

Can We Determine God's Will Through Circumstances?

By David DeWitt

Genesis 12:17-20 *But the LORD struck Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. Then 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 go." Pharaoh commanded his men concerning him; and they escorted him away, with his wife and all that belonged to him.*

The nature of the disease or diseases is not known. Many have suggested they were the kind of illness that prevented Pharaoh from having sexual relations with Sarah. It was not hard for Pharaoh to figure out that having Sarah was the problem because as soon as she arrived he and his house became severely ill with *great plagues*.

The question is, **does this allow us to determine God's will through our circumstances?**

- Neither Pharaoh nor Abram had a written Scripture from God. Following circumstances as a sign from God assumes there is not a sufficient Scripture to apply to the situation.
- Sarah was part of one of the most determinative works of God in all of history – the Abrahamic Covenant. This was not a sign for an ordinary event in the life of the average believer, like what car I should buy or person to marry. This event steered the course of biblical prophecy and human history.
- Neither Abram nor anyone in his household determined the will of God through circumstances. Even the famine that forced Abram to decide to go to Egypt was not considered as a sign for determining God's will. If Abram looked at the famine as a sign, how would he know if it meant God was testing his faith to see if he would stay in the Negev, or directing him to go to Egypt?
- There was nothing vague about this sign. The meaning could not be missed. This was not a general disaster, like the famine in Canaan, or, say, an earthquake or a flood. It was not a vague personal incident that may or may not be interpreted as a sign from God. It was aimed specifically and severely at Pharaoh and his house as soon as Sarah arrived.

Pharaoh was angry with Abram. He asked 3 questions, all basically the same asked in three ways. Actually, none are questions anyway, they are all accusations. Pharaoh is angry and Abram is kicked out of the country.

Many commentators seem to agree with Pharaoh and are outraged at Abram's decision. Gordon J. Wenham in "The Word Bible Commentary" concludes, "The scene ends with Abram's leaving Egypt in silent ignominy, leading us to anticipate rather different behavior when his faith was next put to the test." Abram left in ignominy? That means some say Abram left in public shame and disgrace. Really? He left with his beautiful wife safe and sound, all his servants and cattle in good health, plus more *sheep and oxen and donkeys and male and female servants and female donkeys and camels* given to him by Pharaoh. Disgrace? It seems it's "Mission Accomplished." Whether God bailed him out or rewarded his ingenuity is not stated. So we should not state such.

Also, how does Wenham know this was a "test" Abram failed? And why would we "anticipate rather different behavior" next time. Actually, we see the same behavior next time with no reprimand either time, and more goods both times. A reprimand from Pharaoh is hardly one from God. Abram said nothing (recorded) to Pharaoh. But we might say to Pharaoh, "Where do you get off being so self-righteous? You are the one who just went out and took a woman as a wife. Did you court her or ask her if she wanted to be your wife, or did you just kidnap her without the permission of her or her family? Just because she is beautiful does not give you the right to kidnap her from her people and take her into your household. You should be glad you are getting out of this with your life!" Many parallels are made between this and the Israelite captivity with its exodus from Egypt nearly 500 years later.

- Both went to Egypt because of a famine
- Both were delivered by the intervention of God
- Both involved a plague on Pharaoh and his household
- Both increased their wealth by carrying goods out of Egypt

But if these two sojourns are in parallel, we might also point out the Israelite sojourn began with

- A good guy (Joseph)
- Who got them there by the righteous act of deceiving his brothers by withholding information
- They left Egypt with a good guy (Moses) who was obedient to God

There is no clear scheming unfaithful patriarch who failed God's test—in either incident!