

DIVINE PROVIDENCE AMONG SINNERS

GENESIS 20

The God that established the covenant with Abraham is at work in the world. He keeps His eyes upon those in covenant with Him and watches over their way. He works providentially to surround them with His protection. The experiences of the great man of faith, Abraham, are a reminder to us of just how much we need this protection.

The event in this chapter took place when the man of faith acted in unbelief. When times became difficult, he resorted to an old way of handling problems—he left the territory where he had altars and went into the realm of a strange king. Once he was there, the old fear of man that had been a problem to him earlier showed up again—he began trying to deceive Abimelech just as he had the Pharaoh earlier. I always feel deep disappointment for Abraham when I read this account, but have no difficulty understanding his actions. All of us have known the pain of repeating deeds that we had determined never to do again, of acting in an unbecoming manner and thus becoming an embarrassment to the cause of Christ.

I want us to look at this chapter so we can see divine providence at work in a world of sinners.

I. ALL HAVE SINNED AND COME SHORT OF THE GLORY OF GOD.

The summary statement of Paul concerning the sinfulness of the human family seems to be an appropriate title to this sad chapter. Unfortunately as you read this chapter, sin becomes rather obvious in the saved and the unsaved. Abimelech is a sinner, but so is Abraham. Abimelech has no saving covenant with God, but Abraham does.

1. The seriousness of sin.

God is revealed as taking sin more seriously than do most of us. Many of us would even wonder if Abimelech were really guilty of sin. He himself declares to God that he did what he did in innocence. When he took Sarah into his household, he sincerely thought that she was Abraham's sister. When we remember that Sarah was now an older woman, it makes us wonder just how attractive this good woman must have been. Some have suggested that Abimelech did not take her because he found her attractive,

but rather because he wanted an alliance with Abraham. This is one of the ways that alliances were established in that ancient day. Marriages were often more political than anything else. But in the eyes of God Abimelech was responsible for a serious sin, even though he had done in unknowingly.

If God considers a sin that is committed without a man knowing that he is committing wrong such a serious matter, what must he think of our sins into which we walk fully understanding that they are wrong? Sin is a serious thing with God, and should be considered such by us. This would be especially true of those sins that we commit against the marriage covenant.

Even though God does not address the sin of Abraham in the text as He does the sin of Abimelech, it should be viewed with seriousness. It reveals that the man of faith is not yet perfect. In the mature years of his life, after many revelations from the Lord, he is still capable of falling back under the control of the fear of man. His witness among the pagans with whom he shared the Promised Land was impaired severely by this sinful tendency in him. He continued to jeopardize the purpose of God for his life by his persistence in the old sinful patterns. It is a reminder to us of just how deeply imbedded in us the sinful patterns can be. All sin should be taken seriously—God does.

2. The consequence of sin.

This is a wonderful place to see the consequences of sin revealed for all to see. When God comes to Abimelech in the dream, His greeting is sobering. God says to him, “Behold, you are a dead man.” That ought to wake you up! When God addresses you as a dead man, it is time to call the undertaker. Even though Abimelech had not touched Sarah sexually, God knew that he intended to consummate the marriage relationship with her. In God’s eyes it is treated as something already done. He has sinned and the fruit of the deed is death.

In the Garden of Eden God told Adam, “The day you eat of this tree, you will surely die.” Death is always the consequence of sin. Evidently God intended to inflict physical death upon Abimelech and his family. He had already inflicted death upon the kingdom of Abimelech since the women of the kingdom had already been made infertile by the judgment of God.

Do you realize that every time you sin something dies? Something dies in you and you spread death to all that are around you.

While Abraham is not threatened with death like Abimelech, it does not mean that his sin was without consequences. It is true that his sin did not bring the death that Abimelech's brought; it did have a serious impact. The truth is that Abraham's sin exposed Abimelech to sin. Because this good man gave into a weakness of the flesh, the fear of man, he created a situation in which a pagan king and his kingdom were put in jeopardy of death itself.

Could this mean that if the Christian sins, they will not send their souls to Hell, but they may send others around them? Does your lifestyle make it easier for others to sin? Or does your lifestyle make it harder for others to sin? When the child of God walks in faithful obedience to the Lord, they make it harder for others to sin. This is when they are truly being the light and the salt of the earth.

At least we learn from this chapter that all have sinned. There are just two kinds of human beings—saved sinners and lost sinners.

II. GOD WORKS PROVIDENTIALLY TO KEEP US FROM SIN.

God is at work in His world. He is especially at work on behalf of those with whom He has established a covenant. His work in this world has as one of its goals to keep humans like us from sin. Is not this an encouraging truth?

1. He works directly to put up “Stop” signs.

This is how He related to this Philistine king. Gerar was actually a small Philistine kingdom along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. The name Abimelech is probably a title rather than a personal name—it means either “My father is a king” or “Royal Father”. But the King of all the earth came to this lowly earthly king while he was asleep. During his waking moments Abimelech probably gave his worship to some false god, but the true and living God still knows how to speak to him. He invades the dream life of the king with a warning. He sets up a “Stop” sign before the king to keep him from more serious sin.

God has access to the inner life of every human being. He can speak to them directly through dreams or through other means. In His wisdom and providence God does this to keep them from serious sin. The God of the covenant knows that sin is not only a threat to His purpose in the earth; it is also a threat to the well being of the person who commits it. Some of you

who have blundered into some serious transgression would have to admit that you had some serious indications that you were moving in the wrong directions. You had to ignore some “Stop” signs in order to do what you did. It may have been nothing more than an uninvited memory of something your mother taught you, or a sudden fearful thought about the outcome of the action. Where did that memory come from? Could it have been God speaking to you like He spoke to Abimelech?

2. He works through others to put up “Stop” signs.

Here is a wonder for you—God speaks to a prophet through a pagan king. God himself identifies Abraham as a prophet. He is the first man so identified in the Bible. We know that prophets are men through whom God speaks to others concerning His will. Yet in our text God speaks to the prophet through Abimelech to set up a “Stop” sign. Abraham is moving down a path that can lead to serious consequences for what God has planned for his life. God gets a message to him through a man who has no qualifications to be a spokesman for God.

We must never forget that God spoke to one man through a dumb donkey, to another through a crowing rooster. God can speak to you in any way He

pleases. He does intervene providentially to keep us from the broad way that leads to destruction. If you will LOOK and LISTEN, God is providentially speaking to you. He is putting up “Stop” signs all along the road of life to turn us from the wrong way.

III. GOD HAS MERCY ON SINNERS.

The God of the covenant is a God of mercy. Even though He is confronted with a world of sinners—some saved and some lost—He still acts in mercy toward both.

1. He shows mercy to His people when they sin.

This chapter should be understood as a revelation of God’s mercy toward His friend Abraham. God has a covenant with Abraham to which they have both agreed. Yet we watch Abraham put the promise that God has given to him at risk by his sinful behavior. God had promised Abraham an heir through his wife Sarah. How can God keep His promise to Abraham if Sarah is in the harem of a Philistine king?

This reminds me of a sermon I heard from Dr. J. P. McBeth years ago. He spoke of “The Battle of the Ages”. He described the battle between God and Satan, and traced it through the whole Bible. He saw this incident as another attempt of Satan to keep the Messiah from coming into the world. Satan knew that if he could get Sarah defiled, then the plan of God would be defeated. So we should see this in this larger context.

But God moves in mercy to preserve His friend and servant Abraham. How many times have we experienced that same mercy of God because of our sin? The mercy of God toward sinners must never be used as an excuse for sin, but it sure a welcomed thing when you know you have sinned.

2. He shows mercy to the lost when they sin.

A beautiful thing happens in this chapter. When Abimelech saw the providentially established “Stop” sign, he stopped. Unlike some of us, he repented. He brought Sarah back to her husband as fast as he could get her there. Just to impress Abraham how sincere he was, he brought along a major gift for Abraham. The gift includes slaves, cattle, and other properties. He also gave to Sarah a thousand pieces of silver. The purpose of the silver is not clear from the text. Some think it was simply a public vindication that

Sarah had not been defiled. Others suggest that it was to buy Sarah a veil, which married women, was supposed to wear. If so, it must have been some expensive veil. I doubt that even Neiman Marcus carries a veil that would cost that much.

Where is the mercy of God toward Abimelech? Interestingly it comes when Abraham prays for the Philistine king. When this friend of God offers a prayer on behalf of the king and his family, God removes the curse of death that had befallen his kingdom. The women are once again able to conceive and bear children. This is the first time the word “pray” occurs in the Bible, but not the first prayer to be offered in the Bible. Surely the appeal of Abraham on behalf of the cities of the plains would qualify as intercessory prayer! It is noteworthy that the first occurrence of the word is in the context of intercessory prayer, praying on behalf of another. In mercy God answered the prayer of Abraham.

Another interesting insight in this passage—When Abraham prays for another man to have what he wanted for himself more than anything else, God gives him what he had wanted. Abraham prayed for the wives of Abimelech to be able to conceive, and then Sarah was able to conceive. Is there a connection between the two? Could be!

The lesson of this section of Scripture is clear! God is providentially at work in the world of sinners. He is at work showing mercy. Will you respond to His mercy like Abimelech and Abraham? There is mercy for you in the Lord if you will come to Him.