Subsequently the text says that Abraham went to Egypt to sojourn there (cf. Gen. 12:10), that is, to live for a while. Again we see how it appears that God intended to annul all the promises he had made to Abraham, although he remains in Canaan in the integrity of his faith, steadfast, a pilgrim in the land. And even though he understands that famine is chasing him from that place, he always remains confident that God did not intend to disappoint his expectations. Now the rest of the story cannot be explained at this time.

Let us follow that example so closely that when we have many opportunities to stray from the narrow road, we will always have our eyes fixed on God and aspire to the heritage he proposes for us, and let us make every effort to draw nearer to it until he completely gathers us in.

Now let us bow before the majesty of our gracious God in acknowledgment of our faults, praying that he will be pleased to cleanse us of them and forget them so that they will not count against us. And may he so mortify us in all our thoughts and feelings that, after renouncing all our lusts and all that is repugnant to his holy calling, we will be governed by his Holy Spirit so that we will walk in this world in such a way that we will hold steadfastly to the path he sets before us without deviating from it to the left or to the right. And let us have such strength and constancy that we will always continue in his service and overcome all the hindrances which confront us, those times when he will hold our hand, and may he lift us above the entire world so that we may say truly from our hearts that we are citizens of heaven, that it is there that our treasure lies, and that our whole soul is given to that pursuit. May he grant that grace not only to us but to all the peoples and nations on earth.

And there was a famine in the land: and Abram went down into Egypt to sojourn there; for the famine was grievous in the land. And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon: Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife: and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive. Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee (Gen. 12:10-13).
SERMONS ON GENESIS 11-20

a foreigner all his life, he rests in what he is told, namely, that his seed will possess the earth even though he has no children (cf. Gen. 12:7). But his faith overcomes all that might have come to his mind and caused him to reverse his course. But when famine forces him to go into Egypt and leave the country to which God had led him as if by the hand, it seems that he has reached such an extremity that there is no longer a way to obtain what God had promised him before.

But the fact remains that he continues to hold fast the promise which is given to him despite the fact it seemed to have been completely withdrawn. But we can surmise from this comment which Moses makes that he came into Egypt to be a foreigner, for it is not his intention to return to his country, but his heart remains attached to the land of Canaan because he knows that God wants him to live there. Nevertheless, it is impossible for him to live there at the time, for otherwise he would die of hunger and want. So he goes into Egypt with the confidence that that country is like a pledge that God will not default on his promise. Now it is true that this pledge slips from his hands and he is deprived of it, but he is content with the simple word, just as our faith can be approved only if we are content with God's simple truth even if all else fails.

In addition, we also have to note that this trial was all the more grievous and bitter because he had left a fertile and abundant land if there ever was one, even according to the pagans who wrote about it. Furthermore, he was not at all poor there, for we have seen that he had some possessions and substance. He had family. He had menservants and maidservants and animals (cf. Gen. 12:5). Consequently, because he was well-to-do there and had advantages in the country of his birth, he must have been all the more distressed when he sees himself besieged by death, so to speak, because of the famine, for he was not accustomed to suffering poverty. We even see that the inhabitants of the country stay close together for mutual assistance. The one who used to have animals and a lot of people has no intermediary. Even though he has money, he nonetheless enjoys no sense of calm, for we know that in times of scarcity, each person keeps to himself. There is such distrust that if someone has wheat in his granary, he keeps it well hidden and locked up, for it seems that death threatens the richest.

So there we have Abraham pressed by extremities beyond all others. Consequently, he had to be armed in every situation with superhuman power and strengthened by God's Holy Spirit, or he would have failed a hundred times. That is especially worth noting because, as we mentioned before, we are such delicate creatures that we can endure almost nothing. And when we encounter some difficulty, we think we deserve some exemption in God's sight because he ought to excuse us from more since he knows our frailty. That is the way we react. But the fact is that we must follow Abraham if we are to be considered children of God because he is the father of all believers (cf. Gen. 12:3; 17:4; Rom. 4:11). So we must conform ourselves to his life when he shows us the way to obey God; otherwise, boast as we will that we are believers, we will be denied by God and his angels unless we keep fellowship with our father Abraham and follow his example according to the measure of our faith. And if we cannot reach his level of attainment, we must still work at achieving it.

Therefore, although men find themselves under constraints after living bountifully and God so cuts back on their rations that they subsist on scanty fare, whereas they had been accustomed to enjoying a table well furnished with all the trimmings, let them learn to control themselves with such restraint that they can thank God with will and spirit as if they had all the abundance and variety in the world. And even if we should have to endure poverty and want, let us be aware that we are not more privileged than our
father Abraham. All the more reason, then, that those who have always been of low estate and little influence should not be grieved when they experience great difficulty in earning their bread and, often finding the cupboard bare, do not know what they are to eat. For if Abraham, after enjoying many comforts, was not overcome by dearth, what will be the lot of those who are surely thoroughly accustomed to hard times because God has long held them on a short leash? So let us learn from that example not to miss what we have left behind. There are some in that situation. Even though they have nothing, they continue to have affections for a native land. ‘Oh everything was nice there. We had so many conveniences!’ We have a picture of our father Abraham, for he was in an earthly paradise, so to speak. The land of Chaldea was rich and fertile from one end to the other and very pleasant. In fact, when we look at everything closely, that was the place of the earthly paradise in which God placed the first man. Yet Abraham is taken out of it. So when we make a comparison between one country and another, we will be greatly distressed, for there are those who are easily angered and incensed against God and bitter, for they could be easy-going and peaceable depending on the situation in which God placed them. So they could eat the bread provided for them and thank God, but they take pleasure in talking about what they remember: ‘We had this, and we had that.’ Some will be able to remember enough about all that, and yet they will not be troubled about it. If they talk about one thing, it will be to say, ‘For a while, God showed us his grace in this way and provided for us and treated us very gently, but now, if he is pleased to cut back on our provisions, well, we have to bear it patiently.’ That, I say, is how some will recommit themselves to God even though life is not as easy as they were used to. But others will take pleasure in suffering an unpleasant situation and chafing about it: ‘Oh, I used to have such and such, and now I am much worse off. Life was easier then; now I am enduring a great deal.’ Now let us note from what we are told about our father Abraham that such destructive thinking must be put out of our minds. Whatever our situation may be, let us follow the path God sets before us. And even though we sometimes encounter storms that uproot us in some way or another, may we always be restored to the right path, and may our affection never grow cold so that we turn away from what God proposes for us. That, in brief, is what we have to remember.

It is true Abraham was a stranger in the land of Canaan, as he was in Egypt, as Jacob states later. Even so, he acknowledged the land of Canaan as his proper dwelling place. Egypt was a foreign country to him. Why so? Did he have lands or possessions in the land of Canaan? No. Did he have kinsmen or friends there? We know that he was unknown and that, in that land, he was like a person lost. After leaving the land of Chaldea, he renounced and practically forgot the place he was born. Why? Because God no longer wants him to be there. So Abraham puts out of his mind any thought which could turn him from God’s calling. In the meantime, since the word was given to him, he will be lord of the land of Canaan, or his seed after him will be. That word is a bond which cannot be broken, a bond that is for him more powerful than all the ropes and chains in the world. He remains there like a captive in freely accepted and voluntary servitude. Inasmuch as God assigned that land to him, Abraham does not doubt that God will fulfill his promise. That, then, is how Abraham conducts himself among the Canaanites as if he had been born there. In fact, the word which was given to him is like a second birth. He had to

Once again Calvin is surely addressing the French refugees who were fleeing repression and seeking haven in Geneva. Cf. a letter of Calvin’s to Ambroise Blaurer dated early February and contemporary with this sermon. In it Calvin speaks of the French situation and the repression. See CO, letter 3161, col. 15. — M.E.

The closest reference is in Genesis 47:28-30, where Jacob asks Joseph to bury him outside of Egypt, in the land of his fathers. — M.E.
become a new man and renounce both himself and everything he might cling to in Chaldea. So, because of the word, he possesses the land of Canaan as if he had been born there. As for the land of Egypt, good and productive as it was, where he might have been able to live in complete comfort, the fact is that he understood that God is calling him elsewhere. And that is why, despite the fact that necessity forces him to go into Egypt, he concludes that it will not be forever and that he will forthwith be able to have a way to live in the land of Canaan, that he will return there, and that Egypt will mean nothing to him. In that way, as I said, we are sufficiently taught and exhorted to close our eyes to every distraction that might turn as from the true path God is directing us to or that could cause us to stumble or impede our progress. Let none of that influence us, and let us be firmly resolved to obey God not for a day or a month, but with perseverance until the end.

And even if we can find many ways to rationalize our failings before men and they accept our pretence and outward appearance, and even if they have pity on us and forgive us because of our weakness when our trials are great, let us not think that, as a consequence, it will go easier for us before God. As we have seen previously, when things are difficult for us and even seem to be completely impossible, it is then that God is examining us and testing whether we have an unfaithful and hypocritical heart or whether we are walking in truth and integrity before him, preferring his will above all else. So much, then, for the point Moses makes about Abraham's withdrawing into Egypt.

And Moses even repeats his point to show the virtue of Abraham's faith better, for when he says that the famine was grievous, it is as if he were saying Abraham was not raised up for an insignificant event. So, many people today will convince themselves that there is a famine when they only have white bread to eat and wine to drink. For them, everything is lost. That is when they go take their chances elsewhere. So

Moses shows us that Abraham did not pull up stakes on a whim and that he suffered hunger and severe lack before departing, but it was only after he reached the end of endurance and was no longer able to do more and there was nothing left for himself or his animals, as if a whirlwind had snatched everything away. That was the circumstance that drove him to Egypt. From that we understand how difficult that trial was for him, but the hardest part was when Abraham had to depart from this country which had been assigned to him by the very mouth of God. We must always remember what was shown earlier, namely, that although God does not dislocate all believers and transfer them to another country, we must not settle down and make ourselves comfortable anywhere as if we were to stay there forever, but we must go and come according to God's pleasure. And that attitude must be practiced by those who would like to stay in one place, where some have to work the fields while others are engaged in other kinds of activities. Well, Abraham does not have that kind of choice. Even so, God always advises his people that they are not to cling to the world as if they were attached to it (cf. Heb. 11:13), but they must always be poised to depart, whenever it pleases him to have them go through open fields, facing the wind and the rain, not for just a day or a month, but throughout their lives, if they happen to be harassed by all nations and tossed from pillar to post, so to speak. May they learn to endure it.

We come now to what Moses adds when Abraham is approaching Egypt. He says to his wife, 'I see that you are beautiful and will be desired by these people. Someone will want to have you and will kill me because of you if it is known that I am your husband. Then say that I am your brother so that they will leave me alone and favour me for your sake.' Moses here shows us that there is a flaw in Abraham's perfection. He was like an angel among men,
but, even so, his weakness was revealed. This does not show us that his faith was overwhelmed or destroyed, but that the most perfect still harbour some vice and stain such that if God wanted to judge them rigorously, they would be condemned along with all their virtues. But in order to understand the end of this story and learn from it the lesson it contains, let us note that Abraham, as I have already said, was not overcome, nor was his faith, but he stumbled along the way. He did not go astray; he did not turn from the way; he always followed his calling; he always strove for his goal. But as a man who is walking can stumble along the way, if he comes upon a bad spot or is wearied beyond measure so that he can scarcely drag his feet, there is always the possibility, as I said, of a jarring encounter. Yet he continues to hold to his path. That is what happened to our father Abraham.

Now that is worth noting for several reasons. Those who have contempt for God, who are like vicious dogs which can only bark when they cannot bite, reproach Abraham for being a pimp for his wife in order to save his life. What kind of coward is he? Would not a courageous man prefer to die a hundred times than to expose himself to the shame of having a wife who is a prostitute, of seeing it with his own eyes, and of living with it? How is it, then, that anyone can prize so many virtues in that man? That is how Satan unleashes poisoned tongues to obscure the favours God has showered down on Abraham, as many as on any other living creature. But it is quite certain Abraham possessed love, which is incomprehensible to such scoundrels, for they have only their rotten lives and are so wrapped up in them that all their senses are in a stupor.

Now Abraham, as we have seen, did not waste his time with this world, its pleasures, its sensuality, its wealth, its ease, or anything else. In short, as we have said, he was truly passing through this world and aspiring after heaven. And how is it that he is now fearing so much for his life? It is not out of concern for his person. We have already said that all of Abraham’s senses were collected and focused on the word which was given to him. He was a complete captive to that and did not wander from it a single step. He did not make the changes in his life, as do the wise of the world who want to arrange everything a hundred years after their death. Abraham was like a poor blind man who was allowing himself to be led by God’s hand and, as I have mentioned, did not allow himself the liberty of letting his imagination go and wondering what might happen and what would become of one thing or another. The entirety of Abraham’s wisdom, therefore, lay in obeying God, depending on his promises and taking refuge in them.

Let us now look at what God promised him: that that land would be given to his seed and that in him all the nations of the earth would be blessed (cf. Gen. 12:3). We see here an Abraham who realized he was wretched because he and all the rest have been corrupted in Adam. So he knows there is a curse upon him and all men because all are enemies of God and cut off from his righteousness (cf. Rom. 5:10). Now God cannot renounce himself, and we are filled with sin and corruption. Thus God cannot love us and, as we have seen, he disavows us because we are not worthy of being considered among his children. Abraham, realizing that, has the promise by which he is removed from the general confusion of the entire human race. Now God told him that in his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. Consequently, if his trust is in God’s word, his life is necessarily more precious to him than the whole world. We are not talking about a life of thirty years or even forty that might remain to him when he might have lived five hundred more, but about God who, when he withdraws him from this world and the earthly pilgrimage, shows him that his inheritance is in heaven. How? By that hope he had given him that in him all nations of the earth would be blessed. So he sees that his
life involves the redemption and eternal salvation of the world, as
much for himself as for others. With that understanding, he is not
concerned for redeeming himself for a short period of time and
prolonging his days for an unknown period. He does not spend his
time on anything transitory, but he knows that if he is killed, all
will be lost and the Redeemer of the world, in whom his hope for
salvation lies, will be lost at the same time.

So that is why Abraham prizes his life so highly and why he
is content to suffer the shame of having his wife taken from him
when someone abuses her as a prostitute. Yet it is quite certain that
Abraham was not excused in the least. His faith is good and holy.
And even in that it is clear that his faith was tested better. It is
certain that if he had had a different consideration than this life, he
would have preferred to have himself killed and even suffer a hun­
dred deaths, had it been possible, than to endure the degradation
of having his wife snatched from him, who is even a kinswoman.
If there had been only the matter of kinship, it would have been
unbearably distressing. But if he had been cut off from the other
half of his person and had suffered such dishonour and shame that
his wife was a prostitute, and if he had been exposed to mock­
ery as a consequence, it is certain that, had he been attached to
this world, he would not have valued his life more highly than his
wife's chastity. Consequently, when he wants to redeem her, it is
certain that he does so because of the affection and zeal that he has for
obtaining the fulfilment of God's promises. So we see in this fault
and this weakness which befell him the strength of his faith, which
is indeed admirable.

It is as if he renounced what was dearest and
most delightful to him in the world in order to acquire what he
expected and hoped for from God.

When the meaning of the word faith is discussed and how it
can be recognized, we will always come to this point, namely, that
we will disregard everything that is present and we will not be
deluded by all of the enticements of this world and led from the
path God shows us. Abraham had that kind of faith.

We already see in that an act worthy of great praise, wherein
Abraham is ready to leave his wife in order to redeem his life. As
we have said, we must not imagine that Abraham was held back
at this point because he loved the earth, but that he was waiting
until God raised up seed for him and accomplished what he had
said. So this is the point where Abraham failed: that was only one
way. And that is why I gave the example of a man who will follow
his path, even though it is painful. A man will be obliged to take
a trip. The road is long. There will be many hardships. The road
will be difficult. In addition, he will have to jump over hedges and
walk among thorns and brush. The road will be rough and he will
be more exhausted after a half mile than he would have been after
device miles on an open road. That is Abraham's situation. Even
so, although the road was very difficult and he encountered many
obstacles and hardships, his goal was always before his eyes, and
he never wavered.

In addition, he stumbled, as I said, in this particular, but he did
not fall and then say, 'What am I to do? I have to go back and start
over again.' So he was not in a hurry to go astray, but after falling,
he was immediately put back on his feet, and God had a hand in
it, as we will see, for he had pity on his servant's weakness since
he never permits his own to remain in their fallen condition, but
he lifts them up even though they stumble and fall hard. Even so,
Abraham held fast to God's promise. Yet, having that, he has a lot.
And then Abraham always had his eyes on what God was call­
ing him to and he followed his course. He failed only by creating
for himself a procedure which was not allowed. He was supposed
to place everything in God's providence. If we ask, 'What should
he have done since he found himself in such a perplexing situa­
tion?' It is clear he would have been killed. And what would have
happened to the promise he had been given? At that point, as I have said, he should have had recourse to God and closed his eyes, as he had done at the outset, and said, 'Oh Lord, you have to reach out to me, for what will happen if you do not help me? Here I am on the edge of a cliff. Even your promises will be blotted out. And I am helpless. And because I hoped in you, I will have worked in vain while wanting to obey you. So, Lord, since I find myself in such a hard place, show that you never forget and abandon your people.'

So Abraham had to pray that way and adhere to what God had impressed upon his heart previously: that he was powerful. For this attribute which God had declared of himself was to mitigate those times of anguish and distrust which tested Abraham. In fact, we have to follow the same rule, namely, that as often as God calls himself all powerful (cf. Gen. 17:1; Exod. 6:3; Rev. 1:8), he is judging the world and, with all knowledge, is disposing of all things in accordance with his will. He did not say that just to magnify himself and give lustre to his glory, but so that we may be sustained by his power. And although we see everything in confusion in the world, let us not at the same time relinquish our rest in him. Why not? Because God has means at his disposal that we do not know about. Therefore, Abraham was not to wonder how he could preserve his life, but he was to place all of that in God's hand and surrender everything to him. It is God's responsibility to pull us back from abysses when we are about to fall into them, pull us back in such a way that it is like a dream, just as the psalm says when it speaks of the restoration of the church, that the faithful were as in a dream, for God thus overcomes all their experiences (cf. Psa. 107:26–28). Such must be the experience of each particular individual when God delivers us from an unusual situation which we would never have imagined or understood.

So then we see Abraham's fault. It now remains for us to profit from this story. In the first place, let us learn not to be pleased, as if our faith were perfect, when we virtuously obey God, when we valiantly struggle against many attacks, and let us not be so filled with pride that we convince ourselves that we have arrived at some level of perfection, for if we could achieve a hundred times more than anyone else, Abraham has still surpassed us all. And yet we see in his stumbling that there was still something to criticize, that he was weak, and that he was not so cleansed of what belonged to his flesh and his nature that there was no remnant of it in him. He himself would never have thought that he had wandered in that way from God's will. He did it indirectly. That, then, is a shortcoming so deeply hidden within him that he is not aware of it but is suddenly caught off guard by it.

So let us not pat ourselves on the back, but let us always examine what is in us, and then we will see clearly that we are very far from our goal and that the powers that God has placed in us are mingled among the many vices by which we are still marred. And when we recognize our faults and are humbled and displeased by them, let us learn to practice what David says, for when he says, 'Blessed is the man whose transgression is forgiven and whose faults are covered, and whose iniquities are pardoned', he adds, 'and in whose spirit there is no deceit' (cf. Psa. 32:1–2). Now it would seem on the surface that that comment was superfluous or that David suddenly changed horses in midstream, as they say. But when saying that, he shows us that we sense how indebted we are to God, how we need his mercy and his support throughout our lives, that is, whenever we willingly acknowledge our vices. Otherwise, why is it that men are without hope and God's mercy means nothing to them? The reason is that hypocrisy so blinds them that they do not recognize their need. So that is where we have to begin: there is no deceit in our minds, that is, our senses are not so deadened that we deceive ourselves and convince ourselves that we are what we are not. So much for that point.
Thus, when our hypocrisy has been purged and our eyes have been opened and all our senses have been awakened so that we know what kind of people we are, we will indeed be aware, as I have said, that many weaknesses and imperfections remain in us. And even though we do not recognize them, God knows them, for he sees incomparably more clearly than we do.

What we have to remember, then, is that if Abraham, who had an angelic faith, that is, a faith that is more than human, since he is the pattern of all of God’s children—if he fell short, what will happen to us? So let us learn to back away from such a danger and not be too wise and be unduly curious about what is to happen and consequently seek consultations and make our plans based on imaginative thinking. There is nothing more at variance with faith than when men let themselves consult together and think, ‘We will do this, and then we will do that.’ They are, I say, preoccupied with their own notions. It is as if they are possessed when they think they can arrange everything. So when men discuss their speculations among themselves and say, ‘This is what will happen, and that will follow,’ then they are ready to deliberate. And when they engage in their deliberations, they are closing the door to God. They want to be wise in their own thinking. And unfortunately, as a consequence, they have to stumble and fall. It is true that Abraham only stumbled, as we pointed out, but even so God helped him miraculously. Yet let us be careful not to abuse God’s patience.

So the real remedy for remaining steadfast and not weakening and not stumbling from the right path, is not to resist when we find ourselves in difficulties, in times of discontentment and worry and care, but to commend it all to God’s providence because everything is in his hand.

It is true that when we realize God is vigilant in our behalf and has taken us into his care, he will sustain us until the end, but we must not, as a consequence, let that keep us from utilizing the means he has placed in our hands and permits us to use. Faith does not make us unfeeling or stupid, but God joins the spirit of counsel and discretion with faith and will show his servants how they are to walk, and when they are perplexed, they will see more clearly than all those who have a broad experience in the world. Still, let us be careful not to become involved in enterprises and deliberations that conform to our senses and notions. Whenever we do so, as I have said, we will plunge into an abyss we will never be able to get out of. In those times we will immediately look for unacceptable means, for it is not for the entire undertaking that our intention is good and that the act itself is approved by God. I am talking about the main undertaking. There are also incidental and accompanying acts. So when we want to follow the path that God proposes for us, we must not follow just any path, but we must let ourselves be completely guided by him. And, as I said, we must find our rest in God’s providence, where there is no lack of acceptable means.

So if we are at our wits’ end, as we say, and if we have looked for solutions, if we do not find that God gives us a way to escape the continuing danger which holds us back, we must return to what Abraham will say later after learning in God’s school: ‘The Lord will provide’ (cf. Gen. 22:8).

Here, then, is the second thing we need to remember about this passage: if it falls our lot to be terrified and discouraged in the face of troubles and dangers, as we all must pass that way, God wants to humble us by those circumstances and at the same time draw us to himself so that we will learn to surrender our entire lives to him. Whenever we do that, let us not try to be too ingenious or clever, and especially let us be on guard against putting God’s word to the test in any circumstance, and let us not be bold and foolhardy like those who are always adding to what God declares with his mouth, but let us realize that God is restraining us and does not wish to let
our appetites run free but wishes to keep us in his embrace when we are deprived of means which are in conformity with his word and are clearly given to us by him. When we realize that, God will be appropriately honoured. As for us, we will experience that there is nothing better than to cling to him and thank him that all the wisdom in the world does not come close to his counsel, which we cannot comprehend and which he employs in such a way that we will be transported with admiration and confess that he has always surpassed our faith, great as it may have been, and that our hope was empty in comparison with the outcome which he has made known to us. That is how we must walk, in part, in accordance with the example of our father Abraham and, in part, in the knowledge that his failure, which cannot be excused, warns us so that we will be the more encouraged to call upon our God and let his word and Holy Spirit guide us.

Now let us bow before the majesty of our gracious God in acknowledgment of our faults, praying both that he will make us so aware of them that we will be brought to a true repentance and that we will work every day to withdraw from our fleshly affections and everything that keeps us from obeying his holy word. Let us take more and more advantage of our faith and our fear of his name until we finish our course and are gathered into his eternal kingdom, where we will enjoy the fruit of the victory he has promised us and which we will obtain by his power, provided we do not fail along the way. So let us all now say, God Almighty, heavenly Father, we acknowledge and confess as true that we are not worthy of lifting our eyes to heaven to present ourselves before your face.

And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon: Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife: and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive. Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee. And it came to pass, that, when Abram was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair. The princes also of Pharaoh saw her, and commended her before Pharaoh: and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And he entreated Abram well for her sake: and he had sheep, and oxen, and he asses, and menservants, and maidservants, and she asses, and camels (Gen.12:11-16).

And it came to pass, when he was come near to enter into Egypt, that he said unto Sarai his wife, Behold now, I know that thou art a fair woman to look upon: Therefore it shall come to pass, when the Egyptians shall see thee, that they shall say, This is his wife: and they will kill me, but they will save thee alive. Say, I pray thee, thou art my sister: that it may be well with me for thy sake; and my soul shall live because of thee. And it came to pass, that, when Abram was come into Egypt, the Egyptians beheld the woman that she was very fair. The princes also of Pharaoh saw her, and commended her before Pharaoh: and the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And he entreated Abram well for her sake: and he had sheep, and oxen, and he asses, and menservants, and maidservants, and she asses, and camels (Gen.12:11-16).

YESTERDAY WE SAW that Abraham preferred to abandon his wife rather than to lose his life because he was waiting for the blessing God had promised him and he knew that his life was more precious. So his intention is good and holy, for there was a singular value in him that was worth suffering the shame which he subjected himself to and dying a hundred times for, but he still fell short in respect of how to proceed. For as
we have shown, he did not show God the honour that belonged to him at all times and in all places. That is, when depending on God’s providence, he was ready for any situation that might occur. So that is how Abraham acted too hastily when trying to fix the situation with an illicit solution. He was nonetheless guilty on that point, even though he did not go completely wrong and his faith tended in the right direction.

And since one evil attracts another, there is deceit, which cannot be excused, for he tells his wife, Sarai, to say that she is his sister or kinswoman. For these words ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ in Hebrew signify other degrees of kinship, such as uncles’ relation to nephews, nieces, and first cousins. In that way, it is quite true that Sarai, as we saw in the preceding chapter, was Abraham’s sister, for she was a rather close relation, but the response Abraham puts in her mouth is not without fiction, that is, it is not without trickery or deceit. It is not a lie, if we wanted to define it as knowingly putting something forth as false. We will not say that, in that sense, either Abraham or Sarai lied, for what she says about being his sister is not against the truth, for she was his kinswoman. Still that equivocation is not without some vice, for we must not dispute about words as do the sophists, who think they deceive God with their crafty and deceitful ploys, but we must always deal with the substance of the matter.

Speech is given to us so we can communicate with one another. Consequently, the language of pagans is called the heart’s image. And the truth is that we also experience it. When some speak to others, they have means by which to express their emotions and thoughts, which were hidden and unknown. Since nature shows us that God endowed us with speech so that we can express what is in our hearts, it is certain the person who pretends to be what he is not abuses the gift of language and rejects the order of nature.

Consequently, Abraham, in that situation, failed again. All the more must we learn to keep ourselves on a short leash because as soon as we veer slightly from the path, one evil attracts another, and another, and another, endlessly, and vices become so entangled that the person who thought he glimpsed a very small and insignificant sin in himself finds himself enveloped in a much greater one, and he will finally be convicted of heaping evil upon evil. That is what happened to our father Abraham.

Now when we look at such a patriarch, a man outstanding in all virtues, who is presented to everyone as a mirror of holiness and perfection, and see that he forgot who he was, what will happen to us by comparison? At this point, it is not a matter of using Abraham as an excuse, as do many who think they are at least halfway absolved when they point out that the most saintly were not without vices. But the Holy Spirit shows us the opposite is true. We have to be on our guard and walk even more carefully. In short, that example shows us how necessary it is for us to adhere to the teaching in which Paul condemns all lies and adds that we are to speak the truth with one another (cf. Eph. 4:25). In other words, there is to be no pretence and deceit. And Scripture, not without reason, speaks of a double tongue when we do not speak plainly and sincerely (cf. 1 Tim. 3:8). But that is not the whole story, as I have said. Words cannot be blamed, but if the heart does not respond and there is no conformity between our inner thoughts and our speech, we are already condemned. And then, when our language is doubtful and distorted, people do not know what to make of it because of ambiguity, for it sometimes happens that a person will not be able to express his thoughts clearly. But when we intend to speak knowingly and willingly with a double tongue and no one can make heads or tails of what we say, that too is an inexcusable vice. Therefore, let us realize that Moses is testifying that Abraham is condemned here so that we may know that no
one is so perfect that he does not go astray, that he is without shortcomings, and that he does not need God’s mercy.

In addition, Moses is also teaching us to be more diligent to walk in fear and apprehension, for if the most saintly of those who have set out to dedicate themselves completely to God are still held back by some weakness or other, how will we manage, we who are far removed from their zeal and can scarcely follow in their footsteps at a great distance? That ought to motivate us not to think highly of ourselves.

Also, for the future, let us be advised not to forgive ourselves of a vice, however small, for the moment the devil finds a very small opening, it is certain he will make it larger and gain entrance when we are not thinking about him. So we must pay even closer attention to what we are told here.

It is true that some have gone to a great deal of trouble to excuse Abraham and, as I have already said, if we do not give attention to simple statements, we will not say that Abraham’s response contained the substance of a lie. And we will likewise see that that is the way he answered Pharaoh. Yet he did not try to justify himself completely. As for us, because God does not engage in clever debates and the kinds of subtleties we invent, let us consider what he requires of us. In other words, let us not misrepresent situations, and let our words serve to converse plainly and simply with men.

Let us look now at what induced Abraham to misrepresent his relationship with Sarai. It was a fear that arose from distrust. There are two things to note here. One is that we must not have too great a fear, but we must walk as our Lord guides us while not carelessly creating for ourselves many perils, as is our tendency. All of us do indeed seek rest, and we avoid cares, troubles, and displeasing and perplexing things to the extent we can; yet we bring them upon ourselves. Each of us is glad to do so; each of us engages in them; each of us plunges into them; in a word, each of us drowns himself in them (cf. Rom. 7:19). Therefore, because God cares for us, let us learn to be confident that he will provide many things for what could happen to us.

Now that is not to say we must not be completely unaware, like logs of wood, of what is happening, for our Lord, as we mentioned earlier, has many reasons for wanting us to experience some concern that will wake us up. It is all for our training, for we are not to live here below without some feeling or concern. So God wants men to apply themselves and use the abilities he has given them. And that is why he gives them opportunities to think about them, to take counsel, and to provide for their own undertakings. In that way he counsels us to acknowledge what our state and condition are and realize that we are always surrounded by dangers and need his protection, that we must be encouraged to call upon him and always hasten to him for aid and give him the glory for it, that our lives are suspended by a thread unless they are sustained by him, and that we would be immediately defeated without his power. That is why we said we must be keenly aware of the dangers which threaten us.

And then there is the matter of restraint, which means that we must heed our Lord’s exhortation not to worry about the next day (cf. Matt. 6:34). In other words, we must avoid our customary concern about changing situations, those times when we say, ‘What is apt to happen? What will become of this? What will be the result of that?’ When we are disturbed by such fears, it is certain we are guilty of a lack of faith. We are miserable enough when we think only of living through a day, for we cannot reach midnight before something else angers and torments us. And what will happen when we take note of all the annoying things which might happen to us afterward? What kind of burden will that be? Is that not enough to break our backs? So let us learn to be calm.
and peaceful and to be in fear, not frightened like those who are afraid of their shadow or at the sound of a falling leaf. And if a storm arises, they are so frightened they cannot be comforted. Let us to be wary of such fear, but if we experience fear, let it be directed toward remedying an evil, as God gives us the means.

And then, distrusting our wisdom and the things that come to mind, let us make God our principal refuge, and let us make it our primary prayer that he will guide us with his counsel and wisdom. In addition to that, although he guides us in such a way that he does not permit us to help ourselves, may he supplement our deficiency with his strength, and may he so work in us that we will know that while we slept, he was being vigilant in our behalf (cf. Job 29:4; Psa. 31:23; Psa. 141:3). That, then, is a very useful point to note so that we will not be unduly disturbed by fear; for it is then that we know we are pitiable.

Then we need to observe that the fears which torment men often come from doubts they fashioned in their own minds, truly on the spur of the moment, when they distrust one another. It is true that until God remakes us, a hidden malice will remain in those who think they are more upright and sincere. It is also true that we will see a very great difference in men’s dispositions. Some men will be so inclined to evil and so filled with deceit that they will always have their nets cast to trap those who deal with them. In a word, we will always encounter in our own experience people who are totally given to that kind of evil. Others have more integrity. We can trust their word a little bit. When we deal with them, we can trust what they say. Even so, the root of pretence and lying is hidden in men’s hearts until God purges them. And since there is still some integrity around, that is a special gift of God because he does not want men to be crafty and deceitful. What would that be like? What kind of confusion would we have if every

1 Man cannot find rest apart from God, a leitmotif of Calvin.—M.E.

one of us had an evil and perverse spirit, as we see in some people? It is certain it would have been better for us all to be exterminated on the first day, for only despicable animals think of nothing but entrapping and deceiving. But those who are upright and maintain some sense of integrity are honest because God keeps a bridle on them. In any case, we would do well to distrust all men until God has put his hand on them, that is, until he guides them with his Holy Spirit and we can recognize that they have been renewed and are governed by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ than by Adam’s corruption. That much for that point.

But that distrust must also be moderated, even corrected, for it is said that love is not suspicious.² So when we are inclined to judge unfavourably and have great doubt, we always imagine: ‘Now there is someone who might do me harm. And this fellow might have a grudge and do me some dirt.’ So when we imagined such things, it is certain we wrong our neighbours. And if love is the perfect bond of unity (cf. Col. 3:14), as Paul calls it, it is certain we do a grave injustice when we are suspicious. For this passage that I quoted from Paul cannot lie (cf. 1 Cor. 13:5). So if we do not wish to be unduly fearful of what others might do to us, let us learn not to judge others wrongly. Let us learn, I say, not to judge wrongly, but let us interact with people in such a way that we consider that they, for their part, walk uprightly and honourably among us, for these suspicions often come from the fact that the wicked think others are like themselves. And in fact we will never see people more suspicious than those who lie, cheat, and defraud. For people like that think everyone is like them. And in this way they are never taken in, and they find fault with everything and everyone.

² Cf. 1 Corinthians 13:5. The spelling of ‘souppon’ [suspicion] and its derivatives varied greatly in this passage. This word must have seemed strange to the copyist. In his commentary, Calvin does not speak of suspicion; he even picks up Erasmus, who translates ‘non est fastidiosa’ [is not disdainful].—M.E.
But there will be some who are sincere, yet they continue to be suspicious because they see that the world is perverse and that they do not know what they can depend on. As a consequence, this vice is much too common. That is why we need to look for a remedy, for we also see the bad consequences which result from that vice, as we see in this passage. In short, we make great progress when we learn to commend ourselves to God and pray that he will protect us from all the craftiness and subtle deceptions of the wicked, among whom we are. And while we walk in simplicity, let us be careful not to entertain suspicions unless someone gives us a reason to do so, and let us not project that wrong on those who have been trustworthy and honest with us, at least not until we experience their malice, their betrayals, their lies or deceptions. So let us not condemn those whose vices we have no knowledge of, and let us remember this admonition of our Lord Jesus Christ: 'Judge not, that you be not judged' (cf. Matt. 7:1; Luke 6:37). For he shows us that when we rashly condemn those who have given us no reason to, we well deserve to be condemned just as rashly.

And there is this too: judgment without mercy will be accorded the person who is not kind and gentle toward his brothers (cf. Matt. 7:2; 18:23-35), for when we judge adversely, it is certain we provoke God's wrath and are not worthy of his granting us his clemency and benevolence to help us along.

That, then, is what we can learn from what happened to our father Abraham before he says, 'I know you are a beautiful woman; and when the Egyptians see you, they will kill me.' He is thinking he will be killed. Why? There is no doubt that he had heard bad reports about that country. And it was not when he was forced to go there because of the famine that he asked what kind of nation it was. And the fact remains that that did not completely excuse him. Whatever report he received before hand, he should not have condemned those he did not know. We will see later that there was good reason for him to doubt and distrust the Egyptians, but he still cannot, in this passage, be excusable, but he has to be partially excusable because he had to become guilty. If he had frankly confessed that Sarai was his wife, that fact would have been a veil of chastity to protect her, in the same way Abimelech speaks of it later (cf. Gen. 20:16). So when Abraham experiences fear and misrepresents the situation, it is as if he removed the veil of chastity from his wife and left her there exposed and available. Consequently, the evil arose because of him, his excessive fear, and the unjust suspicion which manipulated him. That much, then, for that.

At this point, we can ask how Sarai could be considered beautiful at that time. Although a woman may possess the most outstanding beauty possible, she still has to be getting wrinkled since she is over sixty years old, and at that age you would not find beauty to say that you desired it. So it does not seem that she had such a great appearance that Abraham feared that his wife's beauty might be the cause of his death, for she was, as we have already said, over sixty. But we can easily conclude that God had kept her beautiful. Even though that is not seen as ordinary, it is true that a woman without children will remain in vigour longer than one who has been fertile. We know that women decline a great deal through multiple child births, so much that their strength wanes, and their face also shows they are no longer what they used to be. That is widely observed to be true. Even so, we must not doubt that it was a special gift of God that Sarai retained her beauty.

There is this also, that at that time, because men and women lived longer, God also gave them greater strength and energy, as if he refreshed them every day. How does it happen that today a man would appear old at the age of fifty? It is because our lives

1 Calvin had had his fiftieth birthday on July 10 of the preceding year.—M.E.
are growing short. Consequently, every division of life must play its part and God has to give less to the first quarter and less to the second quarter until we come to the fourth. That accounts for the deterioration that we see today, that men are brought low in short order.

Now we must not be astonished if men had a greater vigour at that time than today, but still, beyond that, we must remember what we have already touched upon, namely, that God had preserved Sarai in her beauty just as he renewed Abraham in such a way that, after his wife's death, he was as robust as a young man who will beget a great lineage, as we will see later (cf. Gen. 23:1-25:4), and yet it is certain that he was previously decrepit. Sarai also demonstrates it, for she thinks it is a dream and a fable that she is to conceive inasmuch as she was no longer living with her husband (cf. Gen. 18:12). By that I mean the bed and that they were, because of their old age, like a couple living apart. Nevertheless, as we have said, Abraham was rejuvenated by a special gift of God. So let us conclude that beauty was maintained in Sarai. We do not know why unless God still wanted to nourish the hope he was giving his servant so he would not wonder about his wife's sterility and would wait patiently to have a lineage in accordance with the promise. Now although that beauty resulted from God's pure liberality and showed that he was favourable to his servant Abraham, we see that her beauty cost him dearly.

So let us note that all of the evidences of God's love have something unknown mixed in with them, that is, some temporal evidences of his love in this earthly life are always accompanied by something bitter. And that is so the faithful will not become intoxicated with their delights when our Lord provides them with some advantage, gives them some prosperity, and causes them to rejoice in one thing and another. Let them not overly congratulate themselves and, as I have said, let them guard against that spiritual intoxication that Scripture condemns so roundly (cf. Luke 12:16-21). That is why our Lord allows his gifts to be often mixed with trying experiences.

We particularly note here how Sarai's beauty served to comfort Abraham in his affliction, as it was not at all incomprehensible that it would, but the fact is that it would have been much better for him not to have a wife who was so beautiful and so highly regarded. All the more, then, are we taught to be satisfied with mediocrity. There are those who would like for God to be a painter and fashion women for them the way they like them, but they will never be satisfied. This feature will be too big and that feature will be too small. And sometimes men will even precipitate their own filthiness and lechery by giving great attention to dressing and beautifying their wives and wishing they had what they do not have: 'I wish my wife had more of this and less of that.' Because our appetites are thus excessive, let us learn from this example to be satisfied with mediocrity. Let those who have wives love them chastely in loyalty to their marriage vows. When that love exists, it is certain men will not be overly stimulated by their capricious appetites and will not be displeased by their wives, for, as the saying goes, there are no ugly loves. But when men and women are filthy minded and when the husband does not love his wife and the wife does not love her husband, they are already perjured because they do not maintain the faithfulness and loyalty that they promised each other. So let us note that point once again.

And whenever we happen to have lustful desires and ask God to do this or that, let that bridle immediately restrain us. Indeed, when God gives me everything I wish for, what will happen? He will make me pay dearly for it. That is how our desires and wishes are tempered. In other words, when we know that, we could soon envy our own selves if our Lord gave us everything we fancy and followed our directions precisely and at our whim. It is certain we
would be carried away and not know when to stop. That, then, is why we must remember this procedure.

Now Moses adds that the princes of the court, that is, the lords and the king's favourites, as they are called, after seeing the woman and finding her beautiful, come to Pharaoh and praise her. We can surmise from that what we have already mentioned, namely, that Sarai’s beauty was singular. For in the kingdom of Egypt, there were also beautiful women. And every time a woman comes from a strange and unknown land, the news immediately comes to the king's ears. So some excellence had to exist. But this praise brings with it the suggestion of a pimping service. It is certain that the lords and great favourites at the court did not prize Sarai's beauty except to gratify their king.

Now here we see that this corruption did not begin to reign in the courts, for princes want to be fawned over above all, and they want even more to be indulged and satisfied to the full extent of their desires. They also want everyone to bring them some device to excite them and provide them matter for indulging themselves even more. They want more than having their own lusts; they want someone to set those lusts on fire and fan them from every direction, and then they want to be presented with objects that excite them even more. Their passions are already at a fast boil, and they want the fire turned up a notch. A prince who is addicted to avarice and robbery will want someone to devise for him some new deceitful manoeuvres to garner more of the people's substance for himself and to come up with more fees and taxes. A prince who is given to gross sensuality will want everyone to talk to him about it and find ways to blunt the distinction between good and evil and remove all shame so that it seems normal and ordinary for women to be violated and so that lewd, vile, and filthy acts may be rampant everywhere. That is the way of kings.

On the other hand, those who are against them never think about anything else than to get ahead, and as ambition drives them, they also prostitute themselves in every way possible. They do not care, provided they gain favour and advance themselves. That is the reason the ears of kings and princes are filled with every kind of enticement, whose purpose is to tempt them to indulge to excess, for they seek out evil and find it, especially, as I said, those who are trusted, those self-centred people who are led by ambition because they always want to rise higher. That is why they cast aside any thought of integrity and close their eyes to it. And the result of so much bowing and scraping in the courts of princes is the creation of disorder and confusion.

So since we see that this evil is ancient, let us not find it strange today if kings incline their ears to these flatteries which please and gratify them shamelessly. And even if the toadies make them believe that black is white so that they become increasingly hardened, let us not find it strange. It is true that that is a deplorable situation, but the fact remains that we are strengthened against such offensive behaviour. That, then, is what we have to remember from this passage.

Now it is immediately added that the woman was taken into Pharaoh's palace. Here we see that it is because of the lusts of those who are not restrained by the law or any legal authority. For a king will think he is exempt from every law. It is true that if kings were aware of their purpose and to what God calls them, they would...
SERMONS ON GENESIS 11-20

have to be a law even for their own lives. In other words, they would have to be very satisfied that their example serves as a standard for everybody, and they would not, moreover, have to entertain this thought: "That is forbidden. And yet there is a punishment for that, and I am king. So I must order my life in such a way that the laws and ordinances are reflected in my life, and my life must be in accord with them." The thought of God's purpose and call should guide all kings and all princes. But they think they do not possess authority and pre-eminence unless they reject limitations and any kind of submission. That is what they make themselves believe, and in that way they withdraw from the rank of men as if they were not creatures. And they immediately forget God as if they were never to come before him. That diabolical pride exalts them above and beyond being the best regulated of people, and they take such licence that they think they are permitted to do anything.

Consequently, when we learn from this passage that Abraham's wife was taken from him, let us first realize that God has blessed us inestimably by delivering us from a tyranny where everything is permitted and where there is such excessive self-indulgence that there are no scruples about taking possession of a woman, acquiring another's substance, and even killing and oppressing the innocent.

In a word, let us realize that God grants us a special grace by not allowing the strongest to win, but that all men are held in check by some restraint. And let all those who are in some position of authority be aware that they are under the law. Therefore, let them not put forth their hands indiscriminately to engage in violence and extortion. And because we are not oppressed by tyranny, let us be quick to magnify God's grace.

And above all, whenever we compare ourselves with the many poor people who are despoiled of their substance, who are chased from their homes, pillaged and robbed, and even when seats of justice act like highway robbers and the throats of the weak and helpless are cut, let us realize that we have good reason to thank God when he is pleased to provide a better and more pleasant situation for us. Let us remain in subjection to him and thus avoid giving him the occasion to expose us to those kinds of excesses. And when kings take the liberty to become loose cannons, it is because of the people's sins, as Scripture indicates (cf. Isa. 3:1-5; Isa. 10:5-6; Jer. 27; Dan. 9). If we allowed ourselves to be governed by God and he ruled over us, it is certain he would so lead those who have judicial authority that we would see that they are acting as his hands and, in this way, he is presiding over us. That would not be apparent. But he threatens us that, if we act like ferocious animals and cannot submit to well-ordered governance but consume one another and engage in quarrels and betrayals and violent revolts, it is then that he shows us he will send us masters to chastise us in another way. In other words, he will permit another to put his foot on our necks and visit us with all kinds of cruelty.

All the more then must we give attention to this passage inasmuch as it is clearly evident today that restraint has been loosened for the many outrageous excesses committed by kings and by princes and lords. Let us, then, always walk in modesty so that God will always be in the midst of us to guide us with sovereign authority. Those who enjoy greater privilege and renown than others must also pay close attention to this example. For if in this passage the Holy Spirit condemns the king of a great country, what will be the lot of those who do not have such eminence and yet abuse their power under the pretext that they possess some high position and dignity. So let each of them refrain from cruelty and exercise the equity God commands to be written in their hearts, and let us not wait for laws that force us to do good out of the fear of punishment for our noncompliance, but let us act out of...

6 It is God who allows tyrants. Such is the teaching that Calvin gives at the end of his Institutes. Cf. Institutes IV, xx, 27-29.—M.E.
conformity to God's will and keep our desires under control. For it is certain that as long as our desires are in control, they will drive us, we will act irrationally and without good judgment, and we will not distinguish between good and evil. Consequently, if we wish to exercise equity and integrity and live together in mutual love, we must hold our desires captive, even with an iron fist, so to speak. That, then, is what we must remember about this passage.

Subsequently, the text says that Pharaoh dealt liberally with Abraham, giving him sheep and oxen, male and female asses and camels, and a larger household than he had had previously, for he had not arrived in Egypt completely poor (cf. Gen. 12:5), as we have seen. Thus, it would seem at first glance that Abraham had gained a great deal with that pretence he had contrived to hide his marriage with Sarai, for he had escaped death, the thing he feared most. We have already mentioned why his life was so precious to him, but, in the main, here he is free, having endured no hardship because of his wife.

But there is more. He is treated humanely, the king is kind to him, and more wealth comes to him than he expected. In Scripture, all of that is called God's blessing. So it would seem that Abraham had greatly profited from that dissembling and pretence which were condemned earlier. But we must, on the other hand, consider how God preserved him miraculously. And if he spared him again in this case, as in all the others, as we will point out at greater length tomorrow, let us be aware that if God provided for him so humanely, he did not do so to lessen his fault. For God does not always punish us as we deserve. But does that mean our faults are virtues? Not at all. But we are all the more obliged to humble ourselves before him and realize how pitiable we are, even though he does not compensate us in accordance with our merits.

Therefore, although it seems that Abraham found a good and effective way to save his life, to be received with kindness in Egypt, and to live there peacefully and at ease, let us not fail to judge as evil what he did against God's word. So let us not engage in deceitful deeds under the pretext that we are influenced by a worthy hope, for every day we will have occasion to say, 'And if I do this thing, will it be so bad? I will accomplish a greater good.' That will be a daily temptation, but we must resist, realizing there is contentment and well-being only in what God teaches us and in what we can do with a good conscience. In other words, let us be able to state forthrightly that we have not offended God as we seek our own welfare and advantage.

Now let us bow before the majesty of our gracious God in acknowledgment of our faults, praying that he will be pleased to renew us by his Holy Spirit so that we will not be more encased in our fleshly desires, which are that many acts of rebellion against him and his righteousness. And after he buries all our sins, may he be pleased to grant us the grace of walking in his presence with such approval that he will consider us as his children when we are guided by his Holy Spirit. And let us take advantage of that guidance as we struggle against all our weaknesses, which are always many, and by acknowledging them, let us learn to groan until he completely cleanses us of them. May he grant that grace not only to us but to all the peoples and nations on earth.