

A Saint at His Worst

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon highlights the tragedy of a saint at his worst, the potential for a sinner at his best to outdo a Christian in moral behavior, and the consistent excellence of God's sovereignty and saving sufficiency.

Duration: 39:07

Scripture: Genesis 17:7, Genesis 18:1-2, Genesis 18:10, Genesis 18:17-19, Genesis 22:1-2, Genesis 22:9-10, Hebrews 13:8

Topics: "Weakness"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the story of Abraham and how God comes close to him to reassure him of his covenant promises. The speaker highlights how God speaks to Abraham as a friend and reveals his plans for judgment in Sodom. The urgency and sincerity with which Abraham restores his wife Sarah after a mistake is emphasized as a reflection of his high principles. The sermon also discusses the tragedy of moral and spiritual lapses among believers and the need for consistent excellence in following Christ.

Transcript

Perhaps you might like to have your Bibles open in Genesis chapter 20, because we are going to turn together for a little while to consider this rather sad incident in the life of the great patriarch Abraham. The saints of scripture are never men of straw. On the contrary, they are real characters, living a real life in real situations.

And as we come to consider this great stalwart of faith this morning, we must remember that he is a real man, facing real temptations in the real battles of life. There were times when this great man of faith descended to a rather low trough, spiritually. And this morning we are going to look at him in one of these very tragic troughs to which he descended.

Now, there are three pictures that emerge from this chapter that I would like to bring before you. I want to stay particularly with the first, but in order to preserve the balance of scripture I think we shall have to see the three pictures together. The first picture is that of a saint at his worst.

The second will be that of a sinner at his best. And the third, that of the Saviour in his consistent excellence and sovereignty and sufficiency. Now, first of all then, shall we look at the picture that we have in this chapter of a saint at his worst.

The episode before us in Genesis 20 shows Abraham descending to what is perhaps the very lowest plane of living to which he has descended since he left his home many a long year ago, in answer to the call of the unseen God, the God of glory that appeared to him in the land of the Ur of the Chaldeans. The principles governing his behaviour at this particular point are totally unworthy of a man of God, but I think that as we examine the facts that are brought out here, we shall find the Holy Spirit of God showing us that should such principles operate in our lives, they are doubly reprehensible, for we live in the light of the full revelation that God has given to us in Jesus Christ, and we have at our disposal a whole Bible and the fullness of the provisions of the Holy Spirit. So, don't let us be unwise in our approach to this picture.

Don't let us be arrogant as we criticize the saint of old, but may God help us to see that what was a sin in him may be doubly grievous in our own lives. Now, look at the facts of the case. Upon his arrival at the presumed pagan city of Gerar, Abraham introduced Sarah to the inhabitants as his sister.

Reports came to King Abimelech of the man and his wife and the little group that accompanied them, and it would seem from the story that the king himself had come and set eyes upon this beautiful woman that had come into the city. He decided immediately that he would have her as his wife. And having taken first steps to this end, somehow or other he was restrained from pursuing that course of action through.

He may not have been able to understand his own thinking at this stage, but somehow or other the king was strangely restrained. And then the whole truth emerges. Now, the facts show that whereas Abraham was unquestionably a man of faith, a man of proven faith, in this chapter we are told, and told very clearly, that he was living not a life of faith but a life that was dominated by fear.

Perhaps it is due to fear that there is no record of him ever raising an altar in Gerar. In any case, he confesses that as he approached Gerar he rashly concluded, to use his own words, that there is no fear of God at all in this place. He anticipated being confronted by a crude, unprincipled pagan community who would, to use his own words again, kill me because of my wife.

And therefore he feared the consequences of telling the truth. Now, Abraham's fear was nothing new. On the contrary, it was a phenomenon of long-standing.

Well over thirty years ago, just as faith was emerging in his soul, away back home in the land of his nativity, away back there thirty whole years ago, Abraham had manifested this basic fear of his heart. You remember that before he set out in obedience to God's call, he turned to Sarai, his beautiful wife, and he said this to her. When God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, this is the kindness that you must do to me.

At every place to which we come, you say of me, he is my brother. Why? Well, for the simple reason that there was a basic fear at the heart of this man. And we find that as Abraham has gone on and followed the will of God into the land of promise, there have been times when this basic fear in his heart has emerged and has dominated.

One classical example, of course, is that recorded in chapter 12. When Abraham went down into Egypt, afraid of the people of the land, he went down into Egypt. Afraid of trusting God for provision in a day of famine, he resorts to Egypt.

I must say that I am nevertheless encouraged in one sense to find that Abraham did have this fear. I don't want to overdo this because it can be misused and misapplied, but I am encouraged that at the point when

God called Abraham, he was afraid. There are passages of scriptures from which we might conclude that Abraham had no fear at all.

When God called him, he just went out, fearless. Abraham was afraid. And because of his fear, he made this compact with his wife.

But he overcame that fear. And he trudged a thousand miles, living by faith, trusting in his God, overcoming his fear. Now and again, however, it came to the surface.

To have come so far and dared so much with such a dread lurking in his soul is nothing short of a miracle. But that it should emerge again at this stage in his spiritual pilgrimage is a great tragedy. Now there briefly are the facts of the case, but let us look now particularly at the folly, at the foolishness of it all.

Looking back retrospectively upon the sad event, Abraham would doubtless feel grieved at heart. I am quite sure that he would give anything if only he could erase and obliterate this incident again from his life. It brought to light, for one thing, the hideous fact, hideous to a man of faith, that here was one whole area of his life that had never been sanctified.

Here was one whole territory of his experience in which he had never found victory by faith in his God. He had never been able to conquer fully and completely this basic fear. Had faith mastered that basic fear of his, then the pact that he made with Sarai many years ago would have been undone and torn and thrown with the winds a long time ago.

But it wasn't. It wasn't. And so here he has the same pact in being, offering to a stricken faith an alternative means of existing, when he is found with his back against the wall.

To use other language, Abraham has not burnt his bridges behind him. Abraham still has an alternative to faith. There is a whole area of his life that has not been mastered by God.

Moreover, to resort to such carnal methods now, at this stage, seems to call in question the penitence of twenty-four years ago. As we have already indicated, Abraham did something quite similar a way back in Egypt. So very similar indeed.

But then Abraham emerged from Egypt, and it would seem that he was really a penitent man. It would seem that he was a heartbroken man, a man that had learnt his lesson the hard way, and when he came back to the land to which God had brought him, he reared the altar again and he worshipped God, and he went on, sacrificially living in dependence upon God. For example, he was willing to let Lot choose the cities of the plain and the pastures of the plain, and himself to go up to the bleak mountains to live.

He had faith in God now. But this fact brings into question the reality and the depth of that penitence. Again, it was a signally sad and foolish lapse, when we consider how greatly privileged Abraham had been in the meantime.

It's a wonderful story of how God comes into the life of this man and gives him untold privileges. You start reading when you have a moment of leisure, if you have any here in Keswick. Read from chapter 15 on again.

Take chapter 17, where God comes so close to Abraham to reassure him that he is indeed the object of his covenant promises. It is as if the God of Abraham would rub it in so that Abraham shall have no doubt

about it. He is the object of covenant care and covenant promises.

Look at him in chapter 18, entertaining unawares for a while, not only angels of God but the very God himself, talking to Jehovah under the oaks of Mamre. Think of him again being assured that Sarah indeed was to be the mother of the promised seed. And see God speaking to him as a friend, telling him what he's going to do in terms of judgment down there in Sodom.

You see, God is coming so near to him. Fellowship is so sweet. The reality of it is so precious.

And yet, my good friend, despite all this, Abraham lapses. And he descends from the mountain of faith and obedience and comes down to the trough of unbelief and of fear. And listen to this.

The man that cannot now trust God puts his confidence in a lie. Well, now, it's all very well for us to look at this picture, and it's a very challenging one, but now, just for a moment, are we being honest with God this morning? Are we really being honest with God this morning? Could this picture be a mirror in which you would see yourself, my dear Christian friend, if you were honest? Am I speaking to someone this morning who has come to Keswick and who is really living on a lie? And if the truth were told, you are pretending to be what you are not, and you have more confidence in a lie than you have in God. Could it be that there are some of us who have set out upon this convention and who are here on this Monday morning, and as God looks upon us, there are whole areas of our lives that are unmastered by the grace of God? There are still basic fears and tendencies emerging from our old unregenerate life, and though we have gone on for twenty, thirty years, we've still not got the real victory.

Could that be true? In fact, certain things have happened quite recently, maybe in our experiences, that have called in question the penitence that we apparently exhibited ten, fifteen, twenty years ago. We pretended to deal rigorously with an issue that brought us to the place of shame and dishonoured our Lord. We presumed and we assumed that we were going to sway the hideous thing at the heart when we emerged from our Egypt.

But something has happened even recently in the days before we've come to Keswick, which has brought to light the fact that we were not really as penitent as we appeared. We never came to that place where we loathe our own sin and anything that dishonours our Lord, and we are still wallowing in the mire of a secret sin. Could it not be true of some of us? I'm quite confident it is.

Though we have known glorious privileges freely given us by the grace of God, we are despising them in order to court a darling sin that is more dear to us than life itself. We have known those precious moments, and God has been so near that we have been afraid to breathe. Just like Abraham, if, beneath the oaks of Mamre, we've heard him speak to us by name, and we've fellowshiped with him in all the sweetness of it, words cannot tell the wonder of the fellowship we once enjoyed.

And yet, despite that, some of us this morning have more confidence in a lie than in the living God we have known so well in the past. My friend, listen. Do you know that Abraham was willing to sell his wife's purity for his own safety? Are you pandering with the purity and moral and spiritual well-being of your partner or your children because you're living in sin? Abraham would esteem the promise to posterity a light thing for his own comforts.

Oh, God has said so much to him. The blessing is not only to you, Abraham. Children unborn, nations untold will profit if you walk in the pathway of obedience.

Abraham would sell it all for his own comfort. He would permit the glory of God to be eclipsed and tarnished by his selfishness and his fear. My good friend, now, let us be honest.

Could not this be true of some of us in this very tent in this morning service in Kesi? In other words, could it not be that God in his providence has brought some of us here simply because we are living at our very worst? A saint at his worst. Now, that brings me very briefly to the second point here, the second picture, namely that of a sinner at his best. The heinousness of Abraham's sin looks even worse alongside the high standard of the pagan king of Gerar Abimelech and his servants.

The remarkable thing here is this, that their behavior seems altogether exemplary. It is strange how pagans sometimes seem to reach a higher plane of living than some of God's people in their moments of delirious rebellion against his will. This man's high moral standard appears in his attitude to Sarah, for example.

Have you noticed it? This king does not permit himself to be ruled by unbridled passion. Now, I have no doubt that the man's lust was aroused, but something restrained him. And when he saw this beautiful woman, he had decided to make her his wife, but something held him in check.

And like a gentleman, first of all, he questioned Sarah, who are you? Oh, she said, I'm Abraham's sister. And notice this, he's not content with questioning the one, he questions the other. He asked Abraham, who's the woman? She's my sister, he said.

And it was only when this pagan man had received the same answer from both of them that he proceeded to make plans to make Sarah his own wife. Here is a man who is living on a higher plane for the moment, at any rate, than the man of God. This man not only recognized the voice of God in a dream, as verse three tells us, there's something more than that here.

He knows himself to be at the mercy of the God who speaks to him. You read the record, I'm not going into the details, but it's quite obvious. This pagan man, this man who didn't know Jehovah, the God of Abraham, the real God, the living God, the God of the covenant, but he recognized his voice in a dream as the voice of the living God.

And he knew instinctively that his life was at the mercy of this living God that was speaking to him. He knew that he was a sovereign God. His high principles again emerge in the urgency and the sincerity with which he restores Sarah to her rightful husband the moment he knows what's gone wrong.

You notice how he gets up early the next morning after God has spoken to him, and he calls his servants together, and he says, we've got to put this thing right immediately. God has spoken. One of the things that makes the moral and the spiritual lapses of godly folks so tragic is the fact that often there are men at hand who are totally ignorant of the grace of God, and yet whose standards in some respects are incomparably higher.

Their good behavior seems to call in question the very validity of the Christian faith, as represented in the servant of God there at hand. God is dishonored by the standard manifested by his representative, and his glory is beclouded. I wonder whether there isn't someone here this morning who has been a Christian for years.

You've made great professions. Oh, you know your scriptures. You come from an assembly or from a church or from a congregation where there is great Bible teaching, and you are so glad and sometimes so

proud to be able to say that you've sat at the feet of so-and-so.

You know the doctrines of the word of God, and you've had this blessing and that blessing, and you know the place and the time. But listen, friend, there's someone in the office who's far more conscientious than you are, and he's not a Christian. He's there to time, and he does a good day's work for a day's wage, and he finishes the job, and your testimony is under a cloud, not only because of your sin, but because of the standard of the man who is not a Christian by your side.

Alongside of a saint at his worst, you get the picture of a sinner at his best. Let's apply it a little, and bring it a little nearer home, in the place where you stay, where you're lodging. If you're not at home, is it not true to say that there are some others who are unconverted and who know nothing about the privileges that you have experienced? They're far more considerate than you.

They think of others. They're kind. They're generous.

Somehow there is love coming from their hearts, and you, child of God, with all your vaunted experience of the grace of God, you're as hard as flint. Could that be so? Will you be honest with God this morning? Indeed, is it not possible that some of us in the homes where we are have unconverted parents and sisters and brothers whose standards in living are far higher than ours? I don't believe as a pastor in parading the sins of folk under my care, and I would not do it. But I will tell you this much.

I've known in principle this kind of thing happen over and over again. When a burdened father or a burdened mother comes and says, look here, so-and-so has professed conversion, and he comes to the Bible class, and he does this, he goes to the open air service, and if there's anything to do, he'll do it in church, but at home he's a misery, and his unconverted brother is living an exemplary life. What's wrong? Brethren and sisters in Christ, these things ought not to be.

A saint at his worst, a sinner at his best, and it makes the tragedy doubly, doubly disastrous. That brings me to the last picture. The Savior in his consistent excellence.

Hallelujah. He never wavers. His strength is never spent.

His might and his grace and his excellence is always consistently the same. The same yesterday and today and forever. In the presence of a sinning saint, he is here in all his glory and in all his consistent grace.

I want to bring just two very brief pictures out here. He is excellent in his sovereign power, for one thing. I see that sovereign power overruling and restraining the pagan king, lest he should hinder the fulfillment of the divine purpose.

God in his sovereign power puts a limit to the sins of men, and in case of Bimelech, the pagan king should become a little bit proud of his standard of living, God says to him, look here, he says, it was I who kept you from sinning against me. It was I who restrained you from taking Sarai to be your wife. It was I who restrained you, the sovereign God.

Not only overruling and restraining a pagan king, but teaching his erring child by showing him that his fears were unfounded. Had Abraham only trusted God, he would have gone into the city of Gerar and he would have found the most friendly king and the most friendly people and the most understanding folk. There was no need for him to be afraid.

It was all so groundless, all so very unnecessary. And then we see the sovereignty of God supervising the whole of life so that his purpose is fulfilled and not frustrated. The excellency of his sovereign power and the excellency of his saving sufficiency.

Oh, I find great comfort here, and I want God helping me to be his instrument for bringing the same comfort to someone else this morning. Having chosen Abraham and called him and given to him some of the first fruits of the blessings that he held in store for him, God does not give up his sinning saint, and in grace he comes after him and disciplines him, brings him down to despair a while perhaps. But in order to save him and to bring him back again to the plane of faith, I wonder whether I'm speaking to someone this morning who, because of your sin, you are almost tempted to believe that God must give you up.

Oh, the God of all grace and compassion that called you when you were dead in trespasses and sins, I believe is here this morning to minister saving and sanctifying grace to your heart, if you will hear his voice. When Abraham had learned his lesson, God will yet heed even the prayer of Abraham, for Abimelech the king and his household. But the sovereign power and the saving grace of God must not be made a cloak for your continuance in sin.

Now, I find that all the doctrines of Scripture can be misapplied and misused. The doctrine of the sovereignty of God can be misapplied and misused. It is a doctrine in which I believe unblushingly and repose my confidence in it.

But there are men and women who believe in the sovereignty of God in such a way that they excuse their own responsibility in certain issues. So is it possible to misapply and to misuse the great doctrine of God's grace, that we should continue in sin and rebel against our gracious God? Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound? Perish the thought. These are blessed facts to be held and applied to our situations, but not in such a way as to preclude the necessity of our straightening things out this morning, things that have gone wrong.

Now, it may not be a basic fear with you or with me that is unmastered. It could be a carnal arrogance, a boldness, a self-sufficiency. Or it could be something quite different from this.

But the fact is, it has involved you or it has involved me in dishonouring our Lord. Will you not face up to it, my friend, in this first known meeting of our convention? I plead with you to do it. So much of the ministry of this week will be like water on a duck's back as far as you are concerned, if you are not prepared honestly and realistically in a convention such as this to face up to what God says about your condition.

Abraham did. Abraham did. Oh, I marvel when I come on to a chapter like chapter 22, just two chapters ahead, and I see this man that was lapsed away in chapter 20, and I see him prepared even to offer his only son Isaac.

And don't forget, he could not offer Isaac without first offering his own heart. Everything now hinged upon Isaac, but he was prepared to do it now. Why? Oh, this man has come back to live by faith, believing that God was even able to raise Isaac from the dead.

He is living by faith again. But wait a moment. Before he got back to the plane of faith, he had to face his own sin and folly.

Now, this is the challenge of the early hour of this convention. You, my good friend, have been called of God perhaps to do a work for him, a work that in some measure involves others, even now, a work that

could very well determine the plight of posterity, in a limited sense at least. Are you going to perpetuate a lie? Are you going to live on a fib rather than by faith? Are you going to live on a plane that is beneath your dignity as a child of God, leaving the whole vast possibilities precariously poised? Your own children may suffer.

Your own wife, your own partner may suffer. Posterity in general will suffer, if you do. Therefore, for your own soul's sake, for your family's sake, for posterity's sake, for the Church's sake, but supremely for the glory of the God of Abraham and your God and mine, my dear brother, come with me this morning in penitence.

Open your heart. Tell him all about it. Ask him for the grace realistically to deal with yourself.

Plead the grace that he has promised. And I believe, I sincerely believe, not because I happen to be the one speaking here this morning, I really believe he will heal your backslidings and he will have mercy yet. And you may yet ascend and walk the life of victorious faith in a triumphant God.

Oh, may he grant it for his name's sake. Let us pray. Our God and our Father, we bow humbly in thy presence.

Having again been under the disciplines of thy word and spirit, and quite unable to avoid the conclusion that in some measure this picture applies to us all, we pray thee now to save us from thinking of the need of others in this respect, and avoiding to face issues for ourselves. As we have sought of thee already in prayer, we do again humbly beg of thee to give us an honesty of heart and of mind toward thee. So direct us, and so lead us, that during this coming week we shall be brought out into the large place of the wholesome deliverance that thou hast in Jesus Christ for all thy people.

And we ask it now in his holy name. Amen. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.

Amen.

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