

“A Model of Perfection”
Sermon for 1 September 2019
Texts: Genesis 17:1-14

Begin with Almighty God’s All-sufficiency, go on to the holy fellowship and obedience,
then aim at Scriptural perfection and so
you will take on your life in due sequence:
Sure Reliance, Right Position, and Glorious Aim.

Spurgeon preached a marvelous sermon on the consecrated life (#854, “Consecration to God,” 1868) which contained some memorable turns of phrase: “All the called are justified . . . and made meet to be afterwards glorified with Christ Jesus.”; “Salvation sanctifies.”; “Confide alone in the virtue of that precious blood, for thus only will you slay your sins and advance in holiness.”; “It (baptism) is the picture of the whole work of Christ.”; and “Much must perish which nature would cherish. . . .” The whole sermon is worth the study and I am completely impressed with Spurgeon’s “*exposition* of the life of Abraham.” Spurgeon suggests that Genesis 17:1-8 supplies a model of the consecrated life—we are going to follow his lead: first, knowing who God is, secondly, walking before this God and finally, pursuing the perfection of holiness.

First, I wish to put out for your consideration something about perfection that I as an educator I highly value. When you are teaching writing, for instance, a good teacher puts in front of the students, pieces of excellent prose, poetry or drama (a “perfection”) for them to imitate in style, manner of expression, form and format. It is pointless to put before them mediocre stuff, saying, “this is more your level” (which it may be and then some) or, “here’s a standard you can more easily attain.” The best you can attain through the mediocre is mediocrity! Not only is that a royal waste of time, it almost certainly assures that no actual talent will be discovered. That is not merely wasteful, it is nearly criminal. And now you know, what should come as no surprise, why I teach Shakespearian drama. It’s the best, its the standard of theatrical excellences and has stood the test of time. Mediocrity is not remembered. Garbage is not praiseworthy.

This ties in with RELIANCE. we may suppose rather directly with Gen. 17:1c, God speaking: 1. **I am God Almighty**, 2. **walk before me** and 3. **be perfect** (some translators say, **be blameless**, others say **upright** and still others, **sincere**). ***But only one of these translations is excellent—the one which says, “be perfect.”*** Because we may not recognize this moment for the crisis, or catastrophe it is, I want to suggest that Abram is **on his face** because the appearing of God as He is undoes him—he shockingly realizes that although his path has been stunningly faithless, a course of unbelief, the **Almighty God has chosen to stoop to him, to condescend by appearing to him, and, yes, to speak with him!** It is simply impossible to stand in the presence of perfect holiness, entire purity, eternal being, **I am Almighty God**. The natural man shrinks from God, the spiritual man bows down before Him. ***The time for transformation in Abram’s life has arrived in person with power.*** It is utterly crushing and redemptive.

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Let's return to *the words of God to Abram* and consider them as a model of the sanctified, or consecrated life. Such a life is hardly boring, indeed only people are boring! The first stepping stone apparent here is the need for the sanctified Christian to recognize the all powerful (EI) unchangeability of God (Shaddai)—the two, power and immutability, constitute the name of God announced here. **I am the Almighty God**—the all sufficient (for all My purposes and all My promises, utterly on My own and without your help! Ever even!) and **I am the glorious One from all eternity**. All power, all riches, all capacity belong to him. Be awestruck with the source of awe and amazement! To think less than this of him is to think *too little* of him and those who think *too little of him* are prone to be insecure with him and untrusting of him. **Doubtful** is the adjective for such a life. When we trust little, we fear much but when we fear God little we obey little. But if our conception of him is grand, immense, unsurpassably great, we should confide in him much more confidently, trusting more thoroughly, we receive more plentifully and, in harmony with all this, as we serve him more completely and we gladly serve him to our utmost! Sin, or the willingness to transgress, commonly, has its origin in either thinking wrongly of God, or in thinking too lowly of him.

Prime example, Abram did not see how God could possibly make him the father of many nations through Sarai, especially if God didn't begin right away. Hence the Hagar option was unbelief, or an error! Had he remembered that God is El Shaddai, the Almighty and unchanging One, even the God speaking with him right now, he would 1. not listened, at the instigation of Sarai, *to the carnal policies of surrogacy, or of polygamy!*; 2, he would have remained true to Sarai and to their marriage. This, despite two recorded instances of his willingness to jeopardize her chastity—once with Pharaoh (Gen. 12) and once with Ambimelech (Gen.20). Why?! Because in recognizing Almighty God for all he is, he would have trusted more and waited on God **knowing he was able to accomplish what he had promised**. There are no creaturely limits with God, he doesn't time out on reproduction, has no such biological limits as we presume we do. As with Abram, so with us. If we are in some business difficulty, God is up to the challenge. He will see us through without common tricks, traps and deceptions—with integrity. If we are of more modest means, we may practice contentment and resist the temptation to grow envious or seethe with discontentment. *And I am willing to walk before God fully confident that he is my God and that he wants me to walk in such a **transparent and holy** manner*. I will not pursue pleasure in the course of vanity, *having died to my flesh*, or engage in silly chatter and public mirth, *having put a bridle on my tongue and chosen edifying speech*.

My God is invincible, all powerful and unstoppable—he is the One I walk before.
That is the right position!

The God who shut the mouths of hungry lions for Daniel can surely shut this mouth if I let Him.
(Daniel 6:21-22)

RIGHT POSITION: Abram's problem is that he chose to walk before Sarai, and to a lesser degree Hagar. He walked by his own sight, following the inclinations of his own heart. The fact is that Abram acted very immaturely in the beginning of his walk before God; he was childish in his decision-making. Now that he is grown up, God expects "perfection" to be his standard, or the goal. It is practical, full of activity and, most importantly, there is a spiritual, or

divine element in this holiness business. I mean that there is divine power, consistently supplied and available for our pursuit of holiness.

For the most part, most people, including Christians *unfortunately*, live as if there were no divine presence in their life, or the living of their life. They live as if God were not, as practical atheists. God neither restrains, or constrains them for they live independent of God. They choose to transgress with no fear of God! Few live as if they were always and ever in the presence of their King—under his scrutiny on his screen! God never sleeps and his eye is always upon his own . . . always. Therefore it is impudent, even unthinkable to carelessly, blatantly sin. Just because we wink at it, does not mean God follows in kind. Indeed, he does not. Be perfect excludes sin. It is a perfect command, consistent with the perfections of our Lord and his Father! The Lord does not say, “Be as good as you can be!” . . . not ever. He expects us to aim at what none of us achieve. **The Law is holy, and just and good** (Romans 7:12) even as we are **carnal, sold under sin** (Romans 7:14). God is not **oblivious** to our condition, or to our limitations—he is commanding the imperfect to be perfect. Truly?

It is no wonder that we read on, **Abram fell on his face** overwhelmed, undone, in a posture of worship/communion (!) because he knew who was speaking and that God expected him to be perfect even though he had been unbelieving . . . we go to work not believing **I will never leave thee, nor forsake** or **I am with you always to the end of the age**. Sometimes we do not believe he is with us past the end of our driveway—or past the end of the next block. We have not been satisfied to suffer—choosing to grumble and complain instead. We are unwilling to be poor, or to be submissive *without questioning, hesitating, or doubting*. That’s the raw truth.

Walk before the Lord? Who does that these days? Were there angry words at the table, curses muttered in traffic, was there carelessness, worldliness, pride, ambition and I know not what evil else dogging our lives? When we return home, don’t we have to confess to going astray, having forgotten our Shepherd’s presence, direction, provision or protection quite entirely. It’s sad really.

The covenant renewal could not have been more refreshing for Abram—all that God would do for him! And chock full of all the “I wills” with which God spells out as consequent to this covenant. ***Nothing establishes better that this whole business is a work of divine power!!*** In such a plethora of promises, doubts can roam about and ravage like wild boars. They do so in spite of our having a God-given assurance in our souls of our interest in the precious, powerful blood of Jesus! **WHEN DOUBTS ASSAIL WE MUST CRY TO GOD FOR STRONGER FAITH!** Listen, great holiness must originate in great faith—faith is the root, obedience is the branch. If the root is decayed the plant and branches cannot flourish. Some professors foment their doubts and fears to “perfect” their holiness. Surely this is ill-conceived. It is ill-conceived as letting sin weaken our faith. This is where “Confide alone in the virtue of that precious blood” comes in. Sins are to be slain—and one progresses in holiness by their slaughter. One must never surrender simply trust in the Crucified, or the blood of the Lamb. Again, let all the “will’s” and “shall’s” inform your faith, edify your heart! That what is did for Abram.

He had a view of the covenant’s power.
He had a view of its everlastingness.
He had a view of its unchangeability.

He had a view of its invincibility.

How came he into these perspectives? By his regeneration over the past thirteen years—since the covenant was first cut! . Abram was brought by God into a new manhood and that is why his name is now changed—and Sarai's, too. They are now Abraham and Sarah—*father of nations* and *royal princess*. And circumcision is the outward sign of this inward transformation. It has already transpired. It signifies the cutting away of the filthiness of the flesh.

OUR GLORIOUS AIM: Few teachers would expect their writing students to produce Shakespearian quality plays—getting near to that standard would be an awesome thing! —but no one raises the performance level by lowering the standards. God never demands that his servants ***be as good as you can be***. What he actually says is, **Be ye perfect even as your father in heaven is perfect**. True, no one but Jesus has ever attained that mark, but every Christian is to aim at it! Or, more scripturally, God has given us the perfect image of Christ to be our example, and his perfect law to be a rule of life—the “how” of the **walking before him** commanded of Abraham and, by extension, each one of us!

So between the expectation and our execution of perfection, there is some distance. And that distance is traversed by means of several stepping stones. Now what I find illuminating is that between Genesis 15, where the covenant is made by God and Genesis 17 where we are presently, Abraham has aged from 86 to 99, give or take a few months. In terms of spiritual growth, we might say, that the child of Genesis 15 becomes the adult of Genesis 17. In the former place, God's word begins with **Fear not** but here God says, **I am God Almighty**. While Abraham was **justified by faith** earlier, we have to walk through some troubling patches of immaturity and unbelief! Yes, the whole Hagar episode is sinful, a fit of unbelief during which both Sarai and Abram manifest some doubt in God's ability to bring about what he has promised. Their solution to the absent heir problem is unfortunate—and came with masses of unpleasantness and discomfiture. Indeed, the descendants of Abraham are still paying for that breach of trust in God to this day. The household was miserable. There was contempt, pride and rebellion and cruelty, pain and sorrow. . . rejection, separation and abandonment. There is no endorsement of polygamy here—quite the opposite! *Abram's choices were warnings more than examples*—JUST BECAUSE SOMETHING IS IN THE BIBLICAL DOES NOT MEAN IT IS BIBLICALLY APPROVED. A crucial distinction. Abram wronged Hagar in taking her to wife, and he further injured her by directing her to be badly used by his rightly offended wife, Sarai. This is not noble, heroic or even brave of Abram. Need I proceed to *less than perfect*?

The only way to be perfect, friends, is to walk before the Lord in the power of the Spirit. Desiring holiness is truly crucial. So where does one obtain holiness? From worship, from prayer, from communion—both the daily walk with God, **before Me**, and through participation in the ordinances: the Lord's Supper and baptism. Yes, this also means walking with other Christians in the body of Christ, submitting to church direction and discipline—in holy fellowship. Living an upright life is most possible in the company of others seeking to live righteously—those in covenant with God. He works with all who love him and **he brings them through entirely**.

Amen