

**“ANOTHER NEAR-DISASTER”**

After the interlude involving God’s devastating judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah, the focus of our narrative returns to God’s dealings with Abraham. Abraham was not entirely sidelined in the account of Sodom’s downfall, as it was his prayer of intercession that led to Lot’s deliverance from the doomed city. God had decided to tell Abraham about what he was about to do to Sodom, and this prompted him to pray. Abraham came across in a positive light in the account of Sodom, but the same cannot be said of him in this chapter. Here he displays what one commentator describes as “an almost unbelievable collapse of faith.” [De Graaf] Remember, it was only two chapters ago, at the same time that God revealed his plans for Sodom to Abraham, that he also told him that Sarah would have a child within a year’s time. But in this passage, on the eve of the promise’s fulfillment, Abraham’s actions put that promise in jeopardy once again. Worse yet, this was the exact same action that Abraham had taken back in chapter 12. At that time, Abraham went to Egypt in order to find relief during a time of famine, and while he was there he told everyone that Sarah was his sister. Now, nearly 25 years later, he does it again. Like us, Abraham was slow to learn. Or, more accurately, he was slow to trust. His failure in this passage was a failure of faith, the same failure for which he had been rebuked many years before. The point being made by this is very clear: Abraham’s failure of faith, on the eve of the promise’s fulfillment, shows that the blessing that he was about to receive was in no way earned or deserved. Here is a truth that is

stressed over and over again in the Scriptures: the blessings that God pours out on his covenant people are only given to us because of his unfathomable grace.

As Abraham traveled to this new part of the land, he once again struggled with the fear that he would be killed so that Sarah could be taken by some other man. And his fear compelled him to employ the same tactic that he had used all those years before in Egypt: he told everyone that Sarah was his sister. And the result was the same: the king of the land took Abraham's wife into his harem. And thus arose the same dilemma that Abraham experienced in Egypt: how will Sarah be able to bear him a child if she now belongs to another man? Once again, God's covenant promise has been put in jeopardy because of Abraham's cowardice and his lack of faith.

Nevertheless, God would not allow his purposes to be thwarted, not even by Abraham's failure of faith. So he confronts Abimelech for taking another man's wife. Yet Abimelech protests that he is not guilty of this sin. He contends that he is innocent, not in the sense that he is completely sinless, but in the sense that he is innocent of this particular charge. He did not knowingly take another man's wife. God accepts this plea, pointing out that it was his own hand of providence that prevented Abimelech from touching Sarah. Once again, God intervened in order to uphold his covenant with Abraham.

This raises a question: if the Lord was able to prevent Abimelech, who was not even a believer, from sinning, then why didn't he prevent Abraham from hiding the fact that Sarah was his wife? Why did he allow Abraham to tell this lie? We could state the

question in more general terms: why does God allow his children to continue to be subjected to temptation? Why does he permit us to give in to the promptings of our sinful hearts when he has the power to prevent us from doing so? This question is addressed in our Westminster Confession of Faith in the chapter that deals with the topic of divine providence. Listen to what it says:

“The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave, for a season, His own children to manifold temptations, and the corruption of their own hearts, to chastise them for their former sins, or to discover unto them the hidden strength of corruption and deceitfulness of their hearts, that they may be humbled; and, to raise them to a more close and constant dependence for their support upon Himself, and to make them more watchful against all future occasions of sin, and for sundry other just and holy ends.” [WCF 5.5]

In other words, our Lord makes use of our struggle against sin to further our sanctification. I want to take a few moments to consider this a bit further.

As the Confession says, one of the reasons why God often leaves us to temptations and to the corruption of our hearts is to humble us and to make us all the more grateful to him for his saving grace. We are constantly reminded of our wretched condition by the fact that we have to keep on dealing with our sin. Try as we might, we cannot get rid of it. And the longer we walk with Christ, the more clear it becomes to us. An unbeliever

cannot see this. He cannot see how great an offense his sin is against God. But a Christian can. We have the Spirit of God dwelling within us, and he brings us under conviction for our sin. He shows us what a contradiction our sin is to our standing as those who have been declared righteous by faith in Christ. The sins that we commit each day grieve the indwelling Holy Spirit, and by his gracious working, we become more and more sensitive to the offensiveness of our sin.

In addition to humbling us, our continued struggle against sin is also used by God to keep us alert and active in the battle in which we are engaged. We are involved in an all-out war. It is a matter of life and death - eternal life and death. As Paul put it, "For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live." [Rom. 8:13] A soldier involved in a heated battle cannot let down his guard for a minute. Yet it is so easy for us to be lulled to sleep and caught off guard in our battle against sin. Sin is so deceitful. As John Duncan once wrote, "Sin says, 'I'm not sin at all...Ah! do you call that sin? Well, it is but a little sin.'" [Stuart, *Life of John Duncan*, 109] God works, even through our repeated failures in the struggle against sin, to show us how important it is for us to remain alert and on guard.

God also allows us to continue to face temptation and the corruption of our hearts in order to test and strengthen and purify our faith. Like Abraham's faith, our faith often wavers. As our circumstances change, our moods also change; and as our moods change, our faith can easily grow weak. Isn't this what we see happening to Abraham in this passage? God had been so good to him in the past. He had given him great promises.

He had proven himself to be faithful, time and time again. But now Abraham was in a strange land yet again, and fear took over, leading him to commit the same sin that he had committed years before in Egypt. Just think of how this would have reminded him of the extent of his dependence upon the Lord. Here he was, in the same situation that he had faced in Egypt, and his response displayed the same failure of faith. Imagine how ashamed of himself he must have been. He had been walking with the Lord for twenty-five years. He should have known better. We know all too well how Abraham would have felt, because we do the same thing. And God uses such failings to deepen our trust in him. Every failure of faith, every transgression of God's law, every omission of the things that he requires of us, all of these things show us that we are utterly incapable of saving ourselves. They remind us that our only hope is in the Lord.

When Abimelech confronted Abraham for misleading him, Abraham's response exposed his lack of faith. He admitted that the reason why he had lied was because of fear. He was afraid of what might happen to him, because he sensed that there was no fear of God in that land. Now if this was true; if there really was no fear of God in the land of Gerar, then Abraham was indeed in danger. As Calvin puts it, "the door is opened to all kinds of wickedness, when piety and the fear of God have vanished." When people lose all sense of restraint, wickedness runs rampant. We are seeing this happen more and more in our own day and age. People do not fear God, so they do whatever they want.

While this is true, it turns out that Abraham's assessment of Abimelech and his people was completely wrong. While they were not worshippers of the one true God, there was

a sense in which they did live in fear of God. Abimelech was greatly troubled by the dream that God had sent him. The text explicitly says that he and his servants “were very much afraid.” And their fear came in response to words of warning and rebuke from the Lord.

Abraham’s fear, however, was something else altogether. It was not the fear of God, but the fear of man. It was not the fear that goes hand-in-hand with faith, but the fear that runs contrary to faith. Abraham even went so far as to essentially blame God for his misfortunes. Isn’t that the tone of verse 13? - “God caused me to wander.” Abraham’s fearful lack of faith caused him to seek a pragmatic solution to his predicament. How often we fall into this trap! When things seem to be going wrong, or even when we are fearful that they might go wrong, what do we do? Instead of laying our concerns before the Lord and trusting him to guide us and care for us in accordance with his Word, we try to fix things by coming up with our own solutions. That was what Abraham had done in Egypt. It was what Lot and his daughters had done in the previous chapter. And it was what Abraham did again when he sojourned in the land of Gerar.

Despite the fact that Abraham’s explanation was so lame, Abimelech demonstrated genuine sorrow and contrition for what he had done. He woke up early in the morning to deal with this matter. He gave Abraham animals, servants, a great deal of money, and free choice of where he would like to live in the land. His words to Sarah reflected a genuine concern for her honor. If we were to compare Abimelech’s character with that of Abraham, at least in this particular passage, we would have to say that Abimelech was the

better man. Nevertheless, it was not Abimelech who had access to the Lord in prayer. He had not done anything wrong in this matter, but he stood in need of Abraham's prayers of intercession. Abraham had done a disgraceful and cowardly thing, but he was the one who lived in communion with God. He had the privilege of serving in the ministry of intercession. God does not hear the prayers of the unsaved, not even when they appear to be more upright than some believers. The only way anyone can approach the Lord in prayer is through the Mediator that he provides in the covenant of grace. That is why Abimelech could not pray for himself.

Abraham's failure in this passage was significant. He had experienced many years of God's provision and care. God was on the verge of giving him the child that he had promised him many years ago. But when Abraham traveled to Gerar, his fears overcame him once more. If God had left things in Abraham's hands, all would have been lost. Sarah would have been another man's wife, and Isaac would never have been born. It was the Lord who had made the promise in the first place, and it would have to be the Lord who saw to its fulfillment. That is the point being conveyed in this passage. Abraham owed everything to God. And he would have been reminded of this every time he looked at the servants and the silver that he had received from Abimelech's hand. God would not allow him to forget his failures, because he wanted him to remember how indebted he was to his grace. And the Lord does not allow us to forget the greatness of the grace that he has extended to us in Christ. We are reminded of it every time we have

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to get down on our knees and plead his forgiveness for our repeated sins and failures.

Salvation belongs to the Lord. And that is why we sing:

*Nothing in my hand I bring;*

*Simply to thy cross I cling.*