

God's people: Problem or Solution?

Genesis 20

A man begins to believe in God and follow God's lead. Then he messes up in a pretty big way that causes damage to himself, to the ones he loves, and for the reputation of God-followers amongst those who don't believe. Then he gets back on track with God; starts trusting God's promises and obeying his commands and making a godly difference in a dark world.

His life is changing and he can see himself growing in his knowledge and love of God. Things are on the up. But then he blows it again. He messes up - *again*. And hang it all, doesn't he fall down and fail with the same sin that he thought he'd put behind him and grown free of?

Sound familiar? It could describe the experience of many a Christian, if not all of us who are following Jesus. That awful resigned feeling that you gave in and sinned in that same way. Well, it's also the experience we read about in the life of Abraham in Genesis 20.

Those who both pay attention and have a good memory might think this story sounds a bit familiar. Back in August, we had a 'What is Church?' day, when we looked at Genesis 12:10-20. We read about Abram telling the men of Egypt that his wife Sarai was his 'sister.' We read about Pharaoh taking Sarai to be his wife, very likely meaning that he slept with her before God's judgement on Pharaoh and on Egypt led to Sarai being returned to Abram.

We thought there about how God's people do, sadly, still mess up even after they have begun a relationship with Him, and how that damages themselves; those around them; and his witness to a world that doesn't know God. We thought about how God's people actually need to say sorry to the world around them sometimes.

Well, here at Genesis 20, history kind of repeats itself. It feels as you read it as if Abraham learned nothing from the pain and mess that this 'Sarah-is-my-sister' plan caused last time. Just like back in chapter 12, you get to the end of this passage and think, 'Abraham seems to get off pretty lightly here, it's everybody else that suffers!' True enough, just like in Genesis 12, Abraham ends up richer for having given his wife away to another man and been compensated when it all goes wrong for that man.

When I read it, it grated with me: 'It's Abraham's sin, why does Abimelech get the strong words from God and not Abraham?' But I think I've learned in

reflecting on this passage that the consequences of a person's sin for *themselves* is not the point in this passage. It's the consequence of our sin for *others* that we need to pay attention to.

Abraham's deceit is all to do with self-concern and self-preservation, as we read in v.11. That is at the heart of all sin - it is when we put concern for ourselves before concern for God and His purposes and concern for other people. And the consequences ripple out in his family and in the community and nation he is living in here.

Poor old Sarah is given away to have sex with another man again. It seems from v.13 like this is the default plan to protect Abraham everywhere they go. That is, of course, terribly damaging to Sarah. Abimelech, not knowing that he's about to take another man's wife, is afflicted through Abraham's sin. Not only Abimelech, but the community and nation which he heads, are threatened and afflicted (vv.4, 7, 9 and 17-18).

Although this time Sarah does not end up having sex with another man, both she and the whole household of Abimelech live with threat and risk hanging over them, and Abimelech and company are actually afflicted with impotence v.17 tells us, on account of Abraham's deceptive self-concern.

And Abimelech holds Abraham to account for this in vv.9-10. 'Why have you done this to us, Abraham? What did we do to you, that you've caused all this trouble and affliction for us?' Pharaoh asked the same questions in Genesis 12, but he kicked Abraham out before Abram had to offer any answers. Abimelech, on the other hands, wants to hear the answers. What *does* Abraham have to say for himself?

In vv.11-13, we get a series of excuses. Excuses that Abraham has to offer to defend himself, rather than admit he'd done something wrong. As you hear each of these excuses, just ask yourself whether you use the same excuses in the way you behave in your relationship with God or with other people.

In v.11, we get an apparently unwarranted assumption that Abraham had made that 'these people have no fear of God.' The truth was, as we see in v. 8, Abimelech and his people took the threat of death that the Lord God had given to them very seriously.

Abraham had written off the community he was in and thought, 'I don't need to behave in a way that honours God with them, because there's no chance they'll take God seriously anyway. I'd better assume that I need to play dirty

with them, because they're just going to play dirty with me anyway.' Do you ever do that with the people at work? How about with your friends? Writing them off can cause them great damage through your sinful behaviour.

In v.12 we get Abraham pleading a technicality. 'Well, technically, she *is* my sister, because we have the same father...' Okay, let's put aside the 'eeeuughh!' factor we might have about that in a different 21st century culture. Because, Abraham, whilst it might *technically* be true that Sarah's your sister, the point is, she's also *actually* your wife! And that's why all this calamity is coming upon these people!

Abraham was concerned about vindicating his behaviour on a technicality; pleading innocence on a legal loophole. Now that never goes down well with God - the Bible tells us God looks at the *heart*. And Jesus was pretty angry with the Pharisees who wanted to feel right about themselves like this. Let's be honest, alongside God, nobody else around us is impressed when we try to vindicate ourselves by saying, 'Technically, I *did* do this,' or, 'I didn't *technically* steal or gossip or lie or cheat.' Nobody - including God - is impressed with you trying to hide behind your dictionary definitions.

And in v.13, we find a chilling echo of how humans excused themselves earlier in Genesis - they pin it on God. Abraham suggests that he has needed to form this default plan with Sarah because of the wandering that *God* has caused them to do. It's a little too reminiscent of Adam blaming God for the woman God gave him.

Abraham pins his dubious behaviour on the circumstances that God has placed him in. 'Well, God put me in this situation, so what's to be expected but that I behave like this to survive.' Is that how you sleep at night? 'God made me like this.' 'God gave me this temperament.' 'God put me in these circumstances.' Would you rather blame God than take responsibility yourself?

Humans will do all of these things before they just hold their hands up and say, 'I was wrong. I'm sorry.' For your sake - and for the sake of the spiritual, emotional and perhaps physical health of those you are damaging - just say sorry. God's people should be good at admitting their faults and saying sorry to God and to others for them, because we trust in God's assured forgiveness, and because we'd rather be hurt by the refusal of others to forgive us than hurt them by refusing to say sorry to them.

Question - Which things are you inclined to appeal to before saying 'sorry'? Is there someone you need to say 'sorry' to?

For all that we've looked at so far, here's the biggest problem with Abraham's behaviour in this chapter: he must know that it can't be in keeping with God's plan. You only have to think for a moment about this one. Two chapters back, God promised Abraham and Sarah that in a year's time, they would have a son.

If the now-fertile Sarah were to sleep with Abimelech, wouldn't that raise a question a few months down the line as to who the real father of Sarah's child was? Sarah must not yet appear to be pregnant, or else presumably Abimelech would not take her to be his wife. So this is an incredibly risky time for Abraham to be placing his wife in the arms of another man.

Here's the thing though, and this I believe is the main point of this chapter: *God will not allow our sinful mistakes to undermine His plan.* Everything that we read of God doing in this chapter is concerned with seeing His promise concerning a child for Abraham and Sarah upheld.

Back in Genesis 12, Pharaoh was not restrained from having sex with Sarai. Sarai was, at that time, infertile, and the promise of a child born to Abraham through Sarah had not yet been announced. God allowed the damaging repercussions of Abram's sin in that chapter to unfold in their awful fullness.

But in Genesis 20, God acts to prevent Abimelech and Sarah sleeping together. v.6 tells us that God restrained Abimelech, he kept him from unintentionally sinning. He acknowledges Abimelech's innocence about the matter so far, but he does threaten Abimelech and his household with death if Abimelech should proceed with what he now *knows* would be an adulterous sin.

God is swift, serious and decisive in this intervention. And He does more to keep the promise secure and unquestionable. In v.17, we read about how Abimelech and the women of his household were restored to be able to have children again. If not only the women, but Abimelech himself needed to be healed in this way, Abimelech must have been struck with impotence, or some other condition which meant he couldn't possibly father a child with Sarah.

God's actions here are all to secure His declared promises, so that when we get to the next chapter and finally arrive at the birth of Isaac, there can be no

question that the child is anyone's but 100-year-old Abraham's, incredible as that is.

We've looked at how we learn from the promises to Abraham and Sarah in previous weeks and chapters. This was God's promise to *them*, not us - but God's character is consistent throughout Scripture and history, and so we can expect God to act similarly when it comes to the promises He makes to *us*.

We've spoken in weeks gone by of what those promises are - that everyone who believes in Jesus Christ, trusting in His life, death and resurrection; will have life to the full, now and forever, in Christ alone. Through your faith in Christ; God's promises are that you are *completely* forgiven, you *are* a new creation, and you *will* have life forever - promises that God is both willing and able to deliver.

Now the point of this passage is, nothing will stop God delivering on those promises to you - not *your* sin, nor the damage done to you by other people's sin. Neither will anything stop God delivering on His saving promises to other people; not even if you mess them up with your wrongdoing. We are being taught in this passage to be confident that God brings about everything He has promised and overcomes every threat to that.

Now this might sound like a contradictory point to the one I made in talking about how our sin affects other people. How can the chapter be saying on the one hand, 'It matters for people's health, including their spiritual health and walk with God, how I behave with them;' and on the other hand be saying, 'there's nothing that you can do that will stop God's saving action in another person's life?'

Well, I think the question the chapter presents for each of us is this: Do you want to get in the way of God's saving plan for other people, or do you want to get on board with it? Do you want to be an obstacle for God to overcome in their lives, or a channel He can use to bring about His saving purposes? Are you going to be a tool for God to work with, or a spanner in the works? Part of the problem, or part of the solution? A blessing, or a curse?

Question - Think of one friend/family/colleague. What could you change to take a greater part in God's blessing to them?

If you know that there are things you have said or done which have caused setbacks to other people in trusting Jesus, please don't think that you've scuppered God's whole saving project in their lives. In fact, get some

perspective and some humility and remember that God will save whom He wants to save through His power and in His very wonderful plan.

Here's what you can do; you can say sorry to those people for the way you messed up and caused them less confidence in the good news of Jesus Christ. You can have confidence that God forgives you, whether or not they do, and you can trust that God is not sitting with His head in His hands and a torn up plan going, 'Well they've messed that one up for me!' He's got it all in hand.

You can stop regretting, stop wallowing, stop beating yourself up and stop worrying. And you can start getting on with being a blessing to those people around you now. Start telling them about God's promises, start showing them the difference it's making in your life, start feeling free from guilt and death and making that freedom infectious.

And here's another thing you can do. Start doing the thing that God has called *you* to do. In Abraham's case, in vv.7 and 17, we discover that his calling and role was to intercede in prayer for Abimelech and his household and nation.

Last week in chapter 19 we saw how Abraham's role was to stand between God and the city of Sodom in interceding prayer. Here in chapter 20 God wants to see the healing and restoring solution for Abimelech and his people come about through Abraham exercising that same God-given gift and role in this situation.

Isn't this remarkable? Despite Abraham's big, damaging mistake and sinful attitude of self-concern, God wants to bring about the healing transformation of the community through this friend of His exercising his gift and calling. Because Abraham is God's guy. And the pattern through the Bible is that this is how God chooses to work in the world - through His people exercising their God-given gifts and roles.

We see it in the life of Israel in the Old Testament. They kept sinning, they kept making big mistakes, but God still wanted to use *them* to reveal to the world who He is and what He is like. We see it in the New Testament in the birth of the Church in this world. They kept sinning, they kept making big mistakes, but God still wanted to use *them* to show and tell the world that life to the full, now and forever, is through Christ alone.

In 21st century Inverness, we'll see it happen here too. Yes, we keep sinning. And to our frustration, we keep making big mistakes that hurt ourselves and other people and damage the reputation of God's name in our community. But God still wants to work through each of us exercising our created skills, and our God-given gifts, to bring blessing and eternal hope to people here.

When we know we've sinned and feel like we've fallen a long way, we can tend to stop doing what God has given us to do. Maybe you feel like a spiritual fraud - 'How can I encourage other people to live in a Christ-following way when I've just done *that?*' Or perhaps, 'I get that God has just about saved me from sin and death, but that thing I did ten years ago means I couldn't possibly reach out to other people with the thing God used to want me to do.'

The newsflash in Genesis 20 vv.7 and 17 is, *God still wants you to do what He has gifted you to do.* If I were to stop exercising my gift and calling in preaching every time I fell from the very things that I'm telling you Scripture calls us to, I couldn't preach! I preach, not because I'm living up to all the things that I've preached about today, but because Scripture tells us to live like this, confessing our shortcomings and asking God for help with changing; and because I know that God has given me the gift and calling of preaching in this church and community.

So what is your gift? Are you using it? Did you stop using it because you felt you fell too far from grace? Well, in Genesis 17 God says, 'Pick yourself up. Face those you've wronged, including me, and take responsibility for your wrongdoing and say sorry. Stop being an obstacle to my saving purposes in others' lives, and be part of my unstoppable saving plan. And get on with using your gift, because that's part of what I'll use to save the world.'