

Building Altars, Enduring Famines

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Scriptures - [Genesis 12.7-13.4](#)

v7-8

7 And the LORD appeared to Abram and said, “To your descendants I will give this land.” So he built an altar there to the LORD who had appeared to him.

8 Then he proceeded from there to the mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD.

Building Altars

Abraham the journey-man has now become Abraham the builder...but unlike his forefathers in Babel, he's not building towers and cities to make his name great, he is building altars of worship to YHWH. [Warren Wiersbe](#) said that you would trace Abraham's steps by the altars he left behind.

Wherever he went in the land of Canaan, Abraham was marked by his tent and his altar. The tent marked him as a “stranger and pilgrim” who did not belong to the world he was traveling through...this is what [Hebrews 11](#) says,

"By faith (Abraham) lived as a stranger in the land of promise... living in tents...for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" ([Hebrews 11.8–10](#)).

And the altar marked him as a citizen of heaven who didn't worship the pagan gods of the land he journeyed through...Abraham worshiped the one true and living God.

Abraham's tent and his altars gave witness that he was separated from this world (the tent) and devoted to the God of heaven (the altar).

v9-10

9 Then Abram journeyed on, continuing toward the Negev (in the south).

10 Now there was a famine in the land...

The Famine

Definition: A famine is a widespread scarcity of food, caused by several possible factors, including war, natural disasters, crop failure, widespread poverty, an economic catastrophe or government policies. This phenomenon is usually accompanied by regional malnutrition, starvation, epidemic, and increased mortality.

Why was there a famine in the land? Or to ask the question another way; why did God allow for a famine to be in the land that He sent Abraham to?

Many reasons, but one primary reason is this: because the word that God gave to Abraham needed to be tested.

The worst thing that can happen in the earth is for unqualified people to receive a promise and never go through the testing that qualifies them to handle what God wants to do through them. Proverbs says, “The earth trembles under a slave who becomes king” (Proverbs 30.21-22). Abraham had been given a massive promise that would impact generations. To handle the weight of that word, Abram had to become Abraham...who he was had to become who God intended him to be...and who the promise *needed* him to be. Abram only becomes Abraham through testing and pressure. Bob Gladstone said, "Destiny without maturity is the breeding ground for self-absorbed, superficial Christians." For Abraham to be able to hold the weight of what God had said to him, God had to bring him through the testing of famine...when the promise seems to have died of malnutrition.

This book is filled with stories of God coming to unqualified, undeserving people and giving them astounding promises:

- Abraham, your descendants will be as numerous as the stars - so let me take you and your barren wife into a barren land;
- David, your kingdom will be an everlasting kingdom, and you will never lack a son to sit on our throne - a throne which will allude you for 22 years while Saul sits on it and chases you through the desert trying to kill you;
- Peter, on this rock I will build My church - but not before Satan sifts you like

wheat.

The promise that God gives to an individual is not a lottery ticket, it's an invitation into a season of testing and refining through pressure...so that the promise holder the necessary character formed in them that can handle the weight of God doing impossible things through them.

The source of the famine

What was the source of Abraham's famine? Sin...the devil...or God's will putting a man through God's process of maturity through testing?

When you face a test, ask yourself this question: is the test standing in front of me
a giant to be defeated,
a devil to be resisted, or
a test to be endured.

Goliath, the devil, or God. Three very different situations that call for three very different responses. Be careful that you don't assume every famine is the devil, because you may be resisting something that God is using for your maturity and glory.

v10

Back to Abraham...in the land of promise Abraham finds that whatever expectations he may have had about this place are not exactly lining up with reality.

Someone told me recently that expectations are delayed resentment. I am expecting "this" but when I encounter "that" I am tempted to resent the source of my expectations.

Now, we have no evidence in the text that Abraham began to resent YHWH, and I'm not suggesting that he did...but when expectations of what he would find in the land of promise didn't match reality, Abraham did start making his own decisions. Look what happens next...

10 Now there was a famine in the land and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land.

What's missing from this situation? God telling Abraham to leave.

When the word was tested with famine, when the word was starved and malnourished, rather than enduring and trusting in the God who brought him there, Abraham took it upon himself to feed the word, to resuscitate the word with good decisions and logical planning. He packed his stuff and moved south...crossing the boundary from God's land into Pharaoh's land.

In his letter to the church, James writes,

"brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing" (James 1.2-4).

The testing produces wholeness...the testing shapes an unqualified person into a complete saint who can hold the weight of impossible things.

In times of testing, the right question isn't, "How can I get out of this?" but, "What can I get out of this?"

To put it plainly; when you God leads you in a decision and you find yourself in the furnace of testing, stay where He has you until He tells you to move. You are safer in the famine of His will than you are in the palace out of His will.

Faith will always be moved by the current of peace and hope, but unbelief moves in the direction of restlessness and fear. Abraham wasn't moving in faith, he was moving in fear.

Listen to what Jesus says in [John 16.33](#),

"These things I have spoken to you (My WORD) so that in Me you will have PEACE. In the world you will have trials, but do not be AFRAID, I have overcome the world."

There were consequences for Abraham acting out of fear...

v11-13

11 And it came to pass, when he was close to entering Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, “Indeed I know that you are a woman of beautiful countenance.

12 Therefore it will happen, when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, ‘This is his wife’; and they will kill me

Had God not told Abraham that He would bless him make him a great nation? Had God not told Abraham that He would “bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you?” This is what happens when we move from a place of fear, we forget the promises that God has given us.

13 Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you.”

The first consequence of Abraham stepping outside of God's will: he lied. When Abraham moved out of God's will and into his own, he moved from trusting to scheming, he moved from confidence to fear, he moved from considering others to considering himself, he moved from bringing blessing to others to, as we will see, bringing judgement on others.

v14-15

14 So it was, when Abram came into Egypt, that the Egyptians saw the woman, that she was very beautiful.

15 The princes of Pharaoh also saw her and commended her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken to Pharaoh's house.

That's biblical language for actual adultery between Pharaoh and Sarai. Later in the story Pharaoh says, “I took her as a wife” (v. 19). Abraham not only asks Sarai to engage in his deception, but in the process of Abraham's scheming she becomes vulnerable and unprotected and is eventually forced into cohabiting with a man who is not her husband.

v16-20

16 He treated Abram well for her sake. He had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys, and camels.

17 But the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.

18 And Pharaoh called Abram and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?"

19 Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for myself as a wife. Now therefore, here is your wife; take her and go your way."

20 So Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they sent him away, with his wife and all that he had.

Everything about his time in Egypt, and everything that he received in Egypt, became a problem: he lied, he passed that on to his son, and he betrayed his wife.

It may look like, "well, at least Abraham got lots of livestock and wealth while he was in Egypt." Those things actually became a burden that caused him to separate from Lot which put Lot in danger in Sodom AND caused Abraham to have to go to war to rescue Lot.

And there's one more thing Abraham picked up from his time in Egypt. A maidservant named Hagar. Listen to [Genesis 16](#),

1 Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar.

2 So Sarai said to Abram, "...Please, go in to my maidservant; perhaps I shall obtain children by her." And Abram heeded the voice of Sarai.

3 Then Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar her maid, the Egyptian, and gave her to her husband Abram to be his wife...(Genesis 16.1-3).

In Closing - Abraham's Altars

And what about Abraham's altars...where are they? There is no mention of Abraham building an altar of worship while he is in Egypt. All of that stopped the moment he

determined to leave the land of promise. He didn't just leave the famine...he left his altar...he left his worship.

13:1-4

1 Then Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, to the South.

2 Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold.

3 And he went on his journey from the South as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai,

4 to the place of the altar which he had made there at first. And there Abram called on the name of the LORD.

Abraham goes back to his altar. He returns to the Lord and worships Him as he did at first.

Two points:

1. It's never too late to return to the Lord. You're never too far away to come back to your altar. And the more important point...
2. Never abandon your altar. Stay in fellowship with the Lord no matter what the circumstances may be. Never abandon your altar. Endure the famine, endure the testing, resist the urge to move on and seek help from Egypt. As Peter writes in **1 Peter 1.6-7**,

...even though now for a little while you have been grieved by various trials, **REJOICE**, that the genuineness of your faith may be found...and that faith, even though it is tested by fire, is much more precious than gold that perishes.

Rejoice...that's altar language. That's the language of worship. **Jesus People respond to trials the Jesus way**...for the joy set before them, face like flint, both hands on the plow, believing in what is unseen, knowing that whether by life or by death He will be magnified in their body...but they will NOT abandon their altar.