

“Flaws of the Faithful” (Genesis 20:1-18)

In this chapter, we see that despite the clear revelation from God that Sarah would be the one to bear him a son, Abraham once more experienced spiritual failure in chapter twenty. As you read this chapter you should experience a strange sense of déjà vu. For we see a besetting sin overtaking Abraham of the old man with a repetition of his earlier failure in chapter 12. Although the names and places are changed, the results are nearly identical.

In this action Abraham once again risked Sarah’s virtue, and the purity of the promised seed. Only through a direct intervention by God is she delivered from the effects of his sin. Indeed, if God had not intervened the promised line of Christ’s ancestry through Abraham and Sarah would be covered with a perpetual cloud of uncertainty.

Abraham cannot blame any lack of spiritual maturity for this failure. This was not the fall of an inexperienced disciple, but the lapse of one who had long walked the path of faith. Some 23-24 years had passed since he first indulged in a similar deception in Egypt and, clearly, he had not learned from the bitter experience of the stinging rebuke from Pharaoh. Since then God had promised to protect him, he had defeated much greater enemies in the Chedorlaomer confederacy, Abraham had enjoyed communion and blessing by Melchizedek the priest of the Most High God, he had spoken with Christ in his home, had seen his intercession over Sodom answered, and had even withstood the alluring riches of the King of Sodom.

And Abraham journeyed from thence toward the south country, and dwelled between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah. (v1-2)

Gerar is on the southwest side of Palestine, on the way to Egypt. Later the Philistines would inhabit this area. There is no mention of Abraham praying about this move for him to “sojourned in Gerar.” The Lord was blessing him in his years by the oaks of Mamre. Maybe he was feeling self-confident after witnessing the judgment on Lot for his wrong choices. Something spiritually had declined in him since his selfless intercession for Sodom in chapter 18. The irony is that he will act in a similar way as Lot did in a crisis when the latter offered his daughters to the men of Sodom. Situational ethics is not just a sin limited to his nephew.

Faced with a potential threat to his safety, Abraham reverts to an old tactic of deception about Sarah, “*She is my sister*” (cf. Lev. 19:11). This was a half-truth masquerading as a whole truth, which Abraham rationalises, “*And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife*” (v12). A half-truth is even more dangerous as an outright lie as it has just enough truth to make the deception sound more plausible. By using this form of words, Abraham was implying that Sarah was not his wife and was available. He was more interested in protecting the welfare of Abraham than his beloved wife.

We know the reason why Abraham did this because he reveals in v11 his motivation, “*Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife’s sake.*” As he thought through his plan of deceit, he tried to rationalise his sin in three ways in v11-13. Doubtless, the devil whispered in Abraham’s ear that he was being prudent and only trying to take care of his wife. Now even if Abraham was right that “*the fear of God is not in this place*” that knowledge should have led him to seek God’s will before entering. In fact, the men of that place did fear the Lord as seen by their reaction when they heard of God’s potential judgment on them (v8). Ironically, the only one who lacked the fear of God was Abraham!

The fear of man by Abraham is merely a symptom of a core failure in his spiritual understanding at that point. For even if the people did not fear God in Gerar that does not mean that the Lord was not sovereign in power there. The Lord will demonstrate just how sovereign His power is in His subsequent intervention. Just as God had protected Abraham for the last 25 years in Canaan, He could be trusted to take care of him and Sarah now. Had not Abraham witnessed God preserving Lot in Sodom? The Lord had just promised that Sarah would be the biological mother of Abraham's son, so He would make a way for that to safely happen. God does not need Abraham's help in lying in order to take care of his family.

But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, thou art but a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife. But Abimelech had not come near her: and he said, Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation? Said he not unto me, She is my sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother: in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this. And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against Me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her. Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine. (v3-7)

The Lord now intervenes directly by coming to Abimelech in a dream. He also seals up the wombs of the women in the household of Abimelech. As a consequence, the sin of Abraham will be exposed and he will be shamed publicly. Charles Spurgeon once observed, "God will not allow His children to sin successfully." The Lord is an expert in uncovering the sins of His children. He has a multitude of ways to do so. Ray Pritchard points out other blessings of God's public intervention,

"This public exposure served several purposes. First, it forced Abraham to deal with the reality of his own sinful behavior. Second, it exposed a continuing a weakness in his own life. Third, it prevented him from continuing on in sin and possibly making even greater mistakes. Fourth, it served as a warning to those watching that God hates adultery. Fifth, it established the fact that God will not sit idly by while his children live in sin. Sixth, it protected Sarah from the sin of adultery. Seventh, it protected the promised "seed" from corruption at the hands of pagans."

Just as Lot's sin affected those around him, so Abraham's sin here has consequences in the lives of Sarah, Abimelech, and the people of Gerar. Abraham was meant to be a blessing to the Gentile world, but here he is bringing judgment upon them. Abimelech humbly pleads his innocence in this matter before God by pointing out the deception, "*Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation? Said he not unto me, She is my sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother: in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this.*" It is shameful when unbelievers are able to point to the fact that believers have deliberately snared them into sin.

The Lord publicly reveals Abraham's sin but in doing so He prevents Abimelech unwittingly committing one. This would have been a sin not just against man but God, "*for I also withheld thee from sinning against Me.*" God warned Abimelech unless he restored Sarah, he would die, "*if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine.*" This illustrates how highly God values the marriage bond and hates adultery (cf. Heb. 13:4).

Therefore Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ears: and the men were sore afraid. Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said unto him, What hast thou done unto us? and what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done. And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing? (v8-10)

Grace provided a window of opportunity for Abimelech to escape His judgment. Abimelech wastes no time in obeying the command of the Lord. It shows that he feared God. Doubtless, after the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah, Abimelech knew that He was a God who judged sin.

A serious consequence of Abraham's failure was the diminution of his testimony. Amidst the ungodly Canaanite tribes Abraham was well known as the servant of Jehovah. They could not but judge the character of Him whom they could not see, by the traits they discerned in His servant. Abraham's sin showed himself to be regarded as unworthy of them, as Abimelech appeared more truthful and noble and was able to rebuke him, saying: "*Thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin: thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done.*" God can even speak to believers about their sin through unbelievers.

Ironically, although Abraham is the believer and Abimelech the pagan, but Abraham looks like a pagan and Abimelech like a believer. It is Abimelech who recognises and condemns this deceit as a "*sin.*" God could have used Abraham to be a testimony to these pagan people. He had used him before to be a faithful witness before the king of Sodom (cf. Gen 14:22). By his sin, Abraham lost that blessed opportunity to testify of God's promises and power. The reason that this particularly hurts the cause of Christ is because the world expects the unsaved to behave in an ungodly way. They do not expect the godly to do so.

And Abraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her, This is thy kindness which thou shalt shew unto me; at every place whither we shall come, say of me, He is my brother. (v11-13)

It is hard enough to take a rebuke from a godly person, but it is even more difficult to accept one from an ungodly pagan. Abraham now reluctantly admits his guilt before Abimelech. He explains the way he reasoned through the deceit he perpetrated on this man with three rationalisations. Like all sinners, he tries to excuse his sin and evade facing up to the full responsibility for his sin. Indeed, he even tries to imply blame on God for his vulnerable condition, "*And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house.*" There is no explicit sorrow or repentance for his sin.

Although Abraham must shoulder the great bulk of the blame for initiating the conspiracy with Sarah to lie, this does not excuse Sarah's active participation in the deceit. It is true that a wife has a general duty given by God to submit to her husband in "*every thing*" (Eph 5:24b), but there is a limit to this submission. A husband's authority in the home is delegated authority from the ultimate authority – GOD. The husband has no power outside of that authority. When an order or law of any human authority directly contradicts a revealed command of the ultimate authority then the Christian wife must always defer to the latter. Peter and John made this principle clear when they said, "*We ought to obey God rather than men*" (Acts 5:29).

And Abimelech took sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and womenservants, and gave them unto Abraham, and restored him Sarah his wife. And Abimelech said, Behold, my land is before thee: dwell where it pleaseth thee.

And unto Sarah he said, Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver: behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that are with thee, and with all other: thus she was reprov'd. So Abraham prayed unto God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bare children. For the LORD had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife. (v14-18)

In a similar fashion to Pharaoh, Abimelech not only restores Sarah to her husband, but also bestows material gifts on Abraham. He does not allow Abraham's hypocrisy as an excuse to disobey God's word in his own life. This enrichment of a fallen saint proves once again that material wealth in the life of a believer should not be assumed to indicate the blessing of God on a believer's conduct. Abimelech then politely asks Abraham to leave his presence, "*Behold, my land is before thee: dwell where it pleaseth thee.*" Sarah does not get away without rebuke for her part in the deceit because Abimelech adds, "*Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver: behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that are with thee, and with all other: thus she was reprov'd.*"

This is the first time that Abraham prayed in this incident. It occurs only when he is shamed publicly into doing it. However, at least he is humble enough to do so. God shows grace to His reprov'd and unworthy servant by explicitly answering this prayer, "*So Abraham prayed unto God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bare children.*" Even though Abraham failed, the Lord does not cast him out of His service. It proves one again that any time that we are used of God, it is solely because of the grace of God.

CONCLUSION

The fall of Abraham in his maturity is a warning to us all that none of us dare be presumptuous about the power of sin in our lives. Old habits of sin die hard! No one is above temptation, even after years of faithful service. We are never safe in this world. Abraham proves that when placed in difficult circumstances, there is a tendency to revert to the practices of the old nature. Any "victory" over a sinful action will be partial and temporary. That is not being pessimistic but realistic. This should not encourage us to sin but serve as a warning to us about the danger of sin. As one commentator aptly put it,

"We can never know what is in our hearts until circumstances arise to draw it out. Peter did not imagine he could deny his Lord, but when he got into circumstances which were calculated to act upon his peculiar weakness, he showed that his weakness was there."

We all live daily the civil war described in Romans 7 of the war with the flesh. Despite victories by the power of the Spirit, all too often we are back on the merry-go-round or misery-go-round of Romans 7:15-24! Even after seemingly overcome a particular sin, we should never boast that it will never snare us again, "*Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall*" (1 Cor. 10:12). Abraham's failure to a besetting sin should not surprise us, as it parallels our own experience. That should make us gracious to those in the same struggle (Gal. 6:1).

The failure here because of the residual power of the flesh does not excuse the actions of Abraham. His humiliating experience in Egypt should have taught him that it is safer to avoid circumstances where we have failed before. There was no need for him to have gone to Gerar

and certainly no need for him to lie when he was there. He would have been better to do right by telling the truth and trust God to protect them in the circumstances. We should never decide on the basis of the lesser of two evils. Honesty is not the best policy; it's the only policy for a believer!

This story reveals another truth we needed to be reminded concerning. Even the greatest of God's men are not perfect; so everything they think, say, and do must be tested by God's perfect Word. Abraham thought wrongly, spoke wrongly, and acted wrongly. We should never invest any mere man with infallibility but "*Prove all things; hold fast that which is good*" (1 Thess. 5:21).

Despite the *failure* of Abraham, we must also observe a greater constant - the *faithfulness* of God. Abraham fails God but the Lord never fails Abraham. Grace is at work in this story in preserving and ultimately restoring this man. It is a great picture of the eternal security of the true saints of God. If anyone should have lost his salvation, we would have thought it would have been Abraham for this great failure. But Abraham was eternally secure because his salvation depended on God and not on Abraham. That does not excuse Abraham's sins or encourage backsliding, as Abraham had to take the consequences that flowed from his own failure.

God demonstrated that he could take care of Abraham without Abraham having to lie. He also established that He could use a man like Abraham to minister to others despite his clear imperfections. That should give hope to us all. If you have failed the Lord, especially repeatedly, don't drop out of the great spiritual marathon of life. That is what the devil is trying to get you to do. Repent of your sin and get back in the race.

**If you from sin Are longing to be free,
Look to the Lamb of God.
He to redeem you died on Calvary,
Look to the Lamb of God.**

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is it ever right to lie in any circumstance? If not, why not?
2. What made Abraham feel he had to lie in this situation?
3. What does this incident teach you about God?
4. What does the failure of Abraham teach us about putting too much trust in mankind?
5. What lesson do we learn about the power of man to overcome temptation?