

# Deception and Protection

## Genesis 20:1-18

Sunday January 30<sup>th</sup> 2011 Morning Service

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The New Testament sees Abraham as the man who received God's blessing, who was called 'the man of faith' and 'the friend of God.' Our Bibles call Abraham the man blessed by God, the man of faith and the friend of God. But the Scriptures also reveal another side to Abraham; they are frank and painfully honest about his weaknesses.

## 1. The Weakness of the man of faith

Abraham the courageous warrior had led a war party to recover his nephew Lot when he had been captured. Abraham was courageous. But now we see Abraham the coward, who yet again was willing to sacrifice his wife going into a king's harem so that he would not be harmed. What a contradiction, such courage and such cowardice in one man! Here we see the warrior and the weakling. This cowardice of Abraham seemed to be a besetting sin as he had done exactly the same thing before (Genesis 12:10-20). There he had been taught how wrong this was and God had dealt graciously with him. But he did not learn his lesson; he now sins in exactly the same way again. We must know our own weaknesses and take steps to strengthen them. Abraham was willing to use and abuse his wife for his own personal wellbeing, whatever the cost to her; he was willing to lie for his own wellbeing; he was willing to enmesh his wife in his own dishonest schemes. Our sin always affects others and damages others. Why, when God had been so gracious to him last time he did this terrible thing, was he so willing to fall in exactly the same way again? Perhaps the answer is that it is just because God had been so gracious to him before, even making him rich through the incident, that he thought God would be gracious again. Here was a spiritual presumption that God would come to his aid yet another time. God's grace should make us more wary of falling again, but perversely, it can cause us to take liberties. Because we have in the back of our mind that God will forgive our sins if we repent of them, we can perversely feel we are safe to commit them. This is to treat God's grace with contempt and comes frighteningly close to mocking Him.

## 2. God's grace to the weak man of faith

In the light of all this it is staggering that the Lord not only steps in and protects Sarah despite Abraham's despicable behaviour, but bails Abraham out yet again and pours phenomenal blessing on him yet another time. What does this teach us?

The Lord is phenomenally gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love. He gives us what we do not deserve. Abraham stands at the beginning of the covenantal line of faith and so we glimpse here something of the way the Lord deals with all those who are his failing friends. As he treats Abraham so he treats us, and so we are called to treat each other. He we see the gospel: God giving good for bad.

The Lord protects us and those around us from the consequences of our actions, even though we do not deserve it at all. The Lord supernaturally intervened to stop the king even touching Sarah. We are all being protected all the time far more than we know. Were that protection to be removed from us, we would all be in hell right now. One sinful act or thought justly demands damnation the very moment we commit it. Every day that the Lord gives us to repent is a protection for the consequences of our sin. The cross of Christ covers and protects those who run to it. Even on a day to day level, we are protected from the full consequences of our sin far more than we realise. We deserve total disaster. The Lord controls the amount of damage our sin does to us, letting just the right amount through to discipline us to improve us.

The protection of Sarah has a bigger context: she was going to give birth to a child, a son of Abraham who would be the next in the line that would ultimately lead to the Messiah, the Christ. Satan was particularly attacking here because of the messianic promises to Abraham. This may be the deeper reason as to why Abraham particularly fell in this area: Satan wanted Sarah to become pregnant by another man and so destroy the line of the Messiah. This is also behind the attack on Abraham sleeping with Sarah's maid to provide a child of promise in a different way to that which God had ordained. These are all attacks on the line of promise, the line of the Messiah, God's plan for the deliverance of humanity. Here is Satan biting the heel of the seed (Genesis 3:3:15); here is the dragon waiting to devour the promised child (Rev 12:1-5).

The remarkable fact is that the Lord not merely protects us, he also blesses us in spite of our sin – and even through our sin. This is grace superabundant. Abraham is blessed through his stupidity and sin. Material blessings fall into Abraham's lap (14-16). God can turn everything on its head. Satan can mean something for evil, but the Lord can even use that evil for good. The cross is the best example of this: Satan plotted evil to kill Jesus, but the Lord had pre-planned this event to pay the price for our sin. The practical lesson for us is this: our sin should not lead us to despair, but to repentance, and from that, unbelievably to blessing. Forgiven sin is something that gives the Lord more praise and teaches us deeper humility. This is not to say that sin is good, for it certainly is not, but rather that God is so far above the schemes of men and demons that he can turn all things to his purposes. Do not let your sin and failures crush you, but turn from it to Jesus, know his forgiveness, and learn what lessons the Lord would teach you from your failure.

### **3. God's power in the praying man of faith**

One other amazing truth revealed here is the power of Abraham's prayer. Read verses 17-18. Here we see the power of the praying of a redeemed sinner. God had delivered Abraham from his sin and the effects of his sin, and now he calls him to pray and bring down blessing on those around him. Here is an amazing example of God using a weak believer to influence those around him with grace and mercy. This pagan king and his people were learning about the God of Abraham, the God who is righteous, the God who acts in the affairs of men, the God who answers prayer. Surely this man was open to such a message. His heart was prepared. He had a sense of righteousness; he had been spoken to in a dream; he had seen miraculous judgment on his people in their wombs being closed. Abraham had expected this king to be evil and to kill him for his wife, but Abimelech was far more righteous than Abraham expected (read 9-10). Abraham had judged Abimelech on his experience of the people of Sodom, but this king was far more decent than that.

Often unbelieving people can be far more decent than we expect, sometimes, like here, more decent than believers.

When Abraham prayed, the judgement upon Abimelech and his kingdom was lifted. The man of faith, the friend of God, had already seen God answer his interceding for Lot, the believer, now he was seeing God answer his prayer for the unbeliever. These two instances at the beginning of the line of the people of faith, in the life of Abraham, tell us something profound: they tell us that God's people, although imperfect themselves are to pray for believers and unbelievers, that they would be delivered from God's judgement. Here the pattern for people of faith is set out. We are to pray for believers and unbelievers that they would be delivered from God's judgement.

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