

Text: Genesis 20

Theme: Roller Coaster Faith Walk

Sermon delivered by Reverend Dele Agbelusi during Holy Communion Service on 15/11/2015 at 10.30am

Have you ever wondered why you experience ups and downs in your faith walk like a sort of roller coaster? Never mind. You are not alone. You are in good company of the likes of Abraham. But at the same time, does it not amaze you that in our failures and inconsistency, we have the loving intervention of a consistent God, a loving God, a faithful God, the God who never abandons His own.

We will do a small exercise this morning and all I want you to do is to indicate “up” or “down” in Abraham’s walk with God as shown in our past studies of Genesis:

- In **chapter 12** God called Abraham and gave him wonderful promises of blessings and Abraham believed God and left his people as directed. - **UP**
- But after those promises, and Abraham had taken the step of faith and left his people, there was famine in the land and he moved to Egypt. There he lied that Sarah was his sister to avoid being killed in Egypt. His testimony was in tatters as he left Egypt though with a lot of material wealth. – **DOWN**
- In chapters **13-15**, we see Abraham as he wins a battle and God appears to him again with reassurance the He was Abraham’s shield. - **UP**
- But again, in **chapter 16** we’re plunged back in the pits of despair as Abraham connives with his wife and took Hagar to produce a heir for him. The waiting for a son was becoming too long. – **DOWN**
- In **chapter 17** God appears to him and reveals himself as God Almighty and confirms his promises and assures Abraham that in a year’s time, his wife Sarah would be with a child. - **UP**
- In **chapter 18** – He pleads for Sodom and Gomorrah and especially bearing in mind that his nephew was there. - **UP**

All through these chapters it has been up, down, up down. You really wonder, can you really say this is a picture of the man of faith? But all along, God is teaching this servant of His a lesson that he must trust in the faithfulness of God whatever the circumstances he faces – that is walking by faith and not by sight.

So, in today’s passage, Genesis 20, we examine what happens when someone talks to himself, thereby takes his eyes and thoughts away from the Almighty God in the face of danger; and when God talks to the situation on his behalf. We will consider the passage under two main headings:

1. **Anatomy of a backslider:**
 - (a) **Abraham talks to himself**
 - (b) **Abraham forgets former things**
2. **Anatomy of Grace**
 - (a) **God speaks to situations**
 - (b) **Faithful God restores the backslider**

1. Anatomy of a backslider

(1a) Abraham talks to himself with a devastating result; Genesis 20:11 (Repeat of the mind-set as shown in **Genesis 12:11-13**)

“Abraham said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.”” Fear of the people among whom he was, tempted him to equivocate. His conduct was highly culpable. Even though he should have learned from the previous time he denied that Sarah was his wife (remember Egypt?), he tries the same ridiculous stunt again, with terrible results, for Sarah and for Abimelech and his entire household. It's astounding to think that this mighty father of faith could repeat his folly, but he did. If you want a sobering account of human nature, you only have to read Genesis. It's not only the 'pagans' who make such a terrible mess of their lives, but the people of God too.

'Besetting sin' is the phrase often used to describe a fault line in us that means we tend to repeatedly return to a specific sin. It can be a habit or an attitude: we fall, repent and insist that we're not going to go that way again. But our hearts can so easily be deceived, and we start to believe that doing the wrong thing will create the right results, only to fall flat on our faces again. That's what Abraham did: he thought that his lie would ensure peace and freedom, but it only brought about the judgment of God.

Perhaps you're painfully aware that there are some sins you repeatedly revisit. If you'll allow it, those sins will dog you for as long as you are alive. Sooner or later, we have to wake up, perhaps make ourselves accountable to a trusted friend and stop the cycle. May God strengthen you and liberate you as you do.

But the worst thing was of course Abraham's selfishness and his complete disregard for Sarah's safety and honour, which should have become even more important to him if Sarah was indeed pregnant. It may be significant that in this case it is Abraham who says "she is my sister" and not Sarah who says "he is my brother." Sarah may not have been willing to play the game anymore, but Abraham forced her in to it.

Satan must have played a part in this also. He plays a part in every sin, but he would have been especially interested in letting Abimelech have sex with Sarah since that would have thrown doubt on the child she would bring into the world. And we see several times that the devil tries to cut the line which leads to the coming of the Messiah into this world. In the days of Esther, he tries to exterminate the whole Jewish race. And after the captivity in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, he entices the returned captives to intermarry with the heathen nations, so that the Jewish identity would be wiped out. The last belated effort was of course the massacre of the infants in Bethlehem after the birth of Jesus Christ.

Probably none of these thoughts played through Abraham's head at this time. His only concern was his own safety.

(1b) Abraham forgets former things

By talking to himself and taking his eyes away from God, Abraham forgot God's past mercies to him. He forgot about the God who revealed himself as God Almighty (**Genesis 17:1**) and Abraham's shield (**Genesis 15:1**). He forgot that God has made a pledge to him that Sarah would bear a son not many months from then and **there was no way that Abraham or Sarah could die if the promise was to be fulfilled. But our inner fears often loosen our grip on what God has said, as we focus instead on what might possibly be.** That's one reason for us to practise good interior health. When we fix our minds on Scripture and reflect on it daily, we fill our heads and hearts with the pure truth of the Word of God.

2. Anatomy of Grace

(2a) God speaks. (20:3) But God came to Abimelech... and said: "You are as good as dead because..."

At the time when Abraham demonstrated selective deafness to God, He spoke to a pagan king Abimelech in a dream. The heathen king Abimelech shines brighter than the beautiful 90-year-old pregnant beauty queen-Sarah and brighter than the big business Tycoon, Abraham, with a lying problem.

God does not condemn Abimelech for his polygamy; but he warns him about the consequences of committing adultery. **In verse 7 God said:** "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 all yours will die." God speaks with Abimelech fundamentally to preserve Sarah but also because of concern for Abimelech. Because of the seamless web of life, the interconnectedness of all things, those who are innocent are often caught in the consequences of the sinful deeds of others (from personal abuse to wars).

There is a touch of irony in the fact that God sends Abimelech to Abraham to be prayed for and He addressed Abraham as His prophet. This is a pointer to what Jesus does for us. **(Hebrews 2:11) As believers, He has introduced God the Father to us and in the same way; He stands before God and calls us brothers and sisters, what an amazing thing!**

This must have pricked Abraham's conscience deeply. His deceit is exposed, and God orders him to pray for those whom he deceived so that they will be healed. It would have been impossible for Abraham to pray effectively without confessing his sin before God and probably before Abimelech first. **As Ps 66:18 says:** "If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." **Abraham needed as much healing as Abimelech, and God provided this for both of them through Abraham's prayer. We see prayer as a powerful vehicle through which God works to heal.**

Abimelech responded positively when God speaks to him in the dream. He wakes up in a cold sweat and immediately gives Sarah back.

It saddens me to hear people say that they'd never again employ Christian tradespeople, because their work is shoddy, or because they are lax with paying their bills on time. Here, Abimelech acts in a way in which Abraham should have acted: with deep integrity. He was called into action and repentance, and he immediately followed through and did what he was told. How?

Verse 8- Abimelech summoned his officials in response to God speaking to him in a dream

Verse 14 - Abimelech brought gifts as he returned Sarah to her husband

Verse 9. Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said . . . What have you done? -In what a humiliating plight does the patriarch now appear--he, a servant of the true God, rebuked by a heathen prince. What a dignified attitude is that of the king--calmly and justly reproving the sin of the patriarch, but respecting his person.

Are we any different from Abraham? I will say no! But **time and time again, we must fling ourselves into the warm embrace of God's loving arms. After we have talked to ourselves, we must learn to listen to God's Word to us and to our circumstance.** You may think you have blown it big time with God. Maybe you have done something so shameful that you think God could never have you back. Well let me tell you, **God's arms are wide enough to bring back the most far flung sinner.** And his love is deep enough to cover the

most wretched sin. And how do we know that? God gave His Son to die in our place because He loved us so much. And Jesus' resurrection from the dead attests to the fact that the sacrifice and substitution are accepted. All you have got to do is to submit your will to God's will and be reconciled to Him.

Verses 17-18

Now let's get this straight - Abimelech DIDN'T SLEEP WITH SARAH, so what's the big deal? Why do these women remain INFERTILE when Abimelech made an HONEST MISTAKE? What we do invariably affects others. Sometimes innocent people get hurt by our actions. Abimelech was deceived by Abraham's scheme, and for some reason, Sarah didn't feel able to expose the sham either. This suggests that she was either manipulated or intimidated by her husband into participating again in this deception. But Abimelech and his household were blighted by a sin that they didn't even know was being committed.

(2b) Faithful God restores the backslider

I confess there is one part of this story that troubles me: the fact that God told Abimelech to go to Abraham and be prayed for. It seems unfair that a man of relative integrity should be told to submit himself to the prayers of the man who had created the mess in the first place. But then my irritation is banished by this comforting thought: God had promised to make Abraham a channel of blessing to the earth. Despite his deep flaws and sins, that was a promise that God was going to keep. That is grace; the Grace that depends on God's generosity and character and not the flaws of the receiver. This is the grace that cannot be earned. Abraham is now a channel of blessing to Abimelech and his household. There is some redemption in the story, in that Abraham is now able to bless the penitent pagan.

In verse 16, Abimelech gave to Sarah's brother, Abraham a thousand shekels of silver to cover the offence against Sarah. It is interesting to see Abraham *accepted* these gifts, when he had refused gifts from a pagan king previously (Genesis 14:21-24), because he wanted no one to think a man had made him rich. Here, because of Abraham's compromise, he found it hard to reclaim the same high moral ground.

God's word about Abraham's being a prophet serves a double purpose. It protects Abraham from any precipitous judgment that Abimelech may wish to pass, for it makes his life dependent on Abraham's intercession. God gave Abraham a garment of righteousness, that made him a prophet to Abimelech in spite of his waywardness.

Abraham had nothing to glory in but in the Lord. He cannot be justified by his works, but must be indebted for justification, to that righteousness which is upon all and unto all them that believe. We must not condemn all as hypocrites who fall into sin, if they do not continue in it. But let the habitual sinner and the impenitent take heed that they do not continue to sin, thinking that grace may abound. Abimelech, being warned of God, takes the warning; and being truly afraid of sin and its consequences, he rose early to pursue the directions given him.

This episode lays the groundwork for the testing of Abraham's absolute faith in God in Genesis 22 – when he was told to sacrifice his only son!