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## BESETTING SINS

Genesis 20:1-18

By

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Genesis Lesson 42

## Besetting Sins Genesis 20:1-18

Four ministers got away for a retreat. As they sat around the fire talking, one pastor said, "Let's all share our besetting sins. I'll go first. My besetting sin is that every so often I slip away from the office to the race track and bet on the horses."

The second pastor volunteered, "My besetting sin is that I keep a bottle of wine down in my basement. When I get really frustrated with my deacons, I sneak down there and have a nip of wine."

The third pastor gulped and said, "My besetting sin is that I keep a punching bag at home. When I get mad at somebody in the church, I go home and think about that person as I hit the punching bag."

They all turned to the fourth pastor and asked, "Well, what is your besetting sin?" He hesitated, but they coaxed him. Finally, he said, "My besetting sin is gossip, and I can't wait to get home!"

We all struggle with besetting sins. They're like a piece of furniture that you keep hitting your shin against. At some point, you would think you would learn to avoid it. But when it's been a while and you aren't thinking about it--Whack! You do it again.

Genesis 20 shows us Abraham, the father of faith, whacking his shin on the same piece of furniture. He does the same stupid thing here that he did in chapter 12: He claims that Sarah is his sister, and she is taken into the harem of a king. Liberal critics argue that these two accounts (and chapter 26, where Isaac does the same thing) are really the same story, which a not-too-smart editor mistakenly put in several places. But there are a number of obvious differences between the three accounts, and there is no reason to doubt their historicity. They are true to life and show us that certain sins plague us throughout life, and that they are often passed on to our children.

After the high point of Abraham's fellowship and prayer (chap. 18), you wouldn't think that this could happen. If the Bible was a fairy tale, it wouldn't. But the Bible is a realistic book that shows us the humanness of all its heroes. Abraham's weak areas show us the struggles in the life of faith and give us hope for ourselves. If God could work with a sinner like Abraham, then He can work with me!

There are two main themes in this chapter: the *failure* of Abraham; and, the *faithfulness* of God. Yes, Abraham sinned, but God didn't cast him off. He dealt with His erring child and followed it up by fulfilling the long-awaited promise of a son (chap. 21). That's grace! The chapter shows that ...

While we are prone to besetting sins,  
God is marked by holiness and grace.

There's a fine balance here. If the text only portrayed Abraham's sin and God's grace, we might be inclined toward license: "Don't worry about your sin, because God is gracious." But the chapter won't allow that wrong application. God's holiness and the damage our sin causes is balanced with His grace, so that we won't take our sin lightly.

Before we look at the passage in more detail, let me deal with a question you may have, namely, *why would Abimelech be interested in marrying a 90 year-old woman?* Pharaoh took Sarah into his harem when she was about 65 on account of her great beauty. But 90? Was Sarah really that stunning?

Part of the answer involves the longer lifespans of people in that day. Abraham lived to 175 and Sarah to 127. Thus at 65, she would be just past the halfway point of her life, certainly not too old to retain her beauty. At 90, she would be comparable to a woman of 53 who lived to 75, so she still could be attractive, although past her youth. But the text never mentions her beauty in chapter 20. Probably Abimelech wanted her in his harem to cement an alliance with the wealthy and powerful Abraham, who posed as her brother. Later, Abimelech did enter into an alliance with Abraham (21:22-34). Thus while Sarah was not in the flower of her youth, she was an attractive woman whose family ties could help Abimelech politically.

A second question is, *Why did God appear to Abimelech, but not to Abraham? Why didn't God stop Abraham from his foolish action?* I think the reason is that God sometimes allows us to fail to teach us that our salvation depends totally on His sovereign grace, and not at all on ourselves. This event took place on the verge of Sarah's becoming pregnant with Isaac. That couldn't have happened if she was in Abimelech's harem. In his attempt to protect himself, Abraham almost spoiled God's promise to give him a son through Sarah the next year (18:10). This serious failure, right on the verge of the promise's fulfillment, showed Abraham again that if God's promise was to be fulfilled, it would be totally because of God and not at all because of Abraham. Abraham's sin shows us that ...

1. We all are prone to besetting sins.

If Abraham had one, you can be sure that we all have them! Often, like Abraham, we fail in the everyday worries and fears of life, not in the major crises. Abraham had this long-standing fear for his safety. Back before he left his father's house, he devised this "white" lie and got Sarah to agree to it in an attempt to protect himself (20:13). If God had called him to go, God would protect him. So this scheme was unnecessary, illogical, and it didn't even work the two times he tried it. But it was a weak area with Abraham, and he fell into it when he got into these situations. Five observations about besetting sins:

A. Besetting sins are always a danger.

I don't mean that we can't experience consistent victory over them. By God's grace and power, we can. But I do mean that there will never be a time when we're so strong spiritually that we don't have to be on guard against them. If you ever get to thinking, "I've finally got that problem licked once and for all," look out! "Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12). Abraham had walked with God for years, but he fell into the same sin that had defeated him twenty years before.

Some branches of Christianity teach that we can reach a state of sinless perfection in this life. How I wish it were so! The Bible teaches that we can have consistent victory over sin, but it also teaches that even the strongest saints are always vulnerable to temptation. As long as we remember that we're weak, so that we

walk in the Spirit, we'll be strong in His strength. But the minute we forget it, or start thinking we're strong in ourselves, we're in trouble.

We need to be careful to avoid situations which expose us to danger. There is no indication here that Abraham sought the Lord about his move to Gerar (20:1). Since the land of Canaan was so crucial in God's plan for Abraham and since God had blessed Abraham in his years by the oaks of Mamre, I can't believe that it was right for him to pack up and move without consulting the Lord, especially into a situation that exposed him to his old weakness.

If you know that you're easily tempted in certain situations, avoid those situations! If you're tempted by drinking, don't go near bars. If you're tempted by lust, don't go to bookstores where pornography is sold; don't go to movies with sex scenes. If you're tempted when you travel alone, make arrangements to be accountable and plan your free time with things that will build you in the Lord. Knowing that we're vulnerable, we need to plan *not* to sin!

B. Besetting sins are rooted in the love of self.

If Abraham had been loving God, would he have tarnished God's name (which was associated with Abraham) by lying? If he was loving Sarah more than himself (as every husband should do; Eph. 5:25), would he have been willing to let her be taken from his side and exposed to adultery? Why did Abraham do such a thing? Because he was afraid that he would be killed (20:11). He loved himself more than he loved God or Sarah.

I have read statements by "Christian psychologists" to the effect that most of our problems stem from feelings of low self worth. I read an article recently explaining that one reason pastors commit adultery is low self esteem. But the Bible teaches that most of our sins stem from the fact that we love ourselves more than we love God and more than we love others. Any man who commits adultery is loving himself more than he loves God, his wife, his children, and even more than he loves the other woman. If you try to overcome sin by loving yourself more, you're simply feeding the source of the problem! The answer to overcoming sin is to deny yourself, not to love yourself (Luke 9:23).

C. Besetting sins always hurt others.

We tend to think of our besetting sins as basically harmless. Abraham probably thought, "This is just a white lie. No one will get hurt." And yet his sin risked losing Sarah to another man. It must have hurt Sarah's feelings to be used as Abraham's buffer to protect his hide. And it caused Abimelech and his household to get sick and be on the verge of death (20:3, 7). We never have the luxury of sinning in private. Our sin always hurts others.

God prevented Abimelech from his unintentional sin, but God wouldn't heal him apart from Abraham's prayer (20:7, 17-18). That put Abraham in the position of having to pray that another man's wife and concubines would not be barren, a prayer that he had asked for his own wife for over 25 years! In chapter 18, Abraham had learned to pray for those who were under judgment for their own sins. Here he learns to pray for those who had been damaged by his sin.

We can't always undo the damage our sin has caused. But we can pray for those who have been hurt by our sin. We should ask forgiveness, and make restitution when we can. But we need to remember that our sin always hurts others, and thus avoid sinning.

Besetting sins are always a danger; they stem from self-love; and, they always damage others.

D. We tend to excuse besetting sins, not confess and forsake them.

I'd like to be able to report that Abraham confessed his sin and put it out of his life. Maybe he did, but the Bible is silent on it. What we see him doing here is making excuses for it, not confessing it. God uses a pagan king to confront His sinning prophet. Abraham says he thought there would be no fear of God in this place (20:11), and yet the men of that place feared greatly when they heard of God's potential judgment on them (20:8), whereas Abraham had feared them more than he feared God.

Abraham has three excuses for his sin. First, he says that the situation forced him to do it. Ever since God had "caused him to wander" from his father's house, he had been afraid he would be killed, and so he had planned this lie (20:13). What else could a man do in such a situation? But how could Abraham really be in

danger of losing his life, if God had called him to go into Canaan and had promised to make a great nation out of him? There is no situation where God puts you where sin is no longer sin because of the circumstances.

Abraham's second excuse was to justify a half-truth as the truth, to say that Sarah was his sister. But though technically true, it was intended as a lie. The important fact in this case wasn't that she was his sister, but that she was his wife. You can bend the facts or limit them in such a way as to promote falsehood. That's lying, even if it is technically true. The motive is what counts. Abraham calls his lie a "kindness" (20:13). But a lie is never a kindness or "a little white lie." It's always sin.

The third excuse was, "That's the way we've always done it" (20:13). He and Sarah had agreed to do it this way years before. "Don't take it personally, Abimelech! This is just what we've always done." But just because we've always done it doesn't make it right. Maybe we've always sinned!

This story shows us how "a little white lie" can mushroom into a severe problem which hurts many. We'd all be a lot better off if we'd call our sin what it is--SIN--confess it and turn from it.

Thus besetting sins are always a danger; they stem from love of self; they hurt others; and, we tend to excuse them, rather than confess them. A fifth observation:

E. Besetting sins always dishonor God.

Just think what would have happened if Abimelech had consummated his relationship with Sarah! The birth of Isaac, and of Isaac's descendant, Christ, would be forever under a cloud. Abraham wouldn't have known if Isaac was his child in fulfillment of God's promise or Abimelech's child. Since Isaac was the link in God's plan to bless all nations through Abraham's seed, the whole Messianic program was jeopardized by Abraham's foolish lie.

God was made to look bad through Abraham's sin. Abimelech must have thought, "If this guy is God's prophet, I'm not sure I want to know this God!" Abimelech, a pagan, has more integrity here than Abraham, God's prophet. All sin dishonors God. If Abimelech had committed adultery with Sarah, it wouldn't have primarily been a sin against Abraham. God says, "I kept you from

sinning against Me" (20:6). While our sin hurts others, it always dishonors the God whom we represent.

While we are prone to besetting sins, there is another theme of this chapter that gives us great encouragement:

## 2. God is marked by holiness and grace.

These two seemingly opposite traits are in perfect balance. God never sacrifices His holiness for grace, nor His grace for holiness.

### A. God is marked by holiness.

In His holiness, God struck Abimelech and all his household with some disease which prevented them from conceiving children and would have killed them, if Abimelech had not restored Sarah to Abraham. That's pretty severe! But it shows how highly God values marriage and sexual purity within marriage.

The text also reveals God as the source of all holiness. God tells Abimelech that the reason he didn't sin was because God prevented it (20:6). We can never boast in our holiness, because any holiness we have is derived from the Lord. He is a holy God who takes sin seriously. Even though it would have been accidental from Abimelech's point of view, it would have been sin from God's perspective. God is holy and separate from all sin. But also...

### B. God is marked by grace.

As the psalmist declares, "If You, Lord, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with You, that You may be feared" (Ps. 130:3-4). God's grace should never lead us to license, but to fear Him and to fear sinning.

We see here God's grace toward Abimelech. He was a relatively good man, as far as Canaanite kings in that day went. But he was a sinner, just like everyone else. God justly could have killed him to deliver Sarah. But He showed him grace.

We also see God's grace toward Abraham and Sarah. Sarah wasn't as responsible as Abraham, since she didn't devise this plan. But she consented to it. While it's right for a wife to submit to her husband, it's not right for her to submit to him in doing wrong. But in spite of their sin, God graciously blessed Abraham and

Sarah, financially through Abimelech's gifts, and with the birth of Isaac (21:1-7). God graciously was willing to be associated with Abraham, even in his sin, by calling Abraham his prophet. If I were God, I'd want to keep it quiet that Abraham knew me until this thing blew over. But God didn't disown Abraham for this failure. In the many other references to Abraham in the Bible, God mentions his faith often, but He never mentions this sin. Amazing grace!

Thank God that He doesn't deal with us according to our sins! Because the Lord Jesus Christ bore the penalty we deserved, God is now free to deal with us in grace. Just as God sovereignly chose Abraham and blessed him in spite of his sins, so He has sovereignly chosen us and blesses us in spite of our sins. That shouldn't make us be sloppy about our sin. It should make us want to be holy in order to please the God who loved us and gave Himself for us!

### Conclusion

Juan Carlos Ortiz has captured the balance between God's grace and our good works nicely. He writes (*Leadership*, Fall, 1984, p. 46.),

Watching a trapeze show is breathtaking. We wonder at the dexterity and timing. We gasp at near-misses. In most cases, there is a net underneath. When they fall, they jump up and bounce back to the trapeze.

In Christ, we live on the trapeze. The whole world should be able to watch and say, "Look how they live, how they love one another. Look how well the husbands treat their wives. And aren't they the best workers in the factories and offices, the best neighbors, the best students?" That is to live on the trapeze, being a show to the world.

What happens when we slip? The net is surely there. The blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ, has provided forgiveness for *all* our trespasses. Both the net and the ability to stay on the trapeze are works of God's grace.

Of course, we cannot be continually sleeping on the net. If that is the case, I doubt whether that person is a trapezist.

Some of you may be on the net, discouraged by besetting sins. Look to God's grace, confess your sin, accept His forgiveness, and get back on the trapeze. Or in the words of the author of Hebrews, after telling of the faith of Abraham, Sarah, and many others, "Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:1-2).

### Discussion Questions

1. Does God eradicate our sin nature? What does the Bible mean when it says we are dead to sin (Rom. 6:11; Col. 2:20; 3:3)?
2. How would you answer the argument that if we can't lose our salvation by sinning, then it will encourage us to sin more?
3. How can we emphasize grace without encouraging licentiousness?
4. Is it ever okay to lie (e.g., to protect someone else)?

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