

Series: "Genesis: The Beginning Continued"

Sermon: "When Promised Land becomes Famine Land"

Text: Genesis 1:29; 9:1-5a; 12:10-20

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- If you have heard of it, do you believe in the Reformed doctrine of the **perspicuity of Scripture**? Someone raised that doctrine in my thinking last week. It had been a long time since I had even heard the word, "**perspicuity**." Some folks misconstrue it to be a doctrine that claims all of Scripture is clear and easy to understand.
- By those terms, which BTW, are not really what the doctrine teaches, I guess I am a doctrinal heretic because I don't think either of those statements are true. Some of the Bible I don't find easy or clear.
- Then, sometimes, the Bible just doesn't answer all the questions that pop into my head when I read it. I pointed this out when we began this study of the book of *Genesis*. There are, indeed, a few details some of us would still like to know about Creation that weren't included in *Genesis* 1 & 2.
- Today's text in *Genesis* 12 appears to be far less complicated than how the whole universe got here in the beginning. However, today's simpler text also raises some questions that can frustrate interpreters because they remain unanswered.
- Let's read *Genesis* 12:10-20, the record of events. Then I'll show you what I mean about the unanswered questions. Hopefully, I will also demonstrate for you what this text means for the overall theology of the book.
- **READ 12:10-20**
- Probably, the most frequent issue interpreters have about what God left out is a judgment on the morality of Abram's actions. **First**, was it right or wrong for Abram to leave the Promised Land and go to Egypt when his family was in trouble? Egypt would likely have seemed to be a "bad" place in the minds of Moses' readers whose families had lived there as slaves.

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- **Second**, was it right or wrong for Abram to tell a half-truth, or a lie by omission, when he described Sarai as his sister?
- **Third**, was it right for God seemingly to punish Pharaoh with "serious diseases" for something Abram did? Keep in mind, confusingly this could also have been God graciously getting Pharaoh's attention in the only way he would listen.
- I too would like at least a few certain and concrete answers to these moral questions. However, *interestingly*, the text doesn't explicitly provide these. I say "interestingly" because I think we might be interested in "why not."
- Is it possible, as we said before, the answer lies somewhere in a conclusion that the narratives of Genesis are not designed to be the **perspicuous**, that is clear and easy, moralistic, behavioral lessons they are often made out to be?
- This suggestion, for me it's a *conclusion*, is not a happy one for many believers who tend to see the Bible, from cover to cover, as mainly a book of instructions on how to be good and nice people.
- Then, there is another unanswered question that occurs to me. There is probably no way I can raise it without getting myself in trouble with at least some of you.
- We will see that this ruse of calling one's wife a sister happens three times in Genesis. Twice it is used by Abram and once by Jacob. In both Abram occurrences, Abram's reasoning is that Sarai is so beautiful that here Pharaoh and later Abimelech will not be able to resist wanting to marry her.
- One thing this tells me is that I can't quite identify *perfectly* with the culture of that time. Two very powerful men in that world, Pharaoh and Abimelech, men who both had harems of wives and could marry

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any woman in their kingdom—both wanted to marry Abram's 65-year-old half-sister and wife, Sarai.

- One female exegete did some study and concluded that Sarai must have used goat-milk or camel-milk facial creams so that her face so glowed with beauty no man could miss noticing her and wanting to marry her.
- To be honest with you I am still considering that possible explanation and looking for parallel texts that might validate it 😊. I'm not sure, because I didn't click any further on the items in my Google Search, but there seem to be a number of cosmetic companies that use the name *Sarai* on their beauty enhancing products. Maybe they, like this interpreter, know something I have yet missed in this Scripture.
- Sadly, as much as we might like it to be, and as much as it might make us a fortune if we could bottle it, there is no ***perspicuous*** absolute answer to the question of the source of Sarai's powerful beauty, at 65, in today's text.
- So, then, if verses 10-20 of chapter 12 are not simply a Sunday School moral lesson from Abram's bad example and they are not a lesson for Christian women on the beauty secrets for godly women, what are verses 10-20 about?
- As usual, please let me take you back to the ***beginning*** again to make sure we have the big context in mind. The context might not be what first comes to mind.
- Think back to *Genesis* 1:29 a verse that shows up just following God's statement that humans have been purposed with being the *imago dei*—being the image bearers of God in the all earth. After he tells humans they will rule in his name, God say, ***"I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food."***

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- In all honesty, I'm glad I was not born at that time because it seems that the *ribeye steak* had not yet been invented for humans consumption. However, yes, and believe me, it makes me sad to have to say it, God committed to provide Adam and Eve, as two **vegetarians**, with all the food they would need to live a life accomplishing his purpose for them.
- Then, later in chapter 2 verse 16, God assured them, from that start, that living out his purpose within the Garden, they would have the necessary food. He told them they were **"free to eat from any tree in the Garden—except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."**
- God would make sure they had the necessary food to sustain life fulfilling his purpose.
- Of course, enough "food" became a more difficult matter after they sinned. The ground was cursed so that now rather than yielding what seems to be described by God as an easy abundance, they would have to work harder just to eat. This hard work would be a constant reminder of the impact of sin on their part in God's plan.
- Now, skip ahead with me to the fractal-like—i.e., the same beautiful pattern in a different place and maybe with a different size in *Genesis 9* beginning at verse 1. This is the record of God's blessing on *Noah* after he and his family emerged from the ark to restart the human race as the human image bearers of God in the earth.
- Please let me read those verses... **READ Genesis 9:1-5a**
- Once again, God assures the new, redeemed humans they will have the food necessary to sustain life when living out their purpose to image him. Now, God expands the menu to include meat and fish. I could have made it in those days! Prime rib! Grilled salmon!
- I read verses 4 and 5 so that we would hear the echo of *Genesis 1* and 2. As there, here, God again provided a necessity of life for the

humans. However, notice that God did not allow even the fulfillment of that necessity (eating food) to be absolutely according to man's will. God in *Genesis 1* and *2* placed restrictions on eating the fruit of a certain tree in the garden. Here, he places restrictions on eating blood in the meat.

- I think God knows pretty well what happens if humans are allowed to set their own restrictions even around the necessities of life—even around how we go about living to fulfill his purpose for us. God always remains the wise one in control because God truly knows **GOOD**.
- BTW: The same is true in *Genesis* for another necessity for life that will fulfill the purpose of God collectively—that is allow us to be the imago dei we were created to be. That other necessity is **Sexuality**.
- AS God designed it, there would eventually be no more humans to fill the earth with God's NAME and glory without sexual reproduction.
- As we move through *Genesis*, we will see more and more of what happens when humans begin to set their own standards for this necessity as well. When God is not allowed to be the wise one in control of even very good and necessary things like *sex* and *food*, we humans will always mess it up.
- Please hear me here! We humans will eventually mess up the very good things of God when we take control and ignore the restrictions put in place for our good and the good of the creation by God—no matter what those good things may be.
- This is often where the church and some believers get confused. So, for example we might ask: Shouldn't we be people of *love*? Yes but unless we are people of *love* by God's standards we will eventually mess it all up.

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- Or, shouldn't we be people of *community*? Absolutely! But, unless we are people of *community* by God's standards, we will eventually mess it all up.
- This was young Bonhoeffer's complaint about the Lutheran church's claim only to be fomenting godly community by not fighting the Nazis and even helping them sometimes.
- Or, shouldn't we be people who meet the *needs* of others? Yes, but not when those needs are outside of God's standards for them because that will hurt them and not help them! And, we are easily driven to mess things up when we treat others based on their perceived, or "felt needs" or what we perceive they *must* need to help or to fix them.
- Shouldn't we be *kind* to one another and *bear* with one another? Yes we should but not if we humanly define kindness and bearing with one another as making each other feel happy all the time by avoiding conflict! Sometimes God's standards call for us to speak a truth in love that pains the other person for their own good.
- You get the point. We humans are never wise enough to set the definitions and standards of good and evil on our own. Therefore, God gave us his **Word** to provide his wisdom to be his image in this world with metrics that will produce true LIFE not simply a feel good for the moment do-goodism.
- **So, where were we?** We were talking about food—necessary food to carry out God's purpose for humans.
- Now, let's consider a few details of today's text beginning in *Genesis* 12:10. Prior to what we read there, I suggested last week, that Abram had been **parading** God's restored imago dei purpose up and down the Land of Canaan—the land promised to be the land for God's promises to be fulfilled.

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- At that point, where the purpose was restored—Abram was building altars to the LORD and calling on his name fulfilling the very reason for which he and all humans were created. Abram is living right, doing God's will, as we might put, before the eyes of a watching Canaanite world.
- He could not be doing life much "*righter*" than he was doing it according to the bare facts that Moses gave us about the *parade*.
- Then the text moves forward bluntly with, "**Now there was a famine in the land...**"
- **Now**, there is some great **ambiguity** in Abram's life even as he is attempting to live out his God given purpose. The Promised Land he had just walked, in God's great NAME, is now the "*Famine Land.*" ***If you needed it, there is proof that, just because you are doing what God tells you to do, please don't expect there will be no big problems—no ambiguities in life.*** The readers needed to know this truth.
- Famine, in that time and place was a life and death issue not just an inconvenient temporary shortage of toilet paper, canned soup, Clorox wipes and personally, Coke Cherry Zero in cans. There were not many options for food when not enough food would grow.
- AND, very importantly for the theology, let's not forget what we spent time looking at already. Enough food was a promise of God to Adam and Noah in order to carry out God's imago dei assignment.
- What should Abram do? Well, now, there we have the problem of what we wish we knew but don't know explicitly. It seems easy for me to extrapolate that Abram should have somehow trusted God to miraculously provide food if he remained in the Promised Land. That being the case, the messy business with his wife nearly being lost to Pharaoh would never even have arisen.

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- BUT, we are not told what Abram should do only what he did do. Perhaps that hints to us that the big lesson here is not necessarily a moral one based on Abram's good or bad example.
- Keep in mind we do learn to watch for *something* here. No doubt, the most famous test of Abram comes when God calls him to sacrifice Isaac, the son of blessing. In one way of looking at that test, the instructions for the doing of that test were unambiguous—*"Take your special son and kill him as a sacrifice to me on Mt. Moriah."*
- But, in another way, everything about that horrible test feels *ambiguous*. Everything Abram had learned about God and God's plan by the time he is Abraham and walking up that mountain just doesn't fit with what God tells him to do—it doesn't make sense!
- It was all very confusing. There was much ambiguity in trying to live for God then. This ambiguity in living for God's purposes didn't start on that trek up Mt Moriah. I think this stark contrast of Promised Land becoming Famine Land is telling us to watch for it the reality of ambiguity in living for God in this world here, much nearer to the beginning of the story of Abram.
- I think it is difficult for many of us not to conclude that God works in what we see as "**certainty**" rather than "ambiguity." If something we wonder about feels "certain" to us, many of often assume that must be God's will. We conclude that because we want to **control** (and that is the key word) we want to **control**, not just necessities such as food and sex. We want to control life.
- It is difficult for some of us to leave any part of what we feel are necessities for life up to God to restrict from us wisely.
- For this reason, many of us chase after **feelings of certainty** to feel assured we are "In God's will." We sometimes live focused on having those feelings validated by others. We sometimes validate them for

others thinking we are being all those things I used as examples—such as loving, caring, kind, bearing with and so on.

- I'm not talking here about staying way from *perspicuity* that is not caring about the *certainty* of what God has wisely said in his Word. In fact, I think we are explicitly commanded to chase that certainty and grow in it allowing that to renew are minds that mistakenly want to find certainty elsewhere.
- I am talking about not chasing after certainty in the way we feel so we can know for sure we are right in all of our choices as we live for God.
- Would it scare you if I told you I think the Israelites to whom Moses is writing—the generation that would now move out of the ambiguity of their generational desert wandering to enter the Promised Land—Would it scare you if I told you I think Moses is showing them that there will always be human ambiguity—even when one is dwelling in the very place God promised and told one to go to do his will!
- ***The Promised Land will sometimes become the Famine Land.***
- As I said, we humans can turn even the gifts of God's provisions of necessities for his purposes—things like food and reproduction—into gods of our own definition. We can also turn the provision of God's direction into a god of our own proportions by demanding that direction be given in terms of human certainty. We can come to believe God doesn't ever lead us in or by contexts of ambiguity—when, in fact, he very often does!
- One can see how this generation of Israelites may have expected all ambiguity of the Desert Land would be eliminated by the certainty of crossing into the Promised Land. But, read the stories of the conquest of that land. Men women and children would die in the

process. Battles would be won but battles would also be lost. Not all of life fulfilling God's will would be life of clear certainty to humans in human terms.

- These ambiguities would arise from human causes within and without. Moses will give us a taste of that in the next part of the text. They would arise from circumstances in human control and out of human control. They would make sense at times and not make sense at other times.
- In Abram's uncertainty here in 12:10-20, there is at first risk he will starve and not see the promises fulfilled. There is then risk that the human choices he has made, while living in ambiguity, will result in the contamination of the promised seed if his wife—the promised route of that seed—is taken by a powerful man to be his own wife.
- Again, the morality question arises. We find out later, in the second episode of this "half-truthing" about Sarai with Abimelech, that Sarai is not only Abram's beautiful wife but also Abram's beautiful ½ sister. The "rules" for marriage were not the same then. The genetic issues were not the same. This consanguinity in marriage was very likely not the moral issue that it feels like for us.
- As I said, maybe the moral issue is that Abram sort of lies by omission (at least as we see it) and then inexplicably, Moses doesn't even tell us he has broken the commandment. Maybe he expected that the Israelites headed to Canaan already know about this commandment in the Law. We don't know. We are not told.
- In fact, talk about ambiguity! Pharaoh, who seems to be the party harmed, if not the innocent party, as lustful as he was in the matter-- Pharaoh pays the price for any moral wrong we might decide Abram committed here.

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- Abram, confusingly, seems to be rewarded for what we might think of as sinning. He gets to leave with his life and lots of Egyptian stuff (BTW: as the parents and grandparents of the readers wandering in the wilderness left Egypt with their lives and lots of stuff). Maybe the moral we should teach the kids in Sunday School for this lesson is: **"Crime pays!" "Lying a little bit works!"**
- Or maybe the lesson is just that sometimes in ambiguous circumstances humans do very questionable things. Sometimes they even do questionable things justified by what they feel are the right motives—something God would probably like.
- I do not know this but I could conceive of Abram saying to himself, "There will be no great nation if we starve to death here in Canaan. God hasn't directed me so I'll go where the cyclical overflow of the Nile River tends to produce crops even when there is no rain up here in the north."
- Maybe he said to himself, *"If I die because Pharaoh wants to take my beautiful 65-year-old wife, I will not be the father of many nations. Maybe this scheme will work at least to give us a chance to get through this ambiguous time."*
- And, from these possible motives and then the dubious actions of Abram, I certainly, like many commentators do, could give you some moral messages. Don't go to your Egypt. Don't lie to protect yourself. But, again, those lessons are by no means the force of the passage. We must bring them to the passage to find them there.
- I can't get over the fact that in this passage that starkly contrasts with the obedience of Abram just before it—and in this passage that is a fractal-like pattern of Adam and Noah and of God's provision of food (and less so at this point, reproductive purity for the seed)—I

can't get over that God doesn't seem to teach those lessons here at all.

- What does he teach? I think it shines through. ***Even in difficult circumstances, producing human ambiguity rather than certainty around the promises of God, humans can be sure God is working to fulfill perfectly every promise he has made.***
- The ambiguity of the Promised Land suddenly becoming the Famine Land, possibly bad human choices, possibly even human sin—none of these were beyond God's wisdom and power to make sure his promises would be fulfilled—his plan would come to pass as he said it would.
- Of course, this doesn't address the consequences of bad choices and sin in the lives of humans. Other passages in God's Word both Old and New Testament certainly do.
- Just as with the first chapters of *Genesis* and the Creation, if we try to make these passages about what we want them to be about and try to make them answer the questions that arise in us, we will likely miss the point God was making by Moses writing this.
- God's people, here Abram and the Israelites who would now enter the Promised Land after the Exodus and the time in the Desert, God's people, even as they are desiring and attempting to do his will—to image him—do this in a broken world as broken humans.
- The resulting ambiguity should not mislead and maybe not even discourage. ***God can and will keep his promises and carry out his perfect plan.***
- Do you think the same message fits for God's people today? Are we serving him in a broken world? Are we still broken people who can make wrong choices and even sin?
- ***The Promised Land will sometimes become the Famine Land.***

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- When this produces *ambiguity*, is the answer to feel human certainty, no matter how we can achieve that feeling, or to trust God even more?