

Text: Genesis 20

Title: "Facing failure: a layman's lessons for a prophet"

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Introduction: Have you ever failed at something and then received help facing the fact that you failed? I can remember a time as a 10th grader when I entered a preaching contest. My speech teacher, one of the best teachers I ever had (and I've had my fair share of good teachers), arranged to have me preach in our school chapel the ten-minute sermon I had developed for the contest.

I was scared to death, but I made it through the episode better than I thought that I would. I was glad it was over and looked forward to getting my teacher's assessment. Well, she was not one to beat around the bush, so the first thing she said was "you looked like an absolute zombie up there!" I do not remember what else she said, but that line gives you a good idea of the general theme of the whole content of feedback received. I had failed in my preaching attempt, and I received help facing that failure from my faithful teacher.

Abraham fails in Genesis 20, and as he does so he gets some help learning about facing his failure. Abraham is called a *prophet* in this chapter (v. 7), and yet he learns some important lessons from a layman, Abimelech, the king of Gerar. I have titled the message this morning, "Facing failure: a layman's lessons for a prophet," and I want us to learn with Abraham four things about facing our failures this morning.

I. Abraham's experience with Abimelech teaches him that failures repeat (vv. 1-2).

Illustration: Can you remember what you were doing this week twenty years ago? Some of our younger set will have real difficulty answering that question. The question happens

to be easy for me, because last Wednesday was my wife's and my twentieth wedding anniversary. The week after our wedding we were at Niagara Falls enjoying our honeymoon. So I have passed the test; I can remember what I was doing this week twenty years ago. But how is your memory when it comes to experiences you had twenty years ago? How about the failures you committed that week? Do you remember them?

Application: The failures of Abraham in this chapter look very similar to his failures in chapter 12, where Abram lies to Pharaoh about Sarai with disastrous results. For us, that is only 8 chapters ago. For Abraham, however, it has been twenty-five years since that earlier failure (12:4, 17:1).

A lot has transpired over those twenty-five years, hasn't it? We no longer call this man *Abram*; he is now *Abraham*. Sarai is now *Sarah*, and these name changes are emblematic of the spiritual growth of their lives and the rich blessings of God that they had experienced. The long wait for the promised son was nearly over, for a promise had come that in a year's time the new arrival would appear.

Yet even in this state of spiritual victory and maturity, Abraham sees a failure repeat in his life that threatened to undo all the good that had been accomplished up to that point. One of the most important lessons we need to learn about facing failures is to recognize that failures repeat. We never reach the point that we are completely immune from the failures of our past, and this fact makes two things necessary to our spiritual growth and well-being.

1. We always need to be watchful against our potential for sin. 1 Cor. 10:12, "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." We need the Lord's help every day if we are to overcome our propensity to fail. We never outgrow our

need for His grace. We can never assume that we can stand on our own.

2. We always need to be tender about our sinfulness. 1 John 1:8, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us." When we are overcome by sin in our lives, we need to be told that we have failed, and we need to be tender when God shows us our failures. Failure to be tender is self deception that is void of God's truth. It is our enemies greatest temptation to our own destruction.

Abraham's experience with Abimelech taught him that his failures were repeatable, and it teaches us that ours are as well. We must humbly seek spiritual victory every day.

II. Abraham's experience with Abimelech teaches him that facing failure requires confrontation, not hypocrisy (vv. 3-10).

Illustration: We have seen Russia move into Georgia and violate that nation's borders. Clearly, this creates a problem. Nations should not be invaded by other nations.

I read an interesting article by Michael Williams in the UK *Guardian* about this called "How Old Europe Let Georgia Down." The article described how President Bush pushed for NATO membership for Georgia and the Ukraine at the NATO summit in Bucharest last April. He was rebuffed by our European allies because they felt pressure from Russia to stand against Ukrainian and Georgian membership. The author of the article is a democrat and not a Bush fan, but he was harder on the Europeans:

"Europe needs to wake up and smell the jet fumes from the Russian planes bombing Georgia. Russia is a great power and the Kremlin plays great power politics. America understands this[;] Europe does not. For too long Moscow has successfully divided Europe. Putin split the old members of the

EU from the new members as he bullied Poland and Estonia without any opposition from countries such as Germany and France. The Kremlin fractured Europe over the issue of energy, with Berlin politicians selling their souls for a fix of natural gas despite the worries of allied countries to the east and north. Moscow also tried to pit the US and parts of Europe against each other on the issue of missile defense. Europe has stood silently by, allowing European principles to be trampled again and again" [<http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment-isfree/2008/aug/12/russia.nato/print>; accessed 8/23/08]. Evil has to be confronted if it is to be corrected. Facing failure requires confrontation, not hypocrisy.

I want us to notice the way that both the Lord and Abimelech confront Abraham in his sin.

1. God confronts Abimelech even though he had done many things well (vv. 3-7).

God does not want us to stay ignorant about those things that displease Him, even though we can point to some good things we have done. He wants us to grow in grace, and the first step in each stage of our growth is to become aware of something that displeases Him and why it displeases Him. Ignorance can be bliss. We can believe that we have perfect hearts and clean hands but still be clueless because we lack the understanding we need to see what about us displeases God and why. Our understanding of what displeases God and why must ever progress, and as it does we will see our sinfulness in a new light. These are important keys to our growth in grace. God confronts Abraham about a sin issue in his life even though he had done many things well.

2. Abimelech confronts Abraham even though he was a prophet (vv. 7-10).

God makes very clear to Abimelech that Abraham held a special calling. Ps. 105:15 admonishes kings with this warning: "Touch not mine anointed ones, and do my prophets no harm."

That is a solemn warning, and it ought to be followed, but this does not mean that spiritual leaders never need to be confronted. Abimelech rightly asks Abraham to account for the wrong he had done (v. 9) and for the disparity between what he had done and the responsibility he had to be true to the Word of God (v. 10, "What did you see?" is especially significant when asked of a prophet, see Isa. 30:10).

Every prophet ought to be held to the standard of God's Word. That is why you need to bring your Bible to church. You need to let this preacher know where he does not square with what it teaches. Abraham's experience with Abimelech taught him that dealing with sin requires confrontation, not hypocrisy. We need to deal with our sin in the same way.

III. Abraham's experience with Abimelech teaches him that fixing failure requires repentance, not excuses (vv. 11-16).

Illustration: Some things simply do not go together. We might say of two roommates that they go together like oil and water, and we mean that they do not go together. It is difficult to mix oil and water. Even after a lot of shaking, separation eventually occurs.

Well, perhaps even more difficult than mixing oil and water is trying to mix together repentance and excuses. Simply put, excuses are not repentance, and repentance does not make excuses. In our narrative we have an example of true repentance and terrible excuse-making. Remarkably, it is the prophet who makes excuses, and the layman who understand repentance.

1. Abraham makes excuses. Note some characteristics of excuse-making when we are confronted with our sin:

a. Making excuses is selfish (20:11). You cannot be thinking of others while making excuses about your failures. Excuse-making requires a laser-like focus on self.

b. Making excuses is deceptive (20:12). You cannot be entirely honest and make excuses about your failures. Again, 1 John 1:10 tells us that the man who is excusing his sin is simply self-deceived by a liar who wants to seem him destroyed by his sin.

c. Making excuses blames God (20:13). You are not loving the Lord while making excuses for your sin. Love seeks not its own interest, and the response of excusing sin is all about defending one's own interest.

Abraham is a sorry excuse for a prophet as he makes these excuses for his sin.

2. Abimelech truly repents.

a. True repentance does what it must do to make things right (20:7, 14 – God asked that Abimelech restore Sarah, and he did). Sometimes we cannot make right what went wrong, but even in those circumstances, the truly repentant man certainly would make his sin right again if he could. Had Abimelech violated Sarah, that could never be undone. But the repentant man would give anything to go back and undo what he did. Thankfully, where sin abounds, grace does much more abound for this man. Our sin is not undoable at times, but it is always wonderfully atoned for through the blood of Christ. 1 John 1:9, “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Do you and I know what it is like to be truly repentant over

our sin? Have we been willing to make right what we made wrong?

b. Repentance does more than what it must do to make things right (20:14-16). True repentance includes a tenderness of heart that is willing to do even more than necessary to make things right. Remember Zacchaeus in this regard (Luke 19:8, "And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord: Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him four-fold").

Abraham's experience with Abimelech teaches us that fixing our failures requires true repentance, not making excuses. Today, we live in a world that tries to fix the destruction of sin in our lives by labeling it mental illness and diagnosing it as a need for more medication. Even believers take this approach to their sin. When we get away with that, we feel better because we feel less responsible for the cruel ugliness of our sin.

Illustration: Fixing sin that way is a bit like putting air in a flat tire that has a hole in it. Only true repentance can repair the hole. Let's not be tempted by the world's excuse-making approach to sin. Let's be a people who respond in repentance like Abimelech and Zacchaeus to our wrong.

IV. Abraham's experience with Abimelech teaches him that the failures of leaders are especially costly (vv. 17-18).

Illustration: The pastor I grew up under, John Ashbrook, has written a pamphlet called *Axioms of Separation*. In that book he takes readers through the story of the nameless prophet of 1 Kings 13, and he gleans from that story the last of the thirteen axioms of separation he lists: "At any given time of church history, God is most severe on those whom he is using at that moment."

Application: Both Abimelech and Abraham were men whom God was using in a special way at that particular moment. Each was in a position that meant that their failures hurt the well-being of others. This fearsome potential is simply part of the nature of the work. When God gives us the responsibility of leadership, I believe that responsibility comes with a specialized target of the enemy on our back. The Lord allows this, and as leaders, it is especially important under these conditions with so very much at stake, that we know how to pray (vv. 17-18).

Conclusion: And so Abraham learns from Abimelech some important lessons about sinful failure. Prov. 28:13 says, "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper, but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy." Did you notice that the verse puts all of mankind into two categories – those who cover their sins and those who do not. There is no category called "those who have no sin." You and I, like Abraham and Abimelech, have sin our lives that needs to be dealt with through watchfulness, confrontation, and repentance. The question is not whether or not we have sin, but only whether or not we want mercy enough to confess and forsake.

"A man came – I think it was actually in Philadelphia – on one occasion to the great George Whitefield and asked if he might print his sermons. Whitefield gave this reply; he said, 'Well, I have no inherent objection, if you like, but you will never be able to put on the printed page the lightning and the thunder.' That is the distinction – the sermon, and the 'lightning and the thunder.' To Whitefield this was of very great importance, and it should be of very great importance to all preachers, as I hope to show. You can put the sermon into print, but not the lightning and the thunder. That comes into the act of preaching and cannot be conveyed by cold print. Indeed it almost baffles the descriptive powers of the best reporters."

– David Martin Lloyd-Jones,

*Preachers and Preaching*