

## Old Habits Die Hard

**Text:** Gen. 20:1-18

### Introduction:

1. This chapter records another sad event of Abraham's life. This is the third major failure in the life of Abraham recorded in Scripture. The first was his lie in Egypt that Sarah was his sister. The second was taking Hagar to wife. The third is the repeat of his first failure – he again lied about Sarah being his sister.
2. This episode in Abraham's life reminds us that the old nature and its potential to lead us astray is present with the believer throughout the entirety of his earthly pilgrimage. It warns us of the possibility of repeating old failures apart from the grace of God.
3. "The Bible tells the truth about all people, and that includes God's people. It does not hide the fact that Noah got drunk and exposed himself (Gen. 9:20-23), or that Moses lost his temper (Num. 20:1-13), or that David committed adultery and plotted the death of a valiant soldier (2 Sam. 11). Peter denied the Lord three times (Matt. 26:69-75), and Barnabas lapsed into false doctrine (Gal. 2:13). These things are recorded, not to encourage us to sin, but to warn us to beware of sin. After all, if these great men of faith disobeyed the Lord, then we "ordinary saints" had better be very careful!" (Wiersbe)
4. In this message we will study Abraham's deceitfulness and the pertinent lessons we can learn for our own walk of faith.

### I. THE REPITITION OF ABRAHAM'S LYING (VS. 1-2)

Abraham repeats the sin of lying about his wife Sarah.

#### A. The Season of his Fall

1. Abraham is now nearly 100 years old and Sarah 90. Abraham repeats a mistake from approximately 30 years earlier when he did the same thing when he and Sarah sojourned in Egypt during a time of famine (See chapter 12).
2. Abraham's failure at this point in his earthly pilgrimage is a solemn reminder that no matter how mature a believer may be in the Lord, the possibility of dishonouring the Lord is present until we go home to glory on account of the presence of the old nature within us. Abraham was a justified man (Gen. 15:6) with a new nature (symbolized by his new name – Gen. 17:5) but that did not alter the fact that the old nature was still present with him. Paul referred to it as "sin that dwelleth in me" (Romans 7). One old doctrinal creed refers to it as "the infection of nature" that is not taken away in either the regenerate or sanctified.
3. The only way to get victory over the old nature is not by the law of eradication but by the law of counteraction. Romans 8:2 "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath **made me free** from the law of sin and death."
4. We need to be reminded of four victory words from Romans 6 & 8.

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1. Know – Rom. 6:6-7 “**Knowing this**, that our old man is crucified with *him*, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin.”
2. Reckon – Rom. 6:11 “Likewise **reckon** ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord.”
3. Yield – Rom. 6:13 “Neither **yield** ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but **yield** yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.”
4. Mortify – Rom. 8:13 “For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do **mortify** the deeds of the body, ye shall live.”

### B. The Site of his Fall (Vs. 1)

1. This incident took place in Philistine territory. After living in Hebron (“fellowship”) for approx. twenty years, he decided to go to the land of the Philistines. Unlike Genesis 12, the text does not tell us what motivated this move. Some suggest that the rout of Sodom and Gomorrah influenced the move as Abraham wanted to get away from the place. Others suggest it was for trade since Abraham was by this time a powerful chieftain with some means at his disposal.
2. Henry Morris notes, “At this time Abraham decides to take a trip down through the Negev into Gerar, the capital city at that time of the land of the Philistines, near the Egyptian border. This was a prosperous city, as revealed by archaeological excavations there, and it may be that Abraham had some kind of business dealings in mind. The city controlled a lucrative caravan route and Abraham by this time was a wealthy and powerful chieftain.”
3. Whatever the case may be, we can say with a degree of confidence that a sojourn in Philistine territory was not wise. We see this highlighted later in the life of David. Dwelling in Philistine territory is akin to dwelling in Egypt. It is a reminder to us that moving off victory ground to compromise with the world inevitably leads to spiritual defeat in some area.
4. John Butler writes, “Temptation will come no matter where we are, but in the wrong place temptation has more power to overcome us than when we are in the right place.”

### C. The Sin of his Fall (Vs. 2)

1. Evidently deceitfulness was one of Abraham’s besetting sins. “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.” (Thomas)
2. We all have our own brand of flesh. We manifest the sin nature in different ways but it is all from the same rotten source. Hebrews 12:1 exhorts us to lay aside the “**sin which doth so easily beset us**”.
  - a. A.T. Robertson defines it as “The easily besetting sin”. He remarks that it is a double compound verbal made up of ‘eu’

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(well) and 'periistemi' (to place or stand around. So, it has the idea of "the sin standing around us" or the "easily encompassing (or surrounding) sin." In this case apostasy from Christ was that sin. In our cases it may be some other sin."

- b. Albert Barnes adds, "It properly means, "standing well around;" and hence, denotes what is near, or at hand, or readily occurring...Tyndale renders it "the sin that hangeth on us."
- c. Adam Clarke notes, "What we term the easily besetting sin is the sin of our constitution, the sin of our trade, that in which our worldly honour, secular profit, and sensual gratification are most frequently felt and consulted."

## II. THE RESULTS OF ABRAHAM'S LYING (VS. 3-7)

Deceit always bears a bitter crop and Abraham's lying was no exception. Look at what resulted from his deception. It fruited in:

### A. Suffering for Sarah (Vs. 2b)

1. Sarah was taken into Abimelech's harem and had it not been for God's gracious intervention, things could have ended up very tragically.
2. This highlights the selfishness of Abraham in this whole affair. Instead of loving Sarah selflessly, he was putting his own welfare first. This is the opposite of the kind of love husbands are exhorted to exercise towards their wives in Ephesians 5.
3. Leading one's spouse into a deceitful course of action will inevitably hurt a marriage.

### B. Suffering for Abimelech (Vs. 3-7)

1. Abimelech comes under the chastening hand of God and he and his wife were stricken with some sort of malady which prevented them from having children (See Vs. 17-18). We now have an unsaved man and his family suffering because of the actions of a saved man and his wife.
2. God's intervention was really an act of mercy towards both Abraham and Abimelech. God ensured that the promised seed was not interfered with and that Abraham didn't get the full reward of his foolish behaviour he deserved. God also prevented Abimelech from sinning (Vs. 6).
3. God's visitation to Abimelech gives us a window into the mind of God on adultery early on in the Bible prior to the giving of the Decalogue under Moses. To take another man's wife is "sinning" according to God. To his credit, Abimelech appears to have been in agreement with this even as a pagan ruler.

### C. Shame upon Abraham (Vs. 9-10)

1. Abraham's testimony before a heathen king and his people was marred and damaged.
2. When we live in a carnal, selfish manner, it brings reproach on the Name of Christ.

## III. THE REBUKE OF ABRAHAM'S LYING (VS. 8-10)

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C.H. Spurgeon said, "God does not allow His children to sin successfully." When we sin, we suffer from the consequences of our sins and from the chastening hand of God.

### A. The Mouthpiece of the Rebuke (Vs. 9a)

1. What a sad thing when a man of God needs to be rebuked by an unbeliever! In many ways Abimelech stands out as the more characterized of the two men in this account, even as an unbeliever.
2. Interestingly God spoke directly to Abimelech in this account but not Abraham. God chose to use Abimelech as his mouthpiece of rebuke to Abraham and Sarah (Note verse 16). How humbling! This will not be the last time God uses a unique mouthpiece to issue a rebuke. God would even use a donkey to issue a rebuke to Balaam. 2 Peter 2:16 "But was **rebuked** for his iniquity: **the dumb ass speaking with man's voice** forbade the madness of the prophet."
3. A big test of a man's character is not whether he can give a rebuke but whether he can take a rebuke. Do you have the humility to receive a rebuke, even if the Lord uses an unlikely source? This is an important question as often we are inclined to focus on the faults of the messenger in order to excuse ourselves from the reproof. Receiving a rebuke takes real humility and grace but it brings blessing. Be prepared to receive a:
  - a. Pulpit rebuke – 2 Tim. 4:2 "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, **rebuke**, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine." Titus 2:15 "These things speak, and exhort, and **rebuke** with all authority. Let no man despise thee." If Abraham could receive a rebuke from a heathen king, how much more should we be prepared to receive a rebuke from a Spirit-filled man of God as he declares the Word of God.
  - b. Personal rebuke – Prov. 9:8 "Reprove not a scorner, lest he hate thee: **rebuke** a wise man, and he will love thee." Ecc. 7:5 "*It is better to hear the rebuke of the wise, than for a man to hear the song of fools.*" How do you respond when you are corrected by an authority, a spouse or a peer?
  - c. Our attitude should be like that of the Psalmist who said "Let the righteous smite me; *it shall be* a kindness: and let him reprove me; *it shall be* an excellent oil, *which* shall not break my head: for yet my prayer also *shall be* in their calamities." (Psalm 141:5)

### B. The Message of the Rebuke (Vs. 8b-10)

Abimelech issues a scathing rebuke of Abraham's action. He rebukes him for:

1. The Hurtfulness of his Action – "What hast thou done unto us? And what have I offended thee?" Indulging in fleshly habits hurts others.
2. The Sinfulness of his Action – "that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin?" This is a plain and straight forward rebuke of the reality of what Abraham had done. It was a sinful course of action, pure and simple.
3. The Inappropriateness of his Action – "thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done". Believers ought not to lie! Col. 3:9 "**Lie not one to another**, seeing that ye have put off the old man with his deeds;"

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4. The Foolishness of his Action – “What sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing?” In reality this decision of Abraham’s had not been made based on facts but upon his own perceptions and carnal thinking.

### IV. THE REASONING BEHIND ABRAHAM’S LYING (VS. 11-13)

We now discover the heart problem that led to Abraham taking this sinful course of action. His carnal actions were a result of a carnal heart condition. Take note of Abraham’s:

#### A. Carnal Thinking (Vs. 11)

The root of the whole problem is found in the phrase “**Because I thought**”. This verse reveals the inner thoughts of Abraham that were behind the carnal action he took. Wrong thinking leads to wrong living. If there is one thing we need to learn as Christians it is this, our thoughts are often wrong! Learning from the errors of Abraham’s thinking can help us to detect wrong thinking in our own lives. Where did Abraham go wrong? We note several errors:

1. The faith in his thinking. Don’t trust your own mind. Always be careful to check your thoughts against God’s thoughts in the Bible. Visit good books but live in the Bible!
2. The fear behind his thinking. Faith was absent from this thought process. Fleshly fear and worry were driving his thoughts in this direction. Abraham had proved God’s faithfulness over several decades to this point. Could he not trust the Lord to protect him and his family now? A good question to ask myself is this, “Are these thoughts the thoughts of faith or the whisperings of doubt?”
3. The falseness of his thinking. Abraham made an assumption based on a perception he had of the people among whom he was living. That they were not worshippers of the true God was true but to assume they would kill him was in error. Be careful about what you assume about others, especially your brothers and sisters in Christ! Be careful about thinking too much about what you think others are thinking!
4. Illustration: David erred in his thinking during a trial in his life and sought refuge amongst the Philistines; a mistake that would put him and his family in grave danger. 1 Samuel 27:1 “And **David said in his heart**, I shall now perish one day by the hand of Saul: *there is* nothing better for me than that I should speedily escape into the land of the Philistines; and Saul shall despair of me, to seek me any more in any coast of Israel: so shall I escape out of his hand.”

#### B. Carnal Excusing (Vs. 12)

1. Abraham offers the excuse that in reality Sarah was his half sister so the claim was true. However, in this case, the truth was calculated to deceive. The key fact was left out, namely, that she was also his wife. This is a clever and more sophisticated way of lying but it is lying nonetheless. Wiersbe notes that “A half-truth has just enough fact in it to make it plausible and just enough deception to make it dangerous.”
2. F.B. Meyer elaborates, “In a certain sense, no doubt, Sarah was his sister. She was the daughter of his father, though not the daughter

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of his mother. But she was much more his wife than his sister; and to withhold that fact was to withhold the one fact that was essential to the maintenance of his honour, and the protection of her virtue. We are not bound to tell the whole truth to gratify an idle curiosity; but we are bound not to withhold the one item, which another should know before completing a bargain, if the knowledge of it would materially alter the result. A lie consists in the motive quite as much as in the actual words...like Abraham we may utter true words, meaning them to convey a false impression, and, in the sight of Heaven we are guilty of a deliberate and shameful falsehood.”

### C. Carnal Scheming (Vs. 13)

1. This verse provides further enlightenment as to the root of the problem. Abraham and Sarah had a long-standing understanding and agreement on this from years back. It went all the way back to when Abraham left Ur of the Chaldees, some 25 plus years earlier.
2. Within the boundaries of God’s revealed will, a husband and wife have liberty to make decisions together on many things but there are limits and no couple is authorised to make a sinful agreement. Learn to agree together to do right as a couple, not wrong! Decisions as married couples need to be made with careful consideration to the Word of God and Scriptural principles. Learn to re-evaluate decisions and don’t stick stubbornly to them in pride just because you made them together! Beware of being united on an unbiblical course of action!
3. Illustration: Ananias and Saphira – Acts 5:9 “Then Peter said unto her, How is it that ye have **agreed together** to tempt the Spirit of the Lord? behold, the feet of them which have buried thy husband *are* at the door, and shall carry thee out.”
4. There is a lesson in this for the wife that submission to a husband’s headship has limits and a wife should not submit to an unrighteous, dishonest demand from a husband. Acts 5:29 reminds us that God is the supreme authority and there are times when we have to disobey an earthly authority in order to obey the Heavenly authority of God.
5. However, the primary lesson in all of this is for the husband. A husband should not put his wife or his children in a position where they are in conflict between his authority and God’s. This was Abraham’s initiative and idea and it caused suffering and hurt to Sarah as the subordinate. Sadly, Abraham is not alone in this. Many Christian husbands make unbiblical decisions and demands that damage their wives and families.

## V. THE RESTORATION AFTER ABRAHAM’S LYING (VS. 14-18)

If there is one thing we learn from this lapse in Abraham’s life it is that God is merciful and gracious to His children and so often prevents us from experiencing everything we deserve from a bad decision. God did a work of repair and restoration in this situation. If you find yourself in a bad place on account of a bad decision, the sooner you cooperate with the Lord and let Him work, the sooner you will experience restoration and recovery. All three parties involved experienced the grace of God.

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### A. Abraham's Restoration (Vs. 14-15)

Abimelech took God's warning seriously and was very generous in giving to Abraham. Be prepared to give and sacrifice where needed to repair damage in a relationship.

1. He gave what he did not owe (Vs. 14a).
2. He restored what he had taken (Vs. 14b).
3. He gave Abraham freedom to dwell in the land (Vs. 15).
4. This all represented a fear of God on the part of Abimelech and is a credit to him as a pagan ruler. His actions were also selfless and gracious. He went beyond what was required in the situation. All God demanded was that he restore Sarah and allow Abraham to pray for him. Abimelech not only obeyed what God had said, he went further and gave generously.
5. "All through we see the manifest moral superiority of a heathen man over children of God. When believers are out of the line of God's will they will sometimes go lower than other people. Abimelech is at his best. Abraham is at his worst." (Thomas)

### B. Sarah's Restoration (Vs. 16)

1. Sarah also was reproved by Abimelech for her role in this affair.
2. John Gill explains Abimelech's statement to her as meaning "a protection of her person and chastity: so an husband, in our language, is said to be a cover to his wife, and she under a cover: thus Abraham being now known to be the husband of Sarah, would for the future be a covering to her, that no one should look upon her, and desire her, and take her to be his wife; and he would also be a protection to her maidens that were with her, the wives of his servants, that these also might not be taken from him:"

### C. Abimelech's Restoration (Vs. 17-18)

1. The means God chose to use was Abraham's prayer for Abimelech. This would have been another humbling thing for Abraham to pray for the healing of the one he had damaged through his own selfishness.
2. God healed Abimelech, his wife and his household so that they could again have children. We are reminded of God's sovereignty over the womb, a repeated theme in the Scriptures.

**Conclusion:** What sinful habit are you entertaining in your life? Are you seeking victory God's way over the sins of the flesh? Do you need to humble yourself, admit your wrong and submit to God's work of restoration in your life?