

Prayer is Essential  
Sermon for 7 July 2019  
Texts: Genesis 12:10-20 and Daniel 10: 1-14

Here's a amazing fact, when Abram began his journey of faith—the world was perhaps nearly 95% lost. I would make the percentage higher except that when Abraham came to the Kennites, in the land of Midian, we read that they both shared his language and that they may even have held to a monotheistic belief in God. Evidence for these claims comes centuries later when we meet Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, who was a *Midianite priest*—Moses married Zipporah, a faithful Midianite woman. She was Jethro's daughter. The Midianites were of Semitic extraction, but not Hebrews descended from Abraham. The percentage I chose is arbitrary (not based on any data—only inferences) but I chose it to highlight Abram's sojourn as a stranger in a strange land—a **wanderer from my father's house**. (Gen. 20:13) **And when God caused me to wander from my father's house** is not a highly ennobling rendition of his "call."

The relationship of Gen. 20:1-8 to Genesis 12:10-20 is highly instructive. Gen. 20 relates a second **she's my wife** episode in Philistia whereas Gen. 12 is tied to the Egyptian setting—where Abram went due to **famine in the land**. (12:10) Sarai is the beautiful woman in both scenarios so there is a common thread to both incidents. However, the first thing I want to point out is how prayer-less Gen. 12 appears to be. Abram doesn't appear to consult prayerfully with God about going down to Egypt. Is God unable to supply his needs in the Negev? It would appear that migrating to Egypt was a piece of conventional, or human wisdom. Imperiling his wife, or even just putting her in a compromising position. Being taken for **a wife, while still married**, in both instances, had moral (adulterous) implications that both Pharaoh and King Abimelech were conscious of—and the compensatory damages paid out certainly signal that purity and marriage were serious social concerns *as well as religious concerns*. Ironically, the apparent path out the difficulty of wanting another man's beautiful wife was assassination—murder being a lesser offense than adultery in Egyptian and Philistinian eyes. My how times have changed— in our culture, at least on the books, the jeopardy is reversed.

Abram and Sarai had to go through immigration. IN ABRAM'S DAY Egypt had a border security problem. Massive waves of Semitic peoples were pressing down from the famished northeast—Abram among them. Ancient writers detail for us the chain of fortresses, ports of entry and customs, and the connecting wall that was built to control the invasive surges of people—often desperate as well from oppression, tribal warfare, made worse by the dire conditions brought about by famine. In climates where rainfall is typically restricted to two seasons in the agrarian cycle, as in Palestine (the early and the later rains), farming was as tenuously dependent on the weather (rainfall) as the harvest was on the level of raiding, pillage and plunder of hostile nomadic peoples.

The so-called **princes of Egypt** (12:15) would be entrusted with managing these points of entry, customs gathered, permissions given ("green cards"). They would know who was coming in and who was going out. People were registered, tariffs were levied and so forth—regular border stuff. It was to such a port of entry that Abram and Sarai appeared on their way to Zoan, a delta city: a *prosperous Arabian sheik with a large household* would have been noticed, and reported to the king of Egypt. And Sarai, an iconic beauty (Scripture says, **very fair woman**) would also be *noticed*—and her "marital status" and

“beauty” report preceded her to Pharaoh’s court where, it was officially noted, *she was sister to Abram . . . and so, single, and, presumably, “available for marriage.”* The secret of her marriage to Abram was a stratagem hit upon by Abram when they left Abram’s father’s house.

Now as King David wasn’t above killing Uriah to take Bathsheba to be his wife, we may conclude that others who considered murder less immoral than adultery (yes, a curious piece of universal morality perhaps). So Abram, the man married to this raving beauty was a marked man. For anyone was interested in his wife, his mere existence was a remediable circumstance (a “regrettable inconvenience”). Assassination was a real threat, and easily arranged—for lust is real and the times were violent.

However, this piece of worldly wisdom (**say that you’re my sister**), the clever (prayer-less) subterfuge Abram came up with—was not the only card in Abram’s hand. He also had **the promises of God**—promises for safety were hidden in the promise of a great name, a future blessing and the promise of an heir and a son. Abram was not going to be assassinated because God had promised a different future.

So, we have a perplexity here. Why did Abram take his safety into his own hands when he had no need to? And, because we know this is similar, why did Sarai propose that Abram impregnate her Egyptian servant Hagar as a quicker path to a son and heir when the promise was quite specific: Sarai would have a son by Abram. Yes, a son despite their age, and natural barriers—he was ten years her senior. Neither of them were spring chickens. Why didn’t they *pray it through*—they might have concluded that they would be having a miracle baby (Nothing’s too difficult for God!). And chose to trust God to perform what he had promised?

In a word: fear and unbelief—or, second guessing God. Yes, I am aware that Abram was a man of faith. However, we must conclude that his faith was “spotty,” uneven, had some holes in it. His trust in God was not entire, not complete—but it was *sufficient*. How incredibly gracious of God! And how incredibly encouraging for us! Our faith does not have to be perfect either—but it does need to be sufficient!

Let’s be clearer, more pointed. Neither the “surrogate spouse” (Hagar) idea, nor the “she’s my sister” ploy, represent God’s plan to enact his promises. And had the couple spent some time in prayer, the Lord might have straightened their thinking out. Neither idea was splendidly brilliant.

Just imagine going to God and saying, “I know that Sarai is the wife you gave me, and me only. But she’s so beautiful that other men will want her, killing me to get her! They have so little self-control! Even you can’t get men to behave—just look at me! So, Lord, I have this idea . . . I’ll protect my bacon by putting out that *she’s my sister*. What do you think?”

“Right, Abram, and then what? Pharaoh will see your beautiful wife and still make plans to acquire her. Is my arm too short to defend her? Or you? So, you will get bride price for telling this half-truth—this white lie. In this self-protective scheme of yours where’s my honor? My glory? Do you think self-management is the best path?”

“Then,” he continues, “what if the truth comes out? Things get really sticky: Pharaoh learns that you lied to him, defrauded him and deceived him. I might have to plague his whole household to get Sarai out of there. Starting off with a lie sounds like a pretty rocky road lies ahead, don’t you think?”

“Abram, my friend, allow me to ask a few clarifying questions: Do you really think I am unable to keep my promises to you? Do you think that the woman I entrusted to your love, affection, protection and provision alone—is going to ever trust you again if you risk her reputation? If you are willing to leverage her beauty once, what’s to stop you from trying this “get rich plan” a second time? Are you trying to get rich outside my plans to enlarge you, bless you, and acquire for you a great name? Whatever Pharaoh can give you, I can give you more — remember, son, it’s all mine.”

After this imaginary exchange, after some such words in prayer, Abram might have assumed a more bracing posture, a more courageous one: “God has promised me great things—sharing my wife with anyone else is not among them!” Abram should have asked God about the Hagar plan, too; but he didn’t. God might have detonated that piece of worldly wisdom at once.—before anyone got hurt, or created trouble for you. I created the heavens and the earth, and you don’t think I can quicken your seed in Sarai’s womb?? Really?? Look, don’t be envious, or impatient . . . it’s not too late for your own son until I decide it’s too late. I don’t actually perform my will on your time table—that would be less than divine of me.”

“No plan to harm you is going to get past me, Abram. Truly, even your sterility and Sarai fertility is under my control. She’ll get pregnant when I am ready for her to do so and it’s going to be a boy.”

What’s exposed here is that ***Abram did not believe God for the preservation of his marriage, the performance of his promises***, the protection of his life, and/or the purity of his wife. When it comes to God, you either trust him, or you do not.

Some of you may question the “wordiness” of these “hypothetical,” imagined prayer sessions between God and Abram. Does our prayer really flow so conversationally? Well, if Daniel 10:1-14 is any example, or demonstration of private prayer life, I propose that my support for active prayer is strong.

We may not want to be imitators of Daniel’s three friends in the fiery furnace, or even of Daniel in the lions’ den—I get that!— but how about imitating Daniel in his piety, *in his prayer closet*, so to speak, in his *private prayer life*, verbally, as depicted for us here? I hazard that if we did, we have much useful to glean from Daniel 10.

DANIEL SOUGHT THE LORD’S FACE in the third year of the reign of Cyrus, the king of Persia who permitted the Jews to return from exile in Babylonia by edict—which empire he had conquered. HE WANTED ANSWERS. I am drawing our attention past the vision of the Son of Man—the very passage, incidentally, from which Jesus lifted his favorite self title, the messianic title: Son of Man. This towering **vision**, terrifying indeed, **was a word revealed to Daniel. It was true, and it was a great conflict.** But, it is written: **he understood the word and had understanding of the vision.** \*(v. 1) Because we don’t

get to see the “vision,” I want us study the passage for Daniel’s prayer life, paying attention to the verbal transactions themselves: to the use of *words*.

Daniel was *seeking the Lord’s face, praying for answers* at the time. *The exiles were returning by imperial edict. It was apparent that many of them would choose to remain in the Diaspora—or the scattering. What was to become of Israel nationally? I was mourning for three weeks. I ate no delicacies, no meat or wine, nor did I anoint myself at all—* he used no body lotions, or medicinally prepared cremes (for his aches and pains?) *for the full three weeks.* (v.3) Seeking the Lord’s face is a synonym for prayer. **On the twenty-fourth day** he was standing on the banks of the Tigris River, **I lifted up my eyes and looked, and behold, a man clothed in linen.** (v.5) This messenger was all light, all torches, flashing bronze **and the sound of his words like the sound of a multitude.** (v. 6)—we might say, sounds like the roar of a great crowd. This speaks to my assertion about the **essential wordiness** of oral prayer—it is, I suggest, a verbal exercise. Daniel alone saw the vision, but those **with him trembled** and fled the scene.

This, having cleared up some issues, brings us directly to the private prayer dimension—the transactions. We are going to unfold this passage of scripture so as to expound what scripture teaches on the topic of prayer—I am bringing you to a knowledge of the truth about prayer (while honoring Paul’s pleas for public prayer: **I desire then that in every place the men should pray, lifting holy hands without anger or quarreling . . .** 1 Tim. 2:8). I mean to expose to view the *privilege and duty of private prayer* which ought to undergird and direct our walk with God—as well as informing our public praying. Pay attention to the references to speaking, speech and words, the sounds of words:

**So I was left alone and saw this great vision, and there was no strength left in me. My radiant appearance was fearfully changed—or, *my splendor was changed to ruin!*—and I retained no strength. Then I heard the sounds of his words, and as I heard the sound of his words, I fell on my face in deep sleep, with my face to the ground.**

**And behold, a hand touched me and set me trembling on my hands and knees. And he said to me, “O Daniel, man greatly loved, understand the words that I speak [remarkably, not the vision, but the words] to you and stand upright, for now I have been sent to you.” And when he had spoken this word to me, I stood up trembling.**

**Then he said to me, “Fear not, Daniel, for from the first day that you set your heart to understand and humbled yourself before your God, your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words.”**

(Daniel 10:vv. 8-12)

I hold this up before us as a word picture of transactional, private prayer, indeed, as a picture of the efficacy of such prayer—even **the words spoken** in prayer. Effectual prayer begins in spiritual lowliness, in humility: Daniel was humble: ***my splendor was brought to ruin.*** (**Humble yourself in the sight of the Lord and he will lift you up.** James 4:10) Have the right spiritual posture! Then, please note:

- From the first words, our verbal prayers are heard!

- Second, they precipitate a verbal response from heaven. That would include **the roar of the crowd and the sound of his words. Your words have been heard, and I have come because of your words**, (v.12)
- This conversation between heaven and earth, between God and Daniel, has not gone unnoticed (in the spirit realm) and the delivery of an answer has been demonically impeded.

**For twenty-one days the prince of the kingdom of Persia—not** Cyrus, the kind, but the fallen angel, the demonic power behind the throne of Persia—**withstood me**. (v. 13) But, with the assistance of Michael, this heavenly messenger was able to complete his journey and come face to face with Daniel at last.

That, friends, is what occurs in your prayer closet between heaven and you! There God's eye is open to you—**he sees you**—and your eye, if it is open to his eye, will behold the supreme beauty of the Lord. You will "see" the excellency of his grace as he makes the conscience aware of secret sins and of secret duties.

Prayer is the sacred duty of every saint, I think, without exception. Jesus doesn't say, "If you pray" . . . he says, **when you pray. Go into your prayer closet**, your "war room," your holy space set aside for you and God alone, and there let your supplications be made known with words—along with intercessions, offer up praise and thanksgiving. Why? Because your words are heard. Because God answers prayer—exchanging word for word with you. Would you live delightfully? Would you bring heaven down and bring the Spirit and power of God to bear on earth? Pray. Through prayer we get to know God, we come to discern his voice and see the *radiance* of his face! We speak in words and get spoken to in prayer. Bring to mind, if you will, the glorious person that meets you in your prayer closet. *All the world cannot yield the full measure of the beauty that awaits the saint diligent in prayer, dutifully, consistently prayerful*. Yes, beauty. God is so beautiful that all other objects, including Sarai, the fair woman, pale in significance. Part of that paling translates into manageability. Translates into godly perspective.

Had Abram prayed more, he might not have connived at saving his own skin. He would never have incurred the onus of getting rich off the exchange—profiting by a clever lie! He would have discovered the sufficiency of faith! He would have reminded himself of the promises of God (God's words spoken to him personally), remembered the provision and the protections accorded him—he would not have feared for his life because "his life was hidden with God!" He would not have feared for his progeny, worried about his name, and he would have blessed Pharaoh instead of misleading, tricking and deceiving him. International relations would have certainly improved.

So, are you encouraged to go deep with God? Setting your heart to understand? Seeking the will of God which welds the purposes of God to the gifts and inclinations of your being? Are you ready to learn how to better serve him and how to evade self-serving, self-protective sinning? For we know, that all God's children are to walk by faith and they are to always pray. Because of the lives depicted for us in Scripture, knowing that our words are heard and our questions are answered, we should be encouraged to pray like a Daniel and not give up.

**Amen**