



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Genesis 20:1-18

“The Patriarch Practicing Deceit”

TRANSCRIPT

Now let's turn to Genesis, chapter 20 for the exposition, expositional reading I should say, the reading of the passage that will be expounded in a few moments. Genesis chapter 20; one of the advantages of expository preaching is that we have to preach on the apparently good chapters as well as the apparently strange chapters, and this is one of the strange ones. So we have to handle it or try to at least. So let's read for our scripture reading the 18 verses of Genesis chapter 20.

“Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar.” (Gerar incidentally is in Philistia. So this is the first contact of the elect people of God with the PHIL-istines or the Philistines, and that's very significant in itself.) And Abraham said of Sarah, his wife ‘She is my sister.’ So Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent and took Sarah, but God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, ‘Behold, you are a dead man.’ (That sounds almost like our language the day. Doesn't it? You are dead.) ‘You are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken for she is married.’ (Just an aside to those of you who are men. The Hebrew text reads literally, “for she is lorded over by a Lord.” It's not a nice way to speak of marriage. Lorded over by a Lord. That's literal.

Use it any way you see fit man... for protection.) [Laughter] Now Abimelech had not come near her and he said, ‘Lord wilt thou slay a nation, even though blameless. Did he not himself say it to me she is my sister and she herself said he is my brother. In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands, I have done this.’ Then God said to him in the dream ‘Yes I know that in the integrity of your heart, you have done this and I also kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. Now therefore restore the man’s wife for he is a prophet and he will pray for you and you will live, but if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.’

“So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants and told all these things in their hearing, and the men were greatly frightened. Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, ‘What have you done to us and how have I sinned against you that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.’ And Abimelech said to Abraham, ‘What have you encountered that you have done this thing?’ And Abraham said, ‘Because I thought surely there is no fear of God in this place and they would kill me because of my wife. Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife.’ (So Sarah and Abraham had the same father, but different mothers. She was his half-sister.)

“And it came about when God... (incidentally, this word God here is the word Elohim, but the verb that is used is a verb that is used of that which is normally bad and it's used in a number that is rather different. I cannot go into the details. It's not necessary. It's possible that this should be translated, ‘gods,’ and so Abraham even stoops to speak of the deity in the terms of the heathen. “And it came about when gods caused me to wander from my father’s house.” We’ll leave it as God, but the other possibility remains. In that case, it would be even more culpable that he speaks as he does.) But I said to her, ‘This is the kindness which you will show to me. Everywhere we go, say of

me, he is my brother.’ Abimelech then took sheep and oxen and male and female servants and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him. And Abimelech said, ‘Behold, my land is before you. Settle wherever you please.’ And to Sarah, he said, ‘Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. Behold, it is your vindication before all who are with you. And before all men, you are cleared.’”

In order that I won't have time to say anything about this much in the message, let me say about verse 16 that there is a difference of opinion about the meaning of this verse. It is possible that this is regarded by Abimelech as a kind of atonement; that is, he pays the money in the light of the fact that he has wronged Sarah. On the other hand, it is possible that he is being sarcastic because he says, “Behold, I have given your brother” -- not your husband -- “your brother, a thousand pieces of silver.” In other words, he is using the terms that she used in a sarcastic way, reminding her that she said that Abraham was her brother.

In that case, it might be that the thousand pieces of silver, which is for covering of the eyes, literally “your vindication” and what he means is take the thousand pieces of silver and buy yourself a good hat or veil and buy veil for the rest of the women who serve you, so that others will know that you truly are a married woman. In that case, he would be rather sarcastic in his language to her, and it's possible that that's the way that that should be taken, but we cannot be sure. Verse 17,

“And Abraham prayed to God and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maid so that they bore children for the Lord had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.”

May God bless this reading of his word.

Our subject for this morning in the exposition of Genesis, chapter 20 is “the patriarch practicing deceit.” I know that the first time that you read Genesis, chapter 20 after having read the preceding 19 chapters, the impression that you get is how is it possible for a man such as Abraham to practice the same form of deceit that he has practiced previously. Was the father of the faithful a flimflam artist after all? A pathological liar, a phony, a faker, a Machiavelli in patriarch’s clothing, a jackdaw donned in peacock’s feathers, or to use Bunyan’s word, “A saint abroad and a devil at home?”

We know enough of the Bible of course to know that the answer is no, he was not these things. But how can we then explain Genesis chapter 20, which some evangelical commentators have called one of the most difficult chapters in the Bible to understand. After all, we remember that the Holy Spirit has worked in initial movements in Abraham's life. He has made some early faltering steps, but then he has made some advances. But how can we explain this relapse into faithless scheming, and this relapse into faithless scheming for the second time, and not only faithless scheming the second time but it's the same kind of scheming, the very same scheming that he practiced previously, 20 years ago. In the meantime, he has been justified or announced as justified in the Bible. He has been told of course that he is the father of one in whom all the families of the earth shall be blessed. He has just been told that his wife Sarah is to be the mother of the seed and now, he gives her into the hands of the Philistine king. It's very difficult to understand if we look at it from the human standpoint.

Now without trying to answer that at the moment, I think we can say that Genesis, chapter 20 illustrates several important truths and if we gather these truths together, we will have some answer to the question of Genesis chapter 20 as a whole. In the first place, we learn it's hard even for patriarchs to lay aside besetting sin. We live in days frequently in which, in evangelical circles, it is regarded as normal for Christians to live almost a sinless life. We even have people suggesting that it is possible for believers to live sinless lives, and if that is not specifically stated, it is commonly taught in evangelical

circles that there is a plane of life to which we may attain, and once we attain to that plane of life, then things go rather easily.

Thomas Brooks was one of the Puritans and he did not believe that. He said, of David, “His heart was more often out of tune than his harp.” [Laughter] And another Puritan said, “A sheep may fall into the ditch, but it is the swine that wallows in it,” and I think there is a great deal of truth in that because believers are individuals who may fall into the ditch at any time and in the same ditch as Abraham does here, but the difference between a believer and an unbeliever is not that the believer does not fall into the ditch but the unbeliever does, the difference is that the unbeliever does wallow in the ditch. He loves his sin. He likes to persist in it. He is perfectly happy in persisting in it, but the believer is a person who falls into the ditch and becomes very unhappy because of having fallen into the ditch.

Now that’s one lesson that I think we need to learn, that is, that even patriarchs find it difficult to lay aside besetting sin. Now this sin is, we shall see, was a besetting sin for Abraham and Sarah. Another thing that we learn here is that character is not the ground of our acceptance before God and it is well for us to remember that because occasionally we forget. We tend to think sometimes that the reason that Abraham was the man that he was and the reason that he had the position that he had was because of some merit in his own personal life, but that is not true. Character is not the grounds of our acceptance before God. The mercy that God shows us does not come from anything that we may have earned by the kind of life that we have lived.

A few weeks back, Carolyn Custis, who often selects the material that we put on the right-hand side of the inner part of our bulletin, put in a little section for Mr. Spurgeon on the text, “I will remember my covenant” from Genesis chapter 9 and verse 15. You may have remembered reading it, but Spurgeon writes something like this, “Mark the form of the promise, And I will remember my covenant. God does not say, ‘And when you shall look upon the bow and you shall remember my covenant, then I will not

destroy the earth,’ but it is gloriously put not upon our memory, which is fickle and frail, but upon God’s memory which is infinite and immutable. The bow shall be in the cloud and I will look upon it that I may remember the everlasting covenant. O it is not my remembering God, it is God’s remembering me which is the ground of my safety. It is not my laying hold of his covenant, but his covenant’s laying hold on me. Glory be to God. The whole of the bulwarks of salvation are secured by divine power and even the minor towers which we may imagine might have been left to man are guarded by Almighty strength. Even the remembrance of the covenant is not left to our remembrance for we might forget, but our Lord cannot forget the saints whom he has graven on the palms of His hands. It is with us as with Israel and Egypt. The blood was upon the lintel and the two side posts, but the Lord did not say, ‘When you see the blood, I will pass over you,’ but ‘When I see the blood, I will pass over you.’ My looking to Jesus brings me joy and peace, but it is God’s looking to Jesus which secures my salvation and that of all his elect, since it is impossible for our God to look at Christ, our bleeding surety, and then to be angry with us for sins already punished in him. No it is not left with us even to be saved by remembering the covenant. There is no linsey-woolsey here. Not a single thread of the creature mars the fabric.”

Now I confess I had to look up linsey-woolsey [laughter] and afterwards, several people came and said, well that was very common expression, which only shows there are many things I don't know, but I looked it up, and linsey-woolsey was a textile material of mixed wool and flax and now it's a dress material of coarse, inferior wool woven on a cotton warp. I am reading that from the Oxford Dictionary. Now Spurgeon says, “There is no linsey-woolsey here. Not a single thread of the creature mars the fabric. It is not of man, neither by man, but of the Lord alone. We should remember the covenant, and we shall do it, through divine grace; but the hinge of our safety does not hang there. It is God's remembering us, not our remembering Him; and hence because it is God remembering us, the covenant is an everlasting covenant.”

So we are not accepted on the basis of our character. We are accepted on the basis of the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let us never forget that and when the time comes for you to pass into the presence of the Lord, you pass into the presence of the Lord clinging to the merits of the cross of Jesus Christ, not talking about what a great member of Believers Chapel you have been or any of the other things that you may have done. The only thing, and the only thing upon which you can rest for eternity is the blood that was shed for sinners such as you and I are.

William R. Newell was a great Bible teacher of a generation past. He wasn’t so far back that I didn’t hear him. I heard Mr. Newell. In one of his books or one of his messages, he tells the story of some meetings he was holding in St. Louis in the noon hours and businessmen were attending. In one of the meetings, a businessman came up to him, he said a keen-appearing businessman and said to him, “You are speaking to the most ungodly man in St. Louis.” Mr. Newell said, why praise God. He said, “Do you mean to say you are glad that I am the most ungodly man here?” He said, “No, but I am certainly glad to find the man that acknowledges that he is a sinner.”

“Mr. Newell, I’ve been coming to these meetings for four weeks. I did not sleep last night. I have had little sleep for three weeks. I have prayed. I have read the Bible. I have waited here today to have you tell me what I need to do.” Mr. Newell, let’s turn to the Bible. And he turned the Romans chapter 4 and verse 5 “To him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly.” The man interjected, “That’s exactly what I am, but what do I have to do?” He said, why it’s to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly. He said he suddenly leaped to his feet and extended his hand to Mr. Newell and said, Mr. Newell, I accept that proposition.

And he went off without any word, and next day, at the meeting, he was introduced by Mr. Newell to the audience and the man stood up and said, I am a businessman as you know. I know a good proposition and I found one yesterday that so filled me with joy that I could not sleep, awake all night. This is interesting. He couldn’t

sleep beforehand and he couldn’t sleep after, but in the meantime, he had come to salvation, and I want you to know if you have insomnia, it's much better to have insomnia over a good thing than a bad thing and it's certainly is better to have insomnia over being saved than insomnia over being lost.

Character is not the ground of our acceptance before the Lord. Now one third thing and I won't say much about this because it's so obvious, I hope. The Abrahamic promises are unconditional. And man tries to get in the way of the fulfillment of them constantly and Abraham is stumbling along, getting in God’s way, but God is accomplishing his promises through Abraham and through his wife Sarah. There is a great deal of suspense here because you see in the preceding 17th chapter, God has said the child, the seed is going to come through Sarah, and now here in this chapter, we find Abram or Abraham giving Sarah over into the hands of the king of Gerar, and so there would be a great deal of suspense what is going to happen if Sarah is to be the mother of the seed. The chances are that even at this moment, through the supernatural conception of the Holy Spirit that Isaac is within her because he is to be born within the year.

Let us look now at the passage and we will hasten through it as much as we can to try to get you out reasonably early. The first seven verses recall it for us; Abimelech’s taking of Sarah as his wife. We read now, “Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev.” He had been up in the southern part of the land and now he moves to the south. It is not said why he went. Maybe that pasture was needed. It is possible hostility on the part of his neighbors was the cause. It may have been because of what happened at Sodom for he had been at the Oaks of Mamre not too far away and was able to see the destruction there. We do not really know the reason why he moved.

It is possible that directed by the Holy Spirit. He was constantly reminded that the land, as it was then, was not his ultimate dwelling place. He was a sojourner in the land and would be until the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises. When he comes down finally into Philistia to Gerar and there it is necessary for him again, he thinks, to say that

Sarah is his sister and not his wife. He had deep suspicions of the king of Gerar whose name was Abimelech. Incidentally, Abimelech is a dynastic name. It was not his real name, but it was a name like Pharaoh or czar or Caesar. It was a title.

Now Abraham here is guilty obviously of unjustifiable equivocation and distrust of the providence of God. If it were really of the leading of the Lord that he should go to Gerar, then knowing that God has already promised him that from Sarah shall come the seed and that from him shall come the seed, he should not have leaned upon scheming when he came into the presence of this Philistine king.

Now why Abimelech took a liking to Sarah, we cannot be absolutely sure about, but it's possible he wanted to gain an allowance with Abraham for Abraham was a very wealthy man by now or it may just have been that he was fascinated by the beauty of this 90-year-old woman. Now that is a problem to us today because we don't live the length of life that they lived, but remember Abraham lived to be 175 years of age and so consequently, all ages I guess might be halved, and so if she was 90, she really is a woman in her 40s according to our way of reckoning.

Abimelech was fascinated by the beauty of Sarah. There is something amazing about this. It may have been she was rejuvenated because she is going to have a child. I know I can kind of sense in this audience right now a great swelling, rising, silent prayer from the ladies 35 and over, “O Sarah, tell me thy secret.” [Johnson laughs] But any way, he was fascinated and took her when he learned that she was Abraham's sister into his harem.

Now Abraham had stretched the truth. Someone has said the trouble with stretching the truth is it's apt to snap back and it did in this case. It's also well to remember that in matters of spiritual things, the judgment should never be left to our own wits. That was Abram's difficulty. He really thought that he might get out of this by being wise. We never do reach, in our Christian experience, the place where we can dispense with the guidance of God. Unfortunately, very often we do. We think we've

had such great experience as Christians, therefore we know this. And in the circumstances of life, we tend to rely upon our own wisdom, but in Scripture we are taught that all through our Christian experience, all of our decisions are to be made through our personal relationship with the Lord.

We never get to the place where we do not need daily guidance from the Holy Spirit, moment by moment guidance from the Holy Spirit. When we repeat a sin of course, the danger is to lie down in the mud and refuse to get up. And that’s the other side of the matter, but always, every time, in every circumstance of life, the appeal to the Lord is proper. That was one of Abram’s mistakes of course.

Well after Abimelech had taken Sarah into his harem, God, who is going to fulfill his promises, finds it necessary to work. And so he came to Abimelech in a dream. Dreams were often used, as you know, by Elohim for pagans. Dreams were means by which God communicated to pharaoh. It was by dream that he communicated with Nebuchadnezzar. Abimelech evidently is a person who has a rather full view of the existence of God and of the nature of God. In fact, Martin Luther said that Abimelech was a believer. There is no evidence for that, but nevertheless he was a man who had an understanding of the nature and existence of God, at least to some extent, but as a result of this, he contracted from God a lethal infirmity.

Now we are inclined to think that what this means in this little conversation the Lord has with him is that Abimelech is not really to be blamed for what happened. That’s only relatively true. When he says integrity, that’s only a relative kind of integrity because Abimelech is a man who is already married. We read that later on in verse 17. He already had a wife and so he was dishonoring the marriage bond by taking Sarah into his harem, and furthermore so far as we know, Sarah was not taken with her full assent. Now sure, she said, Abraham is my brother, but nevertheless it was a ruse and if the facts had been laid out, she never would have chosen this particular form of action.

In addition, if Sarah was such a beautiful woman, would it not have been natural for Abimelech to say why is such a beautiful woman not married after all of these years? There is no indication he made any inquiry to speak of at all. And so consequently, we are not to think of the integrity of Abimelech as being an absolute one, it was only a relative one. But God nevertheless acted in mercy toward him for He said, “I have kept you from sinning against me;” that is, with reference to Sarah. Therefore, I did not let you touch her, but in the fact that he requires Abraham to pray for him, Abraham the prophet is evidence of the fact that he was responsible even though relatively ignorant of the consequences of the things that he was doing.

Now in the seventh verse after that little conversation, the Lord says, “Restore the man’s wife for he is a prophet and he will pray for you and you will live, but if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die and all who are yours.” The sin of Abram or Abraham was no doubt aggravated by his position. We should not incidentally think of the term, prophet, in the sense that we do today. He was a prophet, but Abimelech and others would have had a little different conception of a prophet. They would have thought of a prophet as being something like a magician. And so when Abraham did what he did, it was not quite the reproach on the name of God that someone who understood prophecy would see, but for us as we look at it now, we see, well, what a reproach this is to the name of God that this prophet of God, and he was that, should give his wife over into the hands of this heathen king.

Now following this little dream and the interview with the Lord, the text now turns to a study of the restoration of Sarah to Abraham, and it's a remarkable expression of humility that comes out of Abimelech, but then he was very fearful because of what had happened. “So Abimelech arose early in the morning and called all his servants and told all these things in their hearing and the men were greatly frightened.” He was terrorized by the word of God. So he calls his servants, confesses his fault, tells the whole story before them, announces the amends that he is going to make, and the servants were

greatly frightened which suggests that they too had some sense of the fear of God. And so it was natural to call for Abraham, and Abraham is called for, and when Abraham comes into the presence of Abimelech, three questions are asked which humiliate Abraham as he lays the blame at his feet. This humiliation of Abraham is the kind of thing that we experience when we do not pay attention to the word of God.

There is a great deal of difference incidentally between humiliation and humility. Humility can never be humiliated. To be humiliated means to be lowered in condition. I know that some of you are thinking well in the case of the Lord Jesus Christ, was he not the object of an act of humiliation when he came from heaven and came down here and took to himself an additional nature, a human nature? Well yes, we do speak of the humiliation of our Lord Jesus Christ, but that word has no reference to our Lord’s personal character.

When we read of the humiliation of the Lord Jesus, we mean simply he was in the form of God, and he came here and then was, as a result of the incarnation, in the form of a servant. That is not a lowering of his person condition, but when we use the term humiliation normally, we mean it's a lowering of condition in the sense of being mortified, and that is what Abram or Abraham must experience as a result of his sin, and so he comes into Abimelech’s presence and Abimelech asks him three questions that were very, very humiliating. “What have you done to us?” he said. And then he said, “And how have I sinned against you that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin?” You see he recognizes that it is a sin. “You have done to me things that you ought not to have done.” And then he asks the third question, “What have you encountered that you have done this thing?”

Isn’t it interesting too that this wiggling that we engage in as believers? Abraham, that’s what he has done, he has just wiggled because he was in a difficult situation and appealed to something that he thought would get him out of it; it is something that the Lord Jesus Christ never does. There was never any element of fear, of cunning, of

diplomacy in our Lord in any shape or form. He was never suspicious of anyone. Nor did he ever trust anyone, except his father. Consequently he was never vindictive and he was never humiliated. It's only possible to be humiliated when we are serving our pride. Most of us know what that is. We know what it is to serve pride and we know also what it is to be humiliated. Well, Abraham answers with a threefold reply himself and the three pleas are a pattern of mistaken choice. They really tell us a great deal about this patriarch and his failure to follow the will of God.

First of all, he is faulty in the recitation of the facts. He says in verse 11, “Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.” That was faulty. That didn’t turn out to be true, and so consequently that idea was fallible. In addition, there is a fallibility in his values. “Besides she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife.”

Now of course, that’s a verbal untruth. True in one sense, false in another. Untruth comes so easy for us. Does it not? We can constantly lie. That's what we do. We lie about the things we don't say and often lie about the things that we do say, and even put them into sentences that we can try to rationalize as being true. How wonderful it is to meet a person who is frank and open and truthful! And finally, is fallible in his motives too. Notice the 13th verse. “And it came about when the ‘gods’ caused me to wander from my father’s house, that I said to her, ‘This, is thy kindness, which you will show to me. Everywhere we go, say of me he is my brother’”

Now mind you, take a look at that sentence carefully and you will see that this pattern of telling people that Sarah was his sister and not his wife is something that goes all the way back to Ur of the Chaldees. It goes back to the time when God caused him to wander from his father’s house. As they left Ur of the Chaldees, he anticipated he was going to have difficulty at this beautiful woman by his side, and he knew he would be out in territory that was strange to him and he knew the characteristics of the men of that time. If they saw a beautiful woman and you were helpless, they would take the woman

and often slay the men and so he made a little compact with Sarah right in the beginning God having called them out of Ur of the Chaldees to go into this land. Mind you, after the great revelation that God had given to him, he makes this little agreement with her -- one of his schemes in order to save his neck.

Isn't it striking that after this manifestation of God to him, he can stoop so low and so all through the years, he has been doing this? Now we have two records in the word, two occasions on which this was done. It's possible that there are many others that are not recorded in the Bible. So Abraham and Sarah both are afflicted with a besetting sin, deceit, lies. It's no wonder that one of the grandsons should be Jacob. It runs in the family and, of course, it runs in the human family. So it was really cowardice.

Now having been found out and having been humiliated, Abimelech takes the noble position and so he gives offerings, and even invites Abraham to stay in the land and pick the place that he wants. He gives Sarah a thousand pieces of silver as a kind of an atonement or else a kind of tweaking of her, sarcastically telling her to buy a veil so that others won't make the mistake that he has made.

And finally we read in the last two verses of this chapter and this too closes on a rather noble note because you would rather think that Abraham was not on praying ground to use the kind of language that we use today. He was surely not on praying ground if one prays only if he is in a kind of total fellowship with the Father, but fortunately the Bible doesn't teach that. Being a prophet and since one of the offices of the prophet is to pray, he prays and he prays to God, and God answers his prayer and heals Abimelech and his wife and his maid, so that they bore children for the Lord had closed fast all of their wombs.

Did you notice the change of name for God all through this chapter? It has been God, Elohim, the term that is fitting for the heathen as well as for the saints, but now the covenant keeping God, for the Lord, Yahweh. That is so fitting because you see it is Yahweh who is fulfilling his covenant. It is he who is preserving Sarah from any

problems, so that the seed shall surely come, through it all the families of the earth shall be blessed and so it just an indication of the faithfulness of God and how even when we get in the way of the Lord, he is going to fulfill his word.

Let me close by suggesting just a few things to try to tie up some of the things with which I have begun the message. It is clear that Abraham is not a flimflam artist. What he really is, is a man of like passions with you and me. He is the object of grace, but he is a sinner, and it's hard even for saints to lay aside besetting sin. When you read this chapter, did you say to yourself, “I just cannot understand how Abraham could do it?” Did you think that? Do you know what led you to think that? Self-deception. That’s what led you to think it because if you can look at this chapter and you can honestly say I cannot understand how Abraham could do it, you are deceived because if you look inside your heart providing you don't love yourself too much, you will never say such a thing because it's obvious. If you know your heart and know what it's really like, you will understand exactly how Abraham could do this. And the chances are you will understand how he could do it from the time he left Ur of the Chaldees to the present time because you will recognize that in the human heart, even the heart of the believing Christian, there is besetting sin. In fact, if you were able to see my heart and I were able to see your heart, we would see our own besetting sins. And they do not leave us unfortunately.

Now when we speak of sanctification in the Bible, we do not mean that a person reaches the state in this life where he is not troubled by besetting sins. In fact, while we are in this life, we shall be troubled by besetting sins. When the Bible speaks of sanctification, it means simply that there is a growth in grace, that there is a measurable or, observable to the Lord, observable plane of life in which there is advance. But it does not mean that at any point in this land of advance, the Christian does not fall into the ditch. It also means that when he falls, he is very unhappy. He doesn’t wallow in his sin.

He cries for deliverance because that’s the attitude of a Christian believer. It is Peter, after he falls, who goes out and weeps bitterly. It is Judas who after his sin

commits suicide. All the difference in the world between the two. Do not for one moment think that when we talk about the perseverance of the saints, we mean that once a person has been converted, then everything is on the rise and there is no besetting sin any longer. That’s very confusing, very untruth.

One of the things that has afflicted evangelicalism has been the tendency to teach that once a person has been converted, it is possible to attain a measure of spiritual life in which things are relatively smooth sailing. Two great errors result from this. The idea that there is such a standard of life at which you’re never exposed to failure and humiliation because of sin leads on one hand to pride and arrogance. And Christians full of pride and arrogance abound in our evangelical churches and then on the other hand, those simple-hearted souls told frequently by preachers who stand behind the pulpit that there is such a thing as a victorious life, a plane of life to which you can attain and therefore everything is going to be wonderful thereafter, and they honestly listen to that and then look at their lives and see the besetting sin that is there and the difficulties that abound and the result is despair and defeat, and it’s not long before some of them are making their ways to those who want to counsel them.

If you will take a good look at Abraham, you will discover that the Bible, when it speaks of the perseverance of the saints, means that those who have been truly converted do not apostatize from the faith, but God preserves them in the faith, in the midst of their own particular besetting sin. Now I don’t want you to go and say, well that was a very comforting sermon to me because I have besetting sins and therefore I am going to be perfectly alright. Now I don’t have to worry about that. I am just like everybody else while you will just be humiliated like Abraham was. You will be humiliated over and over again too.

And of course, the Christian believer who recognizes his besetting sin, it’s that one that he should get down upon his knees and pray about. Things do happen over and over again. I read an account, not long ago, of a woman in Denver, Colorado who was

out on a street corner and a mongrel dog came and bit her on the ankle and she was bitten rather badly and so they took her to the hospital which was just a few blocks away and thereafter, they had attended to her, she came back walking home and she went by the same corner and the same mongrel dog came out and bit her on the other ankle. It is an illustration of the fact that things do happen over and over again. God forgives. Fortunately, he never asks us to do what he himself will not do. We are told to forgive a brother who wrongs us until seventy times seven and we may be sure that God’s forgiveness is as great as that which he expects from his children.

One of the commentators, one of the great preachers, Josef Parker, has said about this, “I am glad that Abraham made such a fool of himself. Had he been without flaw or blemish, perfect, and invincible in faith and complete in the sanctification of his character, he should have awed me by his supernatural respectability.” So, my dear Christian friend, what I am exhorting you to be this morning is not arrogant and proud or despairing, but to recognize that when God begins a work in you, He will perform that work, but you should not expect that you cannot fall into the ditch. Your responsibility and also your privilege is to call upon the Lord in the ditch and have him deliver you and ask him to make you a better servant of his.

Bumper sticker theology is not very good. There is a bumper sticker that has been over the past few years seen. “A Christian is not perfect, he is forgiven.” That is good theology. A Christian is not perfect, he is forgiven. Now of course, he is forgiven because of the merits of the Lord Jesus Christ. Here on the eve of the fulfillment of the promise, Abraham has imperiled the covenant hope. Not even he can boast before the Lord. Acceptance is not on the ground of personal merit. It's on the ground of the merits of Jesus Christ.

What's the root of Abraham's problem? Well I guess if we were to sum it all up, we would say the root of Abraham's problem was unbelief in the ability of God to fulfill His covenant promises. That's really what it comes down to, doesn't it? He really felt,

when he went into Gerar, that God was not able to keep that king from Sarah his wife and consequently he schemed in order to avoid what he thought was coming. Abraham had a real faith, but it was partial faith. It was inadequate faith. It's what the Bible speaks of when it says little faith, but this chapter is an eloquent commentary on the mercy of God. How merciful He is and how patient He is!

And it's a great chapter for legalists. It's a great chapter for those who misunderstand the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and it's a great chapter for those who are caught up in movements like the Keswick movement which give false hope and lead to despair in the lives of Christians. If you look at the life of the great example of faith, you will discover that he was a man of like passions with us and may God enable us to find the same remedy that he found for the problems of his life. F. B. Meyer titles the chapter on this, “A bit of the old nature.” That pretty well explains it. A bit of the old nature. May God deliver you Christians from the humiliation of having God expose your sin, that easily besetting sin. It wouldn't hurt us all a bit if we went home and got down upon our knees and ask God to deliver us from the besetting sins that hinder usefulness of the Christian life.

If you are here today and you've never believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, we remind you that according to the word of God, you are lost in your sin. You are, according to holy Scripture, heading for the lake of fire and consequently your condemnation is definite and just, and there is no way of escape except through the provision made by the merits of the Lord Jesus in His sacrifice upon the cross. There is no salvation in good works. There is no salvation in church membership. There is no salvation in the ordinances which the church practices as believers. There is no salvation in education, no salvation in any other thing than the finished work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

May God help you through the Holy Spirit to see your lost condition. May He bring you conviction, conviction of your sin and condemnation and may he also impress

you so much with your precarious position that you become as frightened as Abimelech’s servants and flee to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ claiming the merits which the Lord Jesus Himself has. It would be a terrible thing to leave this audience having heard that Christ died for sinners and not take advantage of the remedy. May God help you to respond.

I could never bring conviction to you. No one can else could bring conviction to you. Only the Holy Spirit can bring conviction. May He do it. May you respond. May you come to know what it is to have everlasting life and then may you learn to grow in grace in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus and allow him to complete His work of sanctification in you. Remember this. He that hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ. So, take hope Christians. The day is coming when you shall be what you should be, but not until then. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] We are the grateful to Thee, Lord, for the illustrations of the Christian life that come from the experiences of the patriarchs. As we think of these great noble men, we reflect upon our own condition.

O God! Enable us to learn from the experiences that they had and enable us to avoid the pitfalls which are so numerous about us. Give us a trust in Thee and in Thy word that delivers us from scheming. May grace, mercy and peace go with us.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.