

The Biblical book of Genesis has covered a wide range of historic events throughout its first eleven chapters. With the start of Genesis chapter twelve, over four centuries have now passed since the ill-fated attempt to construct the Tower of Babel as described in Genesis 11:1-9. But here in Genesis chapter twelve, the pace of our narrative will slow considerably.

While the events of Genesis chapters one to eleven unfold over the course of two millennia, the final thirty-one chapters will proceed at a relatively brisk pace of about three hundred and fifty years. This portion of Scripture will also place a greater emphasis on individual personalities and the experiences that shaped their lives. That focus will continue throughout the rest of this book.

We were given a glimpse of this new “personality-based” emphasis near the end of Genesis chapter eleven...

***“This is the account of Terah’s family line. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth.***

***Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram’s wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor’s wife was Milkah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milkah and Iskah. Now Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive.***

***Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Harran, they settled there. Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Harran” (Genesis 11:27-32 NIV).***

This background information is important, as it introduces us to three individuals who will later rise to great Biblical prominence: Abram, his wife Sarai, and Abram’s nephew Lot.

***“Now the Lord had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, From your family And from your father’s house, To a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you And make your name great; And you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, And I will curse him who curses you; And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).***

“Abram” is probably better known to us today as “Abraham,” but his name won’t officially change until we reach Genesis chapter seventeen. Here in Genesis 12:1, God appeared to Abram with some specific instructions: ***“Leave your country, your family, and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you” (CEV).***

Abram’s home during that period was “Ur of the Chaldees” or “Ur of the Chaldeans.” The ancient city of Ur was located approximately 160 miles (257 km) from the Persian Gulf and about 220 miles (354 km) southeast of modern-day Baghdad in the country of Iraq. Thus, Abram’s life took an unexpected turn when God directed him to embark on a journey to an unknown destination.

If we were to rephrase God's command to Abram, we might do so by saying, ***“I want you to leave your home and family, and I’ll tell you where to go.”*** This is comparable to a modern-day person who gathers his or her belongings and embarks on a journey with no specific destination. In fact, the New testament book of Hebrews tells us that Abram, ***“... went out, not knowing where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8).***

While it’s true that Abram didn’t begin his journey with a set of coordinates and turn-by-turn directions, he began with something better- a promise from God...

***“I will give you many descendants, and they will become a great nation. I will bless you and make***

***your name famous, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, But I will curse those who curse you. And through you I will bless all the nations” (Genesis 12:2-3 GNT).***

God later fulfilled that initial promise (“**I will make you into a great nation**”) with the establishment of the nation of Israel. We’ll later discover that God fulfilled His second promise to Abram with an abundance of spiritual and material blessings as well.

Then there was God’s pledge to “**make your name great.**” Despite their many differences, all three major world religions share the belief that Abram was a great man, thus fulfilling another of God’s promises.

Finally, God’s promise to make Abram a blessing was fully realized when Jesus, the Savior, was born through his family lineage ([Matthew 1:1-17](#)).

The Biblical Scriptures widely acknowledge Abram as a man of extraordinary faith. However, Abram was not without his faults. For instance, consider Abram’s response to God’s directive as recorded in Genesis chapter twelve...

***“So Abram departed as the Lord had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Then Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot his brother’s son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan. So they came to the land of Canaan” (Genesis 12:4-5).***

While this may not seem unusual, let’s take a closer look at these instructions. Genesis 12:1 tells us, “**The Lord said to Abram: Leave your country, your family, and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you**” (CEV). Since God views husbands and wives as “**one flesh**,” ([Genesis 2:23](#), [Matthew 19:6](#)), we can say that God’s directive to Abram also included his wife Sarai as well.

However, Abram’s nephew Lot apparently decided to leave with Abram according to Genesis 12:5. In addition, Abram elected to transport the possessions he accumulated while living in Haran, as well as his employees. <sup>(1)</sup>

This was a long way from God’s original mandate to “**...Leave your native country, your relatives, and your father’s family...**” So we can say that Abram followed God’s instructions, albeit imperfectly.

***“Abram passed through the land to the place of Shechem, as far as the terebinth tree of Moreh. And the Canaanites were then in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, 'To your descendants I will give this land.'***

***And there he built an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. And he moved from there to the mountain east of Bethel, and he pitched his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; there he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. So Abram journeyed, going on still toward the South” (Genesis 12:6-9).***

So Abram traveled approximately 350 miles (563 km) to the town of Shechem. He then journeyed about 20 miles (32 km) further to an area near the town of Bethel (meaning “*house of God*”). After staying there for a short time, Abram subsequently departed once again. This nomadic lifestyle may help explain what Abram did next.

(1) Nevertheless, God will graciously turn that decision to Abram’s advantage as we’ll see later in [Genesis chapter fourteen](#)

***“Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to dwell there, for the famine was severe in the land” (Genesis 12:10).***

Some may find it easy to criticize Abram for departing to Egypt during this time. For instance, we might argue that Abram should have remained in Canaan and relied on God’s provision during this period of famine. While it’s difficult to question that reasoning, it’s also difficult to condemn Abram's decision in this regard.

You see, this passage specifically mentions the severity of this famine, and Abram surely did not intend to stay in Egypt permanently. In all likelihood, this was nothing more than a temporary detour that was designed to cope with these difficult economic conditions.

However, Abram exhibited some questionable judgment upon his arrival at the Egyptian border...

***“And it came to pass, when he was close to entering Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, 'Indeed I know that you are a woman of beautiful countenance. Therefore it will happen, when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, ‘This is his wife’; and they will kill me, but they will let you live'” (Genesis 12:11-12).***

Genesis chapter seventeen will later reveal that Sarai was ten years younger than Abram (see [Genesis 17:1](#) and [17:17](#)). We also know that Abram was about 75 years old during this period, according to [Genesis 12:4](#). This means that Sarai was approximately 65 years old as she and Abram prepared to enter the nation of Egypt.

From our modern-day perspective, we may find it difficult to understand Abram's concern regarding his wife's beautiful appearance, especially when we consider the fact that Sarai had attained the age where most would consider her to be a senior citizen. This may seem to be a valid question until we recognize the fact that life expectancies in Abram's era typically exceeded those we experience today.

Although human lifespans no longer continued for multiple centuries (as we saw earlier in the book of Genesis), the people of Abram's era apparently lived longer than human beings do today. For instance, Sarai lived to be 127 years old, according to [Genesis 23:1](#). That means she had reached the mid-point of her life here in Genesis chapter twelve.

If we assume that an average person currently lives to the age of 72 years old, we might compare Sarai to a beautiful woman in her mid-30's today. This makes Abram's concern easier to understand. In fact, it appears that Sarai was so physically attractive that Abram was afraid someone would actually try to kill him in order to get to her.

So, in order to protect himself from the potential risk posed by his wife’s beauty, Abram devised an effective countermeasure...

***“Please say you are my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you” (Genesis 12:13).***

It was the custom of that era for a man to negotiate a payment (or dowry) with the father or brother of a woman he wished to marry. Thus, if Abram was acknowledged as Sarai’s brother (rather than her husband), there would be no motive to kill him to gain access to her. If someone showed an interest in Sarai during their sojourn in Egypt, Abram might then respond by dragging out the dowry negotiations until the famine ended. That would afford him with an opportunity to return home secretly with his wife.

To complicate matters further, Abram's request actually represented a partial truth, for Sarai was Abram’s half-sister. Abram and Sarai each had the same father, but different mothers, according to

[Genesis 20:12](#). So while Abram was truthful to a certain extent, he clearly wanted to disguise his actual motive. In any event, Abram was right to be concerned about Sarai's "*beautiful countenance*" because she immediately began to attract some unwanted attention upon their arrival in Egypt...

***"So it was, when Abram came into Egypt, that the Egyptians saw the woman, that she was very beautiful. The princes of Pharaoh also saw her and commended her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken to Pharaoh's house. He treated Abram well for her sake. He had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female servants, female donkeys, and camels" (Genesis 12:14-16).***

This passage introduces us to Pharaoh, a name that carries a great deal of historic and Biblical significance. Just as many have held the title of "President," "King," or "Prime Minister" in various nations today, there were many who held the position of "Pharaoh" during the Old Testament period.

The word "Pharaoh" means "great house," and it was used as a term of respect in much the same way we might use a term like "your honor," or "your majesty" today. In addition to that title, each Pharaoh had a personal name, like Neco, Rameses, or Tutankhamen, as well.

Pharaoh was viewed as an individual who had descended from the gods. Therefore, he was also regarded as a god among the people of his kingdom. Because of this, a Pharaoh was the single most powerful figure within Egyptian society during that period.

Each Pharaoh held complete authority over the Egyptian people. He possessed the ability to confiscate property, imprison others, or execute a death sentence upon anyone he wished. Given the magnitude of that power, Abram's concern was certainly justified. And sure enough, "*...when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace" (Genesis 12:15 NIV).*

So Sarai was taken away to join the harem, just as Abram feared. But once again, Someone had other plans...

***"But the LORD plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife" (Genesis 12:17).***

So Abram's ploy led to significant repercussions for Pharaoh and his officials, even though they had done nothing intentionally wrong. That led to a ripple of unintended consequences for Abram...

***"And 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'? I might have taken her as my wife. Now therefore, here is your wife; take her and go your way.' So Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they sent him away, with his wife and all that he had" (Genesis 12:18-20).***

Judging from Pharaoh's response, it almost sounds as if he felt disgusted with Abram; Abram deceived him, and Pharaoh was penalized as a result. The only thing left for Pharaoh to do was essentially to say, "*Take your wife and everything else you own and get out!*"

Abram's example reminds us that we should be careful in the way we represent God to others. As we're reminded in the New Testament book of Philippians, "*...conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (Philippians 1:27 NAS).*