

Genesis 20

Why Good People Do Bad Things

On the afternoon of July 25th 1911, an Englishman named Bobby Leach climbed into an eight foot long steel drum at Navy Island in the Niagara River. The drum was released at 2:55 p.m. It took eighteen minutes to reach the brink of the Horseshoe Falls before going over. It took 22 minutes to recover the drum. It had become stuck in the river at the base of the falls. Finally an Ontario Power Company employee named Fred Bender tied a rope around his waist and swam to the barrel, tied a rope to the barrel and it was hauled to the Canadian shore. Bobby Leach was removed from the drum and rushed to the hospital suffering from two broken knee caps and a broken jaw.

Twenty three weeks later, Bobby Leach left the hospital and went on tour with his barrel throughout North America and Europe.

In April of 1926, 15 years after his famous stunt, Bobby Leach slipped on an orange peel while on his daily walk. His fractured leg became infected and two months later he died in hospital.

He survived the massive Niagara Falls, but a little piece of orange peel brought him down.

Isn't that a whole lot like what happens to us?

Life hits us with tests and the trials that come on us with all the ferociousness of Niagara Falls and yet somehow we make it through. In the end we may be a bit beat up but we're all the better for it. It's like we see those trials for what they are and brace ourselves in Christ to go through them.

And we do all of that, only to be tripped up by some personal, private, petty thing that proves to be our downfall.

Well, that's exactly what happened to Abraham in Genesis Chapter 20. **Turn To Genesis 20 Page 18**

Abraham is a central figure in God's plan for this world. God choose him out of paganism and idol worship to be a follower of Jehovah God. We've been studying through the book of Genesis and for the last 8 chapters we've been looking at the

amazing life of this man who's known as "The Friend of God," and "The Father of the Faithful."

Up until now we've seen Abraham truly present himself as a living sacrifice to God. He's been willing to give up all to follow Jehovah God. And Abraham's faith has grown to the point where he deals with his fears and he's been willing to obey no matter what the cost.

He's followed God out of his homeland of Chaldea, which would be modern southern Iraq, and traveled to Canaan, which would be modern day Israel. And he followed God when he had no idea where God was leading him.

He's defeated an oppressive invading confederation of city-states. He's accepted God's promise that in his old age he and Sarah would have a son.

I think it is safe to say that Abraham has survived as great a trial and temptation as could ever come on any of us. His faith has been stretched to the max and he has come out on the winning side.

And yet now in chapter 20, after he's grown and matured in his faith, after he's spiritually faced Niagara Falls in a barrel, Abraham slips over something so insignificant that for years in his life it's been overlooked as trivial.

I. If We Don't Deal With Sin We're Bound To Eventually Repeat It

Read verse 1 For years Abraham has been living in Hebron, in the plains of Mamre.

Now after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah he breaks camp and moves to the south. He wandered around in that region for a while and then finally moves up 40 miles north to a place called Gerar

This is the place where Abraham's fall takes place.

Read verse 2

The orange peel that caused Abraham to fall was a seemingly insignificant piece of trivia that he had held unto for over 30 years.

It came when he simply turned to the king of Gerar and said *She is my sister*.

Now at this point Abraham was fearful for his life. Most of the inhabitants of the land of Canaan were wicked people and Abraham assumed Abimelech and his countrymen were the same.

In fact, just to show you what was in Abraham's mind let's jump ahead a little bit to verse 11. After the king had found out that Sarah was really Abraham's wife he asked, why did you do such a thing?

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Read verses 11 - 13

Now I want you to see what he's saying. Sarah really was his sister. She was his half sister, that was true. But she was still his wife. They were married and had lived together as man and wife for years.

But way back when God first called Abraham to leave his home in Chaldea and move out on the long journey to the land of Canaan, Abraham made a deal with Sarah. He said, when we come into a place that might be hostile, please tell them you are my sister so they won't kill me to take you.

Now we've watched Abraham develop as a man of faith. We've seen him struggle with his faith and grow. But here is something that is rooted back in Abraham's spiritual infancy. It wasn't rooted in faith. It didn't believe God's promise of protection, but it was Abraham's human logic figuring his own way out.

And if you've been with us for a while you'll recall that Abraham used this little scheme back in chapter 12 in a very similar situation. There he had just briefly come into the promised land, was forced through a famine to go down to Egypt, and when he got there told the Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister.

Because there's such a close similarity between what happens in chapter 12 and what is told here in chapter 20 the more liberal critics of the Old Testament say that these are just duplicate accounts of the same incident that has come through separate sources.

In their minds the same type of thing couldn't happen twice so this just has to be two people's ideas of what might have happened.

If the Bible wasn't anything more than man's ideas that would certainly be possible. If all scripture wasn't given by inspiration of God then your guess would be as good as mine on some of these things.

But God has clearly told us that all scripture did come by inspiration. Jesus Christ repeatedly referred to Moses as the author of Genesis and the people and places of Genesis as being real historical persons and events.

And so instead of subjectively saying that because two things have some similarities they must be the same event and put ourselves over the Bible as its judge, we need to let the Bible speak to us and learn from it.

Now, if there is still a doubt in your mind if these are describing two separate accounts I'd encourage you to sit down and list the main features from each chapter and then compare them. When you do, I think you'll see that for every similarity there are at least two differences.

Abraham and Sarah really did go through this experience twice and if we don't understand that, we're going to miss out on a very foundational and vital truth for our lives.

Remember since all scripture is given by inspiration of God it is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction and instruction in righteousness. And Genesis chapter 20 is no exception.

Abraham didn't really deal with this sin the first time and now it's come back to bite him.

There is one question though, that probably arises in your mind, that's a legitimate one about this situation that's being described for us. Why did Abimelech (which is probably a title rather than a proper name; a lot like Pharaoh) why did Abimelech take a 90 year old woman into his harem?

Was Sarah still that physically attractive at 90 years old? I think the most probably answer to that question was, he wasn't necessarily attracted to her at all. I don't think this had anything to do with lust or with outward attraction, I see this as most likely a political move on Abimelech's part.

Abraham was tremendously wealthy. He traveled with this huge entourage of servants and animals. He was a powerful, rich, nomadic chieftain

Abimelech already had a harem and plenty of wives, so this marriage to what he thought was merely Abraham's sister was probably a good political move.

It would assure peace with Abraham and it would assure a financially lucrative association with wealthy Abraham

Now it is an astounding thing then, that after what happened to Abraham in chapter 12, he would fall into the same trap in chapter 20.

Remember, there God delivered Sarah from Pharaoh before they had any physical contact and Abraham was shamed publicly and his testimony before Lot and Pharaoh was completely blown.

But now realize that according to what Abraham says this has been part of his life for 30 years. He says here it started way back when God had first called him out of Chaldea. He's carried it with him since he left home, and all the time he's wandered in the land. He's carried this with him all the time that he's been in communion and fellowship with God and he's been obedient to the commands of God.

He's carried this thing with him until this moment, this opportune moment, when it could be drawn out of the back of his life that had never been judged and had never been corrected and could be used in a devastating way.

He's carried it from the point of total spiritual immaturity all the way to this point in his life. It may be just an orange peel but it's got the potential to spell disaster for Abraham, for Sarah, for the program of God - (Remember Sarah was going to bear Isaac within a year). It could spell disaster for for Abimelech and for Abimelech's people

Now, how did Abraham even explain his sin? What excuses could he possibly give?

Notice in verses 11, 12, & 13 he uses three very simple and common techniques.

First, in verse 11 he justifies his deception. He says, *Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will kill me on account of my wife.* And he justifies lying and exposing his

wife to a very compromising situation because of what he thinks might happen if he doesn't lie.

This is the age-old philosophy known as situation ethics, or the end justifies the means.

So when Abraham looks at his sin, which seems to him to be pretty small, he justifies it on the basis of the end its going to produce.

But really it doesn't matter what you call sin, it's still sin.

In this case it's selfishness, lack of faith and lack of trust in God.

A second thing Abraham does to excuse his sin is found in verse 12 where he says, *She is my sister*.

Not only does he justify his sin, but he rationalizes it too. In other words he looks at his sin and says really it's not all that bad because there's some truth in what I've said.

So what Abraham does is he looks at this attitude that's been carried in his life ever since his past immature experience with God and he rationalizes it away by saying it is not that bad.

But again, it doesn't matter about the fine print, it's still sin. When Abraham said "she's my sister" he knew exactly what Abimelech was hearing "she's not my wife."

Then there is a third thing that Abraham does. Not only does he justify and rationalize his sin but he also blame shifts. In fact, he blames God.

Verse 13 says, *And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I asked Sarah to enter into this agreement with me."*

There are 7 Hebrew words translated by the English word "wander" in the Bible. The one that Abraham uses here is used 45 times in the Hebrew Old Testament and always in a totally negative sense.

Taah is used of false teachers who cause people to wander from the truth. It's translated "went astray," and "caused them to err."

And so here Abraham is actually blaming God because God called him to leave the security of his father's house to go out into uncertainty.

He not only justifies it by the circumstances and the end it will produce, he not only rationalizes it away by seeing there certain good things in it, but he excuses the whole thing and puts the blame back on God.

Does all of this sound familiar? Have you ever given these same excuses? We're experts at it aren't we?

But while Abraham is quick to blame God, notice how God in His grace goes to great lengths to protect Abraham and Sarah and keep His covenant promises to them.

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Read verse 3

Abimelech and his people were Philistines. The name Palestine is derived from their name. The Philistines were Hamitic people who settled along the sea coast. In other words they were descended from Noah through his son Ham.

Over time they mixed with the descendants of Japeth. They apparently weren't worshipping Jehovah by the time of Abraham, but there is a good chance that they still hung onto some slight knowledge of His existence.

And out of a sound sleep, the true God speaks to Abimelech and says "you are a dead man. You have taken a woman who is married."

God has always upheld the sanctity of marriage among His covenant people and Abimelech has violated that. I'm sure that this was terrifying for the King but he does have kind of an "ace in the hole" here which he quickly plays.

Read verse 4 & 5

He says, "Hey wait a minute. Number 1 I didn't touch her, and number 2 she told me a lie. How was I to know?"

Well he couldn't have and so **verse 6**

God says your right, there was no involvement on your part with Sarah because I wouldn't have let it happen." The future mother of the promised son Isaac was under divine protection. For all we know she might have been at the very beginning of her pregnancy with Isaac at this point.

But, I want you to notice verse 7 very carefully because this is quite a proclamation that God makes to Abimilech.

Read verse 7

Abimilech must have wondered about Abraham's prophet status. Or maybe he wondered what kind of God Abraham was a prophet for.

It always amazes me how God allows His name to be lowered in the eyes of the world by the sins of believers who represent Him.

Well Abimilech was up by dawn and shaken to the core.

Read verse 8 - 10

Abimilech looked in wonder and said, "Abraham what were you thinking? What was going on in your mind that would ever cause you to do such a thing?"

Think about the consequences of this little sin that Abraham had carried with him and now brings out.

First: He endangered the promised seed. Before Sodom and Gomorrah in chapter 18 God told Abraham within 12 months you'll have a son through Sarah. This was the child he's waited for 30 years. This was the miracle, son of the promise and here he was allowing his wife to possibly go into the bedroom of a pagan king.

This is a crucial moment in the perspective of God's dealing with man and the program for the coming Messiah.

And then through a sin that should have been confessed and dealt with years ago, Abraham jeopardizes it all.

Satan is there to pollute the womb of Sarah and destroy the promised seed and Abraham seems to cooperate.

Second: He caused Abimilech to sin. Abimilech had taken another man's wife into his harem and if he didn't get her out of there quick he was going to experience the judgment of God.

Remember, there's no such thing as an isolated sin. The philosophy of our day is do whatever you want, it is not wrong as long as you don't hurt anybody else. That's impossible. Sin always has repercussions that affect other people.

Abraham might have counted this sin as insignificant but God didn't.

This little thing that he's stored away for 30 years of his salvation experience is all of a sudden causing some drastic results.

Third: The result of this sin of Abraham is his testimony before the world is totally blown.

It's Abimilech in verse 9 who says *You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done.* Abraham the prophet. Abraham the father of the faithful. Abraham the friend of God is humiliated and rebuked before a man of the world. His conduct has brought contempt down upon his testimony.

Abraham is a living testimony to God's grace.

Part of his purpose in life is to demonstrate the salvation of God to the world. Abraham has a direct opportunity to be a witness to this early group of Philistines about Jehovah and his plan for the world. It is through Abraham that all nations of the world are to be blessed.

But all Abimilech knows at this point is, because of Abraham he's being cursed.

A whole nation who eventually opposed Israel is in the process of losing a golden opportunity to be drawn into the worship of the true and living God.

Abraham's little sin isn't so little after all. It's not so simple as it first seems. It's not so trivial as we might first suppose.

And neither is our sin either. While we selfishly worry about ourselves instead of the glory of God, while we rationalize and justify and blame shift to make excuses for doing what we want to do, consequences move out from that sin like ripples in a pond after a stone is thrown in. And eternity will only tell how many people were affected by sins which we thought were completely personal. Our “trivial, small, unimportant” sins.

Well finally our chapter ends with a warning and a beautiful ray of hope for every believer.

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IV. God Forgives Sin But Sin Has Lasting Consequences

Read verse 14 - 16

Abraham was given wealth and he and Sarah are reunited and they are allowed to live in the land. Very different from chapter 12 where he was chased out of Egypt by Pharaoh.

But even as Abimelech gave Abraham and Sarah all this wealth, he did it with a hint of sarcasm. He doesn't say in verse 16 I've given your “husband” a thousand pieces of silver, but rather “I've given them to your brother.” I would have given them to your husband if you would have had one, but instead I gave them to your brother.

The rest of that verse is a little difficult to translate. And there's a lot of different interpretations of it, but I think that the amplified Bible does a good job. It reads “I have given this brother of yours 1000 pieces of silver, see it is to compensate to you for all that has occurred and to vindicate your honor before all who are with you.”

And so she was rebuked.

Then finally Abraham acted in his function as a prophet.

Read verses 17 & 18

Even in the midst of Abraham's unfaithfulness God remains faithful.

Now you might be inclined to say, “Hey, wait a minute. What's this? God rewarded

Abraham's lie? He lies and he gets out with a bonus? What's that about?"

Well remember, God rewarded and protected Abraham because of the promises He made to Abraham, not because Abraham deserved the reward.

God was faithful to his covenant with Abraham even though Abraham wasn't faithful to God.

The whole point of this passage is to stress the fact that God's covenant with Abraham is an unconditional covenant not based on his works, not based on his faithfulness, not based on his goodness. It's a covenant of grace.

Just like salvation is a covenant of grace.

Genesis chapter 20 has to be one of the most relevant, applicable chapters for us as believers in all of the Bible.

The truth is so often we can go over Niagara Falls in a barrel and remain virtually unscathed. We can deal with the bigger things that come at us in life, the bigger trails and temptations.

And then walk away from that great victory and slip on an orange peel and shatter our life.

Often times the most devastating things in life aren't the big things we can see those coming. We see the danger in them.

We're aware of how destructive they can be, so we prepare ourselves spiritually to face them.

But those things we consider little, insignificant, and trivial can be much more damaging. We don't see the danger in them. They are easy to justify and rationalize away.

But how Satan wants to use those sins that we think don't really matter to keep God's purposes from being accomplished in our life.

How Satan wants to bring confusion and trouble into others lives and to destroy our testimony before a watching world.

If that's so, then there are no little sins. There are no unimportant areas in our life. Oh, the sin might not have surfaced yet. Satan's waiting for the opportune time to use it. But that time will come.

There's a lesson to be learned from the life of Abraham and it is so clear in this chapter. It's possible to walk with God for years, and still not have totally dealt with sin in your life.

Is there some area that you've held back from God since you've trusted Christ as Savior? Is there some sin you've pampered you've felt was so small, and trivial that you thought you'd just hang on to it? After all, you can justify it in your own mind!

Let me challenge you this morning to commit that thing to the Lord. Confess it. Agree with God that it is sin. Then judge it before God and put it behind you with His strength.

The New Testament says *we are not ignorant of Satan and his devices*. We are not ignorant of how he works. Don't give Satan a foothold in your life. Because you can be sure one day he'll use it