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THE INFECTION DOTTH REMAIN

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It's been a while since we talked about Abraham, hasn't it? I should mention that we're nearing the completion of our study of Abraham. If there is some book or some part of the Bible you'd like to explore together when we've finished here, I'll be open to suggestions.

When we last left Abraham, he was talking directly to the Lord, pleading with God to spare the unrighteous from judgment for the sake of the righteous. That was quite an honorable position, was it not? What a great and noble honor!

I'm sure it would have been just fine with Abraham if this next part of his story had just been left out of the record, though. Will you turn to Genesis 20? While you're turning, let me just ask you, is there anything you can think of in your own life since you've come to Christ that you'd say, "Man, oh man, I wish I had never done that!" "I wish I had never said those words!" Well, guess what? You're in pretty good company! Look, if you will, at Genesis 20:1-2:

1 And Abraham journeyed from thence toward the south country, and dwelled between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar.

2 And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah.

We look at this and we think, "This all seems so familiar." It should! We read about Abraham doing this exact same thing some thirty years before this when he was down in Egypt. He really had made a bad name for himself down in Egypt because he had told pharaoh that Sarah was his sister and pharaoh had taken Sarah to marry her. Abraham had suppressed the whole truth and had instructed Sarah to do the same. God intervened, and pharaoh returned Sarah to Abraham, but pharaoh was quite rightly angry and disgusted. Abraham left Egypt in shame. But here we are, thirty years later, with the same sin all over again! We are looking at a relapse.

Abraham has left the country near Sodom and has moved down near Egypt. He's at sort of the southwestern-most part of Palestine, where the ruler goes by the title "Abimelech." The word *Abimelech* seems to be more or less a title like *pharaoh* or *king*. The word means "My father is king," which indicates that the highest authority is a man, and not God. Some people view him as a type of worldly churchgoer, living right on the border between Egypt and the Promised Land, the kind who knows some of the truth of God and generally lives a moral life, but is not really a born-again believer.

In any case, Abraham, the man who had so recently spoken with boldness to the Lord, pleading to save a nation from judgment, resorts to a cowardly half truth that puts another nation in danger. Not only that, but we find that his instructions to Sarah had not changed after the first humiliating incident years and years before. Let's look at the next few verses:

3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, thou art but a dead

man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife.

4 But Abimelech had not come near her: and he said, LORD, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation?

5 Said he not unto me, She is my sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother: in the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands have I done this.

6 And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her.

7 Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine.

Abimelech has a dream one night after he's taken Sarah as his wife. In the dream God reveals the true nature of Sarah and Abraham's relationship as well as the fact that God Himself had intervened to keep Abimelech from consummating the marriage relationship with Sarah. If you read on further in this chapter, you'll find out that a great sickness had come upon Abimelech and his household after he'd taken Sarah. That sickness affected Abimelech and many other people. At the time it must have seemed like a great hardship; but what we find out is that God allowed that illness in order to prevent a moral transgression.

This is an interesting aspect to the nature of God's dealings with men. There's a passage in the New Testament that I've wondered about which I think is illustrated here. II Thessalonians chapter 2 talks about the coming of the antichrist, but until he comes, God's Holy Spirit restrains wickedness on the earth. Because the language is a little difficult in verse seven of that chapter, let me read it to you from the Amplified Bible:

For the mystery of lawlessness (that hidden principle of rebellion against constituted authority) is already at work in the world, [but it is] restrained only until he who restrains is taken out of the way.¹

"He who restrains" is the Holy Spirit. Right now the Holy Spirit is at work in the world preventing wickedness from achieving its full potential. Even so, we see the terrible effects of wickedness. Just yesterday Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords was shot along with over a dozen other people. That is a great evil! Yet as bad as this world is, it would be worse without the restraint of God's Spirit. Here in Genesis 20, we see one of the mechanisms He can use in the form of sickness. In the passage today, we find out that this terrible sickness was actually a merciful act of God to prevent something worse from happening.

Let's face it: none of us likes to be sick, but what if we were to find out in heaven that God had used a sickness to prevent something worse? Perhaps you can think of a time in your life when you were delayed by something, perhaps a train, and you found out later that if you hadn't been delayed you would have been in danger.

I remember once when I drove a bus full of my coworkers up to Atlanta for a conference. Someone

¹ The Amplified Bible, copyright © 1987 The Lockerman Foundation.

asked if we could stop at Cracker Barrel for a bathroom break, and you can guess what happened: people started ordering breakfast to go, and our little ten minute break turned into a thirty-five minute break. When we finally got back on the highway, we didn't get far before we found that traffic had come to a complete standstill. It turns out that a major accident occurred just where we would have been had we not stopped for that bathroom break.

But back to our story! Abimelech tells God that he had no idea that Sarah was another man's wife. Both Abraham and Sarah had told him they were brother and sister and had left out the fact of their marriage. Abimelech tells God that he had acted innocently in ignorance.

How does God handle this? Notice that God provides a way out and that He expects Abimelech to follow His instructions. Basically God says, "Here's what is wrong, here's how to get it right, and here's what will happen if you don't!"

That's how the Word of God operates. I love II Timothy 3:16-17:

All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine [what is right], for reproof [what is wrong], for correction [how to get it right], for instruction in righteousness [how to keep it right]: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

Isn't that great? That's how the Word of God operates. It tells us what's right, what's wrong, how to get it right, and how to keep it right. Sounds like all the bases are covered!

Abimelech wastes no time getting the matter sorted out. As we read the next few verses, notice his exchange with Abraham:

8 Therefore Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ears: and the men were sore afraid.

9 Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said unto him, What hast thou done unto us? and what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done.

10 And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing?

11 And Abraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake.

12 And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.

13 And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her, This is thy kindness which thou shalt shew unto me; at every place whither we shall come, say of me, He is my brother.

14 And Abimelech took sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and womenservants, and gave them unto Abraham, and restored him Sarah his wife.

Let's focus on verse nine for a moment. Abraham was the man who had interceded so that a wicked nation might not be destroyed; yet here he is doing something that nearly caused innocent people to be

destroyed! He tries to justify it with three pitiful excuses, but that only makes it worse. What becomes apparent is that in this instance the worldly man is more moral and more admirable than the godly man. Of course we can easily see parallels to this in our own experience. Have we ever come across religious, faithful churchgoers who compare unfavorably at times to decent, upstanding people outside of the church? Yes, of course. You could probably rattle off the names of a dozen or more preachers over the years who have done some pretty awful things: Jim Bakker, Jimmy Swaggert, and Ted Haggard are just a few on the national scene, and we've all known preachers who weren't worth a dime on the local level. It's sad. But even among those who we consider to be strong, faithful people, we sometimes observe things in their lives that are disappointing. Why is that?

To put it in the language of the Westminster Confession, "the infection doth remain." When we accept Jesus as Savior, we begin to become new people; but our old nature is always with us. It is conquered by the blood of Christ, but it doesn't want to stay conquered! Paul captured the concept with three words: "I die daily." Friends, that is what we must do! The old flesh still wants to run the show.

I'm not going to read the final verses, but what we find is that Abraham got right with God; and when he was right with God, he was able to pray for Abimelech and his household, and God healed them.

An old preacher put it so well:

God healed Abimelech and blessed Abraham. This very last scene points up the difference between a Christian and a moral non-Christian. Abimelech was really more noble in this incident than Abraham, which means that Abimelech's old Adamic nature was more pleasant than Abraham's old nature. But both were a total failure in pleasing God.

Perhaps you have noticed this difference. Some non-Christians can be more cultured, refined, and pleasant to live with than some Christians. The Christian who is living in his old nature, in the energy of the flesh, is quarrelsome, irritable self-centered, and difficult to live with. But neither of them can please God with the old nature.

Abraham had something which Abimelech didn't. He had a life from God, a regenerate heart, a new nature, so that when he repented, he was forgiven. God turned his failure into fullness and blessed him and caused him to be the instrument through which Abimelech was forgiven and restored. It was only when Abraham prayed for Abimelech, that Abimelech was healed.

Do you see the distinction? What a lesson is here concerning the grace of God!

When we slip back into the flesh and do some evil thing, we say, "I never seem to learn, it's the old nature again. I have slipped out of dependence upon Christ, and here I am back in this thing." But then we can come back to God, and tell him, "Lord, I don't know when I'll learn to rest and depend upon you, and quit trying to make something out of this old nature. I've done it again. Now take the mess, Lord, and straighten it out."²

Friends, isn't it good to know that God intervenes to protect us, that He loves and forgives us, and that He can take our messes, our weaknesses, and straighten them out? If there is something in your life you're struggling with, won't you talk to Him about it today? And if you're not His child, why wait any longer? I urge you to come to Him today.

2 Ray Stedman, "Old Natures Never Die." 1968. Available at <http://www.raystedman.org/old-testament/genesis/old-natures-never-die>.