

Repeat Offenders

For: Voice of the Church

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We often look down on repeat offenders – people who do the same bad thing more than once. We wonder: Didn't they learn their lesson the first time? We think that they must be especially morally bad.

But did you know that Abraham – the father of all believers (Rom 4:16) – was a repeat offender? Abraham was a repeat offender in Gerar when hiding from King Abimelech that Sarah was his wife and saying that Sarah was his sister. Abraham and Sarah had done the same thing in Egypt with Pharaoh.

The fact that this is a repeat offence gives the account in Genesis 20 its own colour as well as its own special application for us today.

Because, guess what? We Christians are all repeat offenders! So often we fall for the same temptations and commit the same sins in thought, word, and deed. We do this often in small things, and sometimes in big things. Therefore, we repeat offenders need to hear the comfort this passage of Holy Scripture offers.

We aren't told why Abraham journeyed to Gerar, which was a Philistine area, but we are told that "...he sojourned in Gerar" (Gen 20:1). The biblical theme of being a sojourner is raised at the beginning of Genesis 20. A sojourner is someone who doesn't have a home here on earth – someone with no permanent residence, an outsider.

As Christians, we too are sojourners in this world, as the apostle Peter writes in his first letter (1 Pt 2:11). Christians are *in* the world, but not *of* the world. Although we are engaged in the society around us and are concerned about the well-being of our society, we are at the same time outsiders since our values and priorities are different because we serve God.

Abraham had difficulty being a sojourner. Fear got the better of him as he faced the circumstances. Abraham was afraid of suffering loss and possibly even losing his life. Both in Egypt and Gerar, Abraham was faced with a powerful ruler who could want his wife and who could take Abraham's life in the process. Even at her advanced age, Sarah was still a beautiful woman and Abraham thought they would kill him to have his wife (Gen 12:11-13; 20:11). These circumstances were a *repeated temptation* for Abraham.

We too can easily experience that fear gets the better of us as we face the prospect of suffering loss for the sake of Christ. It's a dangerous world for Christians. Because we try to serve the Lord Jesus Christ and live holy lives in thankfulness for the gospel of the forgiveness of all our sins in the blood of Christ, our values are different. This could cause us to lose friendships, standing in the community, or a job. In some parts of the world, Christians are persecuted to the point of death. The Apostle Peter wrote his first letter to believers who were scared and in danger of giving up because they were facing opposition as Christians.

To protect himself, Abraham used the ruse that Sarah was his sister. There was truth to this claim because Sarah was his half-sister (Gen 20:12), but it was a half-truth and thus deception. Abraham used this ruse in Egypt and Gerar, and thus Genesis 20 is about *repeated failure*.

When we forget to focus on God and his kingdom and lose sight of his promises and power, we succumb to temptations and end up in repeated failure. Abraham lost focus on God both times, hence this repeated failure.

But this time was worse. Why? That's because the occurrence in Egypt was in Genesis 12, whereas the occurrence in Gerar was in Genesis 20. Much had happened in the meantime! In Genesis 15, the LORD had established his covenant with Abraham and his descendants (Gen 15:18). A smoking fire pot and flaming torch had passed between animals which had been cut up, representing the fact that God himself guaranteed his promises to Abraham. In Genesis 17, God had given Abraham the covenant sign and seal of circumcision and had said, "And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you" (Gen 17:7). In Genesis 18, God had said that Sarah would have a son in a year (Gen 18:10). God's promises should have been front and centre in Abraham's heart and life! Implicit in those promises was that Abraham's life would be safe in Gerar because the promised child would be born to him.

Yet, in order to save his own skin, Abraham "jeopardized" God's promise of a son – to say it in human terms, because we can never jeopardize God's plan. Abraham didn't think it through: Abraham might save his own life, but Sarah would be in just as much danger if not more because if she was only Abraham's sister it would be easier for Abimelech to take her.

How could they do this? Fear got the better of them; fear overwhelmed faith. They certainly would have said they still believed God's promises, but there was a disconnect because they didn't let their knowledge of God's promises permeate their daily lives. They knew God's promises, but God's promises didn't get hands and feet in their lives and they didn't live out of them. And really, that amounted to lack of faith – unbelief. At those moments, faith was absent. Faith is like a dotted line in our lives: at times there is the line of faith, and at times our faith is interrupted. We often experience the same thing as fear overwhelms our faith and we let circumstances shape our decisions rather than letting God's promises define our decisions.

Christ must be at the centre of all our decisions and actions! That was true for Abraham and Sarah too since God's promise to them was ultimately about the coming Christ. They only knew the rough outline of that, but they knew that God's promises to them reached far beyond them because God had said that all nations would be blessed through Abraham (Gen 12:3). By disavowing their marriage before Abimelech, Abraham and Sarah in effect were disavowing the promised Christ. When we today make decisions and take actions contrary to God's will – whether that be regarding lifestyle, business dealings, or personal relationships – it's like we're saying we don't know Christ!

But in contrast with Abraham's faithlessness, we see God's faithfulness because God protected Abraham and Sarah and the promise of a son. God intervened both in Egypt and in Gerar, and thus Genesis 20 speaks to us about *repeated rescue*. We read that Abimelech had not approached Sarah (Gen 20:4) and that God said to Abimelech in a dream, "...I did not let you touch her" (Gen 20:6). Sarah was given back to Abraham.

God had afflicted Abimelech, his wife, and his female slaves with impotence and infertility (Gen 20:17,18). It appears that Abimelech's temporary impotence was God's way of keeping him away from Sarah.

Abimelech confronted Abraham about this and Abraham had to be set straight by a heathen! Abraham heard from a heathen that the LORD had intervened and protected them and his promise. That was disgraceful. Sadly, sometimes today believers are set straight by unbelievers. Sometimes unbelievers ask believers, "How could you do that as a Christian? Where is your integrity?"

Genesis 20 shows us Abraham as a guilty man. And yet, the LORD continued with Abraham and the promise of a son's birth still stood! Through the promised son Isaac, Jesus Christ eventually would come into the world as Saviour from sin and guilt for believers.

Remarkably, God said that Abraham would pray for Abimelech (Gen 20:7). Abraham prayed for the healing of Abimelech and the females in his household – while Abimelech was more righteous in this matter than Abraham! But that's because God had chosen Abraham in grace to have a covenant relationship with him. Abraham of himself was not better than anyone else. Neither are we. Today people can easily find stones to throw at members of the church, because like Abraham we are often people who neglect our faith and do things we shouldn't. The good news of the gospel is that God does not deal with us according to our sins (Ps 103:10). The Christ was coming and has come for the forgiveness of our sins!

After this incident, Abimelech gave Abraham gifts of animals and servants (Gen 20:14) as well as 1,000 pieces of silver (Gen 20:16). This was a way of redeeming Sarah in the eyes of everyone to make clear that Sarah was innocent and free of guilt, that is, no intercourse had occurred. It was a way to erase any shame. We read: "To Sarah he said, 'Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone you are vindicated'" (Gen 20:16). It was redemption money.

But something much better was coming! This makes us think of Jesus Christ our Redeemer – the descendant of the promised son Isaac – who would redeem Abraham and Sarah and all believers from sin and guilt not with silver or gold but with his precious blood, as Peter says in 1 Peter 1:18,19. Christ would bear our shame on the cross (Hebrews 12:2).

See the comfort of the gospel shining through in Genesis 20! We are all repeat offenders as we all experience repeated temptation and repeated failure. While we must confess our faithlessness, we may confess God's faithfulness. God rescues us repeatedly when we stumble. And God has given us the ultimate rescue through the cross of Jesus Christ. Believers may confess Jesus Christ the Redeemer whose blood covers all our guilt and shame. Do you have this comfort?