

A CHILD IS BORN, A SON IS GIVEN

By Steve Zeisler

If you are a parent, you are probably glad that babies take nine months to arrive because so much preparation is required before they come. Nurseries must be painted, latches attached to various cupboards, and furniture purchased. There is even a tire company that suggests you buy new tires for the car in which your baby will ride. We have come to the part in Genesis when Abraham and Sarah are awaiting the imminent arrival of Isaac, the long anticipated son of promise. The promise from God was clear,

"I will return at this time next year and Sarah shall have a son (Gen. 18:14)."

After decades of waiting, Abraham and Sarah will finally have their first child. The year before Isaac's birth was one of preparation, not of a nursery, but of the heart of Abraham. He was growing in character to become a source of blessing for "all the families of the earth" (Gen. 12:2). He became a man of prayer and learned of the justice and mercy of God as he petitioned the Lord concerning the fate of Sodom.

The passage before us now will concern Abraham's preparation for ministry in the exposure of a pocket of sin which remained within him. In Genesis 20, we see Abraham's characteristic failure. A pattern of lies which he lived with all his life will be exposed, and he will finally repent. Then finally the first seven verses of chapter 21 present the long awaited birth of Isaac. Look at chapter 20:

Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar. 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 because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married!" Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, "Lord, wilt Thou slay a nation, even though blameless? 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 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 arose 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 will 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; and it came about, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that 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" And Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, 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.

Bear with me while I try to help us picture what it was like to live as Abraham did--a nomadic family traveling about the land of Palestine trying to find land that would support his livestock. We need to know what kind of life he lived so that we can think about what we are told in these verses. For a second time Abraham's family was endangered when he claimed Sarah was his sister and implied that she was not his wife. The same thing will happen a third time in Genesis when Isaac will tell the same lie about his wife Rebecca. We need to ask ourselves what made this lie seem reasonable? Why would this happen time and again?

There is another point that we need to clear up: what would make Sarah attractive to Abimelech? When Abraham lied about his wife the first time, we were told that her beauty attracted the Egyptian pharaoh. When Isaac lied about Rebecca, the passage emphasizes that her beauty attracted the Philistine ruler. But in this instance, we are not told that Sarah's beauty attracted Abimelech. In fact, she was ninety years old. Her physical attractiveness probably did not factor into his decision at all. Here is what I think happened. Evidently, these people aged at about half the rate we do. If we follow every point of this story that tells something about their appearance or ability to bear children, the patriarchal families seemed to age very slowly.

Thus, in Egypt when Sarah was in her sixties, she retained the physical beauty of a woman in her early thirties. Under these circumstances, we would expect a beautiful woman to be attractive to a foreign potentate. But now she was ninety years old. We have been told expressly that she was past menopause, and she probably resembled a woman in her late forties. Thus, her attraction here was not so much her physical beauty but the fact that she was a wealthy woman. Why did the lie about their marriage become standard for Sarah and Abraham? Every time they had to move into a new region, they encountered new families, new pressures, and new relationships. Abraham knew that if he had a marriageable woman with him he would be welcomed with open arms. Since he was a very rich man with a large family and large staff of able fighters, he could appear to be a threat to the people of any new territory. And they would probably respond with men of arms and threats in return. On the other hand, if there was an available woman in his entourage, he could expect a positive reception. A marriageable woman would offer the hope of alliance and shared wealth to his new neighbors. Since he did not have children, he never had a daughter to act as the eligible female.

Thus, he adopted the strategy with Sarah saying, "Pretend to be my sister so that everywhere we go, we will not be perceived as a threat. This will give us time to show that we intend these people no harm. Then when we finally tell them that you are my wife, we will have already built a relationship" This was a survival strategy for a nomadic people in a dangerous world. I think Abraham and Sarah agreed on this strategy and used it throughout the years they traveled around the land of Canaan. But twice the scheme tripped them up. In Egypt, the pharaoh took Sarah into his harem, requiring God's intervention to rescue her. And now, some thirty years later, the same problem occurred again. Abraham told the lie and Sarah was taken as a wife of the king before he could do anything to prevent it. Since this happened in the year before Isaac's birth, Sarah may have even been pregnant at this time, although she certainly was not obviously so.

Thus, Abraham and Sarah were threatening the paternity of Isaac. It was a lie that they had used repeatedly as they traveled about the land, but this time it was particularly heinous because Isaac was about to be born. If Abimelech had in fact succeeded in cohabiting with Sarah, it would never have been certain that Isaac was Abraham's son. If the devil had been able to create that doubt, then God's promise and the lineage of the Messiah would have been called into question. Thus, this characteristic lie took an awful turn. This is why God intervened so dramatically to forbid Abimelech to touch her and why the prominent gesture of the gift of a thousand coins was made to announce Sarah's innocence. Since Abraham was acknowledged once again as her only husband, Isaac was certainly his son. Let me raise one more speculation.

Not only was Abimelech frightened by the presence of God speaking to him in stern terms, he was also frightened by the curse that had descended upon his family and tribe which closed the wombs of the women. How they could have known so quickly that the women could not bear children if all this happened in a short time? There are a couple of possibilities that occur to me. There may have been a series of miscarriages which frightened the entire tribe. We are familiar with this in our country because through frequency of miscarriages or birth defects we have discovered places where toxic wastes have polluted the water of a region. Thus, miscarriages may have been the sounding alarm for the people of Abimelech even as they have been in our

day.

Even more likely is the suggestion faintly made in these verses that Abimelech and perhaps other tribesmen were rendered impotent overnight. Remember the passage says God prevented Abimelech from touching Sarah. And in verse 17, after Abraham prayed, Abimelech was declared to be healed as well as the women. This frightening overnight impotence would certainly have a way of spreading fear among the tribe. In either case, it was discovered that the wombs of the women had been closed, and the fear was not alleviated until Abraham prayed. I have tried to draw an image of people who wandered living in tents and families who clashed over territories so we could sense the pressure which caused Abraham to resort to this characteristic lie. I have already alluded to the fact that this was a lie and was therefore an affront to God on that basis. It was a particularly callous lie because Abraham was willing to threaten the health and future of his wife in order to gain some kind of political security for himself. But in this particular case, it was worse than ordinary or callous lies because Abraham was unwittingly willing to threaten the promise of God of a miracle son born to Sarah, the line through whom the world would be saved.

If we look at verse 13, we can discover some of the dynamic behind Abraham's willingness to lie. As he was speaking to Abimelech, who was shocked that Abraham would treat him in such a manner, he said, "It came about that when God caused me to wander from my father's house we developed this strategy." The undertone in this statement "God has caused me to wander" suggests why Abraham was willing to do what he did as he wandered from place to place. Never having a city of his own, he continually had to engage a new stronghold of people as he wandered and had to face danger anew each time. He recognized that he would not have been in this mess if it had not been for God: "God caused me to wander from my father's house." This is exactly what Adam said when he was caught in sin. When God came to him, he complained of "the woman you gave me. YOU gave her to me. If you had not done what you have done, I would be innocent of my sin." I think Abraham did not even realize that he harbored resentment against God for the repeated danger in which he was placed. Yet it was this resentment which led him to adopt the defensive strategy that said, "I am willing to lie and deceive people because it is God's fault that I am in this mess anyway. My only recourse is to find a way to defend myself."

Throughout this period, Abraham was growing as a man of God. He was becoming a leader in worship and was, as we are told, a prophet. Despite this sin, he was clearly a man of great spiritual stature. It is amazing that people like us can grow in the Lord and still have a pocket of resentment or sin in our lives left unjudged! Even when our growth is apparent to all, there are some things that we hold onto, pockets of resistance in our hearts, that have never been dealt with by God. In this last year before Isaac's birth, God was curing Abraham of this lifelong pattern of lies. Consider what Abimelech and Abraham learned. Abimelech is a difficult person to understand. Commentators vary on whether he was a godly man awaiting the Lord's entry into his life or a manipulator. I tend to favor the former. I think he was a genuinely ethical, spiritually hungry man whose need was met when Abraham finally came to him with the truth about the living God.

But there are some interesting overtones. One is found in the statement Abraham made in verse 11. When questioned as to why he acted as he did, he said, "I didn't think there was any fear of God anywhere in this place." Yet, this drama revealed that the people were terrified of God and that Abimelech himself, as we are told in verses 3 and 8, was fearful of the living God. They had a tremendous respect for God. In fact, when Abimelech prayed, he said, "Lord, please don't judge me because I acted in innocence. I didn't know she was his wife." This resembles the prayer in Genesis 18 when Abraham said, "Don't slay the innocent with the wicked." Abimelech was appealing to a God of justice whom he feared and respected as someone who would do what was right and who was powerful enough to punish what was wrong. From the beginning, Abimelech was oriented to obeying God and wanted to know more about him. Yet Abraham's initial notion was, "There is no fear of God in this place." He did not take the time to discover the people's attitude toward God. I am convinced that we live in a world in which there are many people hungry to know God even though they appear not to be.

But many believers have developed lives like Abraham's, filled with deceptions and defenses to avoid interaction with the non-Christian world due to fear of what might happen. We have adopted lies and euphemisms to protect us from having to tell people who we really are. When we go into a new place, instead of being honest about being Christians, we adopt a slippery strategy to avoid honest contact with those who do

not believe. We are afraid as Abraham was. Yet, I believe there are people like Abimelech who wish someone would tell them of a God who is just, powerful and interested in people. But like Abraham, we become a curse to the name of God because of our hypocrisy. We cause the reproach not only of our own name but of the name of God himself because of the way we interact with the world in which we live. Abraham was called to be a blessing. He was supposed to bring light to the nations of the earth, but in this case he made choices that dimmed the light.

Probably the best news of this whole section is that God used Abraham even in his sin. The gracious God whom we serve can use people like us even when we are faint of heart and resentful. Thus Abraham prayed for Abimelech and his family and saw the curse removed. God was good to him even in his sin.

I spoke at a memorial service last week at the request of a friend of mine. She is a person who is a magnet for needy folks. The man who died had lived for the last twelve years in motels. He fled from Hungary in the fifties. To my knowledge he had no living family, no one in his life. When he was discovered dead in his motel room, they called my friend and she took the responsibility of arranging the memorial service. She said, "We can't have the service right away because the only people who would come are people who drank with him at the same bar. Since they only know him by his nickname, Teddy Bear, if we published an obituary with his real name, they would not come. Our best bet is to put a notice in the bar." His memorial service was an amazing opportunity. My friend shared a word of testimony about her friendship with the deceased and her love for the Lord. I taught from the Scriptures and led in prayer. The congregation was a remarkable conglomeration of bikers and other dislocated, unattached people-hard-working, hard-drinking, tough people, who had few connections except to friends with nicknames in bars. The toughest looking people in the room were women. But I found more interest there than I would have ever expected. They listened to my friend's testimony and to what I had to say. As I urged them to consider the fact that they too were going to die some day and that they needed to ask questions about their own destiny and whether they knew God, they listened. There was interest in knowing about a God who is just and listens to human prayer, a God who is powerful enough to do something about life.

It was important for Abraham to learn that he had allowed himself to be defensive about the dangers of this world and in doing so had cut himself off from the world in which he lived. He said, "There is no fear of God in this place." Yet there was a nation of people willing to fear God if they had only known. Think about what Abraham learned as a result of these events. He had developed a pattern of lies that continued with him for so long that he was probably unaware of the degree to which it had become a part of his framework. He and Sarah devised the strategy in the first place because they knew that if they traveled as Bedouin people with an unattached female in their entourage they would be welcomed. Everywhere they went it worked, with two exceptions.

We must assume he had been using this strategy throughout the period of moving around Canaan with good results. The open good will eventually led to good relationships, and Sarah had no problems. But now, at the most critical juncture of their lives when the son was finally to be born, once again they were placed in danger. When they moved into the new region, the old pattern of lies kicked in automatically. But this time, they were swept into a series of events that threatened everything. Had God not performed a miracle and put his hand on the situation to save Sarah, the plan of salvation would have been jeopardized.

Many of us have characteristic patterns of sin--old habits that we have adopted or old responses to pressures or temptations to which we have succumbed year after year. This pattern may not have surfaced for a long time, or perhaps the circumstances that initiate the pattern have not occurred recently. We may think that it has long since died of its own accord. But as Ray Stedman is fond of pointing out, "The old nature never dies; it just smells that way." If we decided to walk in the flesh today, we would be just as capable of childish, shameful, sinful responses as we ever were. Old patterns do not fade away, nor do they die of their own accord. We need to face them honestly and crucify them. In his training to become a mature man of God, Abraham realized that he had resented the danger he had lived with all his life and that this resentment against God was at the heart of his sin, the pattern of lies. There are many ways this can be analogous to our situation. Some people have a soft set of ethics regarding money. They may have been raised in poverty or for various reasons have felt threatened financially. Thus, they have long since learned to be broad in their categories as to what is honest on expense accounts or tax forms. They leave things unsaid or say an extra word when it is to their

advantage, creating a situation where money seems to flow in their direction without any overt influence on their part. There are some who have lifelong prejudices that they never allow to be exposed-racial prejudice, national prejudice, religious prejudice.

It has been interesting to watch the response of residents of Palo Alto to the recent court case that says children in East Palo Alto should be allowed to attend schools in Palo Alto and other neighboring districts. In liberal Palo Alto, there are many whose prejudices are finally being shown for what they are. Many of us Christians will find that we have rejected people without knowing until some incident brings it to our attention. Then we will realize that we have been guilty of this sinful pattern. There are others who have secret alliances with pornography, sexual fantasies, alcohol or drugs-secret alliances with things that are invisible to anyone else and yet are characteristic patterns of a lifetime. Probably the most difficult to face are patterns that exist within families-lies that couples tell each other or to the world, family manipulations, competition between husband and wife, pressure tactics, self-righteous putdowns, bursts of anger and withdrawal.

All kinds of tension and sinful behavior can be true in families as characteristics for years without examination. Abraham discovered in his own heart that he had committed himself to tell the same lie under the same circumstance over and over again. But God brought this pattern into question and allowed Abraham to see how horribly dangerous the choice was. We need to ask ourselves if we have learned to succumb repeatedly to the same kind of characteristic sin because it can be just as dangerous to the cause of Christ and to our own health and future as it was for Abraham. Once Abraham had finished his training and learned his lessons, then the magnificent birth occurred. Look at the first seven verses of chapter 21:

Then the Lord took note of Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had promised. So Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the appointed time of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore to him, Isaac. Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age!"

As I said before, this is the high point of the story to date, the long-awaited birth of Isaac. In some sense, it is presented in an understated manner: God came at the time he said he would, and Sarah had a son. I think we see different responses in these parents to the birth of their son. Abraham named his son "Isaac" as he was told to do and circumcised the boy exactly as he was told to do as a sign of the covenant between God and Abraham's family. He carried out the commandments of God, and we can imagine his mind was filled with theology, filled with the covenant and the future-the line that would come forth with the blessings to come. Sarah, on the other hand, was excited because she was holding a baby in her arms after all the years of waiting. There is no sense that she was thinking great thoughts about an eternal future and the covenant-keeping God behind it all. She was laughing and inviting others to share in her joy. Both responses are appropriate and honoring to God. To have joy in family life, to nourish and nurture children, to invite others into the joy of a home--the ordinary delight of family living--is good and honoring to God. It is also good and honoring to God to see him behind all the events of life and death.

There are times when we ought to reflect upon the theology of the moment, and there are times when we ought to laugh together. Both are appropriate. In conclusion, the terrible thing about Abraham's sin was that he threatened the plan of salvation to be brought through Isaac, the miracle child of promise. We are told in the early chapters of Genesis that there is an antagonism between Satan and the children born of the line of the coming Messiah. There is a vivid picture in the twelfth chapter of Revelation of a dragon thrown down from heaven trying to devour the son of a star-crowned woman.

The continual hope of the enemy of God was that he could somehow prevent the birth of the Messiah who would save the people from their sins. Although Abraham was lying like he always lied, carrying out his resentment against God and his defense against fear, he did not know what he was really doing. At that moment, he had come within an eyelash of giving victory to the enemy, seeking to destroy the certainty that the child of promise was from God. This ought to sober us. If we have characteristic resentments toward what God has done and patterns of sin built on those resentments, it may be that we are serving the enemy in a much

more profound way than we know. He may accomplish something awful through our fleshliness. I urge us to learn the lesson that Abraham had to learn, the exposure of this pattern. Once brought to light and healed, he was fit to be a man mature enough to be a blessing to the world.

Let us learn this lesson and be hard with ourselves concerning the patterns of sin in our lives that are like this. Confess your sins and be healed.

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