

Repeating an old sin

READ GENESIS CHAPTER 20

The very fact that the incident recorded in this chapter appears at all in the Bible is, in itself, a testimony to its honesty and realism in not disguising the faults and weaknesses of even its greatest characters, like Abraham who appears in a very poor light. “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, and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, ‘She is my sister’. Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her” (Genesis 20:1–2).

Here is Abraham, and to a lesser extent Sarah, repeating the very same sin of which they had been guilty some twenty years earlier when they went down to Egypt (Genesis 12:10 fol). Only this time it was even more deplorable since, during those years, Abraham had experienced God’s care and guidance in many wonderful ways. God had entered into a personal covenant with him (Genesis chapter 15); had promised him a son by Sarai (Genesis 17:15 fol); had answered his prayer concerning Lot in Sodom (Genesis 18 and 19) and in general had shown him that he could trust Him absolutely for care and protection in any situation. But, like so many of us, Abraham was still fearful and lacking faith at times, and was prone to depend more upon his own schemes and devices than upon God. As he approached Philistine territory in his wanderings he was afraid that in such a godless place his life would be in danger because of Sarah, and he reminded her of the pact they had entered into many years before (Genesis 20:13), that whenever they entered strange territory she was to say she was his sister. His sin on this occasion therefore, was not committed on the spur of the moment but had long been a deliberate policy, which he and Sarah had agreed to follow.

The persistence of sin

If there is one thing that stands out in this passage, it is that the principle or law of sin is not entirely eradicated within the believer’s life as long as he is

living in this world. Like Abraham, the Christian finds that again and again the old sinful nature pushes itself up to the surface of his life causing him to give way to temptation and to act in a way totally contrary to God's commandments, even to the extent of repeating some old sin or habit he thought he had conquered once and for all. This inner conflict between, on the one hand, the genuine desire to please God by living a holy life and, on the other hand, the relentless persistence of evil, is the practical side of sanctification. Positionally, in God's sight we are already "sanctified in Christ Jesus" (1 Corinthians 1:2), but on the practical side here below, we still struggle after a holy character. The classic passage in the New Testament describing this inward struggle is Romans 7. "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:21–25). Paul is surely telling us that whilst we struggle with sin in this life it is not a hopeless battle. Our proness to sin is no longer inevitable, for we have the power of Christ working through the Holy Spirit within us, counteracting its effect in our lives, and enabling us to live triumphantly.

But there is another aspect of this struggle, which emerges from Abraham's attempt to save his own life at the expense of allowing Abimelech the king of Gerar to take Sarah into his harem. It was the same sin repeated, and since it was a deliberate policy to pass Sarah off as his sister, it suggests that he was open to doing it again and again. In short, his fear in this regard was a particular weakness in his character, and that too is something many of us have in common with him. Again and again we show a tendency to fall before the onslaught of Satan at the very point where we have fallen previously. This, I believe, is partly the explanation of Hebrews 12:1 which speaks of the "sin that so easily entangles" (AV "easily besets"). This seems to suggest sins to which we, individually and personally, are exposed because of some peculiar weakness in our character, and which we are therefore liable to repeat again and again. This is a danger point, and Satan knows it and will attack us at that point repeatedly. It may be a quick

temper, an old habit, a gossipy tongue, sexual laxity, a critical spirit, or whatever. We need therefore to recognise this weakness in our spiritual and moral life and to be especially on our guard.

God's intervention

Where would we be without God's merciful intervention in our lives to save us from our own stupidity and disobedience? Again and again we read of this happening in the Bible. In this instance God intervened to save Abraham from his own folly, to save Sarah from being sexually exploited and, above all, to prevent His own sovereign purpose, in the coming birth of Isaac the promised son, from being frustrated. Indeed, Sarah might even have been pregnant with Isaac at this very time. "But God came to Abimelech 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.' Now Abimelech 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.' 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 yours will die'" (Genesis 20:3-7).

Had God not intervened to save the situation the results would have been disastrous, and Isaac, instead of being the promised son through whom the messianic line was to be continued, might well have been regarded as the child of Abimelech. That would have suited Satan, who all through the Bible seeks to frustrate the purpose of God and the prophetic promise of the coming Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. But God did not allow that to happen. Abraham may have been weak and failed God, but God did not fail Abraham. It may well be that Satan, and the forces of evil, are able through human weakness and man's sin to frustrate the plan of God in the short term, but ultimately God is in control, and as this passage shows neither the wilfulness and disobedience of His servant Abraham, nor the collusion of Sarah, nor the desires of a pagan king, determined the outcome of this incident but God Himself.

How God breaks through

It was through a dream that God broke through to the consciousness of Abimelech and warned him of the consequences of his action in abducting Sarah. This is significant, since here was a pagan king with no knowledge of God, but he was quickly brought to an understanding of who God was through the instrumentality of a dream. “Early the next morning Abimelech summoned all his officials, and when he told them all that had happened, they were very much afraid” (Genesis 20:8). In the light of this, we must be careful not to put limits on God’s power to make His will known to us by dismissing all talk of dreams and visions as fanciful, and no more than a person’s own subjective and speculative experience. After all, the Bible is full of instances of God breaking through to men and women through the medium of dreams. God revealed Himself to Jacob in a dream at Bethel; the young Joseph was given dreams by God, and so was Solomon when he became king. The coming birth of Jesus was told to Joseph in a dream, and it was through a dream the Magi were warned not to return to King Herod.

These few instances, and there are many others, are sufficient therefore to show us that God can use whatever means He chooses to make known His will to us. Granted, dreams and visions are no longer the accepted method by which God speaks to us, since we now have the written word in the full canon of scripture, and the revelation of God in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. But that is not to say God cannot, even today, use other methods when it pleases Him, to speak a personal word to us. And sometimes if He cannot break through to us when we are awake and busy with all the other encumbering concerns of life He will even disturb our sleep. The important thing is that we keep our minds and hearts sensitive to the movement of the Holy Spirit, so that if God does break through we shall not miss His voice, or doubt within ourselves that He has in fact spoken to us.

Rebuked by the world

The one person to come out of this sorry incident with any integrity was Abimelech the pagan king! “Then Abimelech 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 not be done'. And Abimelech asked Abraham, 'What was your reason for doing this?'" (Genesis 20:9–10). Well, we have seen clearly enough why Abraham did what he did, and his half-hearted excuse that Sarah was really his half-sister does not lessen in any way the wrong he did to Abimelech. This is a sad and shameful picture of the pagan justly rebuking the man of God, or the worldly man rebuking the Christian. And when it happens, it is a deeply humiliating experience and brings the gospel into disrepute. For this one brief moment Abraham had lost his testimony in the eyes of Abimelech, and that can happen to any one of us when we act out of character as a Christian in the eyes of the world.

It also happens when the Church loses her credibility with the secular man and woman because it no longer appears to be taking its own message seriously, but fiddles around with secondary issues and trivialities and fails so often to bring to people's notice the great truths of the Gospel, and to give the guidance in spiritual and moral matters that is so sorely needed. But having said that, we must not run away with the idea that the worldly man who, in his integrity, appears in a better light than the Christian is somehow closer to God. That is not so. Abraham, for all his faults, was God's man whilst Abimelech, for all his innocence and generosity, was a pagan. God does not love us, use us, or deliver us because of our integrity of character and good behaviour, but because we have been redeemed through the precious blood of Christ and belong wholly to Him. Abraham could pray for Abimelech, but Abimelech could not pray for Abraham. "Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife and his slave girls so they could have children again, for the Lord had closed up every womb in Abimelech's household because of Abraham's wife Sarah" (Genesis 20:17–18). We cannot be certain what the illness was from which Abimelech was healed, but the context seems to suggest that God had made him impotent so that he was unable to have sexual relations with Sarah or with his wife and slave girls. The opposite was true however with regard to Abraham and Sarah. He was old and she was well past the child bearing age and yet God seems to have rejuvenated them both miraculously so that they were capable of having Isaac. This may also help to explain why Sarah was still attractive enough physically to gain the attentions of Abimelech.