

"To be human ..."

We have reviewed life of Adam, Eve, Cain, Noah, Ham, people of Noah's time, and people of Tower of Babel thus far. This covered first 11 chapter of book of Genesis. Some of you have noticed that within these 11 chapters of Genesis, human being was tested three times. We were tested whether we could live the kind of life God wanted us.

What was the first test? This tested Adam. God tested to see how Adam used the free will God had granted him. Adam was free to eat or not to eat the forbidden fruits in the garden of Eden. Adam ate the fruit and was expelled from the Garden of Eden. This was the first test.

The second test was the Noah's Flood. Many of you might recall that the time was evil. But Noah lived correct life in the eyes of God. God ordered Noah to build the ark. God must have told Noah why. Perhaps Noah shared that information with people in the region. Since it took a long time to build the ark, one would expect that some people might decide to join Noah in this building effort. But, there was no one, other than the immediate family of Noah, who listened to Noah. Thus, all of those who did not join Noah were lost. This was the second test.

The third test was the Tower of Babel. Human beings had been reset with the great flood and the new human family had started with Noah and his family. But, soon after the flood, man started to build the tower of Babel reaching to the sky. This was an attempt by human to show that they are powerful enough to be equal to God. Because of this failed attempt, the languages were scrambled and people were scattered to all corners of the world. This was the third test.

So, from the book of Genesis, we understand that human race had failed all three tests.

The number three indicates that it is significant. We are bound to face a failure in life. Then, although we swear never to repeat the same failure, we fail anyway. After having suffered the same failure twice, we should learn the lesson. We should have regretted. But, sometimes, we fail the third time. That is a human nature. The third time should have never happened. Even patient and understanding friends might not accept such repeated failure from you.

The Bible records the human history. We have failed three times within the first 11 chapters of the Bible.

The first failure was recorded in the Genesis. It would have been more tolerable if the second failure were in the book of Judges, and the third in the book of Kings. But the reality was that all three happened in the Genesis, one after another. This is our human history.

Does the Genesis end with Chapter 11? No, it is not the end of the book. The Genesis continues onto Chapter 12. Chapter 12 presents a big change of scenery. You can sense the change from the get go in Chapter 12, which begins with the following words:

¹ The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you. ²"I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." ⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran.

Human had already experienced the failure three times. The last of these failures was the Tower of Babel. This failure had caused people to be scattered to the far corners of the world speaking different languages. People who had a common language, a common means of communication, lost even that last straw. It was very hard to find any hope. Everyone had thought that the human relationship would be lost forever. Some problems could be overcome if we could communicate with each other. But, even that communication had been lost. The situation had turned from bad to worse. Human history was at the bottom.

In this desperate situation, God turned to one individual just as he had done with Noah before. And that individual was Abraham. The first surprise here is Abraham was already 75 years old at that time. We have what we call the common sense in our society which had been formed through many years of common experience. But God did not follow such common sense. The one individual God turned to at that time was an old man, well over the age of retirement. Nevertheless, God selected this Abraham.

Even more surprising was the fact that God told him to go to a far-off land God had selected for him. And, God continued to say: "I will make you into a great nation. I will bless you. And all people on earth will be blessed through you."

As we get old in age, we are no longer able to do things we could do in the days of youth. We also lose the energy and willingness to pick us up to go off to a brand-new environment. (Although, I am sure, some of you might be exception.) God knew fully well about the age of Abraham. Nevertheless, God told Abraham to go to a land that God showed.

Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time. (Genesis 6:9) So, we understand why God had called on Noah.

But, the Bible does not record any such reason for God to select Abraham at that moment. But, it provides a hint. The Bible says: So Abram went, as the LORD had told him(4) From this, we learn that despite his physical condition, and although he had no idea where he was going, Abraham followed God's command and went out. He believed God. Perhaps God saw the heart of Abraham and selected him.

So, Abraham with his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot left his homeland and moved to the land of Canaan. This land of Canaan was the same place where descendants of Ham, the son of Noah, used to live.

When Abraham came to this land, God promised: "To your offspring I will give this land." (Genesis 12:7)

Yes, this is the Promised Land for the Israelites later in history. This is the land Moses and Israelites had traveled to after leaving Egypt. Last week, we learned that this land of Canaan was blessed with fertile land. The people who lived here were descendants of Ham, the youngest son of Noah. However, they had disobeyed God and Moses was later told by God to conquer the land but was ordered not to take up their custom and life style.

As God had promised to Abraham, this land of Canaan would be given to the descendants of Abraham. This Canaan is the current-day Israel. People talk about homeland and home territory. We must understand why Jewish people and

people of Palestine are so attached to this tiny piece of land. And we must remember that this was the land God had promised to Abraham.

Abraham and Sarah had to move from this Canaan to Negev. This land was hit by a famine. They had followed God's command and moved to this land. But, they had to face an extreme hardship right away. God does not always take us to an easy life. Because of this famine, they left Negev and moved to the land of Egypt.

As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you." (Genesis 12:11-13)

Since Abraham was about 10 years older than Sarah, Sarah must have been around 65 years old at that time. She was not exactly young. But, she must have been a very beautiful woman. In fact, when they reached Egypt, people there were astonished with her beauty. Pharaoh's officials praised her to Pharaoh. Sarah was taken to the palace, and Abraham was treated well. He was given many cattle and servants.

In those days, the circle of human society was not too big. Many people used to marry within their own tribe. And, in fact, Sarah was a half-sister of Abraham. In that sense, Abraham was correct to say that Sarah was his sister. But, since they were married to each other, it was more appropriate to tell people that Sarah was his wife. But, Abraham did not reveal the true relationship to protect himself.

This is rather disturbing to us. We learned that Abraham was a man of strong faith. He had obeyed God even at his advanced age and left for a new land. But, now, the words of Abraham surprise us. Suppose my wife and I were to immigrate to a new country. But, I worry about the extremely beautiful wife. I worry that the ruler of the land would certainly take note of her beauty and would try to take her away for his wife. In such a moment, what I would worry is not what wife has to go through. But, my worry is that I might be killed because of her. So, I tell my wife: "I do not want to be killed. Please do not tell them that you are my wife. Just tell them you are my sister." And, the wife would be taken to the ruler of the land.

Of course, wife would feel that "You do not care about me. All you care is that your life is spared". She would feel betrayed by you.

And we face another surprise when we read more of the Genesis and come to Chapter 20. We face another unbelievable scene:

Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, ² and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." Then Abimelek king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her. (Genesis 20:1-2)

Abraham did not claim Sarah as his sister once. He did it again here. Here also, since Abraham said that Sarah was his sister, the king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took away Sarah. The situation was the same here as in Egypt. Abraham said the same thing to protect himself. I must confess that I have met several people before who thought my wife was my daughter. They thought I was her father. This gave me a mixed feeling. But, I have never said that my wife was my daughter or my sister to protect myself. If I were to say those words, my relationship with wife would be damaged greatly.

We had started our study of human history with Adam and Eve. We studied their sons Cain and Abel. We looked at Noah and his descendants. We learned about the days of Noah and the days of Tower of Babel. We are now studying the life of Abraham.

We are disappointed with his behavior. However, Abraham was very generous to his nephew Lot and allowed him to choose the best land. (Although the custom of the time would have given the right to choose to older Abraham.) When Sodom and Gomorrah were about to be destroyed by God, Abraham pleaded God again and again to spare the people of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham did not protest God when God commanded Abraham to give up his only son for sacrificial offering. Abraham was the most praise-worthy human being before God, and yet he was so disappointingly weak human being.

Abraham said that Sarah was his sister twice to protect himself. I do not know how damaging that was to his marriage relationship. I am sure that a dark shadow fell on their relationship. A similar situation was found when Adam had blamed

Eve for his action. Many problems occur between the closest members of the family.

This was not the only problem with Abraham. Despite God's promise, Abraham could not believe God and, when his wife Sarah urged him to do so, Abraham resorted to have a son by an Egyptian servant woman Hagar. When his wife Sarah was given her own son, Sarah could not tolerate the sight of Hagar and Ishmael and expelled them. This action might have damaged the relationship between Abraham and Sarah.

In this world today, we have Judaism, Christianity, and Moslems. These religions exert very powerful influence to this world today. And all three of these religions claim Abraham as their father of faith, and are very proud of him. But, Abraham was not a super-human. He was unreliable, and at times he was ego-centric. He had his weak side.

As I was preparing today's message, I have contemplated the nature of human being described in the Bible. Then, I realized that the human being described in the Bible is nothing but us. It is the history of all of us. We are no different. We are like them.

[This message was prepared two weeks ago. So, I am a bit out of date here.] When we look at TV, we see the presidential candidate being criticized for his derogatory language against women, another is blamed for misuse of e-mails. Across the ocean, in Japan, we hear that the site for a new fish market was not properly prepared. Another leader of another country in Southeast Asia says he would not use derogatory words against other leaders because God had told him not to. And, he turns around and says that was a joke. There is no end to such unpleasant news in this world.

Last month, I flew back to San Diego at night. It was rare for me to arrive San Diego at night. So, I was admiring the view from the airplane. The night view was filled with beautiful diamonds of light. From the Oceanside to downtown San Diego, the land was filled with flood of shining lights. These lights were coming from thousands of individual houses. Looking at such lights, I was thinking what these people in these houses are doing, thinking, and what kind of life they are living.

When Abraham was traveling to Egypt, and when he was going down to Negev, he must have been watching the lights from torches of the houses as Abraham talked to his wife Sarah. As I watched these lights below from the airplane, I was reminded of the conversation between Abraham and Sarah, between Adam and Eve, between Cain and Abel. I was thinking about the life in Sodom and Gomorrah, the construction site of the Tower of Babel. I was thinking that the same scene is repeated today in our world. This is the life we live. The Bible reminds us so.

Abraham is the father of our faith and he will continue to be so. But, his faith was not perfect as we have learned. But, the Bible tells us that someone perfected his faith.

And let us run ... the race ..., fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.(Hebrews 12:1-2)

Even Abraham did not have a perfect faith. He was not the leader of faith and not the perfecter. Like us, his faith was weak from time to time. Abraham lived with his faith, moving forward sometimes and going backward some other time. In that sense, he had to travel the life of faith one step at a time. But, what sets him apart is the fact that even when he failed, he kept moving forward looking up to God. For that reason, he is called the father of our faith.

In the time of Abraham, there was no Jesus Christ yet. But, fortunately for us, we live after the time of Jesus Christ. We can read the scripture that says : "And let us run ... the race ..., fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith." Let us walk our life of faith keeping our eyes on Jesus so that we can perfect our faith.

Chapter 23 of Genesis records the age of Sarah, wife of Abraham. You might be surprised that Sarah is the only woman in the Bible whose age was recorded. You might think that this was because Sarah's faith was outstanding. But, she had many problems. The Bible records her death in this way:

Sarah lived to be a hundred and twenty-seven years old. ²She died at Kiriath Arba (that is, Hebron) in the land of Canaan, and Abraham went to mourn for Sarah and to weep over her. (Genesis 23:1-2)

In those days, people used to marry in their teens. That means that this couple was married for over 100 years. This wife died first. Sarah had lived her life. Her faith life also came to end. Abraham was saddened by his wife's death.

There must have been many trouble situations in their life. The marriage life was not always smooth as we have pointed out. What we know about their life is limited to what we read in the Bible. Only God and they knew what kind of life they lived. But, the Bible says Abraham mourned and wept for his wife. He had just lost his better half and missed her very much.

Abraham experienced many hardship in his life. The couple was not free from bumpy spots. But, Abraham mourned the loss of his wife. Abraham had hurt the feeling of Sarah with his words twice in their life. But, they must have worked out and restored their relationship. After mentioning the death of Sarah, the Bible records the following:

³Then Abraham rose from beside his dead wife and spoke to the Hittites. He said,
⁴"I am a foreigner and stranger among you. Sell me some property for a burial site here so I can bury my dead." (Genesis 23:3-4)

He told people that he was a foreigner and stranger. He purchased a land for her burial. By this time, 62 years had passed since God had spoken to him. Ever since, their life was a journey of faith. Abraham understood well about the situation. Yes, Abraham understood that he was still in the middle point of his journey of faith. Abraham would live for 38 more years and died at the age of 175. That was the end of his life of faith.

Their life cannot be explained by the two episodes when Abraham said Sarah was his sister. We must also remember his trip to Egypt and to Negev. He had allowed Lot to select the land first. He prayed for Sodom and Gomorrah. He was willing to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. We call Abraham our father of faith because of all of these. Even when we read everything recorded in the Bible about Abraham, our understanding of him is very limited. He lived the life of faith, full picture of which we will never know. We call him the father of faith all the same.

Have you ever seen this type of pin? Perhaps I need this pin myself. How about you? But, I have to explain first what these strange alphabets on the pin stand for.

P/B/P/G/I/N/F/W/M/Y. Please be patient. God is not finished with me yet. That is the meaning of these alphabets.

Abraham possessed some wonderful character and some undesirable sides. But, he lived his life of faith as a traveler in this world. And we are also taking a life of a traveler looking up to Jesus Christ, the perfecter of our faith. The trip takes us to different circumstances. Some of us are climbing up a steep hill, sweating and struggling. Some could be coasting along a smooth path, whistling along the way. Whether the way is an uphill road, or a flat road, all of us continue our journey of faith trying to perfect it. I pray that your trip is protected by God and your trip would turn out to be a fruitful trip filled with gratitude.

Let us pray.

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