

“There’s No Fool Like an Old Fool and It’s Never too Late for Grace”
 Genesis 20
 November 14, 1999
 Dr. Jerry Nelson

READ I Corinthians 10:1-13

If you are now in your twenties or thirties, what kind of a Christian will you be in your forties and fifties?

How mature will your faith be, how strong will be your commitment to Christ?

If you are now in your forties or fifties, what kind of Christian will you be in your sixties and seventies?

Will you be a stronger Christian, more consistent in your obedience, more faithful in your relationship to Jesus?

What kind of Christ-follower will you be in twenty years?

It is sometimes wrongly assumed that just because people have been Christians for many years that they are more mature in their faith.

And some who have been Christians for many years wrongly assume they have reached a place of maturity where they are no longer vulnerable to certain sins – thinking they will remain faithful no matter what happens.

Oh, they would never say that, but their carelessness in the faith betrays them.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian Christians, “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!”

In the men’s group of which I am a part, we recently talked about our life goals.

One of several goals I wrote was this:

“I want to be a man who is self-controlled so that, as I age, I will not succumb to the sins of self-indulgence. I want to finish well, not failing in the home stretch, but faithful until God calls me home.”

I think that desire is true for most Christ-followers.

Isn't it true for you?

You want to be more faithful as you get older.

You want to succumb less and less to the things that disappoint your Lord and hinder the work of his church in the world.

What help is there to increase the likelihood of faithfulness instead of failure?

Again referring to the passage we read earlier, Paul wrote that the Bible contains many examples for us – examples of real people in real-life situations that are written to teach us so that we remain faithful and don't fall.

One of those examples is Abraham.

And the example I refer to today, is given in a story.

I'd like to tell you the story, and if you don't already know the story, I don't want you to read ahead in your Bible to see how it ends.

I'm not even going to tell you where it is yet, though we will look at it in just a few minutes.

When we think about the people of Israel in the Bible, the names of many great people come to mind: King David, Daniel, Jacob, and Moses.

But if you think of the man who started it all, the greatest name, the father of the nation of Israel, only one name qualifies – the name Abraham.

4000 years after his death he is still revered as the father of the Jewish people.

It was certainly true in Moses' day (500 years after Abraham) that Abraham was the faithful man of God who with his wife, Sarah, began the family that grew to be millions in number that dominate the pages of Scripture.

At God's command, this man left the security of his father's household and country to go where God was leading him.

With nothing more than God's promise, he believed God and entered into a covenant with God – trusting that God would give him a son with Sarah, even though Sarah, his wife, couldn't conceive.

By Moses' day, this man Abraham was greatly revered.

Given Abraham's status in the nation of Israel, **it is especially interesting that Moses would tell the story you are about to hear.**

If you were writing the biography of a much-loved grandfather, I doubt you would tell the kind of story Moses tells about Abraham.

By the time of the incident I'm going to now relate, Abraham is mid-life in age.

He is wealthy, respected, experienced and has a history of faithfulness to God.

Abraham and Sarah decided to move from one part of the country to another.

Moving was no small matter for a man with the servants and cattle he had.

In August Barbara and I tented at about 12,000 feet in Central Asia with our missionaries, the Loseys.

We spent four or five days living near a family of nomads who tend cattle.

When those nomadic families move from their summer grazing grounds high in the mountains, it takes weeks for them to get to their winter land much lower and many miles away.

So it was with Abraham, he had herds to drive and people to move to relocate the entire operation.

Here's what the text says: "Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar."

One of the places he stayed was in a city named Gerar.

Gerar was in an area that was controlled by a king named Abimelech.

Now Abraham was a wealthy, powerful man but knew he was no match for King Abimelech.

Abraham therefore lived in that area, understanding that he was under the authority of that king.

Apparently King Abimelech not only noticed Abraham's presence in his country, but felt the need to arrange some kind of relationship with Abraham.

In a later incident between them we learn that they worked out a treaty.

But at this time, Abimelech apparently thought he would establish a relationship with Abraham in a way very common in those days.

Abimelech would marry Abraham's sister.

Thus by intermarriage, they would become family and be obligated to support each other rather than harm each other.

It was kind of a merger.

The problem was that the "sister" of Abraham that Abimelech took to marry wasn't Abraham's sister, but his wife Sarah.

Again, here is the way the story is related in the Bible:

"For a while he stayed in Gerar, and there Abraham said of his wife, 'She is my sister.' Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her."

Now we don't know, in detail, how this situation developed but we are given some hints.

Later Abraham admitted that he and his wife Sarah had made an arrangement years earlier that when they ran into difficulty in their travels through foreign territory under powerful kings that Sarah would claim to be Abraham's sister.

They reasoned that this would reduce the likelihood that Abraham would be killed by some king who wanted Sarah.

And, they must have thought, it would decrease the threat that a powerful man like Abraham, might pose to these kings.

So having been told both by Sarah and by Abraham that Sarah was Abraham's sister, Abimelech took her to be his wife.

Now if you lived in Moses' day, five hundred years after this incident, and were hearing this story for the first time, you would instantly realize what the significant crisis that had developed.

Here was the very man and woman to whom God had promised a son, through whom God would establish an entire nation – his people.

Here was the very man and woman to whom God had promised that he would give them a land – a land that would stretch from Egypt to the Persian Gulf.

But those promises all hinged on a son being born to them.

And now they were throwing it all away with a lie.

What were they thinking?

Unless something happened, everything they had strived for, for twenty-five years, would be gone.

Unless something changed, there would be no son, there would be no people, there would be no land and ultimately there would be no Messiah.

Before we finish the story, I have to ask you, what got Abraham into this mess?

Abraham and Sarah were not recent converts.

They were not babies in the faith.

These two had walked with God for well over 25 years.

Much earlier they had made a similar mistake – back when they moved to Egypt.

But this is now at least 20 years later.

They have seen God do marvelous things, their faith is stronger, and the fulfillment of a promised son is imminent.

This man of God, Abraham, lied saying that his wife, Sarah, was his sister and then stood there silently while they took her away to be another man's wife.

What happened?

Think about yourself or some mature Christian person or couple you know and ask yourself: Could I, could they fail as miserably in a crisis?

As I think about this “example” as the Apostle Paul called it, what do I learn?

Why did Moses tell this story about the revered Abraham, when there were so many other stories he could have told?

What did he want his readers to learn?

The first thing that comes to mind is this:

Sin never stops pursuing us.

No matter how long we have walked with the Lord, we never reach a time when we are no longer susceptible.

About a year ago a pastor friend of mine in his 60s told me of an experience of his just weeks before.

He walked into a fast-food restaurant and while waiting for his food noticed a couple of young women enter.

He said it was like being hit by a truck – all of the sudden, with no warning, he was filled with lust.

He said it had been years since he had experienced anything as powerful as that.

Unwilling to harbor and play with those thoughts, he simply fled the restaurant.

Abraham has matured, he is a man under a covenant, but he is still capable of sin, even great sin. He still needs God’s intervention.

We never outgrow our need for vigilance.

In the Book of Common Prayer this prayer is cited:

“Almighty God, who sees that we have no power of ourselves to help ourselves. Keep us both outwardly in our bodies, and inwardly in our souls, that we may be defended from all adversities which may happen to the body, and from all evil thoughts which may assault and hurt the soul, through Jesus Christ our Lord.” Collect for Second Sunday in Lent, Book

of Common Prayer.

Are you cautious, wary, and vigilant?

Do you pray with David:

Psalm 139:23-24 “Search me O God and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; And see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”

We are never too old to sin and even sin greatly.

A second thing I learn from Abraham’s example is this:
Sin is powerfully deceptive.

Abraham had literally just seen God deal with the sin of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

He had witnessed the judgment of God against those people.
 And he still turned right around and sinned against his wife, his future and his God.
 What happened?

Did Abraham deceive himself into believing that some sins are less in God’s eyes?

Did he think that Sodom’s sin was great but his sin was insignificant?

Did he deceive himself into thinking that God wouldn’t notice?
 Or did he deceive himself into believing that there were limits to God’s ability to care for them?

In spite of his years with God, he allowed himself to “buy the lie” that God could take care of many situations of life, but not this one.

This time they had to do the wrong thing in order to insure that good would ultimately come.

I hear it today from Christians, “I have to do this, even though I know it is wrong.”

“I have to do it because I know that good will result.”

I hear it in reference to too many divorces – “I know that in my situation divorce is wrong but it will be better for everyone.”

“I know that God says it is wrong to marry an unbeliever, but it will work out for the better.

“I know I shouldn’t make this deal in business, but the result will be good.

Do you hear the self-deception in those words?

Sin is always powerfully deceptive.

In the middle of temptation, get counsel – don’t try to go it alone.

Self-deception is the most difficult to overcome.

A third thing I learn from Abraham is this:
Stay out of dangerous situations.

In the Phillips translation, Romans 13:14 reads this way: “Let us be Christ’s men from head to foot, and give no chance to the flesh to have its fling”.

Should Abraham have been in Gerar at all?

He said he thought there “was no fear of God” in this place.

Was he placing himself in sin’s way, as Lot did by living in Sodom?

Where or what is your “Gerar”?

What place are you in that will likely lead you to sin?

Are you in a relationship you need to get out of?

Are you allowing yourself to look at things, read things, listen to things, or to flirt with things that often lead you to sin?

Stay out of dangerous situations.

There’s a fourth thing I learn from this example:
Old sins must be fully repented of.

Later in the story, we hear Abraham admitting something very important.

He said that when he and Sarah set out to follow God into foreign lands, they asked her to do something.

Here are his words, “I said to her, ‘This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, “He is my brother.”””

Not long after that Abraham and Sarah moved to Egypt and sure enough they felt they had to put their plan into action.

The result was that Sarah was taken to be part of the harem of the Pharaoh.

God intervened and got them out of that situation.

But what did they do with that lesson?

I’m certain they were grateful for God’s grace but there is apparently something they did not do.

They evidently never repented of the agreement they had made.

They got out of a tough situation but they never dealt with the sin that got them into the situation in the first place.

They never broke with the past or genuinely turned away from the sin.

When this new threat presented itself in Gerar, they went right back to the old plan.

Do we let sins stay unconfessed?

Do we get out of “jams” but never truly repent of the sin that got us there?

Do we excuse little indiscretions thinking they are not significant?

Do we hang on to our old plans thinking surely there will be circumstances under which this wouldn’t be wrong?

Deal deliberately and decisively with sin. Don’t let it just slip into obscurity.

Those old sins, not dealt with, will raise their ugly heads again.

I titled the first half of this sermon “There’s no fool like an old fool”.

Let’s go back to the story, for there’s more to be learned.

I have titled the second half of the sermon, **“But it’s never too late for grace.”**

The lives of Abraham and Sarah, the future of their family, and the plan of God for the salvation of the world are in jeopardy.

Sarah, who is supposed to be the mother of Abraham's son, who is supposed to be the future of the world, is in another man's harem.

I love the next two words in the narrative: "But God".

Abraham and Sarah have made a mess of it BUT GOD.

The text says that God came to Abimelech.

Given Abraham's fear and his subsequent rationalizations, it is gracious of God that he came to Abimelech instead of Abraham.

Abraham probably would have argued with God.

But God came to Abimelech in a dream at night and it frightened him so severely that he acted immediately on what God said.

When you read what God said, you understand why.

"You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken, she is a married woman."

So real was this experience, so convinced was Abimelech that it was God speaking to him that Abimelech answered God.

He protested his innocence telling God that both Abraham and Sarah had said she was Abraham's sister.

God said, I know that.

That apparently means that if Abimelech had even attempted to get near Sarah there would have been immediate judgment.

Furthermore God tells Abimelech, Abimelech is fortunate because it was God who kept him from Sarah.

God had caused Abimelech to get sick and thus graciously kept him out of trouble.

Then God said the most important part of his instructions to Abimelech: "Now return the mans' wife."

The test of genuineness is obedience.

Early in the morning, apparently as soon as he could get people together, he called for his advisors and told them what happened.

They were as fearful as Abimelech was.

Then he called for Abraham to come and explain himself.

This has to be a low point in Abraham's life.

There the man of God stands before a pagan king to answer for his deception.

Basically the king asks Abraham: "What were you thinking?!"

This is not a flattering picture of the father of the Jewish nation.

For what Abraham does next sounds a lot like Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden when God asks them about their sin.

Abraham blames his actions on three things: Abimelech, a technicality and God.

First of all he said he was afraid of Abimelech because Abraham perceived that there was no fear of God in Gerar.

Abimelech, if you weren't such a heathen, I wouldn't have done this.

Secondly, he rationalizes his actions on a technicality: Sarah was his half-sister.

Isn't that just like us – somehow we try to wiggle out from under the full weight of our actions by claiming some technicality.

Thirdly, Abraham even dares to blame God.

He said that "when God had me wander from my father's household", I had to do something.

He is saying God is the one who put him in this predicament therefore God is at least partially responsible.

Now, if you were God, what would you do with Abraham at this point?

If I were reading this story for the first time, I would expect that God would come down hard on Abraham – maybe even cut him loose.

Would you find yourself a new man?

Would you give up on Abraham?

At this point the story takes an awesome twist.

We expect Abraham to be punished, maybe even severely, maybe even cut off from the plan of God.

BUT GOD!

God worked in Abimelech's heart, by fear or better (I don't know) and Abimelech doesn't kill Abraham, he doesn't even expel him from the country as the Pharaoh had done years earlier, he gives him gifts.

And furthermore he told Abraham he could live anywhere in the land that he wished.

And furthermore he paid Abraham 25 pounds of silver to cover even the appearance of impropriety toward Sarah.

And furthermore he said he completely vindicated Sarah. She would be treated as if she and Abraham had done nothing wrong.

Abraham and Sarah did not deserve the kindness, forgiveness, and generosity of Abimelech and certainly they didn't deserve the grace of God.

There is one more thing that God does in this text to demonstrate his awesome grace toward Abraham.

When God made Abimelech sick and warned him about Sarah, God called Abraham a prophet.

"Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you."

God looked at this man who Abimelech and we see as a despicable cowardly, rationalizing liar and calls him a prophet.

God saw the man who would be, not only the man who was.

God saw the man Abraham would become by God's grace.

The end of the story is a great insight into what Abraham learned in this ordeal.

The text says “Then Abraham prayed to God and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his slave girls so they could have children again.”

Can you imagine what went on in Abraham’s mind when he received the gifts and then heard from Abimelech, that he (Abraham) was supposed to pray for Abimelech and his family?

Can this be?

Can I be forgiven?

Can I be treated with favor when I deserve punishment or banishment?

Can I be called a prophet of God when I have so publicly, faithlessly, sinned against my wife and my God?

As he hears Abimelech’s plea for prayer, Abraham had to make a choice.

Would he accept God’s forgiveness and would he repent of his sin by trusting God and obeying.

He chose to believe.

The test of genuineness is obedience – Abraham prayed.

The most important lesson that Abraham’s experience teaches is that **there is hope for the sinful** – even old sinners.

God’s grace never quits.

When I observe Abraham in this incident, I am humbled in my strength and encouraged in my weakness.

Humbled by recognizing we never outgrow the ability of sin to bring us down – “Be careful that you don’t fall”.

And encouraged that God is faithful even when I am not.

There is no excuse for sin – but neither is it the end of the road.

There’s no fool like an old fool but it’s never too late for grace.

READ Genesis 20