

ABRAHAM AT GERAR

Genesis 20:1-18

This chapter provides a serious warning to the experienced child of God. It reveals the fact that the continuance of the evil nature in believers is a reality of universal spiritual experience. The corrupt nature in the believer remains corrupt. However great his spiritual experience, he remains liable to fall into the same temptations as ensnared him at the beginning of his Christian life. He does not possess any immunity. His safety does not depend upon his experience, or upon his progress in the Christian life, but upon the continual keeping power of God. On that any child of God can rely.

In this chapter we find Abraham repeating the mistake that he made in Egypt, which was recorded in Genesis 12. While in Egypt Abraham told a lie and got into trouble. God got him out of his trouble, but he refused to stay out.

Abraham journeyed onward from Mamre towards the southwestern part of Palestine. We do not know what the motive was which prompted him to make this journey. He may have made it because of the need of new pasturage for his increasing flocks. It may have been caused by his call to a continuing pilgrimage with no settled habitation in the Land of Promise. Some think it was prompted by a desire to remove from the surroundings made so painful to him by the events which were recorded in chapter nineteen. There is nothing to indicate that it was undertaken as the result of prayer, or because of the direction of God. He may have felt safer at a distance from the area that had been destroyed. Regardless of what his motive was, it may be that his departure was the first step out of God's will. To say the least, Abraham went without God's orders. Many of us get into trouble because we go where God does not send us.

It appears that between Abraham and Sarah an arrangement had been made before they left Mesopotamia whereby she was, in the presence of strangers, to pose as his sister instead of as his wife (verse 13); and although they had had one solemn warning of the danger of such an expedient (chapter 12) we find them here again acting upon it. We learn the sad fact that a believer who, when walking with God, can rise to rare heights of nobility, can, if he forsakes that path, descend to depths lower than dordly men. Afraid that his life might be taken from him on account of his wife, whose beauty fascinated kings, Abraham as before said that Sarah was his sister. Thus he attempted to protect himself at the expense of his wife. This repetition of an old sin would be astonishing were it not for the close consistency it bears to human nature, even among the people of God. Believers are often found to slip and fall where they have fallen previously.

The contents of Genesis 20 furnish a striking proof of the divine inspiration of the Scriptures. No secular historian would have recorded this dark blot on the life of such an illustrious personage as Abraham. The tendency of the human heart is ever toward hero worship, and the common custom of biographers is to conceal the defects and blemishes in the careers of the characters which they delineate, and this, had it been followed, would naturally have forbidden the mention of such a sad fall in the life of one of the most venerated names on the scroll of history. Herein the Bible differs from all other books. The Holy Spirit has painted the portraits of the Bible characters in the colors of nature and truth. He has given a faithful and accurate picture of the human heart such as is common to all mankind.

The remaining of the old nature in the believer, the occasional manifestations of it in God-dishonoring activities, the awful backslidings which God's children have been subject to in all generations, and the reviewing of our own sad departures from the paths of righteousness, are quite enough to explain the deplorable and seemingly unaccountable conduct of the father of all who believe. If you have not known such backslidings, then ascribe all the glory for it to the matchless grace of Him Who is able to keep us from falling.

Inexpressibly sad was Abraham's conduct. It was not the fall of a young and inexperienced disciple, but the lapse of one who had long walked the path of faith that here shows himself ready to sacrifice the honor of his wife, and, what is worse, give up the one who was the depository of all the promises. How then shall we account for this? The explanation is obvious: until the time referred to in Genesis 20, Abraham had not been in circumstances to call into exercise the evil that was in his heart. 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. It was stress of circumstances which revealed the state of Abraham's heart, as it is of ours. We do not have any more religion than what we can use in time of trouble. It is comparatively easy to trust God while everything goes along pleasantly, but the time of disappointment, of loss, of bereavement or of persecution is the time of testing; and then how often we fail! Here is where the Lord Jesus was in such striking contrast from all others. Stress of circumstances only served to display the perfections of His heart. When he was reviled, He reviled not again.

Plainly, the evil compact which Abraham made with Sarah was due to the feebleness of his faith in God's power to take care of them. Abraham did but illustrate what is all too common among the Lord's people -- the inconsistency of faith. How often those who are not afraid to trust God with their souls are afraid to trust Him with regard to their bodies! How often those who have the full assurance of faith in regard to eternal things are full of unbelief and fear when it comes to temporal things! We have believed in the Lord and it has been counted unto us for righteousness; yet, how often, like Abraham, in the matter of the practical concerns of our daily life, we too have more confidence in our own wisdom and scheming than we have in the sufficiency of God.

It is hard to lay aside one's besetting sin. Abraham found it so. He said that Sarah was his sister. This was a quibble, intellectually accurate, but deceptive. She was his half-sister according to the flesh, but Abraham meant it for a lie, so he got into trouble again. That is the way with many people. They have what they call "white lies." Their lies are mighty black, but they call them white.

Acting upon the information received about Sarah, Abimelech, the King of Gerar, immediately took her with the intention of taking her into his palace as his wife. He doubtless realized the value of an alliance with a powerful man like Abraham. So, it was necessary that Abimelech should be restrained from doing that which in all ignorance and innocence he was about to do. Because of His sheer mercy, God stepped in and delivered Abimelech from committing sin. Moreover, the Lord's intervention was for the purpose of preserving Sarah, and at the same time fulfilling the divine purposes concerning the seed. We find in this incident another

of the proofs of the absolute sovereignty of God over human actions and states of mind. God allowed Abimelech to take Sarah, but he prevented him from doing any harm. God was already committed to Sarah, so that the whole purpose of redemption was at stake. If God withheld a heathen ruler from sinning against Him, how much more is He able to keep us from falling and present us faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy.

When God revealed the truth to Abimelech in a dream the latter said, "This man has deceived me. He told me a lie. He got me into trouble." God said to him, "You just restore Abraham his wife. He is a prophet and he will pray for you." Think of Abraham being a mouthpiece for God or being in the place of prayer! Isn't it wonderful how God does things? He does them just the way you do not expect. God knows how to get one of His own into the place of prayer. What He wants each one to do is to stay close to Him.

Rising early, Abimelech lost no time in taking steps to comply with God's demands and avert his doom. It is the duty of every sinner to do the same. Abimelech's true humility was revealed in the way he humbled himself in communicating the events of his dream to his courtiers. He deliberately made known to his whole court the compromising position in which he had found himself because of the lie which Abraham had told him.

The character of Abimelech shines out beautifully and is in marked contrast with Abraham's at this point. Men of the world frequently stand out above the people of God, and this is one of the great perplexities and problems of the spiritual realm. Abimelech had no intention of sinning with Sarah, but only of doing that which was perfectly natural and customary in that age.

Again Abimelech's character and attitude shine as he rebukes Abraham for what he had done. It is very sad when a man of God has to be rebuked by a man of the world. Such reproach from one outside the covenant must have been very bitter to Abraham. The consequences of Abraham's weak and thoughtless conduct were far greater than he anticipated. To bring sin upon another is very hateful in the eyes of God. Yet it is to be feared that we all thoughtlessly do it more often than we are aware.

It is always a sad thing for a believer to fall in his conduct below the standard recognized by unbelievers. It is a sad state of affairs when sinners have to rebuke Christians, but it is often true. A believer often finds some old habit or sin cropping up, and if it is not at once dealt with it will assuredly bring trouble and sorrow.

Instead of killing Abraham for the trouble he had caused him, Abimelech dealt kindly with him. He knew, of course, that Abraham had been guilty of barefaced deception and he did not hesitate to rebuke him for it. The way in which Abraham offered his apologies revealed that he was ashamed. Abraham ashamedly explained his motive and gave his explanation for his equivocation. He admitted that what he had said about Sarah was not untrue, for he and she were the children of the same father but different mothers, but that his saying she was his sister had deservedly brought him into humiliation. His description of Sarah had been verbally accurate, but actually deceitful. He had no right to deceive Abimelech simply because he had made a pact with Sarah. He should never have made that pact in the first place.

The reason for Abimelech's friendship with Abraham was the intervention

and revelation of God. Abimelech's gift, made in addition to the restoration, was a proof of genuine repentance. He felt that Abraham's presence might bring him blessing. God is ever able to give us favor in the sight of the ungodly, to protect us and to carry out His purposes through us.

In answer to prayer, God's blessing came down upon Abimelech and his household. Thus God overruled these sad mistakes and brought blessing. Abraham had experienced the power of God to protect him. Sarah was the better for the incident. She was brought triumphantly through a trying experience. Her position as Abraham's wife was preserved, and she would still be the instrument of fulfilling God's purposes by means of the promised seed. Abimelech was better for the incident. He received a revelation from the true God and got the benefit of Abraham's prayers.