

Key idea: The stumble of Abram reveals that the chief obstacle to the promises of God is human sin and that this will only be dealt with as God intervenes.

FCF: The essence of sin is not so deep or evil as God makes out.

Application: The recognition of human sin and its essence, effects and the need for the intervention of God

Prayer...

1. A great man falls

There is a crisis in world athletics. It has been revealed – surprise, surprise – that doping is rife. Russia has just been banned from athletics at the next Olympics for systematic and systemic doping. But the real shocker is that Kenya has now been revealed as rife with dopers. Whilst this is not earth-shattering news, many are holding their breaths because the fall of Kenya would be shattering. The fairy tale about African runners would be forever tarnished – would athletics recover?

There are many falls in our world – the fall of countries, the fall of Queensland in State of Origin, the fall of ideologies. But, perhaps what strikes us most as people, is when great people fall – great men and woman. I remember when a friend of mine – a great minister of the Gospel – fell: he had conducted an affair for two years and had been discovered. It was a fall that affected many people. It was a fall that damaged a productive Gospel-loving church. It was a fall that reverberated round and round and round.

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When great men and women fall, that is what happens: the effect is felt widely. The shock is tangible. The gasps are audible.

Abram was a great man. He was a man of great faith – he trusted the promises of God. He was a man of great wisdom – he knew the goodness of taking God at his word. He was a man declared right with God, because of what God had promised. Abram was a great man.

Moreover, God had worked in Abram to make him great. God had chosen him to carry his promises to save the world, to restore the world. God had promised, through Abram's family, to restore the world to what it had been made to be: God's people, dwelling with God, under God's rule and blessed. In a world broken by human rebellion against God, Abram's greatness lay in his trust in God.

Obstacles had been thrown up against this trust and these promises – and God had overcome them all for Abram. Abram is a great man!

Abram fell! When we read the account of this episode, we can come to no other conclusion: Abram has fallen! And, it should shock us. After the high points of Genesis 14 and 15 – where Abram was revealed to be a man who trusted God completely, was transformed by this trust, was declared right with God – this fall should shock us.

I mean, this family saga is a sordid love triangle, involving deception, pride, a child, anger, avoidance of responsibility and great damage. And, yet, it starts with such an appearance of wisdom and pragmatic 'can-do' attitudes.

The problem is clear: Abram and his family have been in the land God has promised them for ten years. Abram is 85, Sarai probably a decade younger. And, there is the problem in **verse 1... READ.**

No child, no family, no great nation – how long is this promise of God going to take? And, will it ever happen?

According to the custom of the day, Sarai takes matters into her own hand. She is doing what was considered wise by the world, acceptable, and what countless of men and women had done before. She takes her slave-girl, she gives her to Abram, they sleep together, a child is conceived – problem solved. The method is acceptable – to the world. The result is acceptable to the promise – a child from Abram. The all-round result is hunky – dory and a win on all levels!

No it is not!!!

No one emerges from this episode with their reputation intact:

- Sarai has betrayed her marriage, she has used her slave-woman, she has become separated from her husband, and she is now consumed with jealousy and rage.
- Abram has done nothing – and that is the problem. He has avoided all responsibility, he has ignored the God who has proved so faithful, and he has destroyed his marriage.
- Hagar is now proud and haughty, despising the one she should honour.

And, yet, as we gasp at the fall of such a great man, we also acknowledge that his family and his life sounds remarkably like our lives.

Jesus makes very clear that his people will have all that they need to be his people. It is a clear promise – Matthew 6:33. Jesus' people will have all that they need to be his people. That is a wonderful promise.

But, they take so long, those promises! And, I know how to bring about the promise that Jesus made – I just need to be a little proactive, take matters into my own hands – if it works, then I can give it a go. Whether it is companionship, parenting, education, work, providing for my family – whatever it is that I need, I can make it happen for Jesus.

I love this about the Bible: it does not avoid the reality of life as we live it. There is Abram revealed in all the same warts and insecurities as me – he is no airbrushed hero – largely because he is not the hero. He can be seen for who he is because someone else is the hero.

And, the fall can be so hard and clear and obvious: taking matters into our own hands with the promises of God never works! God promises. God will deliver, in his time, in his way, in his wisdom. To doubt otherwise is to... Well, at the least, it is to fall with Abram. But, at its deepest, what does such an action reveal? Why do such falls happen? What can possibly be going on here to trip and tumble and bring down such a great man of faith?

2. The Fall behind the fall (v.1-6; Gen.3)

How do we explain this fall?

Some will say, 'That is just human nature'. I agree – but what is it about human nature that makes such a fall so common? Why does Abram fall?

I think that this passage provides us with some vital clues in the way it is written – let me read **verses 1-6 again... READ...**

When you look at those words – especially the interaction between Abram and Sarai in verses 2-3, some remarkable similarities emerge – some remarkable similarities to another fall that causes us to scratch our heads:

- Abram listened to, and agreed with, Sarai (vs.2) – the same as Adam did with Eve (3:17).
- Sarai took (vs.3) just as Eve took (3:6a).
- Sarai gave (v.3) just as Eve gave (3:6b)
- Abram stood and said nothing, just as Adam stood and said nothing.

Everything about the events of Genesis 16 mirror exactly Genesis 3 – the word used in 16:2 for Abram is only used elsewhere in the Old Testament in Genesis 3:17. The word order and the exact nouns and verbs in Genesis 16:3 mirror exactly the word order and the exact nouns and verbs as Genesis 3:3. The action is exactly the same: the woman leads and the man follows. And the

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exact same consequence is clear: this is a fall, this is a mess, this is not how things should be!!!

Moses – the author of Genesis – could not be clearer: the explanation for Abram’s fall lies in the events of the Fall! (REPEAT)

The explanation for Abram’s fall lies in Abram’s human nature: it is the fallen nature that he has inherited from Adam: he is a sinner. Abram says in his heart and actions, ‘God is not and I am God’. That is what lies at the heart of this fall.

Here, then, is the obstacle of all obstacles to the promises and plans of God. This obstacle is the very nature of humans – it is their nature, as descendants of Adam, to sin. If you like, all episodes of sin in the history of humanity can be written as recounts of the Fall, because that is the essence of the human problem. It is this problem – the obstacle of human sin, our sin – that God is dealing with as he makes promises to Abram – and the action of Abram reveals why this is such a problem!!

But, we can go further, for this passage actually pushes us to consider deeply both the cause and effect of human sin. Remembering that human sin is ‘the attitude and action that says, ‘God is not, and I am God’’, this account pushes us to consider why we would ever say that.

Look closely at how Sarai starts her consideration of the problem that seems to beset her and Abram – **look at verse 2... READ.**

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Sarai recognizes the truth: God is in charge of these events, even her barrenness. Yet, her behavior reveals what she does with the truth. She takes matters into her own hands, betraying her doubt about whether God will or even can do anything about her plight. Again, there is a clear parallel here with Genesis 3: Adam and Eve both recognised the truth but, like Sarai, their actions revealed that they doubted whether God could or would act in line with his word.

Here is the start of sin and the essence of its evil: it is a doubting of the character and nature of God as revealed in his words (**REPEAT**). From there, as is evident in both Genesis 3 and 16, it is not far from doubting God's words to then doubting his goodness to then deciding that we know best to the deciding that we can do things better than God – and then the fall is complete.

That is, I think, the clear statement of this passage: this is how sin starts and progresses. But it then pushes us further to consider the effect of sin.

On the one hand, we see in the sin of Abram and Sarai and Hagar the effect of Adam's sin: all humans are fallen by virtue of being human. But, Genesis 16 shows how sin – whilst all the same in its essence – can vary in its effects. This does not make some sin worse than other sin but it does alert us to the truth that some sin affects more widely. Do you see – I mean, it is unmissable – how this sin ripples out and damages all in its wake? Do you see how this sin affects generations and generations through time? Do you see how it fractures relationships, taints love, undermines trust,

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rips away intimacy, destroys devotion and lays the root of bitterness and conflict?

The effect of this sin is unavoidable – and people are forced to face their responsibility for their sins. This sin does not produce the promise that Abram and Sarai hoped for – it only produces more obstacles and this man and woman now must face their own responsibility for the mess that they have made.

If we are honest with ourselves, we recognize this truth in our lives. We recognise the truth of our sin and this reminds us of its deep and permanent stain on our lives. We recognise this cause of sin – the doubt and the action that undermines the character and goodness of God. And, unfortunately, we recognize the effects of sin in our lives – in our lives, in our relationships and in generations to come, all too often.

3. The intervention of the great God (vs.7-15; Gal.4)

Is there any hope in this account? Can anything good from such a sordid debacle?

Look at verses 7-8... READ...

Again, like we saw in Genesis 13, God's appearance in the account is critical – it is the turning point.

Hagar is nearing her homeland of Egypt. She is exhausted. Someone appears to her, finds her. In the end, she realizes that it is not just an angel but THE Lord.

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And his question is puzzling. I mean, God knows this – he knows what has happened, why she is fleeing, what has taken place. So, why does he ask such a question?

Again, I think we are meant to cast our minds to similar questions – times when God asks the whereabouts of people. In this case, the only other two such occasions are in Genesis 3:9 and 4:9. Then, God asks Adam where he is, and God asks Cain where his brother is. Both are occasions of significant sin. Both are occasions when the story changes only at God's intervention. And, I think we are to look to them to see the significance of what God does here.

Just like those two occasions, God intervenes with a question. Just like those two occasions, God's intervention is the turning point. Just like those two occasions, God's intervention is a moment of both judgement and mercy.

The judgement here is very clear: God does not condone anyone's behavior but he makes them face the reality and responsibility of their sin – **look at verses 9-12... READ...**

Hagar must go back and serve her master and mistress. The child is to be born. The child will be wild – he will be a loner and in constant conflict with the world around him. Abram, Sarai and Hagar cannot avoid their sin. Just as David says in Psalm 51:3 – when he is convicted of his sin of adultery and murder and faced by the birth of his child to Bathsheba – 'I am conscious of my rebellion, and my sin is always before me'. As these three live in

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their camp, God's judgement is clear: they must bear responsibility for the effect of their sin – and it will affect them.

And, yet, at the same moment God brings judgement, he also brings undeserved mercy. The only good that comes from this episode is the very mercy that God brings when he judges. The child will live. Abram, Sarai and Hagar will live. The child – to be called Ishmael – will be a permanent reminder of the fact that God does hear the distress of sinful humans and answers. Hagar herself recognizes the wonder that God – of all people – has visited her and spoken to her and saved her and pronounced a significant blessing on this bastard child.

It is the same with Adam and Eve – they face the effects of their sin and stand under the undeserved mercy of God. It is the same with Cain – he wanders the world bearing the mark of the mercy of God.

It is only the intervention of God that deals adequately with the obstacle of human sin. Abram's behavior betrayed his inability to do anything about his sin. It was only God who could deal with both the sin and its effects. But notice that God also does so justly and fairly.

Such a contrast – the disaster of humans taking matters into their own hands and the wonderful intervention of God to deal with it for them – stands at the heart of how Paul understands the actions and consequences of the life, death and resurrection of the many-grand son of Abram, Jesus.

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Paul sees, in both Hagar and Sarai's sons, a reminder of the events and effects that we have just seen:

- To take the promises of God into our own hands and to try to bring them about by our own intervention is the worst of foolishness: it only serves to show how incapable we are of trying to deal with our sin by our own hands and deeds. That will only lead to the mess of Sarai and Hagar and Abram.
- To turn to the intervention of God alone is the only way any lasting solution to our obstacle of sin will be dealt with. It takes the intervention of God – the intervention that is both just judgement and undeserved mercy – to deal with human sin. And is that not what the cross of Christ is? The fulfilment of the promise of God to deal with our mess for us – that is the cross of the many-grand son of Abram, Jesus.

Now, we now the truth here of the judgement of God: we do experience his judgement in the effects of our rebellion being around us and before us and with us.

But, do we know the undeserved mercy of the intervention of God?

Let me plead with you to know the great goodness of that intervention – when God speaks, asks your whereabouts and then shows that he understands them already. There is no sin that is beyond such intervention. There is no rebellion beyond the reach of such a question. Now, the effects of the sin will not be wiped

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away – but the eternal consequences of them will be handled by God, for you. Let me ask you, ‘Have you experienced the intervention of God, for you, in his mercy?’