... Sarai was Abram's half-sister but **wife trumps sister every time!** Incredibly Abram pulls this very same stunt later, according to Gen. 20. There he tells the Philistine king that he had decided on this scheme as a kind of passport wherever he went. In **Gen 20:12** he says, "*And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her [Sarai], 'This is*

how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."”” Did you get that: *"This is how you can show your love to me"*? That is one over-used line, isn't it ladies?!

So Abram doesn't get killed but Sarai becomes one of Pharaoh's brides-elect, just waiting for her night with the king. Meanwhile, Pharaoh, believing Abram to be her *brother*, standing in for the father of the bride, showers all kinds of gifts on Abram. **FAR!**

I don't know if Abram thought he'd be able to just spirit Sarai out of town before anything really bad happened to her or what, but I know that Abram didn't reckon on God intervening. Vv.17-20... When Pharaoh and his household all got terribly sick he knew something was amiss and somehow he figured out that this curse was connected to his looming wedding. He'd been lied to by a nomad he'd welcomed into his country. He'd innocently fallen for a woman who was already married. Her so-called "brother" had gotten rich at Pharaoh's expense in this scam. Pharaoh and his household had suffered "serious diseases." And it was all Abram's fault. Abram, the guy who had the Lord's promise, *"All peoples will be blessed through you."* Yet even with all this the Pharaoh didn't kill Abram as Abram had feared. Didn't even throw him in prison. Didn't even take back all the wedding gifts. He just evicted him with a well-deserved tongue-lashing.

FAR!

Before, to his credit, we saw Abram's faith in those altars he built in pagan Canaan because he believed the LORD would indeed keep his promise to bless. But faith isn't only defined by the altars we build for the LORD. Faith isn't only defined by our worship, no matter how sincere, or by the way God has spoken to us or how we've spoken with him. **Faith has boundaries.**

I. FAITH NEVER LEAVES THE BORDERS OF GOD'S BLESSING

- A. Just as the Promised Land had borders so God's promises to us have borders too. The borders of God's promises to us are spiritual and moral. For example, **Eph 4** tells us, *"to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and*

to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.” A few verses later the Bible says, “But among you there must not be even a hint of sexual immorality, or of any kind of impurity, or of greed, because these are improper for God’s holy people. Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.”

Outside those borders we’re in unblessed territory. **2 Cor. 6:14-17** says: *“Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said:*

*“I will live with them
and walk among them,
and I will be their God,
and they will be my people.”*

Therefore,

*“Come out from them
and be separate,
says the Lord.
Touch no unclean thing,
and I will receive you.”*

Far and Near.

- B. When we leave the boundaries of the God-blessed life God doesn’t abandon us, but we get stupefied. Just like Abram, and countless others. We become fools. Our moral and spiritual reasoning becomes befuddled. Stupid gets tangled in more stupid. Sin wraps itself in more sin.
- C. Abram left Canaan because he was afraid of the famine. He denied his marriage because he was afraid of the Pharaoh. I suspect he didn’t leave sooner because he had come to like

all those gifts he was getting. But here's a rule of faith: never, ever leave the boundaries of God's blessing—not for security, not for pleasure, not for adventure, not for love.

II. FAITH NEVER LIES, USES PEOPLE OR DEMEANS GOD.

- A. Faith in God requires integrity. **You can't bless people you're using or fooling.** The first rules of faith are love the LORD your God and love your neighbor (not to mention your wife!) as yourself. Abram clearly loved himself—his own life—more than Sarai's. In fact, the only person in this story to protect Sarai was the LORD himself when he afflicted Pharaoh's household in order to bring her release.
- B. Later Abram nobly told a wicked king who was in his debt that he would not take *“even a thread or a strap of a sandal so that you'll never be able to say, ‘I made Abram rich.’”* But here Abram didn't return any of Pharaoh's lavish wedding presents. The next chapter says he *“had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold.”* **The riches of a country where he didn't belong. That is dangerous wealth indeed.** Abram had also received from Pharaoh male and female servants. And one of them was named Hagar, who also eventually got hurt. **Oh, it would have been so much better if Abram had stayed within the borders of God's blessing, if his faith had been strong enough to tell the truth and to treasure people.**
- C. Surely Pharaoh knew that Abram's God was Yahweh, the LORD. But Abram built no altar in Egypt. Abram brought no divine blessings to the people there or to the household of their ruler. Pharaoh had a higher moral standard than Abram did. Pharaoh didn't get so much as a glimpse of the God-blessed life from Abram. Nothing happened to draw him toward the true and living God. In fact, he unwittingly came under the curse of the LORD and suffered from “serious diseases” at God's hand.

Illus.: Several times I've visited with a young Christian who is involved with a nonbeliever. “We love each other,” they say. “Not very well,” I say. “You are a Christian and

God in his Father's love for you will discipline you for your disobedience. And you are dragging this person, whom you say you love, not only into sin but also into God's discipline. I don't think that's very loving."

Our faithless behavior always dishonors the name of the LORD. We can never leave him out of it. People know of our faith and when we leave the borders of the God-blessed life to lie and use people they form a view of our God that dishonors him. **They call Christians hypocrites and want nothing to do with our God.**

Well, what do you think happened next. Abram takes all his people, livestock and treasures and heads back to Canaan, his tail between his legs, still stinging from Pharaoh's tongue-lashing. You kind of expect him to get to the border of Canaan only to find one of God's mighty angels standing there with a sword saying, "*Oh, and I suppose you think you can just come sashaying back here now after that whole fiasco?!*" We wouldn't be surprised to see Abram inflicted with serious disease. He certainly had it coming! But this is what actually happened: **13:1-4... Near.**

Abram hadn't learned his lesson but he was chastened. He did want to return to the LORD. And what is really amazing is that when he came back to Bethel—*House of God*—and built his altar and offered his sacrifices, even after all that sordid, sinful, stupid fiasco in Egypt, God did not drop the sword on him. In fact, God would continue to bless him.

III. FAITH COMES HOME TO FIND THE EXTRAORDINARY MERCY OF GOD

- A.** Abram's faith at that point wasn't anything to write home about but it was enough to bring him back to God, back to the land of God's promised blessings. He was *not* a righteous man, but as **Gen 15:6** says, "*Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.*" **God would give Abram credit for being righteous even with a track record like this because Abraham believed God's promise to bless his life.** That is what God offers you and me, also, through Jesus Christ.

- B. There's no one here who doesn't feel the sting of this story. We've all wandered beyond the borders of God's blessing. We've all made a mess of things, hurting people and dishonoring the LORD. It may be that the only reason we've turned to God is that there's nowhere else to turn. But the God-blessed life still awaits us.
- C. Faith in Jesus is what brings us safely home. Faith that God's sword won't come down on us but that if we come to him *"the blood of Christ will cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God."* [Heb. 9:14] Faith that Jesus meant it when, in his story about the foolish son, he said, *"while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him."* Faith that for Jesus' sake our Father will say, *"Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found."*

You can always come home to the LORD. Thanks to Jesus, you can always return to the God-blessed life.