

OLD NATURES NEVER DIE

by Ray C. Stedman

Immediately following the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, we encounter a lesson which is most important to the life of faith. We last saw Abraham on the promontory looking out over the Valley of the Dead Sea and interceding with God on behalf of the wicked cities of the plain. This is a place of high favor in Abraham's life, when he seems to have grown to a position of tremendous power, authority and friendship with God. This is what many Christians expect to happen in their lives. They have the idea that as forgiven sinners they gradually learn to improve themselves until they become at last worthy of Christ's friendship and can enter into the secrets of God in some such amazing way as Abraham did here.

But this idea of the Christian life, as this story reveals, is wrong. The account which continues in Chapter 20 might be entitled, "Relapse." Doesn't it sound familiar?

From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. {Gen 20:1-2 RSV}

Here is Abraham doing the same thing he had done thirty years ago. He is down in the land of Gerar, the sea coast country on the southwest side of Palestine, just above the Gulf of Suez on the way to Egypt. The people who lived in this area were later called the Philistines. These were the enemies of Israel from whom came Goliath, the giant David slew. These people had come from Egypt. They were not Canaanites, but Egyptians who had moved up to the border of the land of Palestine. They are a spiritual picture of the moral but unregenerate churchman; that is, a worldly people getting as close to the truth of God as they can while remaining unregenerated.

The world is full of these religious people. Thousands of them meet in churches across our land today who do not know what it means to be born again. They do not know what it is to have the life of Christ dwelling in them. They think the church is where they can learn ethical and moral principles along with others who are interested in advancing the highest good of society. Yet they consider themselves Christians and would feel insulted if they were told that they are not Christian in the scriptural sense.

The king of this group is called Abimelech, which means "my father is king." This suggests an authority no higher than man: It is the concept of "my father as king of all the people," the supreme ruler. This is characteristic of the worldly church, the church that does not regard authority as coming from any higher source than man. These are the Philistines -- "holding the form of religion but denying the power of it," (2 Tim 3:5a {RSV}).

These are the people among whom Abraham goes. He is evidently upset by what had happened in the destruction of the cities of the plains, and perhaps longs to get away from that infamy and terror. So he moves down into the south country and comes among these people. The first thing he does there is to tell a lie about his wife. He says she is his sister, exactly as he did thirty years ago. This woman Sarah is still such a lovely creature that she is a lure to all the wolves that are around, and Abraham feels the only way to protect himself is to say that she is his sister. Just as before, the king comes and takes her as his own and gets into trouble.

But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man, because of the woman whom you have taken; for she is a man's wife." [That would not frighten anyone today, but it did then.] Now Abimelech had not approached her; so he said, "Lord, wilt thou slay an innocent people? Did he not himself say 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 you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you

from sinning against me; therefore I did not let you touch her. Now then restore the man's wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you, and all that are yours. (Gen. 20:3-7 {RSV})

Here is a picture of the blundering blindness of unbelief. Here is a man on the verge of committing a very grievous sin when God stops him. This is a revelation of how God views this sin of taking another man's wife. He tells this pagan man he is doing a terrible thing and Abimelech recognizes it. You can see how far we have slipped today, when you realize that even pagans in that day recognized how terrible it was to take another man's wife.

Abimelech protested that he did not realize what he was doing, that he had been tricked, that he was innocent of any wrongdoing and was acting only out of his integrity. Notice, however, that his moral standards were no protection against stumbling into sin. Even though he had higher moral standards than Abraham, they were no protection against keeping him from stumbling into sin. Even with his eyes wide open and meaning to do right, and thinking he was doing right, he was still on the verge of falling into sin. This is the unhappy state of all those who do not know Jesus Christ as Lord. They do not have the inner voice to protect, restrain, guide and keep them from evil. Had it not been for the influence of God, this man would have plunged right on into sin. For Abraham's sake, God restrained him, and as we see at the end of this account, he struck Abimelech with a deadly disease which prevented him from taking Sarah as his wife. Undoubtedly this man thought a terrible tragedy had occurred, but it was really the kindness of God keeping him from something far more serious.

I wonder sometimes if many of the events that appear to be tragedy are not the kind-heartedness of God restraining people for the sake of those who know him, who love him, keeping them from evil. Paul writes of one who restrains the full manifestation of human sin. Even in his day, "This mystery of lawlessness is already at work." (2 Th 2:7a {RSV}), but he says there is one "who now restrains it" {2 Th 2:7c}, keeping it in bounds. In other words, if God was not at work restraining human evil, man would have long since blown himself off the face of the earth. He has never needed atom bombs or hydrogen bombs to do the job. They only speed up the process. He could have done it long, long ago by simpler means -- axes, hatches, knives and swords would have done the trick -- and he would have done so if it had not been for God's restraining hand on human society. Paul says that the day is coming when God will take that restraint away and all hell will break loose on earth. That cataclysm is described for us in most vivid terms in the book of Revelation.

In the next section we find Abraham suffering from the reproach of Abimelech:

So Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told them all these things; and the men were very much afraid. 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 my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done." And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What were you thinking of, that you did this thing?" Abraham said, "I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. Besides she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother.'" (Gen 20:8-13 {RSV})

As a Christian, has anyone had to say to you, "What were you thinking of when you did this thing?" Have you ever had to say it to yourself: "What got into me anyway? I thought I was further along in the Christian life than this. Here I have done this thing that I thought had long ago passed out of my life. Whatever got into me?" If you have ever had to ask yourself that, you need to learn the lesson Abraham had to learn here.

Old natures never die; they only smell that way. You are still capable of the worst sin that you have ever committed -- and more. Abraham has been a coward for thirty years and he is still capable of being the same yellow coward he was at the beginning, hiding behind his wife, subjecting her to dishonor and disgrace and shame, in order to protect his own skin. He had made a pact with her thirty years before and he had never

gotten around to giving her any new instructions, in spite of how much he had grown in grace.

This old Adamic nature with which we are born, which is perverted and twisted so that it never operates as God intended it to, is totally depraved. That does not mean that it cannot do what appear to be nice things in the eyes of others and even of ourselves. There is something about the old self, the flesh, which is able to simulate righteousness. In the flesh's pursuit after pseudo-righteousness, even if it succeeds in an outward demonstration of a sweet and lovely nature, it has never achieved anything but self-righteousness. Self-righteousness always demands self-praise, a longing to be admired and to win the attention of others. If self-righteousness succeeds, it makes you an extrovert. If you fail in your pursuit of self-righteousness, the result is self-pity and self-pity makes you an introvert. Either way it is the flesh, the same ugly thing. In neither case can it ever please God.

This is why when God comes into the human heart through Jesus Christ, he never tries to do anything about cleaning up that old nature. He writes it off as worthless. He says that everything that comes from self is worthless. No matter how it looks in the eyes of others, if it comes from the self-advancing, self-centered core, it is worthless and it always will be. What you now are in the flesh, you always will be, if you live a hundred years.

Now isn't that encouraging? I hope it is! If you lay hold of that concept, you will find it one of the most encouraging truths in your Christian life, because it will release you from that awful burden of self-effort which tries to make the old nature behave itself. You must renounce self as the Word of God tells you to, and quit feeding it, protecting it, polishing it up, trying to make it look good. Give it up. Accept all that Jesus Christ is in you and wants to be through you, for his nature is perfect. If you will let him be what he wants to be through you, you will always be pleasing to God.

Any dependence upon self always results in the kind of experience that Abraham had. After thirty years of walking with God and learning wonderful lessons in the spiritual life, the minute he steps out of a dependence upon God, he steps back into that same ugly nature he had in the beginning, and it is unchanged after thirty years. Old natures have to be kept out of the place of control through walking in the spirit. "Walk by the Spirit, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh," Paul tells us {Gal 5:16 RSV}.

Let us suppose my family decided to demonstrate that the popular conception about a pig's nature is false, that the idea that a pig likes mud is a complete insult to the nature of a pig. We are going to vindicate the pig by showing how it can be trained and educated to be what it is not by nature. We go and get a little silky, baby pig and bring it home, and I introduce this little pig to my children. We'll call it Flash. I tell them this little pig is to be their baby brother and they are never to treat it in any way that would let it know it isn't human. For if we treat it as a human, it will be human. So, we begin its training. We house break it, we teach it to wipe its feet when it comes to the door, to sit up at the table with a bib around its neck. We dress it in a little pink shirt with blue velvet pants, we tie a little bow around its tail, we teach it to stand up when a lady comes into the room and to be very mannerly. At first we make great progress. It seems as though we are accomplishing our objective because the pig is becoming very cultured and refined. But one day, we make a serious and very fatal mistake. We leave the door open. As the spring air comes wafting in, the little pig sniffs, and suddenly, like a bullet, he is out of that door and heading for the biggest, dirtiest mud puddle he can find. As he scoots in and buries himself in the mud, he rolls over and over in uncontrolled glee, kicking his feet up in the air and singing at the top of his piggy voice, "Be it ever so humble, there's no place like home!" No matter how you train it and no matter how you teach it, pig is pig, and mud puddles are home sweet home. You cannot break that nature.

Let us look at the last section:

Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham, and restored Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you." To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; it is your vindication in the eyes of all who are with you; and before every one you are righted." Then Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the

Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife. (Gen. 20:14-18 {RSV})

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."

Remember when our Lord was in the Garden of Gethsemane? Temple soldiers and priests came to take him with force, and Peter impetuously grabbed a sword and struck off the ear of the high priest. The Lord reached down, picked up the ear, and put it back on (see John 18:10 and Lk. 22:51). I have often thought this well describes what we are so often doing -- going around lopping off people's ears. And the Lord is so gracious to come along and put it back on, heal it, and give us a place of blessing as he did with Abraham. He corrects our mistakes and turns the very failures of our life into fullness, the very obstacles into opportunity, the stumbling blocks into stepping stones to further blessing for the grace of God.

Prayer

Our Father, help us to learn this very, very important lesson. You have not called us to improve ourselves, but to quit trying to improve ourselves and to recognize what we are, that in ourselves we can never be good enough, and to appropriate all that Christ can be to us and through us, for his life is satisfying to you. His life is acceptable, his life is perfect, his life is the life of peace, joy, blessing. His is a life of compassion, truth, honesty, and sincerity, and as we allow him, Lord, to live that life anew through us, we will manifest the same characteristics of grace, blessing, and fullness he does. Lord, this is what we would ask, that you would teach us this necessity and help us in the practical experiences of life to refuse to depend upon ourselves, to no longer put any confidence in the flesh in any way whatsoever, but to write it off as totally worthless in thy sight. For we ask it in Jesus' name, Amen.

Title: Old Natures Never Die
Series: The Man of Faith
Scripture: Gen 20
Message No: 13
Catalog No: 3668
Date: 1968

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