

“Revival Comes to Gerar”
 Sermon for 6 October 2019
 Text: Genesis 20

Ray Pritchard said, “There are only two kinds of theology: Big God and little man; or Big Man, little god.” He was preaching on Abraham as a Backslider in his sermon on Genesis 20. I’ve been praying and studying for over a week about how to approach this chapter. On September 30th I had a break-through. I was pondering Genesis 20, and doing my daily devotionals and, all of a sudden, up popped Robinson Crusoe that great Christian classic by Daniel Defoe. By way of reminder, Defoe wrote this book as a way to relate to his father (his authorial intent!) that *he had come to the end of his life as an unregenerate sinner*—he was profligate in sin, like the Prodigal Son in Jesus’ parable by that name! What a balm that is to a petitioning parent! But after a brush with death, surviving a shipwreck as a carnal sailor. Defoe’s life was, by the wondrous mercy and providence of God, redeemed. According to the book, the Bible, providentially stowed in a cask of medicinal tobacco—tobacco as a sedative, rather like the current use of legalized marijuana in current society—played a pivotal role in the author’s salvation. This inconvenient truth, the truth about the role of the Bible in Defoe’s salvation, is hidden from most readers today—because 19th century humanistic editors decided to delete the overtly Christian/biblical content to suit modern taste and sensibility. As a result Robinson Crusoe flipped from Big God, little man to Big man, little god on the proverbial secularizing dime. So, reader, beware of edited texts—the agenda of the editor’s (the effort to make a work more marketable, or contemporary and thus profitable) can seriously mar authorial intent. In the case of Robison Crusoe, they managed to subvert a Christian classic entirely.

Fairly well-read people are amazed when I talk about Robison Crusoe as a Christian classic. Read the original and you will see that it is as I have said. However, that caution aside, I want to draw your attention to the figure of a nearly drowned sailor crawling ashore, miraculously saved, the sole survivor. And I ask which is *more prodigious, the providence of God in saving the man—or the amazing inventiveness and ingenuity of the man*, whose saving from death, predicates all his cleverness? You see, to a generation infatuated with the inventiveness of the age, the stunning technological advances, mechanistically, of modernity—the growing confidence in man, and the promise of progress, it is easy to appreciate how the editors thought they were enhancing the appeal and relevance of the adroit and inventive hero. They saw the epic proportions of materialistic advance, the conquest of nature, human dominion.

What is the “spiritual awakening” of a dead heart as compared to mechanical tinkering (a steam engine, a cotton gin, a turbine, or single stroke engine)? To the success of mastering the challenges of food, shelter and sheer survival? Crusoe’s redemption, the salvation of the man Friday? What are these but obsolete vestiges of a by-gone epoch—one in which religion held high esteem and sway. It is best to sweep away *the superstitions of our Christian past*. Ah, modern man is man come of age! So enlightened! What better way to abandon them than to excise them from the text, and reduce a Christian work to a chronicle of human achievement, progress, scientific success.

So, Genesis 20 *seems to entail a reprise* of Abraham’s earlier sin, of Gen. 12 where Abram first fobs off his wife as his sister and she is taken in Pharaoh’s harem. Sarai is

twenty years younger, and gorgeous, apparently. No matter, for this ruse Abram is rewarded with immense wealth. Note: he makes off with a fortune for his shrewdness. Now, here in chapter 20, is Abraham simply fallen back into habitual sin? Is it sufficient to write this off as a sad example of how prone we all may be to backsliding, to moral lapse and sin? It seems as if all that is true—and many a sermon has assessed and reassessed this episode. There is famine, Abraham's immense flocks need pasturage, so he migrates from Hebron's sunburnt hills to the ampler, grassy knolls of Gerar.

However, also in Gerar dwells Abimelech who, apparently, is in need of revival. His soul like Robinson's has grown deadened to God. His conscience has, we might say, fallen asleep. He is morally complacent, or indifferent and that is where Abraham comes into his life. Abraham thinks he has come for better pasture, but God has bigger things in view. Such as? *Such as bringing revival to Abimelech!* Well, as we know, Abraham is on the far side of a monumental experience. I mean, his breakthrough to prayerful intercession for the wicked, the people of the five evil cities. This is an amazing thing. He called upon the mercy of God for some totally undeserving people—terribly depraved, cruel and evil folks. Lot was vexed, Abraham was, no doubt, offended and God, as the record shows, was incensed. Judgment fell, the region was spiritually sterilized. No doubt, the impending birth of the son of promise was in view. As we prepare a nursery for a baby's arrival, it may be helpful to view the judgment of Sodom and Gomorrah as more than just "what the wicked deserve"—as a cultural cleansing, a purification, a spring cleaning. This is a spiritually high moment. And sometimes, after such a peak experience, there comes a let-down. It may be partially exhaustion. But just as Elijah had the post-Carmel syndrome, Abraham may have fallen into spiritual depression, a time of heightened vulnerability where fear and temptation seem to gain an upper hand. Elijah ran from the threats of Jezebel, a foreign princess all made up? He had just humiliated and crushed the imported priesthood of Baal and he is terrible concerned about what she threatens to do to him personally. She is on her way out—her reign of lustful perversion and idolatry has received a death blow. It is very hard to keep a cult going if all the leaders and workers are dead! Yes, where was their divine protection plan when they needed it most?!

Don't miss the parallels: the priesthood of Baal is destroyed, Sodom and Gomorrah are a smoldering heap of ruin. Robinson has come through the storm, the ship is gone the crew is lost. But out of the destruction God brings new life, new hope, a new page of human history is about to be written. Abraham, who is not fearing God, thinks there **is no fear of God in Gerar**. (v.11) *Is that why he thinks that way?!* He is quite wrong. ***The fear of God is everywhere because God is God everywhere he is!*** He presumes that lawlessness has the upper hand, that he is vulnerable to the lusts of the king—and God has evaporated from his strategic horizon—AND, FRIENDS, WE DO THE SAME THING. I mean, why doesn't Abraham soberly consider how carefully he has been preserved and advanced by God? I know, so haven't we all. But don't we also fall into insecurity, give play to uncertainty? Assume the worse, forgetful that God is in the midst? Abraham gives in to fear, ***lies to protect himself***—when the truth is totally adequate and spiritually preferable. Speaking the truth in love is the positive course. It is also the faithful course. Why doesn't Abraham speak the truth, trust God and let the chips fall where they may? And, for that matter, why don't I? Which is better, the truth, or the lies we prefer to tell? Is that even a question? Meaning: is truth-telling how we choose to live or do we prefer to lie?

They will kill me because of my wife. (v.11) Firstly, does Abraham know that for sure? Secondly, has God *delivered* on the promise of Isaac yet? How is it even possible to imagine that anyone could eliminate him and derail the purposes of God. No one thwarts God. No one. What a terrible suspicion this is to hold. Terrible to those you are assuming are murderers and terrible to your own heart! How does anyone go out in public if they are so fearful, if they feel so fearful. Then, I have read, he **rationalizes** his lie. However, he doesn't rationalize his lie until he has rationalized his fear. The fear births the lie—in fact, fear always gives birth to lies.

But when Abraham rationalizes his lie about Sarah, he shows that he knows it is a lie. He knows that he is making things up. And he ensnares himself. Because now, he will not only have to walk in the lie, the lie will eventually trip him up. **You may be sure your sins will find you out.** (Num. 32:23) The whole house of cards will come tumbling down! Abraham is into a “little god” moment. He imagines that God is too little to handle his concerns, his affairs. **So he takes things into his own hands.** Those who are paying attention see that's *actually* where most all sin begins, isn't it. Abrahams sin is cowardly, deliberate, dishonest, faithless, it jeopardizes Sarah (her purity, well-being and safety) is misleading (misleads an honest man), dishonors God and torpedoes Abraham's witness/testimony. His integrity amongst the Philistines is shot. When it comes to testimony, only truth-tellers will do! Given that our sins will find us out, and given that sinning costs us all along, it is amazing that we still take to sin as a duck does to water!

“When good men do wrong they do worse harm than when scoundrels do what they do” (Pritchard)—we expect scoundrels to behave badly. Just as we expect that foolish to act foolishly and the ungodly to do ungodly things.

Here's an option: Abraham could have told the truth, trusted God and accepted the outcome. What a novel idea! He didn't tell the truth. No, he lied.

So God intervenes. In his mercy, he visits Abimelech in a dream, he afflicts Abimelech with disease that impedes his sex life (ouch!), he closes the wombs of his women folk blocking conception in the household (so this goes on for some time otherwise no one would know that this *something* had gone wrong) and, finally, he publicly exposes Abraham's sin of duplicity. All that bad PR has the effect of showing everyone *that marriage is sacred to God and* that adultery is *a sin against him*—for starters anyway. Then all the parties end up sinned against. So Abraham is humbled, compelled to deal with his fear and sinful mistrust, cut off from the trail of deceit . . . Sarah is, additionally, protected by God (of course) from adultery (he blocks that path) and the seed is secured from outside corruption, or defilement. Well, good for God. When we mess up, he shows up eventually, but certainly.

It seems that Abraham and Sarah *made a covenant to lie* about their marriage. May I suggest that any such a covenant needs to be renounced? It needs to be confessed in repentance, then renounced and disavowed. That would have prevented lots of hurt and confusion—loss of reputation, and sullied integrity. However, the covenants that we make with our own hearts are just as harmful—we may sign up for lust, or greed, or sloth, envy, or anger. When we decide that this is how we are, and that it has to be that

way, we are practicing inner corruption. That will not go well for us. God is into conforming us to his likeness as found in Christ Jesus—this entails renouncing unholy covenants, alliances with sin, the flesh and the devil. What we choose “not to be” can be as formative as what we aspire “to be.”

Let us encourage each other to attempt both—in renouncing sin and in pursuing our righteousness. This course will speed up our progress, please our God and minimize our deflections.

Amen

153 Thou Hidden Source of Calm Repose

1. Thou hid - den source of calm re- pose, thou all - suf - fi - cient
 2. Thy might - y name sal - va - tion is, and keeps my hap - py
 3. Je - sus, my all in all thou art, my rest in toil, my
 4. In want my plen - ti - ful sup - ply, in weak - ness my al -

love di - vine, my help and ref - uge from my foes,
 soul a - bove; com - fort it brings, and power and peace,
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