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A Sad Lapse in the Life of Abraham
(Genesis 20)

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8/24/2014

Without a doubt, one of the most comforting doctrines in the Bible for believers is the doctrine of eternal security. The more a Christian discovers of the remaining corruption that is in his own heart, the more intensely he feels his need for a God whose love will never let him go, a God who will complete in him the good work He began by sustaining him in faith to the very end of his earthly race. How thankful we should be that we not only been called to Christ by grace alone, but are likewise kept in Christ and ultimately glorified in Christ by grace alone. From beginning to end, the believer's salvation in all of its dimensions and stages is "all of grace." Do you not feel your need of such a salvation-- one that is of divine manufacture in every detail? As C. H. Spurgeon says, "It is the Lord who has begun the good work within us; it is he who has carried it on; and if he does not finish it, it never will be complete. If there be one stitch in the celestial garment of our righteousness which we are to insert ourselves, then we are lost; but this is our confidence, the Lord who began will perfect. He has done it all, must do it all, and will do it all. Our confidence must not be in what we have done, nor in what we have resolved to do, but entirely in what the Lord will do."

This truth of the believer's security in Christ is one of the great lessons that emerges from the passage before us this morning. I say that, because in this passage, we see Abraham, after many years of walking with the Lord, fall into a state of spiritual declension from which the Lord alone was able to rescue him. Even though he was a mature believer who had grown spiritually through many faith-building trials over many years, Abraham was still capable of experiencing a spiritual relapse and falling back into some of the same sins that had marred his life decades before. That is why I say this passage highlights the truth of the believer's security in Christ, for had God not intervened to rescue Abraham from his own folly, the story of Abraham would have ended right here in total disaster for Abraham and for all those he loved. It was God who saved the day in this chapter, because he intervened to save Abraham from a crisis situation into which he had plunged himself, his entire family, and

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others because of his own unbelief. Abraham came through this painful experience chastened on account of his sin, but humbler and wiser than before, because God sustained his faith and overruled evil for good.

The events recorded here took place when Abraham was just about to experience the fulfillment of a hope that he had cherished for many years-- the hope that Sarah his wife would bear a son, and that that son would be heir to all the covenant promises that God had made to Abraham. For years, Abraham had lived with this hope in his heart; and now the promise of God was about to be fulfilled. Sarah was about to have a son; for God had recently said to Abraham, "My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year" (Genesis 17). Very shortly after that, the Lord appeared personally at the tent of Abraham to reconfirm that promise. So you would think this would be a moment of great spiritual triumph in Abraham's life, when the repeated promise of God concerning the imminent fulfillment of his hopes would stimulate within Abraham greater faith and joy than ever before. But surprisingly, that is not what happened. This turned out to be moment in which Abraham took a step backward in his walk with God. He did not abandon his faith in God altogether; but he did fall into a state of spiritual declension that led him to lie to his neighbor, put his own wife in jeopardy, and even put the promise of God at risk, from a human standpoint. Abraham came so close to losing all he had gained; yet we see in this passage how God mercifully spared him the potentially ruinous consequences of his sin, while at the same time, He humbled Abraham by allowing him to be rebuked by a pagan unbeliever who showed himself in this instance to be more God-fearing than Abraham himself.

I want us to examine this passage by asking three key questions:

I. Why did Abraham fall into this sin at this time?

II. How serious was his sin?

III. How did God overrule this sin for good?

I. Why did Abraham fall into sin at this time? The most obvious sin Abraham committed in this chapter was that of lying. He lied about his relationship to Sarah by suggesting she was only his sister, rather than his wife. This was a sin that he had committed earlier in his life, you will remember, when he went with Sarah down to Egypt. But it may well be that he sinned in the very first verse of this chapter when he moved with his family from where he was living near the city of

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Hebron in the Judean mountains to the farthest point south in Canaan, a dry wasteland called the Negev, which bordered the Sinai peninsula and Egypt. This was the farthest point to which Abraham could travel without actually leaving the Promised Land.

It was a surprising move, and one that is hard to explain. Why would Abraham choose to uproot his family when Sarah is just one year away from giving birth to the long awaited heir of the promise? Some have suggested that he moved because he needed to find fresh pasture for his flocks. But keep in mind, Abraham had been living in Hebron for twenty years, and had done well there all that time. Why, at this crucial moment, would Abraham give the orders for his servants to pull up their tent pegs and drive the herds and flocks south to the wilderness area of the Negev? It is a bizarre move. One would think that peace and stability were the most important things that Abraham's wife would need at this time, when she was about to find herself pregnant by a miracle of God. What in the world was Abraham thinking?

Not only does this move look strange; it was also a dangerous move, because the particular area where they were heading was associated with the Philistines, a people noted for their very aggressive and warlike character. They were used to taking whatever they wanted by force, and since Abraham had abundant flocks and herds, he would certainly attract the attention of many a covetous eye among the Philistines. If this was such a dangerous move, therefore, why would Abraham undertake it at this crucial hour in his life and the life of Sarah?

Could it be that Abraham was responding to a sense of divine calling? That does not seem likely, for the following reason. Ordinarily, when a person is walking in obedience to God's will, he grows stronger in his faith and in fellowship with God, and exhibits greater consistency and fruitfulness in his walk. But that is not what we see in Abraham. On the contrary, we see him falling into a state of spiritual declension, for in order to protect himself, he ends up manipulating his wife emotionally so that she will lie for him. He also lies to others and shows no concern for the welfare or the safety of anyone but himself; then, when he is called to account for his actions, he minimizes his sin in order to justify what he has done. All this suggests that this move was not an act of obedience to God on Abraham's part, but an act of willful disobedience.

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What was going on here? Why did Abraham sin in this way at this time? Well, the first thing to point is that every one of us is vulnerable to be tempted to sin at any moment of our lives. No matter how many years you have been walking with the Lord; as long as you are in this world, you are still vulnerable to temptation and are still capable of stumbling into some horrible sin that dishonors the Lord. That's because every one of us carries within us, until our dying day, the remnants of a sinful nature, which the Bible calls the "flesh." And until we leave this earth, every Christian must do battle with his flesh, for the flesh generates within us sinful, self-centered desires that wage war against the holy desires of God's Spirit, who lives within our hearts. The only way to avoid fulfilling the desires of the flesh is to cultivate the habit of walking in the Spirit at all times. We need to call on God daily to fill us with His Holy Spirit, so that whatever we do, we do to glorify Him and bring Him pleasure-- not just to please ourselves. But we learn this habit of walking in the Spirit and submitting to the leadership of the Spirit over a lifetime. For that reason, as long as we are in this mortal body, we remain vulnerable to sin. Abraham apparently let his guard down at some point, and for that reason, he began to respond in a fleshly manner to life's pressures.

We don't know the exact motive that prompted this ill-advised move, but if we look at the immediate context, it may well be that the destruction of Sodom had something to do with it. You remember how Abraham had asked God to spare Sodom if only ten righteous people could be found living within it. But God did not spare Sodom. He destroyed it with fire from heaven, and as far as Abraham knew, his nephew Lot had perished in the fire along with the rest. Even though we know that Lot survived, fled to the mountains, and was living like a hermit in a cave, there was no way Abraham could know that. So it could be that Abraham felt overwhelmed with sadness because of what had happened. Perhaps he had lived in hope that one day, he and his nephew would be reunited and worship once again at the same altar. But now that hope was dashed; and perhaps Abraham's sense of sorrow was so intense, he couldn't bear to remain in a place which now associated with traumatic loss. We don't know this was what motivated Abraham, but if it was, we have to recognize this as a fleshly response to his pain, for the fact is, we hardly ever deal properly with pain simply by changing our geographical location.

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Yet how common a response to pain this is in our day. How many young couples divorce for this very reason: they enter into marriage with a romanticized idea about what married life will be like; then, when money problems enter the home, or problems with in-laws, or when they experience conflicting expectations or conflicting desires and dreams for the future, they begin to think, "This is just too painful! I wasn't counting on this," and they walk out on their marriage, thinking that by fleeing their problems they will end their pain. But God has designed life in such a way that he wants us to learn to resolve conflicts where we are, instead of thinking that 'escape' is the answer to everything. As Geoff Thomas points out, "There is no escaping problems in this life. You take yourself with you and generally you are the problem."

Abraham quickly learned that by moving far away from Hebron, he was not escaping life's problems, but was only creating new problems. That is because the root of his problems was not without but within-- his own lack of trust in the Lord. What we see illustrated in Abraham is that one unbelieving act tends to give birth to another; so that, until we get to the root of our problem by repenting of our unbelief, our problems will only get worse and worse. When Abraham acted faithlessly by moving his family to a region that was filled with lawless Philistines, it wasn't long before he found himself facing a situation that was as painful and problematic as anything he had faced back in Hebron. For the city to which he moved was ruled by a pagan king named Abimelech, and this king, like so many kings of the ancient world, was a despot who thought that he had the right to collect all the beautiful women of his dominion to be a part of his harem. When he saw Sarah and heard Abraham say that she was his sister, he did not hesitate to send for her and take her for himself, to be his bride-- for he assumed that she was unmarried.

Now, I know what you are thinking. How could Abimelech have found Sarah an attractive catch-- for she was ninety years old at the time! You don't exactly see a lot of ninety year old women posing as bathing beauties on magazine covers or participating in the Miss America pageant! So how do we respond to those who say, "This is just too incredible to believe?" Well, there are several things to remember. First, the text does not actually mention Sarah's physical beauty here, so that may not have been as great a factor in Abimelech taking her into his harem as the great wealth she possessed as a member of Abraham's family. Also, we must keep in mind that during

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the time of the patriarchs men and women lived much longer than they do today-- Sarah herself lived another thirty-seven years after the birth of Isaac-- so her longer lifespan may have given to Sarah a youthful appearance even in old age. Moreover, there may have been an added youthful glow to her appearance owing to the fact that God was preparing her body to conceive a child. Even today, some seventy year old actresses look as if they were fifty or even younger as the result of cosmetics surgery, facelifts, make-up, etc. If that is so today, then it is not incredible that Sarah, living at this early stage of human history before the effects of the fall shortened the human lifespan to its present duration, appeared to be a woman half her age.

So here was the mess Abraham created for himself and Sarah by his failure to trust in God. He thought that by leaving Hebron, he was leaving his troubles behind, but found instead that he had only jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. His self-deception led him to deceive others as well, by lying to them about his relationship to Sarah. He did that as a form of protection, because of the bad reputation of the people of that region. If people thought Sarah was his sister, no one would kill him in order to take her as a wife. Not only did he lie, he urged Sarah to lie as well, as we see in verse 13, by saying to her, "This your kindness that you should do for me: in every place, wherever we go, say of me, 'He is my brother.'" That is called emotional manipulation, which in itself is a sinful way to deal with other people-- "If you really love me, you'll do what I say. You'll do what is pleasing to me." That is not loving people, but manipulating them.

Most likely, Abraham convinced himself that he was not lying, because Sarah was, after all, his half-sister. They shared the same father, but not the same mother. So they were half siblings; but that simply was not the whole truth about their relationship, and to present it as such, was in essence, to lie. As someone has said, "A half-truth masquerading as the whole truth is a whole lie." Yet here is the tragic irony; Abraham and Sarah convinced themselves that they were being truthful, despite the fact that their words were leading people astray.

This brings us to a second question in our outline:
II. How Serious Was Abraham's Sin?

The fact is, it was very serious, because of how it affected Abraham and others, as well.

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A. How it affected Abraham-- First, it affected Abraham, because it robbed him of many things.

1) It robbed him of spiritual discernment-- It robbed him of spiritual discernment, for that is always the first effect that sin has on the life; it blinds the soul, so that we do not see things according to their true nature. Consider how a liar will often justify lying to others on the ground that his lie is well-intentioned, a so-called "white lie." No doubt, that is how Abraham justified lying to Abimelech; his lie was well-intentioned, because it was form of self-defense. The problem was, his lie ended up harming others and exposing them to danger; so it was an unloving thing for Abraham, but he could not see it; his eyes were blinded.

2) It robbed him of close fellowship with God-- Abraham's sin also robbed him of close fellowship with God. We know that was true, because the Bible tells us the Lord does not hear the prayers of those who harbor unrepentant sin in their hearts. "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear" the Psalmist says in Psalm 66:18. Because God is holy, He will not listen to the prayers of those who reject the way of holiness. Because He is a God of truth, He will not hear those who walk in the way of hypocrisy and deception. There is no way that Abraham could have enjoyed fellowship with God, therefore, while he was dealing with Abimelech falsely.

3) It robbed him of his integrity of character-- Third, Abraham's sin robbed him of integrity of character. We see how Abraham's character had been eroded through deception when Abimelech finally confronted him about his lies in verses 10-14. Instead of humbling himself into the dust and saying to Abimelech, "There is no excuse for lying as I did; please, please, forgiven me!" he started to rattle off a series of excuses as to why he lied, in order to make his actions look reasonable. "First," he said, "I figured you guys were a bunch of murderers who would kill me to get my wife." What a way to win friends and influence people-- tell them that you view them as a bunch of worthless good for nothings who behave like animals! See how far that will get you in winning their respect! Abraham's other excuses for his dishonesty were just as pitiful. He tried to minimize his sin by pointing out that his lie was not completely false, but involved a half truth. Moreover, in lying, he was only acting in line with established precedent, since he had lied in the past in order to protect himself-- so Abimelech didn't need to take it personally. Also, Abraham insinuates that God's providence made him lie, since it was

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God who "caused me to wander from his father's house" (v. 13) Had God not pulled him away from idolatry and led him to a distant land full of dangers, then he wouldn't be compelled to lie in this way. That's right Abraham-- blame God for your own lack of integrity! What a twisting of the truth! This shows that when people get into the habit of deceiving others, they end up wasting a huge amount of time and energy, deceiving themselves by trying to excuse their inexcusable actions.

4) It robbed him of his testimony-- Abraham's sin also robbed him of his personal testimony, for how can you bear effective witness to your neighbor concerning the righteous character of the one true and living God, if you are not righteous in your dealings with your neighbor?

5) It robbed of his family-- Finally, Abraham's sin robbed him of his family, for since he did not speak plainly to Abimelech by saying to him, "This woman is my wife," Abimelech viewed her as eligible for membership in his harem. How much better it would have been for Abraham to speak truth from the beginning! He had nothing to fear, for God had promised that Sarah would bear him a child within a year's time, so there was no way that God was going to let Abraham be murdered or Sarah separated from her husband forever. That Abraham entertained such thoughts shows that he was letting fear dictate his actions, instead of faith.

In addition to affecting himself, Abraham's sin of lying also affected others.

B. How it affected others

1) It put Sarah at risk of being violated-- First, it affected Sarah, because it put her at much greater risk of being taken away from him. That is in fact what happened, but by the grace of God, Sarah's virtue was not compromised, for Abimelech did not know her intimately. Since she was under God's protection, no man laid a hand on her.

2) It put the promise of God at risk--- Abraham's lie also put the promise of God concerning Isaac at risk-- or at least it seemed to do so from a human standpoint. We know that God's purposes are fixed in eternity past, and nothing can thwart their fulfillment. But God's promises can be treated so lightly by men that their fulfillment is put in seeming jeopardy. God had promised Abraham that within a year's time, Sarah would bear him a son. Because of Abraham's lie, however, Sarah found herself in danger of being taken in the arms of Abimelech and impregnated by him. If that happened, what then would become

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of God's promise? Even if Abimelech did not succeed in impregnating her, the very fact that he lay with Sarah might cast a shadow on the paternal origin of any child born to her. How foolish it was of Abraham, therefore, to lie about his relationship to Sarah. In so doing, he not only put his wife in jeopardy, but the promise of God, as well.

3) It put Abimelech himself at risk-- Then, too, Abraham's lie put Abimelech at risk, because God in response to Abimelech's action threatened him with death for taking another man's wife. In verse 3, we read that shortly after Sarah was placed in Abimelech's harem, God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "Indeed you are a dead man because of the woman you have taken, for she is a man's wife."

Abimelech was shocked to learn the truth of what he had happened, for he was totally ignorant of the fact that Sarah was married to Abraham. On that basis, he begged God to show him mercy, for it was through no fault of his own that he took another man's wife. How good to know that God responds to pleas for mercy when they are founded on truth. God confirmed Abimelech's integrity by saying to him, "Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart. For I also withheld you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her." Because Abimelech was ignorant of Sarah's marital status, God spared Abimelech and did not kill him as he said he would do. Nevertheless, He told Abimelech to receive this outpoured mercy, he would have to go to Abraham, the very man who had lied to him, and ask him to pray on his behalf. "For he is a prophet," God said, "and he will pray for you and you shall live."

That leads us to the third point in our outline:

III. How Did God Overrule this Sin for Good?

It is a wonderful truth about God revealed in Scripture that He is able to overrule sin in such a way as to bring out of it something good. That is what we see in God's dealings with Abraham and Abimelech in this chapter. Instead of killing either man for the wrong he committed, He dealt patiently with them and showed them both mercy. He intervened in this terrible situation to set right what was wrong. How so?

A. First, He gave Abimelech forewarning of coming disaster-- God could have simply killed Abimelech, without giving him forewarning. But His goodness is revealed by the fact that He intervened to

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forewarn Abimelech of danger and urge him to seek the mercy of God.

Notice the fact that Abimelech's ignorance of Sarah's marital status did not mean that he was entirely without guilt for his actions. He had, after all, abducted Sarah against her will and was all too willing to believe Abraham's claims without questioning them, so that he could have Sarah as his wife. From this, we learn that no man is ever as innocent of wrongdoing as he imagines himself to be. The fact is, we all stand in need of God's forgiveness and cleansing; there is no other way to approach the Lord. No man will ever be able to stand before God and claim to be innocent of all wrongdoing in his sight. God wanted Abimelech to understand that, so he urged him to approach Him in a proper manner-- not boasting of his own righteousness, but confessing his sins with an attitude of humility, and looking to the intercessory prayers of another to bring down upon him the mercy of the Lord. This is the same attitude that Christians have when we approach God the Father through Christ's own intercessor ministry on our behalf.

So God intervened in Abimelech's life to bring good out of evil. He did the same thing for Abraham. How so?

B. First, He brought Abraham to repentance through the stinging rebuke of a pagan-- It must have been extremely humiliating to Abraham when an unbelieving pagan man called him in, confronted him about his lies, and rebuked him for doing wrong. As Warren Wiersbe points out, "It is hard enough to submit to the rebuke from a Christian brother or sister, but accept rebuke from an unsaved person demands a great deal of honesty and humility."

Abimelech pulled no punches in reproving Abraham. First, he interrogated him by asking him three questions:

1) "What have you done to us?" (He used the word "us," for Abraham's sin not only affected Abimelech, but all the members of his household, as well, for we read in verse 18 that "the Lord had closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.")

2) "How have I offended you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin?" Abimelech felt as if he were the victim of an unprovoked assault. That is how people often feel when someone wrongs them without a just cause. They feel violated, assaulted, abused. That was how Abimelech felt, and he told Abraham so-- "You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done." Abimelech was

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letting Abraham know how offended he was that someone who claimed to be a servant of the Lord would deal so deceitfully with him by drawing him into a defiling situation.

3) What did you have in view, that you have done this thing? This was the most humbling question of all, for it forced Abraham to face up to the vile attitudes he had in his own heart-- his distrust of God, his fear of men, his self-centered obsession with his own personal safety.

How deeply painful this interrogation process must have been for Abraham, for it made him confront the evil in his own heart, and that is always painful; nevertheless, it was salutary, because ultimately it brought him to repentance. We know that, because of what we read in verse 17: "So Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his females servants." God heard Abraham's prayer for Abimelech, and that would not have been the case had Abraham not repented of his sin. So it was great mercy that Abraham was raked over the coals by a pagan.

Not only did God spare Abraham the just consequence of his actions, He also showered on him, contrary to what he deserved, an abundance of unmerited blessings-- and that, from the very man whom he had deceived. Because Abimelech wanted to make restitution to Abraham for having stolen his wife, he bent over backwards to make amends for the past. What irony! Abraham had feared the inhabitants of Gerar because of their lack of piety-- that is why he lied about Sarah; but in the end, Abimelech showed more piety than Abraham; for Abraham tried to evade responsibility for his sin, but Abimelech did not. He took responsibility for his sin and dealt more magnanimously with Abraham than Abraham did with him. He gave Abraham sheep, cattle, and slaves. He gave him permission to travel all over his land and settle wherever he wished. He also gave Abraham a thousand shekels of silver to make restitution for the wrong done to Sarah.

CONCLUSION

There is something extremely painful about this sad episode in the life of Abraham. It is painful, because these sad events were all so unnecessary. Had Abraham responded rightly to life's pressures back in Hebron, he wouldn't have ended up in the far south of Canaan, lying to an unbelieving pagan king about his relationship to Sarah. This whole mess was created by Abraham's failure to trust God. His attitude of distrust led him to deal deceitfully in an unloving manner with his fellow men, and that landed him in a heap of trouble,

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bringing dishonor on the name of God, exposing his wife to danger, and exposing a pagan unbeliever to the threat of divine judgment. What lessons do we learn from this sad affair?

1) Even the most mature believer is far from perfect. In chapter 19, we saw in the figure of Lot a weak believer who trusted in the Lord but failed to bear spiritual fruit in abundant measure. In chapter 20, however, we learn that even mature believers can fall into serious sin, if they fail to respond rightly to life's pressures. Abraham was a mature and fruitful believer, but he was still capable of falling into sin. That ought to be a sober warning to all of us, as well as an encouragement. It ought to warn us, because it means that no matter how much you have grown in the Christian life, you remain vulnerable to temptation; that is why you must be always on guard against the deceitfulness of your heart, lest you fall through carelessness, like Abraham. At the same time, this passage should encourage us, because it shows that God is in the business of saving imperfect people who fall short of His glory and who stumble in many ways along the path to heaven. It is because we are so far from perfect, that our standing before God must always be founded upon His grace alone, through the imputed merits of Jesus Christ.

2) Unbelieving pagans can sometimes show greater integrity than Christian believers-- That was certainly the case here; Abimelech was not a believer, but he showed greater piety than Abraham in this chapter. It is wrong to think that only Christian can show integrity on the job, at home, in their dealing with their neighbors. Unbelievers can and do sometimes show more integrity in these areas than professing Christians. That ought never to be the case, but it is. And if that is so, how careful we must be to conduct ourselves blamelessly in this present world, lest we end up dishonoring the Lord by our actions, causing unbelievers to blaspheme God and driving them away from Christ by our own inconsistencies. We need to pray earnestly that God will give us a consistent walk, lest pagan unbelievers outshine us in integrity.

3) Forgiveness is always available where there is repentance-- When we fall into sin, we must never hesitate to go to the Lord at once, confessing our sin and receiving his forgiveness and cleansing. God was willing to forgive Abraham, but he had to acknowledge his sin and humble himself before the stinging rebuke of the man he had wronged. Let us always remember that the key to spiritual growth is never to hide our sin, but to confess and forsake it.

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4) God will complete the good work He begins in His elect, for His commitment to them is unconditional; consequently their final glorification is guaranteed by the gracious character of election.

Notice that even though Abimelech showed greater integrity in this chapter than Abraham, God did not suddenly reject Abraham and say, "From now on Abimelech is my chosen one." Instead, he told Abimelech, "Get Abraham to pray for you, since he is my chosen servant."

Why did God refuse to reject Abraham? We know the answer. It is because God never chose us because He saw that would lead a perfect life. He chose us on the basis of His grace alone. He chose us because He loved in spite of all that we are, and despite all the sinful things that He foresaw we would do. God knew beforehand the very worst thing there is to know about us, yet He chose us anyway, because His sovereign choice is never based on our works, but on His grace alone. If that is so, let us pray for grace to be faithful to God in all our dealing with our fellow men, and to trust God's at all times, even in times of sadness and trial and difficulty, that we may glorify Him in all our works and bear effective witness to the lost around us, without bringing dishonor on the name of God. Let us give thanks for the forgiveness that is in Jesus Christ, and when we have fallen into sin, let us repent of it at once and go on, thanking God for the grace that heals, restores, and can overrule evil for good. Amen.