

November 1, 2015

THE REBEL
Genesis 20

INTRODUCTION

On our recent trip home from vacation I observed one young boy whose attitude caught my attention. He was maybe 10 years old. He and his family boarded the airplane behind us. As we walked down the jetway I could hear him behind me. He wasn't loud or obnoxious, but he was quietly singing. He wasn't singing words, but he was singing a tune that obviously stirred his soul. It was his superhero song. This young man was *excited*. He was boarding a jet airplane, setting out on a heroic adventure. As we stepped onto the aircraft I heard him enthusiastically proclaim, "I get the middle seat!" I'm pretty sure that is the only time in my life I've ever heard those words uttered with enthusiasm. After we got seated I had another little encounter with that boy. As they neared us on their way to their seats I heard him say to his father with, if possible, even more excitement, "Dad, I got to talk to the *pilot*!" The rest of us were submitting to the indignity of being crammed into a modern airliner, preparing to endure the torture of 5 hours strapped into a seat clearly designed to inflict as much discomfort as possible. This little guy was having a great adventure so exciting he could hardly contain himself. He was alive!

I know he's young and I suppose he'll eventually learn better. Sadly. Wouldn't it be great to go through life like it is a great adventure and be brimming with enthusiasm like that kid? Some might think such an attitude can only be found in kids, but I know it's not true. It may not be as overt as with that boy, but I see some of that attitude in my wife. At one point on our outbound trip I caught a glimpse of this. We were watching a movie on our tablet computer. To do that we had a splitter so we could both plug our earphones into it and hear the sound from the movie. But that meant we had the splitter and two sets of earphones with wires for each ear. We paused the movie to go to the restroom. When we got back all those earphone wires had become impossible tangled. We didn't do that. I am sure they did it themselves while we were away from our seats. Laurie started untangling the wires. It was ridiculously complicated. Half way through she started laughing. This is the kind of thing that really tries my patience but she saw it as humorous, and in short order she was laughing so hard she could hardly breathe. Other people on the plane were looking at her and thinking, "She's sure having fun. Wonder what's so funny?" That's Laurie. She's on her own adventure. Today I am going to talk about some key components to being truly alive. There are some lessons in Genesis 20, surprisingly, that can help us not just exist, but be full of life.

ABRAHAM HAD A RERUN

Abraham moved on from the area he had been living not far from the town of Hebron, south of Jerusalem. He went south and west from there and stayed in a place called Gerar. This was an area that would later be the home of the Philistines, a constant enemy of Israel. The ruler there was a man called Abimelech. That name means “my father is King.” There are a number of characters in the Old Testament that have that name. It is possible that it actually was a title, something like the king of Egypt being called Pharaoh. Verse 2 says, “there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, she is my sister.”

Wait, I’ve seen this movie before. Is this a rerun of an episode we’ve already watched? I hate reruns. But doesn’t this sound like a rerun to you? All the way back in Genesis 12 we saw Abraham pull the “she’s not my wife she’s my sister” stunt when he went to Egypt to get away from a famine in Canaan. Because he was afraid that men in Egypt would see his gorgeous wife and want her so badly they would be willing to kill him to get her, he had her pretend to be his sister instead of his wife. It was a cowardly, despicable act on his part. It might have protected him but it required a terrible sacrifice by Sarah who ended up as Pharaoh’s wife.

Abraham learned a lesson. He learned that God was faithful to protect him and bless him even when he felt threatened, even when he failed so abominably. After that previous incident his faith had grown stronger and we saw him act with great faith and courage in several instances. But now we see him pull the same stupid, cowardly stunt yet again.

In verse 11 we see the motive was exactly the same. He was afraid. He thought the people there would kill him to get his wife. In the previous incident we were amazed at the fact that Sarah was considered such a hot babe even though she was 65 years old. This incident takes place almost 25 years later! Sarah is nearly 90! Was Abraham panicking for no reason? I mean, come on, the woman was 90 years old. Does it seem likely that someone was going to mistake her for a supermodel? Do you think Abimelech cruised old folk’s homes looking for 90 year old babes? This just couldn’t be true. And yet, verse 2 tells us that Abimelech did indeed take Sarah into his harem. Clearly Sarah was aging very well. The only thing I can conclude from this is that her 90 was the new 30.

Some scholars claim this only happened once and some editor, after finding two varying accounts of the same incident mistook them for separate events. Who could believe that Abraham would employ the same awful tactic on two different occasions? However, the details of this story are quite different than the one in

chapter 12. And is it really that hard to believe that someone could make the same mistake twice? The only issue is how are we to believe that Abraham pulled the same dumb stunt twice?

The first incident took place 25 years earlier. That's a long time. Back in 1990, 25 years ago, East and West Germany reunified to make one German nation. The US sent troops into Panama to capture dictator General Noriega. Some of the hot movies were *Home Alone*, *Pretty Woman* and *The Hunt For Red October*. Yeah, that was a long time ago wasn't it? I find it very easy to believe that Abraham might have made a mistake 25 years after he had done the same thing the first time. Perhaps more important, this reminds us that fear can cause us to do some awful things when it takes hold in our minds.

GOD SAVED THE DAY

In the first incident God intervened by having Pharaoh and his household become ill after taking Sarah. There were some physical effects for Abimelech as we will see, but this time God took a different approach. He actually appeared to Abimelech in a dream and said, "These aren't the droids you're looking for." Well, it was kind of like that. He made it clear he had drafted the wrong woman. He was as good as dead because he had taken a married woman into his harem.

Abimelech pleaded with God saying, "hey I didn't know. If I had known she was a married woman I would never have taken her. Are you going to punish me and my people for something that wasn't my fault?" He objected at the end of verse 5 that he had a clear conscience and clean hands in the matter. The problem was with Abraham and Sarah. They had lied to him, and had they been honest none of this would have happened.

As we learned in chapter 18 God is just. He's not going to punish an innocent man. So he tells Abimelech, "yes I know you're innocent. If you give Sarah back to Abraham and leave her alone then no harm no foul." He warns him that if he doesn't give her back that he's going to die.

ABRAHAM BACKPEDALED

Abimelech acted promptly after that warning. Verse 8 tells us that early the next morning he called all of his officials to him and explained what had happened. They were all afraid. Then he called Abraham in and said "what have you done to us? What did I do to you the cause you to bring such guilt on us?" You can rest assured that Abimelech's comments were delivered with considerable heat. He was

upset. Abraham's and Sarah's dishonesty and lies had put Abimelech and his people in a precarious situation. And he was none too happy about it.

What a humiliating experience for Abraham. Not only is he once again being confronted with his own cowardice and dishonesty but he also had to deal with the chagrin of recognizing that he should have known better. He had learned the first time what an idiotic plan that was and yet he had committed the same mistake once again.

Abraham did what humans always do. He rationalized. He sounds like a little kid saying, "Well, what happened was..." He said it was because he was so afraid. Abraham insists that he knew that everyone would want Sarah. He was afraid for his life. And then comes the real rationalization. He says "besides, she really is my sister." He said she was the daughter of his father but not of his mother. Now we have in my family genealogy a few spots where the branches of the tree are rather closer together than you'd like them to be. But I don't think there's any place in their where somebody married his half-sister. That seems a little sick to me, but those were different times.

Even if what Abraham said was true his intent was to deceive. Whatever else she was, Sarah was most definitely his wife. He was trying to hide that fact. He insisted that his wife join him in lying to people about it.

ABRAHAM BLESSED AND WAS BLESSED

Once again we see that God was faithful to his promises even when Abraham was unfaithful. Abraham had just been told by God that within the next year he and Sarah would have a son. If Abraham was dead that couldn't happen. In other words, if Abraham actually trusted God he would not have needed to lie for he would have known for a fact that God was going to protect him.

So Abraham failed to believe God, cooked up his own scheme once again to protect himself from a threat that was in his own head, and lied. Nevertheless the result of this incident was that once again Abraham was financially blessed. Abimelech gave him cattle, sheep and slaves. He also gave him 1000 shekels of silver. That was to cover the offense to Sarah. So once again even though Abraham was unfaithful, God was faithful to his promise that he would bless Abraham.

Furthermore we learned at the end of this chapter that none of the women in Abimelech's household had been able to have children. God had an answer for that. The answer was for Abraham, despite his failure, to pray for Abimelech. It

was only when Abraham prayed that God solved Abimelech's problem. Isn't it amazing that even though Abraham was totally at fault God still chose to use him and his prayer to help others?

APPLICATION

WATCH OUT FOR FEAR

One of the lessons that we need to learn once again from Abraham's experience is the devastating effect that fear can have on us. Why did Abraham once again retreat into cowardice and dishonesty? It was because he was afraid for his life. We have a tendency to do the same thing. We too can easily compromise our convictions because we are afraid.

Do you remember what happened to God's people after they had escaped slavery in Egypt? God had worked some powerful signs to get them released in the first place but then they found themselves trapped at the shore of the Red Sea. The Egyptian army was charging hard and fast and they had nowhere to run. God worked a great miracle at that point, one of the most famous in all of history, when he parted the Red Sea. Not long after that God miraculously provided food and water for them in the wilderness and through Moses established his covenant with them. He then took them to the border of the land he had promised to them, the land he had promised to Abraham and his descendants. And what happened when they surveyed that land? They encountered fierce-looking people who live there and they became afraid. Out of fear they refused to enter in to the Promised Land. An entire generation of Hebrew people spent the rest of their lives wandering through a desolate wasteland as a result.

Do you remember what happened the night that Jesus was arrested? His disciples, for the most part, ran away in fear. Peter however did not completely give up. He followed at a distance. He tried to keep a low profile and stay under the radar but to no avail. He was identified by a lowly servant as one of Jesus followers. But what happened when that servant called him out? Peter caved in to fear. He categorically denied even knowing Jesus. And he did it repeatedly. Fear caused him to fail miserably.

What are you afraid of? In his book *The Way to Love*, Anthony DeMello wrote, "take a look at yourself spending almost every waking moment of your day placating and pleasing people, whether they are living or dead. You live by their norms, conform to their standards, seek their company, desire their love, dread their ridicule, long for their applause, meekly submit to the guilt they lay upon you;

you are terrified to go against the fashion and the way you dress or speak or act and think.”

Fear is all around us, and unfortunately it has a powerful tendency to cause us to forget what we believe and scramble like Abraham did. Fear can take a lot of forms. I have mentioned before that one of the downsides of pastoral ministry for me is poor sleep every Saturday night. No matter how well prepared I am or how much I tell myself there's nothing to be fearful of, for some reason my mind doesn't listen to what I'm telling it. I don't usually sleep very well because I'm anticipating Sunday morning. I also have church dreams from time to time. They are invariably unpleasant, not because church is unpleasant but because of what I fear at some level in my consciousness. In one dream that I have variations of periodically I am beginning to preach my sermon but my notes are in utter disarray. I keep trying to figure out how everything is supposed to go together but I just can't seem to get things in order. People start getting disgusted and walking out of the service. That dream reveals some underlying stress and fear. I am not alone. Linda, who runs our PowerPoint, she has church dreams too. She told me of one in which I gave her my outline to put on slides and it was all in Korean. Underlying all of that is fear. We have fear of failure, fear of looking bad, fear of rejection, fear of what people will think.

Fear keeps us in prison. We are not really alive when fear rules us. It obliterates peace and joy and causes us to throw away freedom and love and pursue self-protection just like Abraham did. The result is it alienates us from other people. If we want to truly live we absolutely must not let fear rule in our lives.

The late E. Stanley Jones, missionary and theologian, wrote, “I am inwardly fashioned for faith not fear. Fear is not my native land, faith is. I am made so that worry and anxiety are sand in the machinery of life, faith is the oil.” He claimed that we are made to live by faith, to live with confidence and peace. It is our fears that are the sand that gum up the gears of our lives.

Have you considered what the Bible says about fear? Psalm 23:4 says, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley I will fear no evil, for you are with me.” Psalm 27:1 says, “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?” Psalm 34:4 says, “I sought the Lord and he answered me and delivered me from all my fears.” Hebrews 13:6 says, “The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?”

Well that's good, but fear still seems to hang around. Two wannabe big-game hunters were out in the bush in Africa when suddenly they were confronted by a huge and ferocious looking lion. One was on the verge of panic when his friend said to him, "remember what the book we read said we were to do. It said that we should stand still, be calm, and look the lion right in the eye." His frightened friend said, "yes I've read the book, and you've read the book. But what if the lion hasn't read the book?"

We are going to experience fear in this life. How can we stand calm and look the lion right in the eye? What can help us deal with our fear? I would suggest there are two thoughts that we can learn from circus performers that can help us deal with fear. Works for me since it seems like my life is a circus much of the time.

First, think about trapeze artists. What enables them to do tricks suspended in the air like that? They must overcome fear. Juan Carlos Ortiz years ago wrote an article in which he depicted the Christian life as a trapeze act. He said that people watch open mouthed as we forgive those who hurt us, give grace to fallen people, love our spouses unconditionally, care for the downtrodden and love God. It is amazing to watch. What frees us up to do such daring feats is the net beneath us. Yes, we will slip and fall, only to land softly and safely in the net.

What is that net? It is the grace and presence of God. Psalm 91:4 says, "He will cover you with his feathers and under his wings you will find refuge." Psalm 4:8 says, "In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, Lord, make me dwell in safety." God loves us, he is watching over us and will always bring good out of every situation for us. We need not fear that we will ever be abandoned. This is the key truth that Abraham forgot when he lied about Sarah. God was going to take care of him and he didn't need to fear. At every moment of our lives remember that great truth.

The second truth that can help us with fear comes from the tight rope walker. Dan Thurman is a business leader who has an interesting hobby. He is a tight rope walker. He wrote a book titled *Off Balance On Purpose*. And it he says that a tight rope walker is never truly at rest or on balance. They are continually making tiny adjustments that bring them back into balance. He says most of these movements are so subtle that they are imperceptible. It may look effortless to an audience but it is not nearly as easy as it looks. So he discusses how one maintains balance on a tight rope. He writes, "when new students step onto the rope or cable they almost always begin with the same flawed game plan. They stare downward at the wire to ensure that they have the proper footing. And so they fall. So what is the solution

to this dilemma? If you have ever closely watched professional tight rope walkers, you may recall that they never look down at their feet or the wire or to either side at their hands or the balance bar. Rather they keep their head up and look forward toward the goal, the faraway platform, in front of them.”

That is what enables you to keep your balance. I learned this same principle when I attempted stand up paddle boarding. If you look down at the board you’re going to fall. You have to look straight ahead in order to keep your balance. And that is exactly what can help us deal with our fear. We must keep our eyes on our goal.

Hebrews 12 urges us to run the race with perseverance. In order to do that it tells us in verse 2, “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of the faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross.” Jesus kept his eye on the goal. That’s what enabled him to endure the cross and not give into fear. We need to do the same thing. We need to have very clearly in our minds where we are going and what we are aiming at.

The goal is not to have life be comfortable for easy. It is not to get everything we want the way we want it and when we want it. The goal is to glorify God, to make him known, to display his character, and to spread his grace everywhere we go. If we can keep in mind that that is our goal and we keep our eyes fixed on that that will enable us to overcome our fears.

Would you volunteer to stand rooted in a spot while someone stood 60 feet away and threw a rock hard projectile at you at 90 miles per hour? Who would do such a thing? If you got hit it would hurt, and could even do serious harm. Yet people not only volunteer, they eagerly rush to do that. It's called baseball. Have you ever been hit by a pitch? I can assure you it hurts. In my younger days I once got hit on the elbow and my whole arm went numb. That night it swelled up to twice its normal size. The number one thing a wannabe hitter has to do is overcome fear of the ball. If you're afraid you will never be able to hit. The fear never completely disappears. It's what causes you to bail out when you see a pitch coming at you. But you overcome it mostly by having the desire to play the game and hit the ball be more important to you than the fear. What helps us not give in to fear in life is when the goal of glorifying and serving God is more important than whatever the fear is.

DON'T LET THE REBEL WIN

The Star Wars hype is really building now. There was a scene from the original Star Wars movie that took place on the Millennium Falcon. Chewbacca was

playing a sci-fi holographic form of chess with R2-D2. Chewbacca starts howling after a move R2 made. C3PO says, "He made a fair move. Screaming about it can't help you." Han Solo says, "Let him have it. It's not wise to upset a Wookiee." 3PO answers, "But sir, nobody worries about upsetting a droid." Solo says, "That's because droids don't pull people's arms out of their sockets when they lose. Wookiees are known to do that." 3PO considers that then says, "I see your point, Sir. I suggest a new strategy R2. Let the Wookiee win."

I'm going to suggest you a different strategy. It's the opposite. The strategy is don't let the rebel win. But what rebel are we talking about? In the story that we are looking at today in Genesis 20 Abraham failed to believe that God could protect him and take care of him. He decided that it was up to him to keep himself safe and that he would do whatever it took to achieve that goal. Because he didn't think he could trust God he devised a way that he thought he could protect himself and he ended up with cowardice, dishonesty and disloyalty to his own wife. The heart of the problem was he did not believe that what God supplied him would be enough. God could not keep him safe so he had to figure out a way to do that on his own.

In the New Testament there are many references to something called "the flesh" or "the sinful nature." Romans 8:4 speaks of us as those who do not live "according to the flesh but according to the spirit." The flesh is that principle within us that says what God supplies is not enough and we have to get what we need for ourselves. It continually insists it is up to us to take care of ourselves, to provide for ourselves and to protect ourselves with our own cleverness, strength and ability.

Romans 8:7 says, "the mind set on the flesh is hostile to God." In that verse Paul goes on to say that the flesh will not and cannot do the will of God. The word that is translated "hostile" is a word that means to be an enemy. In other words the flesh is an enemy of God. It wants no part of submitting to God. In its essence, the flesh is rebellion against God. That is what I refer to when I speak of the rebel. It is the flesh with in us, the principal that I'm taking care of myself, because I cannot trust God to take care of me. I choose what is best for me, because I can't trust what God says. That's the rebel speaking.

The opposite of the flesh is living by the Holy Spirit, or living by grace. It is operating primarily on the principle that what God gives is enough, so it focuses on being faithful to do what God tells us and trusting all outcomes in life to him. It is doing things his way and trusting that he will make it come out right.

At every moment of every day of our lives we face the choice between walking by the flesh on one hand and walking by the spirit on the other. In other words, the rebel inside you is always there trying to convince you to live his way. It doesn't matter whether you have been a follower of Jesus for two days or two decades. No matter how long you have known Christ, no matter how mature you are in your faith, you still face this choice day in and day out. Here's what you need to remember, the rebel is always the rebel. It never changes, it never gets better. And it is there clamoring for attention and obedience every moment of your life. Abraham is a classic example of this truth. He had walked with God for 25 years. He had suffered through some humiliating failures of faith and had learned to trust in God. And yet even when he was nearly 100 years old and had been walking with God for so long we see him give in to the rebel. We can do the same thing.

If your spouse or your roommate or friend treats you in an unkind fashion or is behaving selfishly with no regard for you, you are faced with the choice. The rebel will have a recommendation on how you should respond. Pay no attention to trusting God to make that situation right. Pay no attention to believing that God can meet your needs. You take care of yourself. You fix that person's wagon because you have the right to protect yourself. You do whatever it takes. That's the rebel speaking.

Every day of your life is going to present you with a myriad of occasions to make a choice between letting the rebel win, or letting the spirit of Christ rule in your life. The opportunities are too numerous to list. The bad news is this struggle will go on as long as you live. There will never be a moment when the rebel will disappear from your life in this world.

Well that sounds exhausting doesn't it? Why not just give in and let the rebel have its way? Wouldn't that be an awful lot easier? Well yes it would be easier, but it would not be better. Consider again our story. When Abraham gave in to the rebel did things get better? What Abraham also produced was a negative impact on other people, specifically Abimelech and his household. And especially his own wife Sarah paid severely for his selfish cowardice. He himself ended up humiliated by his own actions. There have now been several instances in the life of Abraham that we have seen in which he chose to let the rebel win. In every one of them the results were unfortunate at best. And in one case they were disastrous.

Romans 8: 6 says, "the mind governed by the flesh is death, the mind governed by the spirit is life and peace." That is as clear a statement as you could ever ask for.

Why struggle? Because the rebel always produces death. Sure it can be easier to go his way in the short run but the long run will always produce death. Oh, I don't mean that you will physically die from it. But you will experience some element or form of spiritual death. You will not experience peace and joy. You will not increase love in your heart and in the hearts of others. You will always produce a loss of those things that are the very essence of life.

So in short why fight the battle against the rebel? Because it is the only way to experience true life, true joy and true peace. Because in the end taking the easy route and doing as the rebel suggests will always produce regret. Do you want to be a live, living out your great adventure? Then don't listen to the rebel, follow the Spirit of Jesus.

DON'T GIVE UP

We tend to have an idealized image of spiritual maturity. We think that the way this is going to work is we are going to steadily grow and get better and better until we reach a spiritual plane where we are nearly always victorious and above obvious failures.

Is that what happened with Abraham? Sadly no. He was spiritually mature. He had had encounters with God in which he actually had a face-to-face conversation with God. He had been walking with God for many years and he has learned through some failures how to live by faith. But the rebel is always there. Even after so many years he gave in to the rebel. We can fail at anything at any time just like Abraham did. There is never a moment when we are impervious to fear or temptation. There is no such thing as sinless perfection in us. It's never going to happen.

But there is good news. In fact there is the best news. Did Abraham's ugly and ignominious failure mean that he was no longer in a covenant relationship with God? Did it mean that God was no longer going to bless him? Did it mean that God was disgusted and had all he could take of Abraham and his fears? No quite the opposite. Despite Abraham's lamentable actions, despite his disgusting treatment of his own wife and his ridiculous dishonesty, God continued to bless him. Not only did he bless him, but he told Abimelech the solution to his problem was to have fallible Abraham pray for him. Do you see what this means? With all of his weaknesses and all of his failures God was still going to use Abraham in a powerful way, and he was still going to bless him.

There is a principal that is hard for us to accept and truly believe. That principle is that ***character is not the ground of our acceptance by God!*** The ground of our acceptance by God is what God supplies through the Savior the Lord Jesus Christ. It is through his grace and nothing else.

One of my favorite shirts is 76% polyester and 24% rayon. I have another shirt is 100% cotton. I'm not here to talk about the merits of various fabrics. I want to ask you this: is our relationship with God like a shirt made of blended material or is it like that 100% cotton shirt? Is it an article of clothing that is 75% God and 25% me? This incident in the life of Abraham reminds us God's acceptance in his covenant relationship with us is not a blended material. It is 100% him and 0% me!

Though I wish it were not so there are going to be times when we resemble Abraham all too closely. We too are going to fail in ways that we can't even understand. We are going to disappoint even ourselves. So the good news, and the gospel truly is good news, is yes you are going to fail to live up to what you wish you were. You are not going to live up to the idealized image you have of yourself. There are going to be times in your life when the rebel wins and brings with him all of the misery that comes from listening to his ideas. But you can take heart and knowing that God can still bless you and still use you. Our failures and our flaws are neither fatal nor final. And that is great news.

Last week Laurie showed me a video that Grace Turner posted on Facebook. It was a video about a guy named Mark Sertich who lives in Duluth, Minnesota. He is 94 years old and still plays ice hockey 3 or 4 times a week. My first reaction was to feel pretty crummy about myself. The last time I played ice hockey was probably about 10 years ago. I have been patting myself on the back that I played that very physical game for as long as I did. I miss playing hockey but I'm too old now. And then I saw that video. I'm old, but I'm not that old. And that guy is still playing hockey. So my first thought was I'm a wimp. But then I realized there was another lesson in this for me. I'm not going to run out and sign up for a hockey league, but I want to be like that guy. I want to be alive and moving forward and active as long as I live like he is. No matter how good that guy is, his friends are not playing hockey with him because he's so good. At 94 he's not all that good. They have him play just because they want him to be with them. If he dwells on his inabilities and his failures he is going to quit. The key to his longevity is recognizing that's not why he's allowed to play. They play with him because of the grace and love they extend him. The key to our longevity and walking with God is not dwelling on our inabilities and failures. It is knowing that God loves us and accepts us purely because of his grace and mercy and love and because of what he has done

for us through Jesus Christ. When we understand that and live in the reality of it we can keep going with energy and joy and perseverance for as long as we live.

If you want to be truly alive, humming your superhero theme song as you go through your adventure, keep your eyes on the goal, not fear, live by the spirit not the rebel, and don't quit even when you fail, for God still loves you.