

“GOD’S FAITHFULNESS IN OUR FAILURE” **(Genesis 20:1-18)**

Some years ago, I led a home Bible study for new believers, and one week a new person showed up – a younger guy – and he sat silently through the whole study until the very end when he said he had a question. I said, “Shoot.” He said, “Do you believe a Christian can ever reach a point where they never sin?” I didn’t have to think too long about that and I said, “No, this side of heaven we will never be completely free of sin.” Then he said very authoritatively, “I don’t believe that.” He quoted a few verses then told the whole group that he had progressed in holiness to the point that he no longer sinned. My group of new believers looked at him wide-eyed, and then they looked at me to see what I would say.

I said, “Do you ever get angry?” “No, I don’t.” “Do you ever have a lustful thought?” “No, I don’t.” My group didn’t know a lot of theology, but they knew their own tendency to sin. After several minutes of going back and forth, he turned to the group and said, “Do you agree with him?” and he pointed at me. When they said “yes,” he stood up and made his way to the door. One of the members of the group – a guy named Carl – stuck out his hand as a gesture of goodwill, but the man refused to shake his hand and stomped out of the room like an Old Testament prophet who was shaking the dust off his feet. We took a vote and all agreed that he had just committed a sin. To this day, whenever I see Carl, we stick our hands out to shake and then take it back.

It would certainly be nice if we reached a point in the Christian life where we no longer struggled with sin, but the reality is that we do. Alan Redpath, a British pastor, said, “The conversion of a soul is the miracle of a moment, but the manufacture of a saint is the task of a lifetime.” As long as we are in our earthly bodies there is always more room for growth, there are hidden pockets of sin to be dealt with, and character flaws that need to be refined. The goal is not perfection, but progress. As the Apostle Paul said of his pursuit of knowing Christ... “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me” (Philippians 3:12). One day we will be made perfect when we see Christ face to face in heaven, but until then we are unfinished products.

Abraham was just such an unfinished product, and if we were to chart his spiritual growth, it would look like the line on an EKG machine that spikes up and spikes down. Abraham was a man of incredible faith, but he was not without his flaws and failures, and in Genesis 20 we see one of those failures. At the same time, we also see the faithfulness of God in his failure that gives hope to all of us who are imperfect.

As we move through this chapter, we’ll first view it through human lens of Abraham’s failure, and then through the divine lens of God’s faithfulness. We start with Abraham’s failure, and we see – by way of an outline – the *reoccurrence* of sin, the *repercussions* of sin, and the *response* by those who are confronted with their sin.

As we come to chapter 20, Abraham has now been walking with the Lord for 24 years after God called him to leave his pagan world behind and go to a land God would show him. God promised Abraham to make from him a great nation with many descendants, and through his family the entire world would be blessed. The ultimate blessing is Jesus – the direct descendant of Abraham – who would reverse the curse of sin and bring salvation to the world.

The tension throughout the story of Abraham is that God promised he and Sarah a son, but that son has not yet been born, and without a son none of God's plan for the world would not come about. But after 24 years of waiting, in chapter 18 the Lord tells Sarah that by this time next year she will be holding a baby boy in her arms. Their long wait is nearly over. But now in chapter 20 Abraham does something that threatens to blow everything up.

Verse 1a says, "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." Abraham made his home in Hebron, but would move about from time to time in search of new pastureland for his flocks and herds – and after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he moves about 30-40 miles to the southeast to a place called Gerar.

Verse 2... "And there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." Then Abimelek king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her." Ut-oh. In one short verse Abraham puts God's plans for his family in peril. Sarah is taken by the local king into his harem, and the whole future of God's redemptive plan for the world rests on Sarah being delivered from this king and returned to Abraham.

In Abraham's culture it was common for powerful kings to take a number of wives both because they could as well as to make political alliances. Abraham assumes that Abimelek is a pagan king who would kill him and take his wife, and out of fear lets it be known that Sarah is his sister.

If this sounds familiar it's because Abraham did the same thing in chapter 12 when he went down to Egypt and told Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister, and Pharaoh promptly took Sarah into his palace. Sarah would have become Pharaoh's wife if God had not intervened and inflicted diseases on Pharaoh and his household, which caused Pharaoh to return Sarah to Abraham.

Now the same thing happens all over again. Why? Outward sins like lying are symptoms of a deeper, underlying issue, and the issue in Abraham's case is *fear* – he's afraid of being killed – which is a natural fear – but if he simply remembered God's promises, he would have no reason to fear. God had just appeared to him and told him that he and Sarah will have a child within the year, but in a moment of panic he stops trusting God and devises his own plan. This is a reoccurring theme in Abraham's life – he trusts God, but under pressure he tries to scheme and plot his way out of trouble.

Abraham has one of what Hebrews 12:1 refers to as "besetting sins" – particular sins that we continually struggle with. When I was preaching through the seven deadly sins last year, Sharla and I discussed which of these sins we struggled with the most and which were less of a struggle – and they were different for each of us. Some of the sins I struggled with she had very little struggle with, and vice-versa. I won't reveal what those sins are...

All of us have besetting sins that are unique to us – it might be lust or greed or pride – it might be anger or sloth or envy or gluttony. Moses' besetting sin was anger. He killed an Egyptian taskmaster in anger when he was younger, and his anger flared several times later in life when leading the Children of Israel in the wilderness – and his anger kept him from entering the Promised Land. Samson had a life-long struggle with lust that which eventually led to his captivity and demise. Peter had besetting sins of pride and self-confidence that got him in trouble more than once.

The besetting sin in Abraham's life was failing to trust God in stressful situations. Under normal conditions he was a tower of faith, but under pressure he panicked and tried to alleviate the pressure with the quickest solution possible. It's during moments of stress or uncertainty that we need to slow down and pay attention to what's happening inside us – so that we respond not from fear but from faith.

We not only see the reoccurrence of Abraham's sin, but the **repercussions of his sin**. Abraham's foolish actions creates a mess. Verse 3 says, "But God came to Abimelek in a dream one night and said to him, 'You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman.'" Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive.

Abraham's lie creates a domino effect of consequences, and puts four things in jeopardy. The first is God's plan. If Abimelek marries Sarah, she will never have a son with Abraham and God's plan to save the world through Abraham and his people will not come to pass.

The second thing put in jeopardy is Sarah's purity. In trying to save his own life Abraham causes Sarah to be taken by another man. God makes it abundantly clear to Abimelek how he views the sanctity of marriage – to take the wife of another man is a life-and-death issue and God will not tolerate it.

The third thing put in jeopardy is Abimelek's life. God called Abraham to be a blessing to the other nations – to be a light in the darkness so his neighbors would be drawn to God through his witness and be saved. Instead blessing Abimelek, Abraham curses him.

The fourth thing put in jeopardy is Abimelek's household. When we skip ahead to verse 18 it says... "For the Lord had kept all the women in Abimelek's household from conceiving because of Abraham's wife Sarah." So serious was the sin of adultery that Abimelek is not only under a death sentence, but so is the entire future of his family.

What's interesting in this passage is that both Abraham and Abimelek sin – Abraham sins *intentionally* and Abimelek sins *unintentionally*. Later the law of Moses will make a distinction between intentional sins – sins that are pre-meditated and deliberate – and sins that are unintentional and done in ignorance (Leviticus 4; Numbers 15:30-31). Abimelek did not know that he had taken another man's wife – but he did and God holds him responsible. All sin, intentional or unintentional, violates God's holiness and must be held to account. Abimelek has taken another man's wife – he has violated the sanctity of marriage – and God says, "You're as good as dead for what you've done."

Abimelek's response shows that he gets it. Verses 4-5 say, "Now Abimelek had not gone near her, so he said, 'Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? Did he not say to me, 'She is my sister,' and didn't she also say, 'He is my brother?' I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands.'" Abimelek acknowledges that taking another man's wife is wrong, but pleads innocence... "I had no idea she was married – my conscience is clear – I did not knowingly take another man's wife."

Verses 6-7, "Then God said to him in the dream, 'Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her. Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all who belong to you will die.'"

I love the little pictures of the gospel we get in these stories – here we see that when a person becomes aware of their sinful condition – as Abimelek has – they have a choice to harden their heart and continue in sin or to acknowledge their sin cry out to God for mercy. If we refuse to repent and continue in sin, we will die. If we acknowledge our sin and confess it to God, we will live. God forgives us and removes the penalty of death that hangs over us. Abimelek does the right thing – when he is made aware of sin, he pleads for God’s mercy and God tells him that two things must happen – he must return Sarah to Abraham and he must have Abraham pray for him.

God refers to Abraham as a prophet – someone who speaks for God and acts as His mediator. God chooses Abraham to intercede on behalf of Abimelek so he won’t die – just as Abraham was the mediator between God and Lot so he would not be swept away in judgment. Abraham is a picture of Christ – who mediated on behalf of sinful people before God so that we would not die in our sins.

Verses 8-10... “Early the next morning Abimelek summoned all his officials, and when he told them all that had happened, they were very much afraid. Then Abimelek called Abraham in and said, ‘What have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should never be done.’ And Abimelek asked Abraham, ‘What was your reason for doing this?’”

The repercussions of Abraham’s lie continue to mount up – not only has he put God’s plan in jeopardy, Sarah’s purity in jeopardy, Abimelek’s life in jeopardy, and the future of Abimelek’s nation in jeopardy – but he has failed to be a good testimony for God – and he is rebuked. Abimelek says, “What did I ever do to you? Why did you do this?” It’s humbling when your sin is exposed and rebuked. God wanted Abraham to be a blessing to the nations, but instead he has brought a curse upon them.

Both Abimelek and Abraham are confronted with their sin, and while Abimelek is quick to confess his unintentional sin, Abraham rationalizes his intentional sin. Verses 11-13... “Abraham replied, ‘I said to myself, ‘There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.’ Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. And when God had me wander from my father’s household, I said to her, ‘This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, ‘He is my brother.’”

When confronted with his sin, Abraham does three things. First, *he justifies his sin* – “I assumed everyone here was godless and would kill me, so I had no choice.” It turns out that the residents of Gerar were not who he thought they were – they did not know God but they were open to knowing about God.

Secondly, Abraham *minimizes his sin* – “It wasn’t really a lie because Sarah is my half-sister. I told the truth.” But he left out the part that really mattered. It’s like a person who just started driving a week ago saying, “I’m a really good driver – in the past thirty years, I’ve only gotten four speeding tickets.” His statement is true, but it deceptively leaves out the most relevant truth.

Third, Abraham *premeditated his sin* – “We use this ruse wherever we go.” He and Sarah had developed a pattern of deceit to protect themselves rather than trusting God.

Our natural instinct when we get caught doing something wrong is to explain why we did it – there’s always a reason. When our kids did this, we would say, “That may explain why you did it, but it doesn’t excuse what you did.” God is quick to forgive our sins, but we must first acknowledge our sin and confess it to Him.

In verses 14-16 Abimelek makes amends for his transgression... “Then Abimelek brought sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham, and he returned Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelek said, ‘My land is before you; live wherever you like.’ To Sarah he said, ‘I am giving your brother a thousand shekels of silver. This is to cover the offense against you before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated.’”

Through these gestures Abimelek does three things. First, *he shows the sincerity of his repentance*. He reminds us of Zacchaeus in the New Testament – the tax collector who ripped off poor people. After coming to faith in Christ he paid back those he defrauded four times the amount he owed. His actions revealed the true remorse he felt for his sin. Abimelek does the same thing.

Second, *he seeks peace with Abraham*. He recognizes that Abraham is a man blessed by God and he wants to show respect to him and His God. He says, “Take whatever land you like, and let’s be neighbors.”

Third, *he vindicates Sarah*. He gives Sarah a thousand shekels of silver to cover any perceived offense towards her and to declare that he never laid a hand on her or violated her purity. In this way the legitimacy of the son Sarah bears will not be in question.

In verses 17-18 Abraham takes his role as a mediator – the one redeeming thing he does in this chapter – and intercedes for Abimelek... “Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelek, his wife and his female slaves so they could have children again, for the Lord had kept all the women in Abimelek’s household from conceiving because of Abraham’s wife Sarah.” After bringing a curse upon his neighbor, Abraham fulfills his calling to be a blessing to his neighbors and prays over Abimelek.

If you read this story not knowing anything about Abraham, you wouldn’t think much of him or his faith. In a panic, he fails to trust God and his lie places many people in danger. But what really shines through in this chapter is the faithfulness of God. Even though Abraham fails God, God is faithful to him and He makes sure that Abraham’s foolish plan does not derail all the promises He’s made to Abraham.

Look back with me at verse 3. After Abimelek takes Sarah, the first two words of verse 3 say, “But God.” These are two of the most hopeful words in the Bible. You may have made some poor decisions, *but God*. You may see no way out of your predicament, *but God*. You may be dead in your trespasses and sin, *but God*. God’s grace is greater than your sin.

Everything that Abraham jeopardized by his foolish decision, God made sure didn’t happen. He made sure that his promise to give Abraham a son through Sarah would be fulfilled. He made sure Sarah’s purity was protected – in verse 6 he tells Abimelek, “I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I didn’t let you touch her.” God made sure that Abimelek’s life was saved, and He made sure that Abimelek’s family line would continue.

The big question is why – why is God faithful to someone who failed Him and messed things up so badly? You’d think God would say, “Maybe I chose the wrong guy. When is Abraham ever going to learn?” But God doesn’t say that. He doesn’t give up on Abraham or disown him. When God makes a promise He is faithful to keep it.

God shows grace to Abraham not because of Abraham's *works*, but because of his *faith*. Abraham was an imperfect, unfinished product, but he believed in God – and His belief was credited to Him as righteousness. Once God entered into a covenant relationship with Abraham, nothing could sever that relationship – God would be faithful to the end.

Likewise, when you enter into a relationship with God by grace through faith, God declares you righteous and promises you eternal life – and what God started in you He will be faithful to complete. There is no flaw or failure that will cause God to disown you.

But, you say, what if I am unfaithful to God? If you are truly saved you will want to please God and sin will not be a pattern or habit. This doesn't mean that you will not struggle with sin, and it doesn't mean that there will not be occasional failures – but you will be quick to confess it and learn from it. When you do sin, you will reap the natural consequences of what you've sown – just as Abraham does in this story. As Charles Spurgeon put it... "God does not allow His children to sin successfully." Just as Moses and Samson and David all paid dearly for their sin. God disciplines those He loves, but He will never disown those who are truly His.

While our faithfulness to God may waver and our spiritual EKG line may go up and down – God does not waver, but remains faithful. He remains faithful to His promises, even though we are sometimes unfaithful to Him.

Knowing that God is faithful makes a big difference in our daily walk with the Lord – it gives us comfort and assurance that our failures are not fatal, and it gives us hope and confidence that we can learn from our failures so that we don't repeat them.