

Faith and Compromise

Genesis 12:10-20

Naomi Pendle

NOTE: Accompanying slides can be found on the website at:

https://allsaintsweston.churchinsight.com/Articles/739731/2_Faith_and.aspx

First of all, it is so lovely to be back in England when I get back from South Sudan. But also, you are an amazing church. Every time I come back, I think, 'I am so blessed to have you as my family.' So, thank you for being my family. And thank you to those of you who prayed when I was away.

I am going to start with a question.

What is God's call on your life?

Who did he call you to bless?

Who is he leading you to?

Who has he led you to?

Also, what troubles have found you on the way?

Maybe that call came recently. Maybe it came years ago. There was a great testimony by Philippa Nash a few weeks ago, talking about how her teacher prompted her to think about nursing, and her call to nursing came in an instant when she made a decision. Or I know I was called to Sudan about twenty years ago, sitting at the back of the church one evening service, and God laid Sudan on my heart.

I know you all have your stories of calls, but I also know we have trouble. Today is all about the trouble and the compromises we make and the distrust we have and the moments when we try to fix it all ourselves and leave God aside.

So today I am briefly going to remind us about last week's conversation by Robin, his talk on the first part of Genesis 12. Really this is part two, the second part of a two part preach, because the first part last week is the beginning. It was telling us about how Abraham, at this point, was blessed and called. But with that comes the second part of Genesis 12. The reality, and God knows the reality, that even though we can feel so excited by the call, that we can say, I will not be shaken, as we have just sung, troubles come to shake us. But God knew that. And he had a plan and he redeemed Abram.

So that is what we will be talking about. We are looking at the trouble, looking at God's apparent silence in the trouble, which I suspect shook Abram even more. Then we will be looking at Abram's response and the problems with that, the compromises he made, but then also how he returned to the blessing.

Just very briefly to remind you, last week Robin spoke about the first part of Genesis 12. He spoke about Abraham's call, and God said to Abraham, go and I will bless you and make your name great. In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. It was a blessing for him, but it was a blessing for his family and for all the nations of the earth. But to do that he had to go. He had to leave his land and his father's house and the people he knew, the people of the nation he was born into. He had to go. But the blessings were big, and he went. He had faith.

The start of Genesis 12 is that exciting moment. Maybe you have been to New Wine or a big festival like that where you feel so encouraged and overwhelmed by the call and you are ready to go and full of faith, and you do it, and you go.

We really see in that beginning of the passage a pattern. Verses one and two, God speaks and he speaks clearly. 'I will bless you and all the peoples.' God is speaking and Abram went. Then following on from that, he enters Canaan, and as he enters Canaan he has a bit of a panic because he sees there are loads of Canaanites. He is probably thinking, 'God, you told me to come here, but there are loads of people here already.' But God speaks.

Genesis 12:7

“7 'To your offspring I will give this land.'”

And Abram continues to go. He goes on to the Negev. So the first part of Genesis 12 is full of that bold blessing and faith in going. God speaks, Abram goes. God speaks, Abram goes.

But in this second half of Genesis 12, we are hit straight on with troubling times. In the middle of the passage, right in the middle, we meet famine. A severe famine has come to the land. There are troubles, big troubles.

As some of you know, I work at the university, but I work on Sudan and South Sudan. I work on those countries, and particularly at the moment I am working on famine. I work on contemporary famines, famines that are happening now. My specialism is not biblical famines, but I think we have something to learn about what Abraham would have been feeling if we think about famines in the world today.

Now, the first thing to say is that there should not be famines in the world. We have more than enough food, but there still are. These statistics might seem overwhelming to you. **24.9 million people are on the edge of starvation, the edge of famine.** There are technical categories to describe this, but basically it means people are probably eating a meal a day, maybe one meal every two days. And then 0.25 million, (so 250,000 people), are in IPC 5. They are in famine levels of hunger, which means they are probably eating a meal every two to three days, and there will be people dying of hunger.

And that is the case in the world right now. About 2000 people in Gaza are in that situation, 41,000 in Yemen, 73,000 in South Sudan, and 140,000 in Sudan.

This is real hunger. If you have children, you cannot feed them every night. In famine times, you always feed at night. I am privileged to listen to many stories about famine from people who have survived. They always say they feed at night because it is really hard to go to sleep hungry. But in famine levels of hunger, there will be nights when you cannot eat. It will be the second day without food.

Many mothers tell the story of putting the pot on the fire as if they were cooking, knowing they have no food, and putting stones in the pot so the children will be deceived that something is cooking, that maybe they will get something to eat, because the children are complaining and hungry. The mother knows she has nothing, but she will let the pot boil until the children go to sleep, just so they can sleep despite their hunger.

It is a horrible reality, and it continues.

These are pictures from Sudan. Kate Brankin, who we'll hear from later, also works in Sudan. She used to be a member of our church and is still a close friend of our church.

In the Sudans, as everywhere, the famines have been caused by war. There is a war ongoing. They are burning the city I was in last year, Kauda. People are fleeing to the mountains. They already had famine there in 2024. They had famine in 2011, in the 1990s and the 1980s. Sometimes famines are caused by people blockading the city, not allowing food in. Sometimes they are caused by aerial attacks during planting season.

This is planting season in the Sudans in May. Aerial planes will come over as if they are going to bomb. Whether they bomb or not, people have to

hide inside and then they cannot plant. People end up incredibly hungry.

The war in the last few days means people have had to flee from the fertile plain up to the hills. In the Nuba Mountains the hills are the safer place to be during war, but it is really hard to plant anything. It is mountainous, rocky land. They are hungry and will be even hungrier in the year to come.

During famine, people do things they would never normally do. Some of these things are disgusting or uncomfortable, though not necessarily immoral. People will eat things they would never normally eat. In the Greek famine in the 1940s, people survived by going to bins and eating rotting vegetables. Some of the richer, prouder people did not survive because they would not eat the rubbish. Survival involves humbling yourself.

In the Sudans, people often have leather skins from their cattle used as blankets or mats. They rehydrate them during famine and chew them to try to get nutrients. It is disgusting, but maybe there is something left.

People eat animal food. In Darfur at the moment, people have turned to eating animal feed because they are desperate.

Sometimes people break moral boundaries. One old lady from the Nuba Mountains was horrified because her blanket and her food were stolen. She said it felt like the end of all moral boundaries that someone would steal from a very old, fragile lady.

Famine undermines human worth and dignity. Primo Levi's account of starvation during the Holocaust describes the loss of humanity as the body changes.

A recent story in Juba sums it up. Juba is the capital of South Sudan. In many ways it should not be as hungry as other places, but famine is never about the world lacking food. It is about some people not being able to access it.

There is a clinic for malnourished children meant to host thirty to forty children. It currently has seventy, so people are sharing beds, which spreads illness. People often come too late and nothing can be done. The clinic currently has two to three children dying a day. These are all under five.

We met one mother who had come from the Nuba Mountains. She had recently been married and had her first baby. There was happiness and hope. They fled to Juba for safety, but they had no access to food, no networks, and could not feed the child well. They came to the clinic, but it was too late. The child died within hours.

The real horror was that the child had nowhere to be buried. The parents were beside themselves. They were guests in someone else's compound. No one wanted a dead child buried on their land. Public graves cost money. There was nowhere to bury the child. Their struggle for a day was to find a place to give dignity in death to their young child.

Famine is awful and tests the very nature of who we are. It still happens.

For Abram it must have been tough. It was tough then too. The kind of test that would make him question what on earth God was doing. In famine you want to be at home with your people and networks. But God had said to Abram, leave your land and your father's house and your people.

In famine you need your land and your father's house and your people. You need the land you know, because then you know what food you can eat. You know which berries are poisonous, which grasses have nutrients. In the Nuba Mountains they have a root vegetable like a sweet potato. You have to wash it for three days to stop it being poisonous. They eat it only in famine because it is so poisonous, but it is worth it if it is the only food. You wash it for three days, putting it in the pot, taking it out, scrubbing it, putting it back. People who flee there do not know this and some have been poisoned.

Abram was away from his land. He was in Canaan. He would not know which foods to eat. It was dangerous to be away from your land in famine. He was also away from his social networks. People survive by sharing. It is incredible what people share in the hardest times.

In 1998 in South Sudan there was a famine that killed about seventy thousand people. Aid agencies were confused because they knew there was not much food, but they did not understand why people were surviving and then suddenly were not. Mortality fell off a cliff overnight. They realised the only reason people had survived was because everyone was sharing what they had. You share with your family and friends. But Abram was a foreigner in a land far away. He could not be sure of that.

What about us now? We do have food poverty in the UK. About eleven percent of people are in food poverty according to a parliamentary report from last year. That is high. But for many of us here, we know we will eat many times today and through the week. That is not our big fear. But there are things that shake us even if it is not famine. Maybe we do not have enough money, or we have issues with our jobs or mortgages or family or health. Things where we think, 'God, this cannot be what you foresaw. I need to fix it myself. I cannot process that this is part of where you were taking me. I need to find my own solutions.' We have those troubles too.

For Abram, another issue was God's silence. In the first part of Genesis 12, God was speaking. He was sending Abram. He said go, and Abram went. Abram was nervous about the Canaanites. God said, 'I will give you the land.' Abram continued to the Negev. Then there is famine. Then God is silent. In the most troublesome moment, we do not hear God speak. We see silence. That is really hard.

Many of us have experienced that in hard moments God can seem silent and absent.

C. S. Lewis wrote about this after losing his wife:

'When you are happy, if you remember yourself and turn to him with gratitude and praise, you will be welcomed with open arms. But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face and the sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. There are no lights in the window.'

This also comes through in the Bible.

Psalm 10:1

"¹ Why, O Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?"

Some of us hear God very well in trouble. Kate, who goes to Sudan, sometimes is in incredible trouble and God speaks loudly. Sometimes I need trouble to make me listen properly. But that is not always the case. Abram felt silence.

It prompts us to ask, 'Why God? Why did the famine come? Why not tell Abram what to do?' The passage does not give us the answers.

Sometimes we are not listening. We are panicked. We think the trouble is too big. 'How am I going to fix it?' There is no space to hear God. It is like we have headphones in. God might be talking loudly, but we are not listening.

But that is not always the case. Some of you can listen to God even in trouble.

Maybe sometimes God chooses to be silent, present but silent. Sometimes only later do we realise that surely the Lord is in this place, even if I was unaware of it. That comes later in Genesis with Jacob.

Sometimes God is there even when we do not know he is there, even when we forget, even when we do not hear him.

Maybe what matters is not that he speaks, but that he has spoken. Abram had been given a clear path. God had told him what to do. He did not say, only do this if everything is well. God would have known the famine would come. Maybe he did not need to speak. There was already a plan.

But Abram chose a self-directed course. He compromised and went to Egypt. He did not wait for God to speak. Maybe God would have spoken. But he set off to Egypt, a safe place in his mind. Egypt had irrigated flood systems, so it was a place to go in famine. Egypt relied on the Nile. When Canaan did not have food, Egypt might. It was a time of political stability in Egypt. They had had one family in charge for 180 years. Not democratic, but peaceful. They were welcoming strangers and people from Abram's people.

In human eyes it seemed a good place to be. But Abram had not waited for God's call.

If we look back at Genesis 12, we see the rhythm. At the beginning, God speaks, go, and Abram went. God says, keep going, this is the land. Abram goes. Then there is famine. Then the next person we hear speaking is Abram. He takes over as the voice. He speaks, but what he speaks is to allow his wife Sarah to be taken to Pharaoh's house. He says,

Genesis 12:13

“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.’”

He does not stand up and protect his wife. Instead he allows her to be taken to Pharaoh's house. And Sarah went.

This has consequences. It has consequences for his family. But also, that compromise, that distrust, has consequences for his call.

Verse 3 had said that all people on earth would be blessed through him.

But in verse 17:

Genesis 12:17

“¹⁷ But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram’s wife Sarai.”

He was called into a blessing to be a blessing. He feared and tried to fix it himself, and now he is a curse on the nation, a curse on Pharaoh's house. He has brought curse upon them. He has done the opposite of what God hoped he would do.

And we do this. I do this. I make compromises all the time.

Kate is visiting the church today. I did not realise she was coming until a couple of days ago. We both work in Sudan and I must say, Kate always reminds me, whenever I see her, of the compromises I make, because sometimes I have simply had enough of mosquitoes. There are so many mosquitoes in South Sudan. There are also snakes and scorpions, and I have had enough, and nylon bed sheets which are so uncomfortable, and I choose to stay in a nice hotel. Kate never does. She is unflinchingly uncompromising in the places she is willing to stay.

But Kate also works a lot with the church there and reminds me of the incredible things the church does there without compromise. So Kate is briefly going to share an example, I think, of the church being uncompromising in the Sudans, even though they also face famine and starvation.

Kate Brankin

Can I first of all say it is lovely to be back with you. This was my home church for over thirty years until we moved to Hereford four years ago. It is always a blessing when we come back. We normally visit and just come for the nine o'clock, but I persuaded Steve to stay for this one too. And as Naomi said, this was not planned.

She has talked about lots of statistics about the famine, and behind all of the statistics there are real people. I was in the Nuba Mountains last November and we had gone to lead some conferences with the youth and the women. We got there and they said, but what are you doing here now? This is our harvest season. We want to be in the fields harvesting. And we said, your bishop invited us now, that is why we are here.

So, we got around that and they came for their three days in each archdeaconry. But they very much wanted to be harvesting because they needed that food for the rest of the year. Being displaced from their home and having to uproot is difficult for them. The bishop was saying to us, we need to build the people. We do not need buildings. We need to build the people because they will get displaced. A bomb will come and destroy the buildings or fighting will destroy them. So it is all about the people.

Four years ago, I set up a small charity called Keeping Step International, which is the reason I am still able to go to South Sudan. I have been going there for about sixteen years now. And we just sang about, I will build my life upon your love, it is a firm foundation. That is what I try to do.

I take small teams of South Sudanese or Sudanese people to give the people in these difficult places a firm foundation in God. Church is not just about the music being good or doing some good singing. It is about the relationship with Jesus so that when they have famine, when they have to run, they are in a stronger position, and they will look to him and trust him.

Naomi Pendle Pt.2

We know a Pastor Vicar from the Nuba Mountains who was leading his people up the hills, to get out of the valley where the conflict is worse. These are difficult times. They are missing cultivation. They will be at the end of their food supplies. But he will be there to try to keep them faithful when Abram failed.

But when we fail, it is not the end of the story. We know that with Abraham's story it kept going. God redeemed the situation despite his compromises, despite Abram trying to fix it all. God managed to redeem the call.

The last speech we hear in Genesis 12 is Pharaoh at the end saying to Abram, 'go.' Abram left and went back to Canaan. Pharaoh wanted him to go because Abram had brought a curse on his house. He had deceived him, confused him, brought bad things. Pharaoh knew he wanted him out of there.

This was not an easy, nice way to go. Initially, when Abram enters Canaan earlier in Genesis 12, there is a sense of celebration of him being faithful, doing what God wanted. He is led out of Egypt with an armed guard sent by Pharaoh. This is not a going of confidence. This is a going back in disgrace in a way. But God puts him back in Canaan through Pharaoh.

But he does not stop there. He has promised Abram what he will do, and he remains faithful even when Abram was not. He promises again that he will have as many children and descendants as the stars in the sky. He gives him the land of Canaan and his children the land of Canaan. Those promises are fulfilled even though Abram left.

But also, the blessings to the nations. Over time, God will bless Egypt, not perfectly and completely yet, but one day. Even in Genesis we have the story of Joseph. In a time of famine Joseph is sent to Egypt, well, forcibly sent to Egypt, but there he blesses Egypt. He fills their grain stores because he knows what is coming, and he saves Egypt itself from famine. So, although Abram failed to be a blessing, his descendant will be a blessing.

There are other relationships that God's people have with Egypt over time. Even Jesus himself would come out of Egypt. And the church would eventually be built in Egypt, because Jesus would say,

Matthew 28:19

“19 ‘Therefore go and make disciples of all nations.’”

And not just Egypt, the world. **God had a mission and he did not give up on it. In the end he had to send his Son**, because Abram, like all the other characters in the Old Testament and like us, kept getting it wrong.

Luke 20:13

“13 ‘Then the owner of the vineyard said, “What shall I do? I will send my son, whom I love;

Even though we get it wrong, he will restore us to our call. He was so eager to do that that he would even send Jesus to lead us to the nations and allow us to continue the blessing God had promised us.

So, as we finish, I want us to think about these questions.

I know you have been called. I know God has blessed you and called you because you are the people of God. But I ask you,

What troubles and silences have challenged your trust in God's blessing and call?

What blessing and call do you need to hear God reaffirming?



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