

SUNDAY, JULY 11, 2010

Sunday, July 11, 2010: Here We Go Again

Here We Go Again Genesis 20: 1 – 18.

I. Introduction.

Breaking News...LeBron James has decided not to play basketball for the Cleveland Cavaliers next year. Instead, he wants to play for the Miami Heat, where he thinks he has a better chance to win a championship and ultimately to be happy.

Did you follow the story of LeBron James last week? I'm ashamed to say that I did. I didn't spend the week glued to the TV or the Internet, but I didn't have to. Every time I watched Sports Center, the local news, or looked at sports sites on the Internet there were updates. It was really silly.

I'm also ashamed to admit that I watched the first 30 minutes of LeBron's TV special on ESPN Thursday night. I just knew he was going to stay in Cleveland. In fact, in my opinion, staying in Cleveland was the right thing to do. Moving to Miami was heartbreaking for the city of Cleveland and the thousands of fans who have cheered for LeBron James.

But, I understand why he made his decision. He wanted to be happy. And personal happiness is the single most important factor in the decisions we make as Americans. We tell ourselves that we deserve to be happy. Life is too short to be anything other than happy. We teach our children to strive for happiness above anything else in life.

Don't misunderstand me...I like to be happy. I want other people to be happy. I want LeBron James to be happy. But, I don't think we should ever place our personal happiness above the people who love us the most. Other people must come before personal happiness.[1]

This is the same mistake Abraham made in Genesis 20. Abraham made a series of self-serving decisions that caused harm to other people. Abraham told a lie and used his wife, Sarah, as a tool to protect his personal happiness. As a result, Abraham was happy and safe. But, everyone else was placed in harm's way: Sarah, Abimelech, the nation of Gerar, and even his promised son, Isaac.

Read Genesis 20: 1 – 18.

The first thing we notice about this story is the way it reminds of Genesis 12: 10 – 20. In Genesis 12, Abraham and Sarah fled from the land of Canaan because of a famine. They went to the land of Egypt to find food. While they were in Egypt, Abraham told Sarah to tell everyone they were brother and sister. This was because Sarah was a beautiful woman, and Abraham was afraid Pharaoh would kill him and take Sarah to be one of his wives.

Some people believe this is simply the same story told about two different kings. But, I believe we

can find evidence within Genesis 20 to prove this happened more than once. For example, **Genesis 20: 13** says, “**And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, 'He is my brother.'**”

Perhaps the ancient world had a problem with “wife-stealing” and Abraham had good reason to be afraid for his life. Perhaps Sarah was an exceptionally beautiful woman that kings would want to take her from her husband. Perhaps Abraham was just paranoid and didn't trust that God would really keep his promise to make Abraham into a great nation. Whatever the case may be, we cannot find an acceptable reason for Abraham's actions. He lied about Sarah and used her as a tool to protect himself from his fear of death.

Interestingly, the Bible makes no explicit moral judgment on Abraham's lies. The Bible neither condones nor condemns Abraham. It simply tells us a story about the way Abraham handled his fears. However, both stories tell us that God intervened. God did not allow Abraham to get away with his lies. God sent plagues on Pharaoh to stop him from taking Sarah as his wife. God spoke to Abimelech in a dream and prevented the king from touching Sarah in inappropriate ways.

God intervened in Abraham's life. God protected Sarah from committing adultery with Abimelech. God rescued Sarah from her abductors. God protected Abraham's future son, Isaac. God kept his promise to Abraham and did everything to keep Abraham from thwarting God's plans.

Ultimately, this is a story about sin. While I believe that all humans are sinners, I can find two people in this story who committed sins: Abraham and Abimelech. Abraham represents God's chosen people—the people in a covenant relationship with God. Abimelech represents the rest of the world—the people who live outside of a covenant relationship with God. Therefore, this story tells us how God views sin in two groups of people...The sins of God's chosen people...The sins of those outside of God's covenant promises.

II. Sin Leads to Death.

Notice in verse 3 how God views sin. **Genesis 20:3**, “**But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, 'You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman.'**”

This is a consistent theme throughout the entire Bible. This is what God warned Adam and Eve about in the Garden of Eden. If they ate of the forbidden fruit, they would surely die. This is what the Apostle Paul says in the New Testament when he says, “**The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 6: 23).**”

All humans have a problem with sin. The Bible describes for us what God expects from us...The way God's people are supposed to live. In very general terms, we are supposed to live with God as our king—the one who rules our lives and determines the course of our lives. However, that is often not the way we live. Instead, we want to be the king of our own lives. So, we remove God from the throne of our lives and live by our own standards—often placing personal happiness above God's will.

In more specific terms, sin is anything we do that is contrary to God's commandments. For example, in Genesis 20, Abraham's sin was lying about his relationship with Sarah. Abimelech committed two sins. First, he kidnapped Sarah and (we presume) placed her in his royal harem.

Second, his intention was to commit adultery with her.

Perhaps you have never committed one of Abimelech's sins. You have never kidnapped another person. You have never committed adultery. But, what about Abraham's sin? Have you ever lied? (If you tell me you have never lied, I might just tell you that you are lying right now.)

From a human point of view, there are different degrees of sin. Typically, we judge these sins on the number of people they will affect. Adultery, kidnapping and murder affect more people than other sins.

However, from God's point of view all sin is equal. All sin separates us from God. All sin leads down a road to death.

III. God Can Prevent Us from Sinning.

Notice how God intervened in Abraham and Sarah's life. God spoke directly to Abimelech in a dream and told him...**Genesis 20:6, "Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her."**

Abraham sinned by lying about his relationship with Sarah. Abimelech sinned by abducting Sarah. Abimelech's intention was to commit adultery with Sarah, but God stepped in. We don't know how God did this. All we know is that God prevented Abimelech from going through with his plans.

This is not the only place in the Bible where we read about God's intervention. There is the famous story of Joseph when he was approached by Potiphar's wife. He refused her advances numerous times. When she would not take no for an answer, Joseph stripped out of his overcoat and ran away in his shirt sleeves.

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul tells us, "**No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it (1 Corinthians 10: 13).**"

Sin and temptation are very real. Christians will always struggle with both sin and temptation. However, there is a big difference between sin and temptation. There is always a way out of temptation. God always provides us with a way out.

First, God will give you the strength to resist temptation. Second, when the temptation is more than you can handle, God will give you an opportunity to run away.

The problem with this arrangement is the fact that we don't want to listen to God. We don't really want to hand over the controls of our lives to God. We don't listen to His Holy Spirit and the strength he gives us to resist. And, we don't look for opportunities to run away from temptation.

The best way to resist temptation is to listen when God tells you to avoid certain situations. If you have a problem with lust or the temptation to commit sexual sins, do not expose yourself to that kind of temptation—avoid websites that tempt you, don't go to places where you will find temptation, and never allow yourself to be alone with a person of the opposite sex.. Teens, don't go to parties where alcohol will be present. God is speaking to us to give us strength in the face of

temptation.

IV. Confession Is the Answer to Sin.

There is a difference between sin and temptation. It is not a sin to be tempted. It is a sin to act on the temptation. Temptation is the way Satan pulls us away from God and tells us that we can be happier if God is not in control. Temptation is a fact of life for all humans. As long as we are alive, we will face temptation. We don't have to act out our temptations. But, the sad fact remains...We will sin. Even Christians continue to struggle with sin.

The New Testament teaches us about the remedy for sin. Ultimately, our remedy for sin is the cross. Jesus died on the cross as our final sacrifice...to take away the penalty of sin...to save us from death and hell.

So, what should we do when we sin? **1 John 1: 9** tells us, **“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”**

Do you know what confession is? It is an admission of guilt. Look at the different ways Abraham and Abimelech dealt with their sins in Genesis 20.

Genesis 20: 11 – 13, “Abraham replied, 'I said to myself, 'There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, 'He is my brother.'”

Abraham never admitted his sin. He made excuses for his behavior! An excuse is not the same thing as a confession.

Has anyone ever “apologized” to you like this? “I’m sorry that you were offended by what I said / did.” That is not an apology. That is an excuse. That is blaming the victim and claiming that you did nothing wrong. (I have recently asked my children to stop using the phrase “I’m Sorry.” I would rather they say, “I was wrong.”)

Abraham gave two excuses: I was afraid; She really is my half sister. But, he never said “I’m wrong.” This is a typical human response to sin. We rationalize and do everything in our power to prove our actions were justified. Abraham rationalized by claiming he told a half-truth. He manipulated the facts to serve his own fears. Half-truth may be good enough to fool other people. But, God has a higher standard of truth. God is not fooled.

Abimelech offered a confession. **Genesis 20: 14 – 16, “Then Abimelech brought sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham, and he returned Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelech said, 'My land is before you; live wherever you like.' To Sarah he said, 'I am giving your brother a thousand shekels of silver. This is to cover the offense against you before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated.”**

His actions show that he knew he was wrong and that he took responsibility for his sins. God appeared to Abimelech in a dream and told him he was a dead man. Abimelech confessed his sins, because he was afraid of God. Abraham did not confess his sins, because he was not afraid of God.

At least, Abraham feared other things more than he feared God.

What do you fear more than God? Do you fear what other people might do to you? Your life is your god. Do you fear what other people might think of you? Your reputation is your god. Do you fear losing your job or your ability to provide for your family? Your money is your god.

[1] <http://blog.beliefnet.com/bibleandculture/2010/07/king-james-puts-his-head-in-a-miami-vice.html>
