

Faith that Breaks the Power of Sin

Rich Nathan
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The Journey of Faith
Genesis 20

I read a story about a man who was pedaling his bicycle through the countryside in India. He became aware of an unusual silence near him – nothing was stirring, no birds were chirping. He stopped his bike and saw off to one side of the road a snake. Its head was slowly bobbing and weaving as it fixed upon a small bird on a lower branch of a bush. The bird seemed paralyzed, as if locked in a hypnotic trance by the snake’s motion. It appeared incapable of flying away. The man waited for the snake to strike and then he thought, “Maybe I can do something to save the little bird”.

He decided to distract the snake by rushing towards the snake and throwing something at it and yelling. Maybe his actions would allow the bird to fly away. His action was successful, the stare of the snake was broken and the bird, free from whatever hypnotic spell the snake placed on it, instantly spread its wings and flew away. When I read this story, I thought about a more tragic hypnosis. The way that we human beings fall into a kind of hypnotic trance concerning temptation and sin.

Over the last couple of months, I’ve been doing a series on faith as it plays out in the life of one man, a man named Abraham, in the Old Testament book of Genesis. What we’ve been discovering is that if a person is serious about wanting to have a relationship with God, there’s never a time in our lives where we are not required to exercise faith. There’s never a time where we say, “Ok, I’ve got this faith thing done, now I can move on to more complicated matters.”

What we see in the life of Abraham is that faith is required in every season of life, in every part of life, in every situation in life. If we are serious about having a relationship with God, we’re constantly called upon to exercise faith. Today, I’m going to talk about the issue of evil, the issue of sin and its power and consequences.

To begin this message I want to ask the question: how does faith break the power of the stare of the snake? I’ve called today’s message, “Faith that Breaks the Power of Sin”.

Let’s pray.

Genesis 20:1 – 3, 8 – 18

Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, ² and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, “She is my sister.” Then Abimelek king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her.

³ But God came to Abimelek in a dream one night and said to him, “You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman.”

⁸ Early the next morning Abimelek summoned all his officials, and when he told them all that had happened, they were very much afraid. ⁹ Then Abimelek called Abraham in and said, “What have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should never be done.” ¹⁰ And Abimelek asked Abraham, “What was your reason for doing this?”

¹¹ Abraham replied, “I said to myself, ‘There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.’ ¹² Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. ¹³ And when God had me wander from my father’s household, I said to her, ‘This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, “He is my brother.”’”

¹⁴ Then Abimelek brought sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham, and he returned Sarah his wife to him. ¹⁵ And Abimelek said, “My land is before you; live wherever you like.”

¹⁶ To Sarah he said, “I am giving your brother a thousand shekels^[a] of silver. This is to cover the offense against you before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated.”

¹⁷ Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelek, his wife and his female slaves so they could have children again, ¹⁸ for the LORD had kept all the women in Abimelek’s household from conceiving because of Abraham’s wife Sarah.

There is a difficulty that some sensitive readers of the text have with this account in Genesis 20. It’s a problem with Sarah’s advanced age at the time. How could a woman of her age be so attractive to another man that he would want to take her? Some scholars say that this incident took place at a much earlier time in Abraham’s life and the only reason that it’s inserted here is because the next chapter deals with this man, Abimelech. It is possible that the events in Genesis are not recorded in chronological order, but it is also possible to believe that if Sarah experienced a physical miracle that enabled her to bear a child at an extremely advanced age, then this physical rejuvenation may have caused her to retain or recover her physical attractiveness. Or it may be that ancient standards of beauty are very different than modern ones. For my money, I’m going to say that the chapter is placed in the correct order and that God, in giving Sarah the capacity to give birth, also restored her youth.

What I would like to do before digging into the details of this chapter is to step back and to consider a foundational question. That is, the use of the word sin and the importance of recovering a clear understanding of the power of sin in the 21st century.

The importance of sin

You see, these days, the word sin has lost its awfulness. It's lost its power to frighten us. About the only context that you ever see the word sin mentioned outside of religion is in reference to desserts.

Dessert pic with this description: Sinful Kebabs: Devil's cake, strawberries and marshmallows skewered together beneath an abundant chocolate drizzle.

There is virtually no one in secular society that really believes the biblical view of human nature, that every human being is constructed out of crooked timber. Or to put it even more plainly, while America's favorite hymn continues to be "Amazing Grace" and gospel choirs sing it whenever there's some kind of national tragedy, very few of us think of ourselves in the terms of that great hymn.

Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind but now I see.

How many folks today would say, "If you want to understand me apart from the grace of God, you have to use terms like sinful wretch and lost and blind." Whatever the historic reasons for our loss of the concept of sin, I believe there's almost nothing more necessary in restoring a good life, a healthy life for ourselves and our world than that we recover the mental furniture of this word, sin.

Unless you had the mental furniture of the concept of sin, we rob human beings of the dignity of real responsibility and real choice. We live in a time where everything has become deterministic. Everything is a matter of brain chemistry and genetics and family backgrounds and social forces. Individual freedom and individual choice are just getting reduced and reduced and reduced down to nothing. The place of individuality. The place of personal responsibility, the place of choice have been evacuated because we've lost the mental furniture of sin.

We need to recover the importance of sin because, ultimately, sin is real. We can dress it up and replace it with a bunch of other words – weakness, mistake, error, foibles, peccadillos. Call it what you will, but until we recover the word sin, we won't see ourselves truly, that there is in each one of us a perversity. In each of us, there is this bondage. We want to do one thing, but we do the other. We don't like being cruel, we

don't like being unloving, but sometimes we are. We don't like lying to ourselves, but we all engage in rationalization. We don't like hurting other people, but sometimes we say and do things that are really hurtful. We don't want to stand idly by while people suffer, but sometimes we just don't care.

We need to recover the importance of sin. This innate tendency to go our own way, rather than God's way. If you want to understand the anthem of sin, it's Frank Sinatra's old song, "I did it My Way". It's not "I did it the right way" or "I did it the kind way" or "I did it the compassionate way" much less "I did it God's way". You want to understand the essence of sin in all of us, it's "I did it my way".

We've got to recover the mental furniture of sin if we're to speak truly about ourselves and our world along with recovering dignity for every human being, the dignity of choice and responsibility. In looking at this text, I'd like to turn our attention to what I would call:

The playbook of sin

When the Ohio State football team plays an opponent, before they get on the field the coaches and the team study game film. They study the opposing team's tendencies on offense and on defense. What the opposing team likes to run in various situations. They study film to explore the opponent's tendencies and to probe the opponent's weaknesses. What weaknesses are there on the other team that we can exploit to our own advantage? Maybe there's an inexperienced cornerback on the other team that we can complete passes against. Maybe there's a substitute lineman that we can overpower. Maybe their quarterback holds the ball too long and we can take advantage of that.

All of us are subject to the stare of the snake in our own unique ways. Do you know that the enemy of your soul has watched decades of game film on your life? Have you ever thought about that? That the enemy of your soul knows your tendencies, the enemy of your soul has probed your weaknesses. He has studied game film on you since you were born. Do you know what the playbook is on you?

In Abraham's case, and we're going to explore this in a moment more deeply, the enemy knew the tendency of Abraham in certain situations was to lie because of cowardice. We read this in verses 10-13:

Genesis 20:10-13

¹⁰ And Abimelek asked Abraham, "What was your reason for doing this?"

¹¹ Abraham replied, "I said to myself, 'There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' ¹² Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. ¹³ And when God had me

wander from my father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."'"

25 years before, we read of a similar circumstance way back in Genesis 12 when Abraham and Sarah venture down to Egypt. Abraham, in an act of self-preserving cowardice, asks his wife to lie about their relationship. Here's what we read in Genesis 12:

Slide Genesis 12:11-13

¹¹As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. ¹²When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. ¹³Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."

It doesn't matter how long we've walked with God. There is, in each of us, a weak vein that can be exploited by the enemy who has a playbook he runs against us. We have an enemy who knows our tendencies, who can exploit our weaknesses. Do you know the playbook on your life?

The Apostle Peter didn't know the enemy's playbook on himself, even though Jesus read right from the playbook to him on the night that Peter disowned him three times. He said, "Peter, this is who you are." Peter said, "No, I'm better than that. That's not really my weakness."

Moses didn't know the playbook on his life, but in certain situations he would give in to explosive anger. As a young man and as an old man, anger was the weak vein in Moses' life.

So, let me ask you again, do you know the enemy's playbook on your life? Do you know the weak vein? Do you know yourself well enough to know which tendencies of yours can be exploited? Where the door is open and needs to be guarded. If you don't know yourself, if you are out of touch with the playbook, then you don't know what situations you need to avoid.

There's an old saying in addiction recovery that if you hang around a barbershop long enough, eventually you will get a haircut. When Abraham traveled in a foreign territory, the enemy used his cowardice to cause him to sin. This is a call for us to look deeply within ourselves and do some reflection regarding where we're vulnerable, what we need to guard. Perhaps as we do some introspection, we might see an open door to sin as a result of a profound need in our lives for acceptance or our need to win in competitive situations or our need for recognition or our cravings for approval from our mothers or our fathers. The enemy just pulls on this loose thread of acceptance or recognition or competitiveness or whatever and just unravels the whole sweater.

Sometimes, the playbook on our lives will include our strengths because even our strengths, if overdone, can be exploited. Maybe you have a strength that you are passionate to see justice done in the world, but if that strength is not submitted to God, your passion for justice can sour and become a self-superior, judgmentalism toward anyone who is not as enlightened as you are regarding a particular issue or situation.

Maybe you are someone whose strength is peacemaking. Having you around brings people together. You are a harmonizer. But that strength can be exploited into peace at any price. Sometimes you lose truth in your desire to make peace.

The enemy had a playbook on Abraham, as he does on each of us, and as I said, the enemy knew Abraham's tendencies and weaknesses. I want to look a little more closely at Father Abraham, because in his life we discover an important root of sin.

A root of sin

In Abraham's life, the root of sin was cowardice. Let's look again at Genesis 20:

Genesis 20:11-13

¹¹ Abraham replied, "I said to myself, 'There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' ¹² Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. ¹³ And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."'"

And Genesis 12:

Genesis 12:11-13

¹¹ As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. ¹² When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. ¹³ Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you."

The dictionary defines coward as someone who lacks the courage to do difficult, dangerous or unpleasant things. A coward shies away from unpleasant situations. A coward is someone who does whatever necessary to save their own skin – lie, cheat, steal, betray trust. Cowards do whatever they need to do to preserve themselves.

We don't talk that much anymore about cowardice. But like the word sin, cowardice is a dreadful reality whether we talk about it or not.. Whether we acknowledge it or not. Do you know, the Bible classes cowardice alongside of murder as one of the things that will cause people to be condemned to eternal separation from God?

Here's what we read in Revelation 21:

Revelation 21:8

⁸ But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death.”

Alongside of murder and witchcraft, alongside of sexual immorality and idolatry, we read about the sin of cowardice.

Cowardice is at the root of many other sins. Consider the man Pontius Pilate, the man who has gone down in history as being guilty of a particularly heinous sin – condemning Jesus Christ to death. Pontius Pilate's name is even mentioned in the Apostle's Creed when about Christ we read:

He suffered under Pontius Pilate

Why did Pilate cause Jesus to suffer? Why did he condemn Jesus to death by crucifixion? What was at the root of Pilate's sin? After he examined Jesus, he said, “I find no fault in this man.” Pilate's wife warned him that she had suffered from a troubling dream and said, “Don't touch this man.” Pilate was so impressed after his meeting with Christ, that he wanted to set him free. But ultimately, he was a coward and chose not to do the right thing, the just thing, the true thing. So, he took some water and he washed his hands believing that he could somehow wash himself of his crime and then he ordered Jesus to be nailed to a cross.

If we had the time, I would look with you at the roots of King Saul's sin. Why the kingdom was taken away from Saul and given to King David. What you see in Saul was the sin of cowardice, the fear of what people would think instead of what God thought.

If I had the time, we'd look at the sin of Aaron, Moses' brother who made a golden calf that the people of Israel bowed down to and worshipped. And we'd see that at the root of Aaron's sin was cowardice.

If I had the time, I would go through a list of people in the Bible and in history and trace their particular sins back to cowardice. Friends, if we could uproot the sin of cowardice in our own lives, we would uproot so many other sins. Think with me for a moment how cowardice, the fear of other people how cowardice causes so many other sins. What is it that keeps people from coming to Christ? Men or women may come to the point of decision, where they say to themselves: “You know, I think there really is something to this person, Jesus. I've been searching, I've been exploring, I've been listening, I've been reading, I think that this person Jesus is who he said he was. I think he is the way to

God. I think he is the truth. I think that in him I could discover life worth living. I think this person Jesus really did die on a cross, not for his own sins, but to pay for my sins and the sins of the whole world.”

A person may even come to the place of believing that this person Jesus, after he died, rose from the dead. He’s alive today. I can have a relationship with him. A person may get right to the edge of decision and then walk away because of cowardice. If I became a follower of Jesus, what would my family think? My mother would be really upset, my father would be angry. What would my husband or my wife think? What would my boyfriend or girlfriend think? This could really cost me a work. It’s because of cowardice that so many people hesitate at the point of decision and turn their backs on following Christ.

It’s because of cowardice that those of us who consider ourselves followers of Christ refuse to speak publically about our relationship with Christ. We refuse to bear public witness because we’re embarrassed. We want to save face because we want to preserve our reputation in a group or with an individual. It is because of cowardice that we go along and laugh along and refuse to stand up for what is right, what is true, what is good. Friends, if we could uproot cowardice from our lives, we would pull up so many other sins.

What happened when Abraham sinned?

The consequences of sin

When we choose to do what is wrong or we choose to fail to do what we know we ought to do, when we choose to go our own way rather than God’s way, the consequences of our choice can often go way beyond anything we ever imagined.

Years ago, I felt like God gave me a picture of what happens when we choose to sin. The picture was of a man holding a big rock standing by the edge of a pond. While the man held the rock in his hand he had a choice. He could put the rock down on the ground and walk away or he could choose to fling the rock into the pond. If the man chose to fling the rock into the pond, he has no choice regarding how far the ripples from that rock would go. The ripple effect, the consequences, were outside of his hands. That’s the way it is with sin.

In Abraham’s life, the ripple effect of his sin was farreaching. When he chose to lie about Sarah and to claim that she was only his sister and not his wife, he endangered his wife. He made her complicit in his sin and beyond that, he placed his wife under the power of this foreign ruler. He not only endangered his wife, he endangered Abimelech. In this story, God was going to judge Abimelech who innocently took Sarah believing she was available. And Abraham endangered his children and grandchildren. Abraham’s sin

didn't stay in his generation. He opened a door and his son, Isaac, walked through. And his grandson, Jacob, and Jacob's 11 sons. Abraham's sin became a pattern for his son's life.

In Genesis 20, Abraham's son Isaac is in Gerar, the land of the Philistines, again because of a famine. Like his father, Abraham, Isaac also had a beautiful wife. Her name was Rebekah. Like his dad, Isaac was afraid for his life. He suffered from the sin of cowardice. He was afraid that the men in the land of the Philistines would kill him in order to take his wife so Isaac, Abraham's son, resorted to the same ruse, the same lie that his father told a generation before.

We see this in families. Our sin creates patterns that our kids imitate. Do you see this in your own life, friends? Do you see any places where some of the sins that your parents struggled with have shown up in your own life and you struggle with the same things? Or maybe do you see this in your children's lives? Do you see some of the struggles, some of the issues that you've never overcome in your life and are now repeating themselves in your children's lives? The same anxiety? The same perfectionism? The same addictions? The same promiscuity? The same fears regarding money? The same materialism?

Once we choose to throw the rock into the pond, the ripple effect can often go way beyond ourselves. And I would just say, brothers and sisters, that if you see sins in your own life that were also present in your parents or your grandparents, your brothers and sisters, then it is biblical to confess not only your own sins, but the sins of your family. There are many instances in the Bible where somebody confesses, not just their own sin, but the sin of their family and the sin of their ancestors.

We talked about the importance of recovering an understanding of sin. We talked about the playbook of sin that the enemy has for each of our lives. A root of sin is cowardice and then the consequences of sin and then let's close with:

The defeat of sin

How do we defeat the stare of the snake? How do we overcome the power of temptation and the power of sin in our lives? The power to defeat sin lies in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ on the cross. What happened on the cross unleashed a transforming power, a converting power that can be compared to God's power when he created the universe. The way to lay hold of this transforming power, this converting power, this power to overcome sin in our lives is faith.

We start with conversion. Conversion is an old word. It describes the most important choice that any human being can make. Robert Frost wrote a poem on the importance

of choices. It's called "The Road Not Taken". In this poem, he identifies a key moment in life where a decision maker is standing at a crossroads, a juncture in life, and has to choose. Which path shall I take? The road to the right or the road to the left?

Frost says:

I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

To choose to trust Christ and his sacrificial death for you on the cross will make all the difference. Some of you have not yet made the choice to get on the path of following Christ. In a few minutes, when I end this message I will give you the opportunity to make the choice to follow Christ. Let's say that you said, "I've taken that road, but I still struggle with the stare of the snake in some area or other in my life. What's the remedy for me? How do I overcome the power of a particular sin in my life?"

The answer is faith.

If you trace the source of any one of our problems all the way upstream, at some point we are going to run into the issue of a lack of faith. Let's say that your problem is anxiety. You're a worrier and you worry about your future. You worry about what's going to become of you. You're anxious about your child. You're anxious about your finances. You worry about how you're going to make ends meet. You're anxious about getting old or being single and alone or getting into grad school. Jesus says, "Your problem is not that you are hard-wired to worry or genetically determined to worry. Let me call anxiety what it is, it's sin. I'm going to restore to you the dignity of choice. You can give in to this sin or you can put the rock down, but the issue for you regarding your anxiety is faith."

Listen to what he says in Matthew:

Matthew 6:28-30

²⁸ "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?

If you trace the root of any sin: lust, impatience, jealousy, bitterness – at some point you're going to run into a deficit of faith. We don't believe that God will provide for us. We don't believe that we can find the joy or the love or the intimacy or the acceptance

that we crave. We don't believe we can find that in God, we have to go somewhere else to get it.

You say, "Oh, great, Rich, my problem is not just this particular sin. My problem is not just that, it's a lack of faith. Oh, thank you so much!"

What you see here is a cure for a lack of faith. We don't have to live with little faith. Here's what we read in Romans:

Romans 10:17

¹⁷ Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.

The way to deal with a lack of faith in a particular area, grooved out weakness in our lives, is to immerse ourselves in the Word of God, the scripture.

The Apostle Peter says in 2 Peter:

2 Peter 1:4

⁴ Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.

You know, there is a practice that has unfortunately fallen by the wayside for many contemporary Christians and that is the practice of scripture memory. Taking a verse or a few verses of the Bible and repeating them over and over until they're locked in your heart so that every time you are tempted to throw the rock, you can latch onto the word of God and choose to put the rock down. Or to change the metaphor, take a few Bible verses and throw them like a rock at the snake and break the power of his hypnotic stare.

It is faith in nothing other than the Word of God and Jesus Christ to whom God's word points. It's faith and faith alone that defeats the power of sin in our lives. Faith in the Word of God.

Let's pray.

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