

Genesis 20 — Relapse

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If you are like me, this winter you put on a few extra pounds. I can tell when I tighten my belt in the morning and I expand to another hole. Anticipating spring, I am trying to watch my diet, get more exercise and lose a few pounds. Is anybody else trying to lose that winter belly bulge? This week I read a discouraging statistic for those of us in the quest for a tighter waist line. Up to 95 percent of dieters relapse and gain back the weight. There is some debate if that number is too high but either way most dieters are like Oprah. They lose the weight and gain it back within a year. We tend to relapse into old junk food habits and eating patterns. Does anyone else besides me have this problem?

Today, we are talking about the problem of relapse. We are not talking about relapsing to junk food that restores those extra pounds and unwanted inches. We are going to talk about a much more serious relapse, relapsing into our old habits of sin.

All of us have sins we continually fall into again and again. Maybe for you, it is your mouth. When you get under stress you say some of the most hurtful things to those you love. You draw blood with the sword of your tongue. You hate this about yourself. You keep asking God to forgive you and change you, but when you get stressed, you relapse into using bitter hurtful words. For others there is the continual struggle with the sin of lust. Maybe you have a blocker on your computer and you avoid the most lustful images that appear on the screen of your television, but when you are tired and when you are lonely; you find

yourself losing a tug-o-war battle with your lusts. You hate this about yourself because you relapse into that same of sin again and again. Still others of us relapse continually into the sin of pride because we are so smart. Perhaps you find yourself looking down on others because they just can't get their act together like you can. They can't do what you find so easy. Again and again you relapse into arrogance in your heart and you know it is wrong.

What does God do with continual relapsers? Where is the time when God finally gets tired of us because we won't learn our lessons and break free from our old sinful habits so he writes us off? Today we will find the answer.

As a church we are studying through Genesis. Today, we come to Genesis 20. For the last few chapters of Genesis we followed the life of Abraham. This morning, we continue his story.

Before we get to the text, there are important things you need to know.

While Abraham is mentioned more than 300 times in the Bible. He is called a hero of faith in the book of Hebrews. If you didn't know his backstory you would think of him as bulletproof, like Superman. The truth is he struggled with sin. Many times he fell to the same old sin again and again. Abraham had a serious problem with relapse. Under stress, Abraham often feared for his life. He was afraid someone would kill him to take his beautiful wife. Whenever he came to a new town he feared for his life. He took off his wedding ring and made his wife take off hers. Then he claimed they were brother and sister instead of husband and wife.

Ladies, I know your husbands have some annoying habits that come out when they are stressed. Maybe your husband bites his nails. If that is all he does, you can be thankful. At least he doesn't do the Abraham and disown you in public and start acting like he is single. That is a serious problem. That is serious sin. Abraham didn't do this just once but he did this multiple times. Abraham was a hero with some serious sinful faults.

Genesis 20, where we are this morning, will sound eerily similar to Genesis 12. In Genesis 12 Abraham feared he would lose his life because his wife was beautiful. When he went to Egypt he disowned her in public and claimed she was just his sister. As a result, she was scooped into Pharaoh's harem. If it wasn't for God's supernatural intervention, Sarah would have committed adultery with the Pharaoh.

Genesis 20 is 20 years after Genesis 12. Abraham was 100. Sarah was 90. When Abraham went into the land of the Philistines he was again overcome with fear that he would be killed so men could steal his beautiful bride. Just like old times, he claimed his wife was his sister. In a replay of Egypt, his wife was scooped into the king's harem and would soon be violated.

This is amazing. In Genesis 20, Abraham is 100. Most men are not worried about their wife's beauty at that age. I don't know any 100-year-old men that is worried he will be killed so another man can take his smoking hot 90-year-old wife. This means one of two things. Either Sarah was smoking hot, beautiful off the charts or Abraham had a bad case of cataracts. I will let you decide.

Let's jump into the story and see how God handled Abraham's sin.

From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb and lived between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, “Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man’s wife.” Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, “Lord, will you kill an innocent people? Did he not himself say to me, ‘She is my sister’? And she herself said, ‘He is my brother.’ In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this.” Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. Now then, return the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.” Genesis 20:1–7 (ESV)

The first question we ask ourselves is, “Why did Abraham leave his home in Mamre?” Abraham was hanging at the Oaks of Mamre since Genesis 13. For some reason he decided to leave town and find a new place to live. We don’t have any record of God telling him to

leave. We don’t have any idea of why he chose to leave. He just left. My personal opinion is that after the cities of the Jordan Valley, such as Sodom, and Gomorrah,



were destroyed by God, it probably ruined the view. If the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was some type of volcanic activity, and Abraham lived only 20 miles away, I can see why he wanted to change neighborhoods when the horizon looked like the aftermath of the apocalypse and the smell of burning sulphur was what he woke up to each morning because it lingered in the air.

Abraham traveled south with his family to the Negev. That is the desert. He ended up by Gerar. This was Philistine country. Was this still within the boundaries of the Promised Land? Yes. Were the Philistines friends to God’s

people? No. This was like moving from the United States to live in Turkey or Iran. That is not a place you want to wear Christian T-shirts. It is not a place you put a fish on your car. It is not a place you play Christian music on your stereo. You lie low. It is a dangerous place. This was Abraham. He was sleeping with one eye open every night.

The biggest problem with living in hostile territory was his smoking hot 90-year-old wife. I can't even imagine the beauty of Sarah that men would kill a guy to get her when she was 90. My friends, that is incredible beauty.

One of the things every woman wishes was included in the Bible were Sarah's beauty secrets. If the Bible told us the kinds of lotions she used so that after a life in the sun and dry desert, she still looked like a swimsuit model, that product would sell like hotcakes. If you could bottle it and market it, you would be richer than Donald Trump and running for president instead of him. Every woman wants to know Sarah's beauty secrets.

Abimelech heard of Abraham's drop-dead-gorgeous sister so he scooped her into his harem and prepared for an amazing wedding night. Abraham's cowardly fear put the matriarch of the promise that would change the world in jeopardy. Once again, God stepped in to save the day.

He stepped in by speaking to Abimilech in a dream. I love God's opening line, "Behold, you are a dead man because the woman you have taken is another man's wife." When God speaks to you in a dream and the first thing he says to you is that you are a dead man, that gets your attention. God obviously

places a high value on marriage. He is very concerned about adultery and adultery with Abraham's wife was a serious problem.

Abimelech said, "Wait a minute. I am innocent. They lied to me. They said they were brother and sister. I didn't do anything intentionally wrong." This brings us to an important point.

Even if I don't feel guilty of sin, that doesn't mean I am innocent of sin.

There is a myth in our culture that as long as we have a clear conscience, we are not guilty of sin. Ask people if they will go to heaven when they die. Many people will say, "Yes," simply because they can't think of anything hugely sinful they have done wrong. They are decent citizens. They are better than the people in the newspaper. We think we are essentially good people because we are not conscious of most sin in our lives. Here is the problem. We only think of sin as what we have consciously chosen to do wrong.

If you remember our studies last Christmas in the book of Leviticus, we learned about intentional sin and unintentional sin. Intentional sin is open, chosen rebellion. In Leviticus, most of the daily, weekly and monthly sacrifices for sin were for unintentional sins that people had done without realizing their sin.

We usually think of sin as just conscious, chosen rebellion. Sin also includes unintentional, inadvertent rebellion. Unintentional sin is not as serious as intentional sin but it is still sin. It still separates us from God. It will still be judged. Sarah was married. If Abimelech had slept with her, would he have committed adultery even though it was done unintentionally? Yes!

This is the difference between our culture's perspective on sin and the Bible's perspective on sin. Our culture tells us sin is just when we intentionally

choose to do wrong. The Bible tells us sin is not just intentional rebellion, it is anytime we transgress God's laws even without realizing what we have done.

While Abimelech's heart was in the right place, his actions would have been in the wrong place and he was in danger of being struck dead because of it. Just as Abimelech had to go out of his way to make his unintentional sin right, when we sin unintentionally, we must do the same.

Sometimes God graciously protects me from sin and disaster.

After God warned Abimelech that he took a married woman into his harem, Abimelech protested a bit and said he hadn't touched her. It was a good thing he hadn't touched her. If he had touched her, he would have been a dead man. I love what God said, "I know you sinned unintentionally. That is why I kept you from touching her." Apparently something happened that kept Abimelech from consummating the wedding. Maybe Sarah had a sudden splitting headache. Maybe Abimelech had a sudden, last-minute meeting that kept him from his wedding night. Whatever it was, there was an unexpected delay in the wedding night. It was a God-orchestrated delay to graciously keep Abimelech from sin and death.

This is the story of God's providence. Sometimes God graciously brings delays in our lives to protect us from our own mistakes or to steer us away from our unintentional sin. How do you look at delays in your life? How do you react when you are stuck in traffic? Maybe the delay is God making you late to protect you from disaster. On September 11, when the World Trade Centers fell, how many people were thankful they were delayed and late for work that morning? Those delays were God's grace keeping those people from disaster.

When I was getting out of seminary in Chicago, I was looking for a church to serve in as a youth pastor. I saw on the Trinity job board about a small church just down the road from my wife's parents. I thought it would be a great place to work that would allow Cindy to help her parents because, at the time, her mother was sick. I applied for the job. The interview was going well until we came to the subject of alcohol. They asked me my views on drinking.

I told them I don't drink but that drinking was not always wrong.

1. Alcohol in the Bible was far less potent than it is today. Alcohol in the Bible was often mixed with water in order to kill the microbes because nobody had a clean water system. While they had hard liquor in biblical times, most wine was watered down and was used either to purify water or to be a safe drink.
2. I don't drink as a matter of wisdom. I have alcoholism in my family history. It isn't wise to expose myself to that danger because I have a genetic predisposition to becoming an addict.
3. As an example, I don't want other who are predisposed to alcohol to try alcoholic drinks because of my example. If people see Pastor Kurt slamming down a cold Coors after preaching, they are going to be more likely to start drinking because of me. I don't want that to be the influence of my life.
4. I have yet to meet someone who is thankful they drink because it made their life better. I have only seen drinking make life worse. In all my years of counseling, I have never seen alcohol make a life or family better. It only makes a life or family worse.

While the Bible specifically says drunkenness is wrong, it doesn't say drinking alcohol is always wrong all the time. Look what Paul said to young Timothy who refused to drink any alcohol and he had stomach problems because of the poor water system in the ancient world.

(No longer drink only water, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments.) 1 Timothy 5:23 (ESV)

He didn't say Timothy should never drink alcohol. He said drink a little alcohol to kills the bad stuff in the water. Don't be a freaked out legalist on this.

I thought I stood on good ground with my answer.

The guy interviewing me at that church became a little twitchy with my answer. He told me his church taught that alcohol at any time or in any form was sinful. Being the young smarty pants that didn't have a good rein on his tongue, I challenged him to prove his position from the Bible. Let's just say the interview ended shortly after my bold and inappropriate comments.

I was seriously bummed I didn't get the job. I remember wrestling with God on why he shut the door on what I thought was a good church. Down the road I thanked God I didn't get that job. I later learned the church was unhealthy. God was protecting me. God derailed me in that job interview to save me from getting that job.

This week, when your Internet is slow, or when your computer crashes, or when a person in front of you at the check-out line at Hy-Vee decides to pay in pennies and count every one, how will you look at it? Will you get angry at God for cramping your schedule or will you look at it as a possible God-orchestrated

delay to protect you from disaster or unintentional sin, just like he did for

Abimelech?

So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants and told them all these things. And the men were very much afraid. Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done." And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What did you see, that you did this thing?" Abraham said, "I did it because I thought, 'There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, "He is my brother." ' "
Genesis 20:8–13 (ESV)

The first thing Abimelech did when he got out of bed was call his servants and address the situation. When God called him to do something, he got things done. He was not like Lot who only left Sodom when angels dragged him out.

Abimelech realized he almost lost the life of his servants and his subjects because Abraham tricked him and lied to him. Abimelech called Abraham in and let him have it with both barrels. If I had a picture of Abimelech's face, I am sure it was fuming mad.

"What have you done to us? How did we sin against you that you made me almost sleep with your wife? You have done something that shouldn't be done. What did we do to you that you treated us this way? We were nice to you. Nobody threatened you. You returned the favor by lying to me, and everyone was almost struck dead by God. What do you think this is?" One clear principle comes out that we see again and again in the Bible.

When I sin, others will suffer.

When Abraham sinned, it was Sarah that almost committed adultery. It was Abimelech that was almost killed. It was Abimelech's people that were almost destroyed. When we sin, others will suffer. We think sin just affects us. We think we can keep our sin self-contained. We can't. It affects everyone, especially those we love. When the executives at Enron saw a financial crisis on the horizon and they secretly made their own golden parachutes while the company collapsed, their sin made thousands lose their pensions. When someone does drugs, it doesn't just affect them but it encourages their friends to try drugs. When someone drinks and drives, in the accident it is invariably the other driver that is killed. When someone divorces his or her spouse, it is the children that suffer.

Don't think of sin as something that just affects you. Sin, by nature, will always spread. It never stays isolated. It makes other people suffer, especially those we love.

Truths intended to deceive are still a lie.

Was Sarah Abraham's sister? Yes. The words were true but the purpose of those words were to give a different impression. A truth intended to deceive is still a lie. The Pharisees of Jesus' day had a whole system figured out so they could lie. In Matthew 23:16 we see that if you swore by the temple you could lie but if you swore by the gold in the temple you were bound by your oath. They used these kind of tricky schemes to find ways they could lie to other people.

It reminds me of the kids on the playground where you would say something but if you had your fingers crossed behind your back, you could lie.

You could say something to your friends but you never knew if it was really true until somebody said the magic words, "I cross my heart and hope to die." Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:33-37 that his followers should not be that way. Let your yes be yes and your no be no. Simply tell the truth. We should not be like Abraham and when we are fearful start telling lies or half-truths intended to deceive.

There is a stupid debate that often takes place in this area about honesty. It is the theoretical debate about when is it right to tell a lie? The favorite question to ask is, "Can we tell a lie to the Nazis if they come to our door and ask us if we are hiding Jews in our basement?" Is there a time we can tell a lie? The problem with this debate is it distracts us from our need to be more truthful. Not many of us are hiding Jews in our basements to protect them from Nazis. We don't need to focus on theoretical arguments about when we can lie, which is almost never. Instead, we should focus on being more truthful as a husband, more transparent as a wife, more faithful as an employee. Those are the challenges we face every day. We simply need to be more like Jesus and less like Abraham so we don't tell half-truths intended to deceive which are really lies.

Just for the record, are there extremely rare cases where a lie is acceptable? Yes! The point is those cases are very, very rare. Very few people every encounter those situations in their lifetimes. Let me show you some examples.

When Israel was in Egypt, the Hebrew midwives were told to kill the male babies on the birth stool. Did they do it? No. They lied to Pharaoh and said the

Jewish ladies were not like Egyptian ladies. They popped out the kids so fast the midwives couldn't get there in time. Maybe the Egyptian midwives intentionally took their time getting to the Jewish women when they were giving birth. When the choice was between tell a lie to Pharaoh or murder children, the midwives chose the lie over murder. God commended them for it.

In another situation, Rahab was a prostitute that lived on the wall of Jericho. She aided spies that came to her house. She hid them for their safety. When the leaders of Jericho came to her and asked if she was hiding Jews, she lied. She sent the soldiers on a wild goose chase in the woods. Those cases where you are forced to choose between telling a lie or someone facing death, you protect the life. Before we focus too much on when we can tell a lie, remember the choice was either lie or someone dies. In that case it is appropriate to cloak the truth and protect the life. A choice of that calibre will almost never happen in our lives. What happens every day is we need to make a choice to be more truthful people, like Jesus, not deceptive like Abraham.

Don't be surprised when your children copy your sins but not your boundaries.

For a moment I want to chase down the rest of Abraham's story and the legacy of dishonesty he left for his children. Abraham's willingness to lie under pressure was a sin he passed on to his son Isaac, who passed it on to his son Jacob, who passed it on to the 10 sons of Israel. This lying became a family trait.

In Genesis 12 and 20 Abraham told a half-truth to stranger. He said true words that were intended to deceive. His wife was his sister but he also left out

the important information that she was also his wife. In Genesis 26 we see Abraham's son Isaac doing the same thing. Look what he learned from his dad.

So Isaac settled in Gerar. When the men of the place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," for he feared to say, "My wife," thinking, "lest the men of the place should kill me because of Rebekah," because she was attractive in appearance. Genesis 26:6–7 (ESV)

Does anything sound deja-vu? During a time of famine, like his father, Isaac went to the area of the Philistines. He was afraid so he lied, claiming his wife was his sister because she was so beautiful. The difference is Sarah and Abraham were legitimately brother and sister. It was a half-truth intended to deceive a stranger. Were Isaac and Rebekah brother and sister? No. This was a full-on lie intended to deceive a stranger.

The moral of the story is marry an ugly woman so you won't have to lie about your wife. Just kidding. The moral of the story is we pass our sins on to our children but they will extend our boundaries. Abraham told half-truths to save his skin. Isaac told outright lies in the same situation.

Let's take it one step further to Abraham's grandsons, Esau and Jacob. In this culture the older brother was given double inheritance and became the family patriarch at the death of the father. Esau and Jacob were fraternal twins. Esau was the older brother. Esau was dad's favorite. Esau was the hairy one. He looked like Chewbacca off Star Wars. He was the hunter that wore camouflage and spent his day in a hunting blind. Jacob was mom's favorite. He stayed home and watched the Cooking Channel and day-time soap operas with his mother. When Isaac was about to die, he needed to give his blessing to his son. In this culture, the blessing was ironclad. It was like signing a will with a public

notary. There was no going back. While Isaac planned to give the blessing to his oldest son, Esau, at his mother's suggestion Jacob stole his older brother's blessing. He dressed like his older brother and used animal skins on his arms so he felt hairy like his older brother. He tricked his elderly father, who couldn't see straight, into giving him the family blessing. Here is my point. Abraham used a half-lie to strangers. Isaac used a full-lie to strangers. Jacob used a full-lie to his own father. Are you seeing a pattern?

Take it another step further. Abraham's grandson, Jacob, ended up with two wives. They ended up in a maternity competition to see who could pop out more kids and be the favored woman. They were popping out kids like rabbits. Jacob may have had a lot of fun making children but he was a terrible father once they came. He favored his youngest son over the rest and let everybody in the house know it. He even gave his youngest son, Joseph, an expensive multi-colored coat that had embroidered across the shoulder blades the phrase, "I am dad's favorite."

One day Jacob sent Joseph to check on his older brothers in the field to make sure they were working. When the older brothers saw him coming, they came up with a plan. They planned to kill him, put blood on his coat and blame Joseph's death on a wild animal. Reuben, one of the brothers, came to his rescue and convinced his brothers to throw Joseph in a dry well. While Reuben was gone, they sold Joseph as a slave to a bunch of Ishmaelite traders on their way to Egypt. Then all the brothers convoluted together to lie to their father, showing him Joseph's blood-stained coat, telling dad Joseph was killed by a wild

animal. We went from Abraham's half-truth about his wife to strangers, to Isaac's full-on lie about his wife to strangers, to Jacob's full-on lie to his father, to all of the kids in the family agreeing to sell their own brother and lie about it to their father. Do you see the pattern?

My friends, our children are watching our actions as parents. They are learning from them. They will repeat them but they will make new boundaries for their sin that is beyond our own.

This means when we have an appointment but our kids see us call to cancel, and we don't tell the truth about why we can't come, they are learning to lie from us. Rest assured, in the future their lies will be worse than ours.

When our kids see us call into work and claim we are sick and they know we just wanted to stay home and work on the house, they will learn to tell that lie.

When our kids see what we watch on television, they will watch the same kind of programs but they will be trashier. Our children will learn from our sin but they won't keep the same boundaries of our sin.

Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you." To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone you are vindicated." Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife. Genesis 20:14–18 (ESV)

What amazes me in this story is that God didn't let Abraham go. After relapsing into this major sin, God held on to Abraham and still used him as the

prophet to pray for Abimelech and restore health and fertility to his household after Abraham was the one that sinned and ruined Abimelech's life.

When we think of the Old Testament patriarchs we usually think of them as superheroes. They weren't. They were ordinary people, like you and me. When they sinned, did they suffer consequences? Yes. Did God discipline them to correct them from sin? Yes, he did. But did God let them go? No. Even when they relapsed into the same old sins God still held on to them and continued to use them. David was a murderer and an adulterer. Abraham was a compulsive liar on more than one occasion. Jacob was a deceiver. Moses had serious anger issues on multiple occasions, and once that even led to murder.

What I find most encouraging is they were ordinary people who struggled with old sins, just like you and me.

The same is true for each of us. Are there consequences to our sin? Yes. Will God discipline us to correct us from sin? Yes. Will God let us go because of our sin? No.

How should God's amazing love for us in spite of our relapses cause us to respond?

1. **It should keep me humble.** The longer we walk with Jesus the easier it is to think we are saved by the goodness of our lives instead of the perfection of Jesus' life. The only reason we are saved is God's goodness to us through Jesus. Each of us will continually struggle and fall to old sins.
2. **It should encourage me in my failures.** When we struggle with the same sins again and again it is easy to become so disgusted with ourselves that

we start to give up on ourselves. Don't give up in your struggle with sin. God won't let you go.

3. **It should change the way I look at others.** Since God gives me grace when I relapse into old sinful habits, it should help me extend grace to others as they relapse in their struggles with their own sinful habits.



Dr. Kurt Trucksess is ordained in the Evangelical Free Church of America. He enjoys reading, writing, time with his family and wrestling with his sons. His favorite topics are preaching and ancient rhetoric. Feel free to contact him at www.Christ2RCulture.com (www.c2rc.com)

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