

Most of us have heard of pre-arranged marriages. Perhaps less well-known in our culture. But not unknown.

Genesis 20 invites us to examine the marriage of Sarah and Abraham. While we can't tell if their marriage was pre-arranged, we see in this chapter a concerning 'pre-arrangement' in their marriage.

V 13:

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

'He is my brother.'

I want to speak about the dilemma and dangers of pre-arranged sin.

Those things we agree to in our relationships - marriage or otherwise - that lead us into habits and behaviours that we know are sinful.

Wrong before God. Harmful to others.

Of course, all relationships exist on the principle of pre-arrangement. What we have agreed to bring to the relationship. Marriage is one of the most common reminders.

Genesis 20 tells us it's sinful pre-arranged repetitive sin that leads us into trouble.

Wrong before God. Harmful to others.

Consider the three characters of the chapter to understand its message.

Firstly, the repeated sin of Abraham. Secondly, the repentance of Abimelek. And thirdly, the restoration by God.

The Repeated Sin of Abraham | God's Word Taken Lightly (w 1-2)

'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."'

Genesis 20 is the first time we learn of this pre-arrangement in Abraham's marriage. But it's not the first time it's happened.

In Genesis 12 Abraham is plucked from obscurity to become the father of many nations from whom global blessing will come. The covenant is God's pre-arrangement to bring his saving grace to the world.

Many associate the number 13 with back luck. In both chapter 12 and chapter 20 verse 13 is just associated with bad practice. Genesis 12:13:

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 encounter with the Pharaoh in chapter 12 and the Philistine King in chapter 20 are the consequences of Abraham's pre-arranged repeated sin.

Verse 13 of Genesis 20 explains Abraham's manipulative motives:

This is how you can show your love to me...

We've heard it before. Perhaps we've been there before:

If you really love me...

Those five words have been the justification of many a sin.

How does it get like this? Why do we, like Abraham, allow sinful repetitive habits to infiltrate our relationships? With God. And with one another.

There are at least three reasons from Genesis 20:

Firstly, because we're **fearful**.

Abraham feared for his own life. Sarah's beauty placed him at risk. He feared they would dispose of him to seize his wife.

He was prepared to accommodate adultery in his marriage for the sake of preserving his own life.

God's word was not enough. Instead Abraham out of fear would turn to Sarah. Guilt her into giving her word for his safety.

The second reason we allow repeated sin is because we're **flippant**. We're prepared to explain away our sinfulness with the superficial.

Abraham says he'd really done nothing wrong. Technically Sarah was his sister. A different mother somehow justified the adulterous plan.

Abraham brings new meaning to the phrase 'Innocent until proven guilty'.

If God had not entered the picture to point out the consequences of Abimelek's actions, Abraham almost believes he could have covered over his sinful behaviour.

Genesis 20 is a mirror. It shines a light on our lives for the times we have justified and manipulated the reality of our wrong behaviour to preserve our innocence. Perhaps we've called it 'the white lie'.

It takes bigger lies to cover for smaller lies. The consequences of repetitive sin are cumulative.

Our flippancy about God's word leads to the third reason we don't take it seriously.

Because we're faithless. We stop trusting God and taking his word seriously. It no longer becomes a reference point for our lives.

We begin to exclude God from those areas we don't want him to be involved in. This can be especially so our relationships with one another.

Beware the repeated sin of Abraham. His faithless heart not only led him into personal repeated sin, but placed Sarah at extraordinary risk.

This pre-arrangement was supposed to prevent harm. It only created it.

The supreme irony is that his son Isaac would repeat this very sin in his own marriage. Before the same king. Genesis 26.

If you're a parent. Or a grandparent. A leader in your business. A leader in ministry. Your life is always an example to others.

At the heart of sinful pre-arrangements is the agreement you make with yourself.

1 John 1:8:

If we say claim to be without sin we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

The Repentance of Abimelek | God's Word Taken Seriously (w 3-16)

Secondly, consider the repentance of Abimelek.

It doesn't take long in the chapter for God to intervene. Verse 3:

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.

We have some sympathy for the Philistine King. V 5:

Did Abraham not say to me 'She is my sister', and didn't she also say 'He is my brother?' I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands.

Most of the dreams I have are just confusing. And sometimes distressing. I have trouble making any sense of them.

The dream that comes to Abimelek is an expression of God's grace.

V 6. It was God himself who kept Abimelek from touching Sarah. It was God himself who kept Abimelek from incurring judgment for adultery.

A pagan King has better ethics than Sarah and Abraham. Even though Abimelek's conscience may be clear, sin still couches at the door it seems.

A judgment has been placed on his household to reveal the gravity of the situation. Things cannot remain as they are.

God in his grace provides the way forward. V 7:

Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all who belong to you will die.

God uses a pagan King to chide Abraham for his behaviour, the humiliation of which brings Abraham's petty explanation of verse 13.

Abimelek's repentance is generously displayed in the gifts he gives Abraham. Along with permission to live wherever he likes in the Philistine territory.

He recognises too the harm done to Sarah. V 16. Blessing Abraham with further gifts to show that she is completely vindicated. The king is a better model for the marriage than the husband.

Learn the lesson of the pagan king. Having encountered God, Abimelek wanted his repentance to be two things God seeks from us too.

To be real. And to be restoring.

This is the problem with pre-arranged, repeated sin in your life. Generally, it suppresses authentic repentance. The path to God's grace.

How often do we take out suppression orders on our sinful habits?

We won't talk to ourselves about them. We won't talk to others about them.

We won't talk to God about them.

Instead, we've decided we'll just repeat them. As if the consequences don't matter.

Abimelek knew the consequences. The judgment for lack of repentance, according to v 4, would be upon the whole nation. If the king commits adultery it's not just a private sin.

Sin is never private. We have invented this naïve Australian ethic that you can do what you like as long as it doesn't bring harm to others.

What goes on in the bedroom is nobody's business. As long as there's been consent.

Remember the lesson of Genesis 20. When you sideline God's word in your relationships with others, whether in the bedroom or the boardroom, your so-called private and usually pre-arranged sin will ruin the lives of families and friends. And likely shipwreck your faith.

Let your repentance be real. So you might, thirdly and lastly, experience God's restoring grace.

The Restoration of God's Grace | God's Word Taken to Heart (w 17-18)

The surprise of this chapter is that the one who caused all the trouble becomes the one by whom restoration is achieved.

Just like the ending to that movie, or the twist in the novel that you never would have predicted, Abraham is the prophet who will pray for Abimelek, and as the chapter ends, bring restoration to his family.

All this must have seemed so strange to Abimelek. The guy who had caused him so much grief was the one who would be the key to his restoration.

Abimelek's gifts displayed the authenticity of his repentance. But they could never achieve his restoration before God. That can only ever take place on God's terms.

A mediator was required. Abraham the prophet. Called this for the first time in his blurred career. The vehicle for bringing God's word to the nations.

The healing through Abraham is a sign of God's surprising grace. Which we can only ever receive on his terms.

According to the promises of God, the prophet mediator Abraham - who caused all this trouble - leads to the one who took all our troubles.

Jesus Christ is the ultimate mediator. Took God at his word and humbly gave his life on the cross. To rescue us from sin. To rescue us from ourselves.

Note the direction of Genesis 20. Repeated sin. Repentance. Restoration. This is the way of the gospel. Come to God on his terms.

Abraham was the sinful mediator, so we might come to know Jesus as the sinless saviour.

Be overwhelmed by the merciful forgiveness of God for our sins. And the lasting blessing of his presence through the power of the Holy Spirit.

What's your pre-arranged sin? That habit or thought you're having trouble conquering? That area of your life where the suppression order is still in place?

Is adultery a risk? Remember it's really just a form of greed. Which usually harms most parts of our lives. And our relationships with others.

Is it anger? I think COVID-19 is probably testing that one. We might call it impatience. You're looking for someone to blame for the way things are.

Is it arrogance? If only more people were more like me the world would be a much better place.

I've just started with the 'a's. We can work our way through the alphabet and identify habits and patterns we know we need to repent of.

It's not whether you should change. It's where you start.

But the message of grace is good news of Genesis 20. Live life in the renewing and restoring grace of the one who died to save us from ourselves.

The promises to Abraham lead us to Christ. Anyone who receives him enters God's family and can truly say of Christ 'He is my brother'.