

BACKSLIDING: A PILGRIM'S REGRESS (Genesis 20:1-18)

The anniversary of his death was Friday, August 31st. Had he lived, he would be 395. He was born in 1628. He wrote a book that is universally considered a classic. I read it on my own when I was a senior in high school. I taught it when I was a senior in college. On behalf of the Baptist Student Union at OBU, I developed a series of Bible studies based on his book, which I taught to sophomores, and those sophomore encouragers taught those lessons to freshman students.

To this day, I still think that book is the greatest book to ever be written, except the Bible. It was written by a largely uneducated, Baptist preacher who spent 14 years of his life in prison. He lived in England during a time when you had to be licensed by the Church of England to preach. He was arrested and jailed for preaching without a license. The authorities said they would release him if he promised not to preach. He couldn't make that promise because he knew the first thing he would do when he got out was to gather a crowd in the countryside and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

While he was in the Bedford County Jail, John Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*. It was first published 345 years ago (1678), has never been out of print, and has been translated into more than 200 languages. It is an allegory in which people and places are given the names of virtues and vices. It tells the story of Christian who is making his way from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. During his journey, he meets a host of people good and bad who have such names as Faithful, Hopeful, Mr. Worldly Wiseman, Lord Hategood, Mr. Stand-Fast, and Mr. Valiant-for-Truth. He encounters such places as the Slough of Despond, Vanity Fair, and Doubting Castle where he is seized by Giant Despair and placed in a dungeon. Christian eventually frees himself when he remembers that he has a key called "Promise", and that key will open any lock in Doubting Castle.

Throughout the book, we see Christian's progress as he journeys and grows, but he does suffer some setbacks and self-inflicted wounds. Even those, however, are used by God for his good.

We have been looking at the life and journeys of Father Abraham. He was, indeed, a pilgrim, and he walked by faith, mostly. In the chapter before us today, Abraham suffers a setback. I have entitled the message, "Backsliding: A Pilgrim's Regress."

We come to Genesis 20 where Abraham falls back into an old habit of using deception to protect himself. After years of living by faith and trusting God to do the incredible, he falters dramatically. We will read the 18 verses of this chapter and work through them to find what they can teach us about the sin of backsliding.

Backsliding Has an Inward Cause

There was nothing external to Abraham that made him distrust God and use deception to protect himself as if God were not up to the job. God promised to give Abraham a son through his wife who was now almost 90 years old, and he believed that God would do that miraculous feat. Now, he enters a territory overseen by a king named Abimelech,

who ruled over an area in the southern part of present-day Israel.

In this passage, we see that Sarah is still amazingly attractive despite her advanced age. So much so that the king took Sarah into his harem. He felt the freedom to do so since Abraham said Sarah was his sister.

Why would Abraham do that? He explains himself in v. 11. I disagree with his excuse. Abraham lied not because the people in that region had no fear of God. He lied because he had too little trust in God. Since he didn't trust God to protect him, he took on that responsibility for himself.

We are too often guilty of the same sin. We don't trust God to take care of us; so, we hoard money, and we work at accumulating stuff.

I'm not saying it is wrong to have a savings account and a retirement account. I don't think it is a sin to lock your door at night, install a security system, and own a gun. Those are logical, practical things. I am all for using your seatbelt when you drive and putting child-proof caps on medicine bottles. I would add that as a country, we need to have a strong military, and it is ridiculous for people to go around chanting, "Defund the police." That is just idiotic and absurd.

While we can do commonsense things to mitigate harm, we cannot eliminate danger. We must entrust ourselves to God's providence, wisdom, power, and God's purposes.

That is exactly what Abraham did not do in this instance. Why? To answer that question is to answer why you and I tend to backslide, why we regress when we should progress.

You will remember that this wasn't the first time Abraham had passed his wife off as his sister. He had done that 20-plus years earlier when he and Sarah had gone to Egypt to escape a famine in Canaan. We saw that in Genesis 12. Again, you might remember that the OT gives us no indication that God told Abraham to go to Egypt. That was another case of Abraham working to protect himself and his household rather than letting God provide.

King David wrote in Psalm 37:5, "I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread." Unlike David, Abraham did not have a godly legacy upon which to draw. He did not have the benefit of the Jewish Scriptures. He did not have the blessing of hearing the stories of how God had provided for His people again and again. Abraham was the first one. He did not have a godly legacy, but he left a godly legacy.

I don't know what you had. My question is, "What will you leave?"

Today, sadly, our nation is biblically illiterate for the most part. The average person does not know the stories of the Bible. People are not familiar with what it teaches. While I wish I didn't, I must agree with those who say we live in a post-Christian culture. While that may be true, the influence of the Christian faith is not completely gone. The Bible is still the #1 best-selling book each year. There are hundreds of thousands of churches that are still open, and not all, but many of them are still preaching the gospel of salvation through faith in Jesus.

You have what Abraham did not, a spiritual heritage. Those of us who are Jesus-followers have no excuse when we backslide, but there is an explanation. We have chosen

to walk by sight rather than by faith. We have chosen to revert to old ways of thinking and old ways of acting. We are depending on our old nature, our sin nature.

That is what happens when we are not listening to the Spirit of God, when we are not reading the Word of God, and when we are not praying to Almighty God. To live by faith, we must cultivate that faith and feed that faith. When we fail to do so, we drift, and I guarantee you, that the current of our culture will move you away from God, not toward Him. You can't just allow yourself to drift spiritually and expect to stay close to God. One day you will look up, look around, and wonder where God went. He didn't go anywhere. It is you who left Him.

You and I are born with rebellious hearts. Jeremiah, the Weeping Prophet, cried out, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). The NLT poses the question this way, "Who really knows how bad it is?"

You and I are capable of incredible self-deception. We can pretend and think that we are far better than we are. If you think you are all that, watch out. You are headed for a fall.

Did anyone see this month's blue moon? It's not really blue, of course, but it is what we call it when there are two full moons in the same month. They only happen every two or three years. The full moon toward the end of last week wasn't just a blue moon; it was a super blue moon. What's that? The orbit of the moon around the Earth isn't circular. It is more of an oval shape. There are times when it is closer to the earth than at other times. When it is close to the Earth and full, it is called a supermoon. We will have to exercise some patience because we won't have another super blue moon until January of 2037, almost 14 years. Just remember that when it happens, I'm the one who told you about it.

Mark Twain once said that we are like the moon—We all have a dark side. Unlike the Earth, the moon doesn't revolve. It shows us only one side. It keeps one side hidden. That is what do. We do our best to hide our unattractive side, the selfish side, the sinful side. Sometimes we are so good at hiding it that we don't even see it ourselves. But it is still there, and it won't stay hidden forever.

When we are tired and exhausted or when we are bored or stressed out, it will show itself.

In a sermon on our dark side, Bob Russell said:

Do you know who understands that? Fathers whose daughters are old enough to date. Fathers know that inside that smiling, courteous 16-year-old boy who wants to date his daughter is a hormone-driven, selfish fiend who can't be trusted. Fathers know there's a dark side—they remember when they were teenagers.

Do you know who else knows about our dark side? That would be our Father God. He created us. He knows about our sin nature. He stands ready to help us. Turn to Him.

Backsliding Has an Outward Consequence

What I mean is that sin and backsliding don't just hurt us; they can have a negative

and dreadful effect on others. That was true in Abraham's case. Abraham had passed off his wife as if she were just his sister. He hid the fact that Sarah was his wife. That didn't change the fact that Sarah was his wife, and it didn't change the fact that by taking her into his harem, King Abimelech was doing something wrong. The king didn't know the reality of the situation, but God took steps to make sure he did.

God came to the king in a dream and said dramatically, "You're a dead man." Fortunately, God had kept the king from having relations with Sarah. We are not told exactly how God kept it from happening, but it appears that God gave the king more than a headache. Based on the latter verses of the chapter, it seems that God afflicted Abimelech with some kind of disease. Regardless, God providentially protected Sarah. And, to rectify the situation, God told the king what was happening. He also clearly told the king what would happen if he didn't return Sarah (v. 7).

To his credit, Abimelech didn't waste any time correcting the situation. Look at v. 8.

Abraham's sin had placed Abimelech in great danger. It had made him sick, and it affected every woman of child-bearing age in his household. Look at vv. 17-18.

Your sin can have a disastrous effect on other people. We find this illustrated in Joshua 7. God had given His people a great victory over the walled city of Jericho in chapter 6. Prior to that battle, God through Joshua instructed the people to devote the entire city to destruction, and if they found any gold, silver, etc., those items were to go into the treasury of the Lord. The people were to keep nothing for themselves.

After winning a great victory against the great city of Jericho, a force of 3000 men goes out against the little town of Ai, and the army faces a stunning defeat. Thirty-six of their men are killed in that battle, and they are made to retreat.

What in the world went wrong? Joshua humbles himself before YHWH and asks why they experienced such a terrible and humiliating defeat. God informs Joshua that someone has kept for himself some of the spoils from the previous battle.

The next morning, it is revealed that Achan had kept 200 shekels of silver and a bar of gold and that he had buried them inside his tent. Achan confesses what he had done.

One man's sin resulted in the death of 36 soldiers and the loss of a battle that should have been easily won.

We think we can sin privately and that it will just affect us. What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas is a lie. You can't contain the negative consequences of sin. Like ripples in a pond, the consequences of your sin move outward from you and touch those around you.

When there is sin in the camp, the whole camp is affected. When there is sin in a church, the whole church is impacted. When there is sin in a family, the whole family will suffer.

The 17th-century poet John Donne wrote:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the continent, a part of the main;
if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe
is the less . . . any man's death diminishes me,

because I am involved in mankind.
And therefore never send to know for whom
the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.

The bell to which Donne referred was the funeral bell. Before a funeral, a bell would be rung. Regardless of who it is that dies, it affects you because it affects the community, and you are part of the community.

Sin and its consequences are never a private affair that is completely divorced from you or those around you. Your temper affects the members of your family. Your addictive behavior hurts the people you love and the ones who love you.

When you backslide, when the fire for the Lord that once burned hot grows cold, when you engage in secret sin, others will be hurt.

There is one more whom we have not mentioned who is also hurt. Our sin, our backsliding hurts the heart of God.

Listen to an autobiographical story written by the author Philip Yancey:

Last summer I had an encounter with masked men bearing scalpels. A surgeon operated on my foot, and my life was never in danger. Yet the horizontal recovery time did give me a chance to reflect on the pain that we choose voluntarily, sometimes for our own good and sometimes to our peril.

While rehabilitating, I often did exercises that hurt because I knew that working through the soreness would allow my foot to regain its usefulness. On the other hand, the surgeon warned against bicycling, mountain climbing, running, and other activities that might endanger the healing process. Basically, anything that sounded fun, he vetoed.

On one visit I tried to talk him into granting me a premature golf match. “Some friends get together once a year. It’s important to me. I’ve been practicing my swing, and if I use only my upper body and keep my legs and hips very still, could I join them?”

Without a flicker of hesitation, my doctor replied, “It would make me very unhappy if you played golf within the next two months.”

. . . As we talked, I began to appreciate my doctor’s odd choice of words. If he had issued an edict — “No golf!” — I might have stubbornly rebelled. He left me the free choice and expressed the consequences in a most personal way: Disobedience would grieve him, for his job was to restore my health.

God is the physician of our souls. He desires our health. When we choose to disobey His orders that are meant for our health, it grieves Him. He knows the pain it will cause us and others.

The cause of backsliding is inward. The consequence of sin is outward.

Backsliding Has an Upward Cure

Because God loves us, He does not leave us in a backslidden condition. He takes

action to bring us back into full fellowship with Himself.

God chose to do an interesting thing with Abraham. God didn't go to Abraham. God went to Abimelech.

When you do wrong, the Holy Spirit will speak to you, but sometimes, we aren't listening. God will often reach us through someone else. He can use a parent, a grandparent, or a family member. He can use a friend, a co-worker, or a boss. He can use a preacher, a teacher, or a mentor.

The sad and surprising thing is that God used a pagan, a man who didn't know or serve the God of Israel to set Abraham straight. Look at what Abimelech says to Abraham (20:10). You know you are in a bad way when an unbeliever has a greater sense of morality than you do.

The NT teaches that conviction of sin is the work of the Holy Spirit. God, however, routinely uses people to do the work He wants to accomplish.

I have often heard people say, "I'm not the Holy Spirit. It is not my job to make people feel guilty."

You are absolutely correct. You are not the Holy Spirit, and it is not your job to make people feel guilty. You are responsible, however, to let God use you as He wishes, and sometimes He may want you to go to Mr. Smith or Mrs. Jones and conduct a "come to Jesus" meeting.

That is what Nathan, the prophet, did with King David. King David had committed adultery with Bathsheba. She got pregnant. He was having a hard time covering up his sin; so, in the end, he had Uriah, Bathsheba's husband killed. He then took Bathsheba as his wife and hoped people were bad at math.

King David tried to ignore his conscience. He sought to evade responsibility. He attempted to forget the evil he had done. He was miserable.

Then, Nathan came and dropped the hammer on David. The Spirit of God laid David out flat. It wasn't Nathan. It was the Spirit of God working through Nathan.

The cure for backsliding and unconfessed sin is upward. Let God set you back on the right course. The Spirit of God uses the word of God to do that work. Listen to 2 Timothy 3:16. That verse says: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and [is] profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness." Teach tells the right road to travel. Reproof tells us when we have gotten off that path. Correction shows us how to get back on. And training in righteousness helps us stay on the right road.

Six years after Bunyan wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*, he wrote a second part that covers the journey of Christian's wife and their sons. Toward the end of that second volume, the reader is told of Mr. Valiant-for-Truth's crossing over the River of Death to the heavenly city. One pastor referred to this portion of the book as "my favorite passage in all of literature." I share it with you as a conclusion to this message.

After this it was noised abroad that Mr. Valiant-for-truth was sent for by a summons . . . When he understood it, he called for his friends, and told them of it. Then said he, "I am going to my Father's house: and though with great difficulty I have got hither, yet now I do not repent me of all the troubles I have been at to

arrive where I am. My sword I give to him that shall succeed me in my pilgrimage, and my courage and skill to him that can get it. My marks and scars I carry with me, to be a witness for me that I have fought his battles, who will now be my rewarder.” When the day that he must go home was come, many accompanied him to the river-side, into which, as he went down, he said, “O death, where is thy sting?” And as he went down deeper, he cried, “O grave, where is thy victory?” So, he passed over, and all the trumpets sounded for him on the other side.

There is coming a day when you will be summoned. And you will keep that appointment. On that day you will cross the River to the other side. May that day be for you a day of joy and not regret. It will be a day of joy if you are faithful in your journey. You are a pilgrim. Don't regress. Keep progressing.