

Here We Go, Again!

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[0 : 0 0] Well today we're looking with God's help at Genesis chapter 20 as the next episode in the life of Abraham as we've been following his life has set out here for us in these chapters in Genesis and as soon as you read into chapter 20 you get a sense of what's nowadays called déjà vu. We've been here before, we've seen him do this before he is passing off his wife as his sister as he did previously with Pharaoh some chapters back and in order to protect his own life in these circumstances and some critics of the Bible will see that as proof that the Bible really is a fallible book that is just written by human beings down through the course of the years because this kind of thing is evidence of the fallibility of human beings

I mean they wouldn't really nowadays would they include such a thing in the life of one man if this had happened once that would be enough surely to mention it and critics of the Bible tell us that all of the passages that you have here were really put together over different times by different people from different sources and that different versions of these stories existed and as they were brought together they kind of ended up in this form this very unsatisfactory form well of course we don't believe that when you come to regard the Bible as God's inspired word as God breathed out to give people like Moses the ability to write these things as an accurate account as an authoritative account it's not evidence at all actually that the Bible is fallible but it is evidence of the nature of sin and it's evidence that God is not afraid to actually show that a good man like Abraham would have the same failures in his life more than once indeed that's something that's important to take note of

God doesn't hide the blemishes in the lives of his people he doesn't gloss them over he doesn't airbrush them out of the picture he leaves them there so that you and I will see these are real people with real lives in this world facing the same issues that you and I face from day to day and experiencing the same failures by and large that you and I are prone to as well it's proof of all of that and that God himself is concerned to record this for us so that for one thing we will take encouragement from the fact that even despite our failures God does not give up on us and that God can use and does use people like you and I who are inwardly flawed in our thoughts in our conclusions in our actions in our words our behaviour that people like that can be used greatly by God to bring further glory and honour to himself

Abraham Moses David Samson Peter all of these were flawed individuals and their flaws are openly set out for us in the Bible and yet God used them and God didn't give up on them so what do we see in this déjà vu chapter in this here we go again kind of incident first of all we look at Abraham's relapse because that's really what it is he's relapsing he's going back to this practice this policy that he had adopted and then we'll see Abimelech's response now Abraham here has entered into what's called here the Negev which is a southern region between Kaddish and Shur and journeyed in Gerar and that means he's come into land that was at that time occupied by the Philistines Abimelech was the king at the time of that people Abimelech is maybe not a personal name it really means literally my father is king or the king is my father and it's probably a title just a little similar to

Pharaoh all the successive rulers in Egypt were known as pharaohs way back in history and it's probably the same for these kings as well in this region that they were called Abimelech so you'd have Abimelech the first same again with Nebuchadnezzar Nebuchadnezzar the second so whatever it is he is the king and he's called here he's given the name Abimelech now you'll see that Abraham here when he came into this region said of Sarah his wife she is my sister and then when you go down to verse 13 you realize that in fact we mentioned this when we saw him doing this in the presence of Pharaoh that in verse 13 he and his wife Sarah had actually agreed that this would be Abraham's policy whenever it would come in to these circumstances he would actually say this is my sister instead of saying let me introduce my wife Sarah he would say this is actually my sister and that was in order to preserve his own life particularly because that's what was in his mind here as we'll come to see now what that is really telling us is that despite this man being a man of

[5 : 49] God a very upright man of God in so many ways a godly man a man who walked close with God and yet here he is in a relapse he's going back to the same mistake and the same practice as had failed him the first time he had been driven out by Pharaoh when it happened the first time in Egypt and yet he's gone back to it again to have the same scheme put in place now as he had then and isn't that what it's like for ourselves because you and I have the same proneness to go back to things that we thought we had left behind practices thoughts how often do you find yourself saying about something that you realize you've done or thought nasty thoughts about someone or bad thoughts or suspicions about someone and you say well I was really thinking I was past that I want to leave that sort of thinking behind me I want to leave these kind of things that I find coming up in my heart and in my soul and in my conclusion perhaps even it's a practice of some kind something that you know is sinful something that you know is not right and you think well I'm not going to do that anymore

I'm just going to put that behind me I mustn't really repeat that and yet you find yourself sometime down the line you do the same thing again and you realize this is really frustrating this is just my sinful self and I've got to overcome this you see the Bible is telling us this so that we can place this in our own lives or place our own lives in the light of this and say well this is really telling me what I need to know about myself as well as what I need to know about Abraham because even when we become Christians and when God changes our life that's not the end of things we're not then immediately perfect rebirth spiritual rebirth is the very beginning of things as somebody put it it's just an instant to bring about rebirth but it takes a lifetime to produce a saint to produce someone who is ultimately perfect and it'll take us the whole of our lifetime however long or short that's going to be as Christians it's going to take the whole of that time to knock out of us and to knock off our practices these kinds of things into which we relapse sadly from time to time it doesn't give us any excuse whatsoever that we find other people doing that that some people even like Abraham did that we have to hold our hands up before God and say

Lord I confess once again I failed please forgive me please help me with this in the future and when you come back to him next time you're thankful he doesn't say well you told me you wouldn't do it again so don't come back to me he'll still say I forgive you and I will help you but it's going to be something you need to work at all through your life that's what's called sanctification where God works in our lives and where we have responsibilities along with that that help us deal with the sin that's within us with the problem that's within us with what is really a legacy of our fallenness that we relapse that we take up the same things again and again and are sorry for it and bring them to God but that means we have to watch against our weakness I don't know what your weakness is

I know what mine are and I know that we all have maybe one particular weakness one thing that we're particularly prone to Abraham was here obviously very prone to telling this lie you might say there's no such thing of course as a white lie we talk about white lies as if they're not really as serious as the dark lies but there's there's just lies and truth no in between but you know what I mean when we talk about white lies Abraham wasn't Abraham was telling a half truth if you like she was his sister in the sense that she was a close relation but it was still wrong of him to say she is my sister but she's implying that she wasn't his wife that's where it was bad that's where the thing was really not right and here he was in another situation where he was very likely to fall back into that same practice now that's what you and I have to watch if you're prone to something particular you don't put yourself deliberately in a situation where that is going to be severely tested and where you're liable to succumb to the temptation whatever it is your weakness is whether it's something that's not seen by anybody else that takes place in your heart in the privacy of your own mind or whether it's something as it is with some people that is seen openly some people have problems with types of behavior let's not be very specific about it but you all know what I mean types of behavior that people can actually see in practice happening in their lives and they relapse and they go back to these things and it's very difficult when it's open and when it's public but it's equally serious when it's internal it's still just as much a sin when it's a sin in your heart as it is in an outward sense whatever it is you and I today have as a weakness watch when that temptation comes your way to develop that weakness further to succumb to that weakness when you feel drawn aside to do the very thing that you know you shouldn't relapse into don't put yourself in a situation deliberately where you're going to be prone or liable to fall back into the same mistake and failure and practice and when we come to realize our lives and the weakness of our lives one of the things we must do is depend absolutely on God and this is the problem this is the problem with myself and

I'm sure the problem you say is of yourself as well we know we should depend upon God Abraham knew he should depend upon God and still he tries to inject a little bit of his own ability a little bit of his own plan of his own better judgment if you like into the situation that's where the failure comes in instead of depending upon God completely there's a big difference between leaning upon God in the sense of depending upon him fully and using God as a crutch many people will use God as a crutch in a crisis or come to actually look to God perhaps even pray to God cry out to God looking to God's help during the crisis and when the crisis is over the crutch is thrown away religion doesn't become important in the sense in which it was during the crisis a crutch is very good in a physical sense if you break your leg or if you have some sort of injury like that where you need a crutch then a crutch is very good for you you can't really do much without one in those circumstances but spiritually crutches are bad for you and using God as a crutch especially is bad for us

[13 : 48] I remember some of you probably will remember the song I think it was Frank Sinatra that sang it most often although others have sung it too a song called My Way I did it my way and if you look through the lyrics of that song it's actually stuffed with pride absolutely stuffed with pride every single line of it almost is just filled with that human ability that just depends on itself and does things my way and the final verse of it says for what is a man what has he got if not himself then he has not that's nothing to say the things he truly feels and not the words of one who kneels the record shows

I took the blows and did it my way that gives you the essence of the mind of whoever it was that wrote the song to say the things he truly feels and not the words of one who kneels not the words of the weakling who gets on his knees and says that he depends on God not the weakling who has to actually cry out to God for help a God that he cannot see oh you do it your way be proud of it stand up be a man say in the words of the song I did it my way I finished my life now I've come to the final part of it I'm proud that I can say I took the blows I did it all and I did it my way that is the way of failure all you'll get out of it is the space of ground to put your body in and a lost eternity and how different the sentiments of that song to the teaching of this

Bible you remember what this book of Proverbs says for example just to pick out one passage which is such a dynamic passage on this very point in chapter 3 where it says my son do not forget my teaching let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you and then verses 5 to 6 trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not lean on your own understanding in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths be not wise in your own eyes fear the Lord and turn away from evil how different that is to saying I did it my way what you and I want to do is I did it God's way and that means he really did it for me that's where the failure really is seen when we try and do things our way when we think we know best when we decide how often we should go to church when we decide whether or not we should actually come out and profess the

Lord when we decide what it really means to follow the Lord and what it doesn't let God and let God's word decide it for you lean upon him with all your understanding not your own sense of what's right and wrong so there is Abraham we could say that really tells us all habits die hard and we have to make sure that we come to God without weakness now the second thing you find in Abraham's relapse is that he's actually endangering the promise of God now I know that in the overall sense in the ultimate sense God's plan will be done anyway whatever we do is not ultimately any threat to God's plan and God's plan for Abraham is that he will have a son through Sarah but Sarah will indeed even in her old age she's going to have a son and that son is going to be the son of God's promise come about in such a remarkable way and it's through the birth of that son and the descendants that come from him that all the families of the earth are going to be blessed in other words the whole of what you know as the line that leads to

Jesus Christ and the line that leads to the blessing of the gospel reaching out over the world it begins here with Abraham and it begins with the promise that God has given that Sarah shall have a son and what's he doing he's putting Sarah in danger of having a child to Abimelech a pagan king he's putting Sarah in circumstances where the promise of God is lost sight of he's putting his own safety and his own policy above the promise of God at this stage the promise of God Abraham should have seen this the promise of God to Sarah that she would have a son by Abraham should have been for Abraham an assurance that wherever they went God was going to look after that and that he didn't have to pass her off as his sister just so as to try and save the situation let God look after that and his promise and whatever circumstances

[19 : 52] Abraham would have to go through in his life everything was safe with God Abraham did not interfere did not need to interfere with the way that God had specified a promise to try and actually manipulate things himself and the more you see he would do that the more he was actually going away from the way God had promised that child to him in the first place in other words when you and I begin to interfere with God's way of doing things with God's better judgment when you and I come to think that well I know what the Bible says but I really think for me at this moment that doing things another way or doing things my way would be best for me no why should it be who is wise you or God who knows best I or God whose word whose judgment whose mind whose plan is really ultimately the best one it's

God's isn't it every time it's God's every time it's God's word every time it's God's specification every time it's God's word and God's law and God's rule and God's command and that's what we always must come back to so there's Abraham's relapse but look at Abimelech's response and in many ways his response is predictable but also remarkable first thing you find here is that there's a revelation to him from God God came to him in a dream by night and the remarkable thing you find there is here is a pagan king and God is in a conversation with him while he's asleep does that not tell you something about God and something about ourselves sometimes we think when people are unconscious even people who have never followed the Lord in their lives if they've lapsed into an unconsciousness in the final part of their lives we sometimes perhaps conclude well there's little hope for them now how do you know how do I know what God is communicating to that person even while we cannot see into their minds if God can hold a conversation with a pagan king while he's asleep remember he can always do remarkable things in the lives of people even if you don't see it and I don't see it let's never reach conclusions that would presume that we know everything about

God well that's what he does he holds this conversation he tells Abimelech what's happened and of course Abimelech is alarmed and he says to God in the dream I did this in innocence I did this in the integrity of my heart he told me that she was his sister and she said the same about him that he was his brother and God said yes I know I know you've done this in the integrity but I've kept you from sinning against me that's why I didn't let you touch her now return the man's wife for he is a prophet you see Abimelech latched on to that and in actual fact at that stage the remarkable thing is Abimelech looks more like the Christian than Abraham does and more like the believer than Abraham does because it's Abimelech that's acting honorably in what he now does rather than what Abraham did to get himself into this predicament there's a lesson there for us too it should never be the case but sometimes the world is more like what Christians should be than what they are among themselves that's just by the way but here's this confrontation then that takes place where Abimelech calls Abraham and said what have you done to me to us how have I sinned against you what did you see that you did this thing he's very understandably asking Abraham what on earth came over you what do you see in us what made you do this tell me what was it in us that really led you to such a thing and to put us in danger as a people and you know

Abraham's answer is not very satisfactory the Bible again honestly shows us that he's being somewhat evasive and somewhat not really coming up with all the facts let's look at his answer verse 11 he says I did it because I thought there is no fear of God at all in this place and they will kill me because of my wife he acted on an assumption and the one thing you don't do in life is act on the basis of an assumption you assume something about someone and you act on the basis of that that's what Abraham did he came into this place he said they've got all of these idols these Philistines they don't know the true God the fear of God is not in this place so I'm sure what they're going to do is they're going to kill me so that they will keep Zerah he assumed he made up his own mind as to what these people would do and then he acted accordingly always dangerous stuff you don't assume things about anyone except you don't assume things about anyone full stop you need to know the facts and from that you get all kinds of important angles on behavior you don't assume things about people so therefore you don't spread anything you know not to be true unless it's verifiable fact you don't actually say things about someone and raise suspicions and even if you know them to be fact it doesn't necessarily mean you have to go and tell everyone about it you see all of these things are tied on to this lack of perception and lack of good behavior and good thinking on the part of Abraham so this is the assumption and you see his mind is so much of what will happen to him he is not really at all taken up with well what will this do to them because obviously

God brought a measure of judgment upon Abimelech for what he had done taking Sarah and on his people and the wives of the women of his people God had brought that upon them because of Sarah Abraham's wife whatever you say about that it's not easy to actually fully get into that and understand all that's in that but that's what it says Abraham hadn't said well if I do this what is that going to do to them what consequences will there be for others you see he's taken up with himself and that's what happens in our lives if we are so taken up with ourselves we are sometimes then blinded to the implications of our actions as they actually touch the lives of other people we always have to ask will there be harmful effects in my actions for other people am I going to damage their reputation am I going to bring something upon them that they don't deserve here is

[27 : 35] Abraham even by his very answer saying his thinking was just not right and not only that but in verse 13 when God he says caused me to wander from my father's house I said to her this is the kindness you must do to me at every place we come say of him he is my brother what does that remind you of especially the first part of it when God caused me to wander from my father's house he is kind of shifting the blame back onto God's arrangement of his life it reminds you of the words of Adam when God came to challenge him as to what he had done you remember Adam said the woman that you gave me she actually caused me to eat she gave me and I ate that's friends that's the nature of sin the sin that's in you and me that's the way sin works that's how we are naturally in our fallenness we are simply not prepared to accept all of the blame that attaches to us we want to pass at least some of it off we want to try and make excuses we want to actually even sometimes blame God if only things had been arranged differently when God caused me to wander from my father's house this is what I said to you more or less saying I had really to come to this decision because of the way God caused me to wander from my father's house going through all of these strange areas this is what I was more or less saying I was forced to come up with this policy

I know that in life we have difficulties and trials where we find it very difficult to understand where God fits into it but the one thing that you and I must never ever do is attach blame to God he knows what he's doing whatever path he takes us on and wherever we go wrong in it the blame is ours not God's and indeed Abraham here actually damaged his own testimony before Abimelech because obviously when he came into this place and God wasn't worshipped by these people they're their own gods their own idols and Abraham said the fear of God is not in this place he would have said to Abimelech that this God that he worshipped was different to their gods he would have said I believe in this God that met me and the God of my father too

Abimelech could well have said well you tell me you're a believer in this God and that this God is in charge of all the earth why then didn't you trust him to look after your wife and yourself when you came into my territory you see he's really compromised his own testimony and that's something that you and I will always have to bear in mind as well that our failure will very often compromise the testimony we have to being the Lord's people we have to watch against that too and then you find that he recognises Abraham's status you see he took these sheep oxen servants and he returned Sarah his wife to him and he said to Abraham behold my land is before you dwell where it pleases you that's so different to what Pharaoh said to him get out of this land you would expect Abimelech to actually come now and say after Abraham had made his confession right Abraham there's no place for you to go back to where you came from that's not what he did and there's a very important point there

Abraham had done wrong Abimelech knew he had done wrong they both together acknowledged that there was wrong done by Abraham and indeed by Abimelech taking his wife though he did it innocently but Abimelech latched on to the fact that as God said to him he is a prophet this man and he will pray for you in other words Abimelech looked beyond the fault to the office that Abraham had as a prophet of God and there's a point for you and I in that as well because what we tend to do is look on the faults and not on the good things in the lives of other people when we look at ourselves it's very often the opposite we look at the good things as far as we're concerned as we see them as we conclude them and we kind of gloss over the faults we cover over the faults for ourselves but when we look at other people it's the faults that really loom large in our sight they're the ones that we find magnified as we see their lives and the good things sometimes the very good things sometimes the very good things that far outweigh the faults in people's lives we lose sight of those here's a principle for you and for me to take from this passage never look at anyone's faults in such a way that magnifies them beyond their qualities here's a pagan king that teaches us a lesson he could have said to

Abraham you've done wrong therefore please leave me and please leave my people alone instead he said you're a prophet of God you've done wrong but please pray for me he looked beyond the failure and the fault to the good thing in Abraham's life and you see he benefited from that Abraham prayed to God and God healed Abimelech and isn't it good that you end that that chapter ends the way it does you conclude from that something that's also very important a point we'll just finish with the matter is concluded it's over there's no rancor Abimelech is not going to drag this up again when he meets

[34 : 24] Abraham next time and Abraham is not going to do anything else to harm the relationship as it now is when you have a fallout and you mend things leave it at that don't take things up again let it be finished that's how this chapter ends there is a settling of the matter and that's how it must be with us too that is essentially what God teaches us he himself has done when he forgives our sin that's the end of the matter he doesn't come and hold them before us and say actually we're not quite finished yet when they're forgiven they're forgiven they're covered they won't accuse you again and it's on that that our behavior has to be based when matters need to be settled let them be settled and that's true even of such things as this referendum there have been heated discussions understandably strongly held views presented promoted from each side understandably after it whatever else people do elsewhere let it be true of you and I as a congregation that differences even if they continue to be held are held amicably properly and that we settle it in a way that honors

God and promotes his name let's pray Lord we thank you for all the things that we learn from your word that are so applicable in the practice of our own lives and we thank you today for these many principles and the many things in practice that we learn to apply in our own circumstances bless to us we pray this passage today help us to be thankful for it and help us to dwell upon those things that you have taught us even as we have waited upon you here today go before us into this day be with us this evening and forgive our sin for Jesus sake Amen