

THE HIGH COST OF LETTING DOWN

by Ray C. Stedman

It is a refreshing experience to meet a pilgrim in the midst of our secular, security-loving age with its continual emphasis upon comfort, convenience, and compromise. We can identify pilgrims by two invariable symbols: a tent and an altar. Not that such people actually live in tents, but their whole outlook is that of one who lives in a tent. They hold material things loosely, and are conscious of the fleeting, ephemeral values of what the world thinks important. There is a discontent with what the earth offers and a hunger for something more. This is the tent. The second characteristic is the altar, the place of self-judgment where true worship is found. It means having a low opinion of one's own abilities and a high opinion of God's. It is an awareness of the constant need of cleansing and a dependence upon a power greater than self.

The story of Abraham is the story of such a pilgrim. It takes us back two thousand years to the other side of the cross; but the spiritual history of this man is as up-to-date as if he were born in the 20th century {A. D.}. With his tent and his altar, Abram sojourned in the land of Canaan. That is, he had no permanent home, but moved about from place to place. The land of Canaan, as we have seen in our introductory study, is a picture for us of the Spirit-filled life. It is not a place of special privilege, as many think. It is not a place to which only the great and the favored few can come. The land of Canaan is where God expects every Christian to dwell every day of his life, twenty-four hours a day!

Though Abram is now in the land, he has not yet learned the conditions of life in the land. He stands in the same place as any new Christian who is now "in the Spirit" {Rom 8:9}, but has not yet learned to "walk in the Spirit," {Gal 5:25 KJV}. And as so often happens at this stage of the Christian life, as we pick up the story of Abram in Genesis 12, we find it is the story of the failure of faith. What new Christian has not discovered what it is to lose his sense of joy and his awareness of the presence of Christ in his life? We shall find the reasons for this perplexing experience traced here in three movements:

- The famine in Canaan,
- The folly of Egypt, and
- The fullness of God in the land.

The account begins in Chapter 12, Verse 10:

Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. {Gen 12:10 RSV}

The land of Canaan was much like parts of California -- wonderful land with a magnificent climate, but dependent upon the limited rainfall for water. But there are times when there is no rain and the land experiences a drought -- the land becomes parched and dry and the grass withers. In a pastoral economy this is a dangerous time. Abram was a man with flocks and herds, and when the rains failed these were severely threatened. He saw his immediate source of sustenance endangered, and it must have seemed increasingly impossible to remain where he was. As the scarcity of food grew, he felt driven to leave, even though God had called him to be there.

There is not a word here about asking God's permission to go down to Egypt. Abram took counsel, not from God, but from his fears alone. To use a contemporary expression, he "pushed the panic button," and down to Egypt he went. It was fear that drove him.

Now, if the land is a symbol for us of the life of fellowship with a living Christ, then a famine in the land is any circumstance that threatens our dependence upon him. It is any circumstance that makes faith difficult to maintain.

Have you ever experienced such a famine? Have you been living in the full joy of fellowship with Christ, and the strength of God is your portion, and suddenly some circumstance beyond your control makes it difficult to maintain that fellowship, and there is a famine in the land?

It may be a new boss who turns out to be an ogre; it may be neighbors who throw their garbage over the back fence; or a tiger of a mother-in-law who comes to live with you. It is always some difficult circumstance of life that makes it hard to maintain fellowship with Christ. Perhaps it is hard and demanding labor that leaves you little time for cultivating the spirit. It may be a bitter disappointment that crushes you and your heart aches so you can hardly find strength for prayer and fellowship. It may be depressing surroundings which are hard to rise above, which continually oppress you. It may be misunderstood motives -- you meant to do good and someone took it wrong, and you have been cut to the quick. In short, it is any temptation that seems more than you can bear, which threatens to cut off your very strength, your fellowship with Christ.

When this occurs, the temptation is to flee rather than to stick it out. We do not enjoy trials like this, and we try to get away -- physically, if we can. We move to another neighborhood, change jobs, take a trip, or go home to mother. If we simply cannot flee physically, we try to run away mentally. We escape the unpleasant reality by a flight into unreality. There is so much of this being done today -- some retreat into a mental Egypt where life seems much more pleasant than it is in reality.

Once, perhaps, it was a simple problem of daydreaming, but now we can have it done for us electronically by way of the television set. *Dr. Parker's Fourth Wife* is brought to us in picture as well as sound. Many live in that realm of fantasy all day long. Or maybe you begin to haunt the movie theaters for distraction from your worries. Of you find you need a continual din from the radio pouring into your ears to keep you from disturbing thoughts, or from a quiet, thoughtful facing of life as it really is. Perhaps the retreat you choose is a constant round of social life a period of activity, or the overloaded weekend. Far too many Christians are demonstrating that the spirit is willing, but the flesh is ready for the weekend! With some, there is a retreat to alcohol, or even to overeating, forgetting that an overhang is perhaps as bad as a hangover. Whenever we attempt to satisfy the spirit by the same resources that the worldling has at his command, we have gone down to Egypt.

There is a vast difference between this escape and the occasional need for recreation and rest which God himself recognizes: "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while," (Mark 6:31 {RSV}).

Nor is Abram's flight into Egypt a warning to us that we should have nothing to do with worldly people. We are expected to live our lives in the midst of the world and its ways. But going down to Egypt means adopting the attitudes, the expectations, and resources of the world. It is to try to slake the thirst of the spirit at some dry cistern once more.

Abram's experience here is given to teach us the unutterable folly of Egypt:

When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful to behold; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account." When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, he-asses, menservants, maidservants, she-asses, and camels.

But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her, and be gone." And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had. (Gen. 12:11-20 {RSV})

Now let us see what happens in Egypt:

First of all, the pressure is off! Abram found the release he was seeking, there in Egypt. There was a famine in Canaan and he felt the pressure of it and ran away from it, and immediately he found the pressure relieved. There was plenty to feed upon in Egypt, and it is far more comfortable and relaxing to live in a house in Egypt than in a tent in Canaan. But this is not the whole story.

What else happened in Egypt? It is most evident that when Abram lost his faith he also lost his courage! Even before he got into Egypt he grew afraid and descended to cowardliness and falsehood. He told a little white lie; that is what we would call it today. He said to his wife, "Look, dear, I know these Egyptians. I read about them in the library in Ur. They are all wolves, and you are a beautiful woman. I know what will happen when we get down there. They will want to take you, and if they know you are my wife, they will kill me. Let's play it smart with a little strategy. You tell them you are my sister." This was not wholly a lie. Sarai was Abram's half-sister. She was the daughter of a woman who married Abram's father after Abram was born. So this was a half-truth. But a half-truth is also a half-lie, and a lie in any proportion is intended to deceive. The nearer it is to the truth, the more perfectly deceitful it is. Abram's intent was clearly to deceive. Doubtless he justified it on the grounds that it was needed to protect his beautiful wife. Perhaps this is the most startling thing about this story. Sarai was sixty-five years old at the time, yet so remarkable is her beauty that Abram is afraid he may lose her, and when the Egyptians see her they immediately take tales of her beauty to Pharaoh. Abram feels cast upon his own resources to defend her, and his only recourse is to lie.

This is the first result of moving out of Canaan, and out of fellowship with Christ -- out of the land, away from the tent and the altar, old self comes to the fore and assumes control. The immediate manifestation is hypocrisy and deceit.

Have you found that to be true? The minute you begin to move away from the control of God, your old self, with its defensive mechanism against being hurt, comes to the surface and you stoop to falsehood, hypocrisy, and deceit.

The outcome of this lie was that Sarai was put into a place of real danger. The king claimed her for his harem, and the lie Abram told opened the door for him to take her. The danger he thought existed had no power to harm her until he made it possible by his lie! This is the second folly of Egypt -- our loved ones suffer because of our cowardice and deceit. Abram was trying to protect himself, but in protecting himself he exposed Sarai to ignominy and danger.

This is the trouble with Egypt. It is true the pressure we fear is relieved there, but, when we try to live on the resources of the world, we lose our own strength, and endanger those who look to us for help. Not only was Sarai endangered, but Lot also. Abram's nephew, Lot, went down to Egypt with him. Later on, when the allurements and enticements of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah cast their spell over Lot, we are told that he saw the land as though it were the plain of Egypt and the lust for comfort and worldly glory that was born during this stay in Egypt almost destroyed him then.

Remember, when you flee to Egypt, your loved ones are being hurt, as well as you.

The third factor about Egypt is that Abram was made very rich. You say, "What's wrong with that? This is not an evil, but a blessing." Perhaps, but it was Jesus himself who used the phrase, "the delight in riches" {Mark 4:19b RSV}, referring to one of the things which could choke the Word in a person. In Egypt, Abram was given sheep, oxen, he-asses, menservants, maidservants, she-asses, and camels. This is the wealth of the oriental world. But when he comes back into the land, the first thing we hear of is strife between his herdsmen and Lot's herdsmen over the riches they got in Egypt. Furthermore, we are told he was given maidservants, one of whom was named Hagar, with whom Abram later conceived the child, Ishmael, the father of the Arab nations, who have been ever since a thorn in the side of Israel. The price of living in Egypt is a fearsome price to pay.

But this is not all: Abram became a curse to the worldlings with whom he lived. "The Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife." He was called to be a blessing, but when he got into Egypt, he became a curse instead! A Christian out of fellowship with Christ is of no help to the lost

people around him. Instead, he is a hindrance. His life of hypocrisy and weakness is a stumbling block and a plague upon the hearts of those who are watching him.

In God's name, if you are not walking in the fullness of the Spirit, do not attempt to witness to anyone about Christ! You will become a curse to them if you do.

Finally, Egypt is a place of rebuke and humiliation. What a scene this is! Here is Abram, the man of God, standing before this pagan king who has better morals than he has, being publicly rebuked for his folly.

Years ago, when I was a young Christian living in Denver, Colorado, I took on the job of soliciting advertisements for a small church paper. The pastor felt that some of the businesses with which the church dealt would be willing to put an ad in our little paper. I was to call them on the telephone and solicit the business. Among others, I called the woman manager of a prominent restaurant nearby and opened the conversation by telling her I was calling for Mr. Hewitt, the pastor of the church, as he had given me permission to do. Evidently she misunderstood and thought that I was Mr. Hewitt. Throughout the conversation she addressed me as Mr. Hewitt. It took me off guard at first, and I did not correct her at the time. She placed an ad, and the next month, I called her again to renew it. It had worked so well to be mistaken for Mr. Hewitt that I thought I would tell her it was he calling again. So I got another ad. The third month, I tried it again, but this time her voice grew cold and distant, she said, "I don't know who you are, but you are not Mr. Hewitt, for as I sit here in my office I can see Mr. Hewitt and his wife eating lunch. I don't know what kind of church you run, but if this is the means you have of getting business then don't bother with me anymore." And she hung up the phone. I can still feel the shame and humiliation of that moment as though it were yesterday. What a terrible place of rebuke and folly is Egypt.

But now God terminates the painful lesson of Egypt in Abram's life. At the deepest moment of his agony, crushed with humiliation and sick at heart, Abram comes out of Egypt, tarred and feathered and riding on a rail, back into the land of Canaan. We read, "Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had." "Good riddance, Abram, we're through with you!" What a price to pay for the release from pressure that Egypt affords.

But once back in the land, he finds the fullness of supply that he could have had all along!

So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him into the Negeb. Now Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold. And he journeyed on from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord. (Gen. 13:1-4 {RSV})

As soon as Abram is back in the land, there is the tent and the altar again. There is no tent or altar in Egypt. That is, there is no pilgrim character, no place of worship or cleansing, no fellowship in Egypt. But even back in the land, Abram must come back to the place where he had made an altar at the first, and there Abram calls upon the name of the Lord. In other words, time spent in Egypt is wasted time! There was no growth in grace in that land. He had to come right back to where he was when he went down to Egypt. He had material gain to show for the time in Egypt, but nothing but barrenness and weakness spiritually.

Have you discovered how true this is? When you forsake the pathway of faith, when you refuse to walk in fellowship with God, when you depend upon the resources of the world to satisfy the empty hunger of the heart, these are wasted years! They may literally be years. I know Christians who have lived almost all their Christian lives in Egypt and all they have to show for it is a barren, wasted, empty, dreary, boring existence.

When Abram at last returned, what did he find? There is no mention of famine when he returns, but I think the famine is still going on. Remember, Abram was driven out of Egypt. He was not yet ready to leave it of his own choice, and this would indicate the famine was still raging in Canaan. Also, the quarrel which developed with Lot's herdsmen over the pasture land suggests there was still a severe shortage of feed. But though the famine still continues, Abram is no longer troubled about it. Why not? Because, when he reached the land, the first thing he did was to call on the name of the Lord! This is what he should have done, and could have done,

when the famine first struck.

The name of the Lord stands for all the resources of God. When we cash a check we are calling on the name of the man who signed the check. When Abram calls on the name of the Lord he is discovering the resources of God. He discovers that God is able to meet his needs despite the famine, the trial, or the circumstances. Just as Paul proclaims, "And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus," (Phil 4:19 {RSV}).

In the closing days of Hudson Taylor's life, the Boxer Rebellion broke out in China. Every day reports were coming to missionary headquarters of the death of national pastors, or the persecution and imprisonment of missionaries. It seemed that all that Hudson Taylor had given his life to was crumbling before his eyes. One black day, after some particularly distressing news had come, Hudson Taylor's associates wondered if it would be too much for the old man. He spent the morning in his house, alone, and when they came to see him in the afternoon, they trembled at what they might find. But as they approached the house, they heard him singing to himself:

Jesus, I am resting, resting,
In the joy of what Thou art;
I am finding out the greatness,
Of thy loving heart.

Thou hast bade me gaze upon Thee,
And thy beauty fills my soul,
For by thy transforming power,
Thou hast made me whole.

Are you in a time of testing and trial that makes it difficult to hang onto God? Do not think for a moment you will find what you need by running down to Egypt? You will find a kind of relief, but the price of Egypt is a terrible price.

For the soul that says, "It's all right, Lord, I'm looking only to you to see me through," there is yet waiting the sure and full supply of God, that inner strengthening of the heart that makes it possible to meet whatever trial may come, in the joyfulness and glory of faith.

Prayer

Our Father, how many times must we confess to you we have been down in Egypt. We have sought to quiet the hunger of our hearts by indulging in some of the things to which the world turns in its desperation, and we have found nothing but emptiness, and more hunger. Help us to see that only in you, the Living God, is there an abundance of supply, and you wait to reveal that supply to any heart which will give up its wanderings and searchings and cast itself upon you and rest there. May we, like Abram, learn that in Egypt there is nothing but heartache and sorrow and danger for our loved ones, but in you is all we need to meet our deepest cry. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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