

“Imperfect People”

Genesis 12:10-20

April 18, 2021

Read Genesis 12:10-20

This is the Word of the LORD.

Prayer of Invocation

If ever we read the Bible thinking the people involved were superhuman heroes, this story would put a quick end to it.

God Deals with Imperfect People.

This kind of event always surprises me. I think more highly of biblical characters than this; they are in the Bible, right? Isn't the Bible like a Hall of Fame; in order to be let in, you have to do or be something outstanding? Shouldn't the Bible writers all act like the baseball writers who vote to determine who gets into the Hall of Fame? Shouldn't the Bible writers have compared and contrasted lifetime and career statistics to decide whether or not someone is “worthy” of induction into the Bible?

But that is not how the Bible works; that is not how God works. God works with imperfect people.

Abram had just had this incredible epiphany at the culmination of an amazing journey – standing in the presence of the living God. He heard God's promises. In faith, he left his country and his kindred and his father's house, and he went to the land God showed him. Abram built altars so that God's faithfulness would be remembered.

And then, Abram got squirrely when times got tough.

Isn't this just like you and me: we have an encounter on the mountaintop – whether at a retreat, or in a worship service, or in prayer, or just walking around; where our whole world is turned upside down and we are filled with joy and the Holy Spirit; we have experienced being in the presence of the living God – and then we come back to real life and we suddenly find ourselves back in the muck and mire of our sinful ways. It is the kind of thing that makes you wonder why God would have anything to do with us. And yet, he does.

Because of a severe famine (you know it is severe when the Bible says it twice in the same verse), Abram headed to Egypt. As they got close, he was afraid that he would not fit in and that the Egyptians would hurt him – physically, if not oppressively – unless he pretended Sarai was his sister and not his wife.

Let's think about this for a minute. This was not a spur of the moment, “oops.” This was an intentional decision. Abram looks like a sitcom husband here. He got spooked and hatched this wacky plan. He had to sell it to Sarai, so look at what he did:

- **He flattered her.** “When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife, ‘I know well that you are a beautiful woman in appearance.’ Is this “a little sugar to make the medicine go down?”

- **Then, he made his paranoia her problem.** “When the Egyptians see you, they will say, ‘This is his wife’; then they will kill me, but they will let you live.” It is your fault; you are too beautiful and they are going to hurt me. O h, woe is me; my wife is beautiful.
- **Finally, he was willing to sacrifice her in order to save himself.** “Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account.”

This was God’s hero? This was God’s choice? This is the guy through whom redemption history was going to be written?

As a matter of fact, yes.

If we look through the great patriarchs – Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – we see that they were *all* flawed. And they did not have just little flaws. Moses had murder as a skeleton in his closet. David had adultery and murder in his. Each one of them was flawed. And it is not just the guys. Sarai got mad at Abram for having a child with Hagar when it was her idea. Rebekah, Isaac’s wife, tricked Isaac into giving the blessing to Jacob. Rahab was a prostitute. Each one was imperfect. All were imperfect people God used in his grand plan of redemption.

The New Testament folks fare no better on the Hall of Fame “deserving” scale. Peter was a bombastic fisherman who denied Christ. Matthew was a tax collector. Paul held coats so others could throw stones. They were not the elite, they were not pure, they were not somehow above the temptations and failures you and I experience. Just like them, God cares and is able to use each one of us even though we are imperfect.

God can use imperfect people, which is comforting. It is comforting because we know we are imperfect even when our intentions are good.

A man went to the doctor for his annual physical examination. After the doctor had examined the man, he asked “Is there anything else you’d like to discuss today?” The man thought a moment and said “Yes, as a matter of fact there is. My wife has gotten so hard of hearing that often she doesn’t hear me...and she refuses to get her hearing checked. What can I do about this?” The doctor thought for awhile and then said “I have an idea for you. Next time you see her and she is not looking, say something to her and see if she hears you. Then see how close you have to get before she hears you. Let me know what happens.”

So the man went home. They had one of those open floor plans with a great room that included the living room, dining room, and kitchen. He saw his wife with her back to him and she was at the kitchen counter getting dinner ready and he stood at the far end of the Great Room. So, he asked in a reasonable voice, “What’s for dinner tonight, Honey?” As usual, there was no answer. She just kept doing what she had been doing. So, he took a few steps closer and said again, “What’s for dinner tonight, Honey?” Again, there was no response or change. So, he took a few steps closer and asked a third time, “What’s for dinner tonight, Honey?” The same. The man shook his head to himself. Finally, he got right up behind her and asked again, “What’s for dinner tonight, Honey?”

At this point she turned around and faced him and said, “For the FOURTH time, Beef Stew!!!!”

God can use imperfect people – which is a good thing because we are all imperfect.

Now, to be clear, God did not condone their failings. God did not rejoice in Abram's plan. Look what happened: Pharaoh suffered plagues and, when the truth was revealed, rebuked Abram for dealing dishonestly. Abram did not argue, indicating he knew what he had done was wrong.

God does not celebrate our sins, but he deals with them. God did not celebrate David's adultery, but David experienced grace and God did not leave him. Jesus had to restore Peter after his denials – he did not simply shrug it off as if it did not mean anything. God deals with sinful imperfect people; he does not condone unrighteous behavior.

If we actually believed and understood this, it would be a huge relief to one of the great anxieties Christians have: that they do not have to be perfect in order for God to love them. We act and feel like we have to earn the grace we have been given in order for God to keep loving us. Not so. God did not stop loving Abram because Abram was imperfect. Many people – even believers – stop coming to church because they do not want to be hypocrites. There is an old joke: the church is not filled with hypocrites; there is always room for more.

Have you ever wondered if – even after receiving Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior – if you were good enough for God's love? One of the most insidious seeds of doubt is the thought that God demands perfection before he will love. Remember: we can live boldly and free because God's grace *has* been given to us and we can neither preserve it nor pay it back. We can only live into it with humility, thankfulness, and joy.

The Way God Treats Us

All right. So, at the risk of dwelling on the obvious, what was the big deal in what Abram did? It highlights the difference between how we treat one another and how God treats us.

What is the difference between a sister and a wife? What is the difference between a sibling and a spouse?

For starters, there is a different line for loyalty. There's an intimacy, a connectedness, a personal commitment that is far greater for a spouse than even the closest sibling. Marriage is something you enter knowingly; siblings happen to you. Marriage is a union; family is an affiliation or association. Family is a close association, but it is not equal to or stronger than a marriage commitment.

When I was a kid, I was often told how much I looked like my older brother. Teachers would call me by his name. Because he was a good student, many of them would have a presumption that I would be a good student. I often heard, "Your brother did not have trouble with this material..." There was nothing I could do about it. It was not all bad, mind you; but the shadow cast by my brother was a given in my life – it had nothing to do with me. To put a finer point on it: I loved my brother, but I did not have any sense that I was responsible to sacrifice anything in order to protect him or his reputation. There was nothing particularly self-less about our relationship. He did his thing, and I did mine, and that is how it was.

When I got married, I made a covenant before God and witnesses to love, honor and cherish Jennifer. I entered that covenant. I made those vows. (25 years ago) I promised to love her like Christ loved the

church – to be willing to give my life for her. Her joy is my joy, her health is my health, her life is my life. We are joined together.

Abram treated his spouse like a sibling. Jesus treated his siblings like a spouse.

Who is Christ's bride? The church. What did Christ do? Philippians 2 puts it this way:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. ” (Philippians 2:4-8 NRSV)

The writer of Hebrews put it this way,

...who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.” (Hebrews 12:1-4 NRSV)

Jesus is the one who is able to keep us from falling, to make us stand without blemish in the presence of his glory with rejoicing. (Jude v.24). That selflessness – putting the other's need and life above your own – that is how you cherish a spouse.

Consider communion. This may seem like a bit of a digression, but it ties in at the end; go with me for a couple of minutes.

The Lord's Supper takes place in the context of the Passover meal; the meal in which God established the identity of the people of Israel and drew them up out of bondage to slavery in Egypt. There are four cups of wine used in the Passover Seder. They symbolize the four distinct promises made by God to the Hebrews as told in Exodus 6:6-7.

- **"I will take you** out of Egypt",
- **"I will deliver you** from Egyptian slavery",
- **"I will redeem you** with a demonstration of my power", and
- **"I will acquire** you as a nation".

It was at the point of the third cup – the remembrance of God's promise of redemption with a demonstration of his power – that Jesus instituted 'the Lord's Supper.' He took the bread and gave thanks (Matthew 26:26): "Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, the Creator Who brings forth bread from the earth", according to the Jewish ritual . Then He broke the bread and passed round the third cup of wine, called the Cup of Blessing or the Cup of Redemption. Jesus said, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:20).

This is relevant to our discussion of the difference between a sibling and a spouse because Jesus' actions in the Lord's Supper tie together Passover and the covenant ceremony of betrothal between a

bridegroom and his bride. In biblical times, an Israeli bridegroom proposed to his beloved by offering the third cup in the Passover seder – which means cup of sanctification or holiness. When the bride price was established, the bridegroom would offer the bride this cup, saying in effect, “This cup is my life, given for yours.” This was the point of her decision. If she accepted his marriage proposal, she sipped from the cup and was now betrothed and promised in marriage to him.¹

Jesus kept the same wedding custom after the Passover meal, offering the cup to His disciples. Now, when believers take Holy Communion, they are entering into or renewing their wedding vow to Jesus, our Bridegroom.

When you take communion, you are accepting his life for yours. You are accepting his offer to love you, to redeem you with a demonstration of his power, to make you holy.

Jesus treated you as his beloved. How have you treated Jesus?

This brings us back to Abram.

Today’s Christians are not altogether in a different situation than Abram. We have been called to leave all our security and follow to the promised land Jesus will show us. Where we have followed faithfully, we have seen God’s hand at work. Now, as we wander around below the mountaintop, we get caught up in the everyday struggles of life. We may not have the physical famine that Abram was experiencing, but we are in a situation like Egypt was for Abram, where we are foreigners in a foreign land. And, if we do not watch carefully, we suddenly look to treat Jesus like Abram treated Sarai.

What does that look like? Believers try to distance themselves from Jesus, as if he is a sibling we only kind of claim. “Jesus is savior for me,” I have heard people say, as if there is another savior for others. We are afraid of offending other people if we hold onto Jesus too tightly; we worry more about what they will think of us rather than what Jesus thinks of us. We act as if we are saying, “Yes, Jesus is like my brother; what are you going to do? I am stuck with him.”

When you take communion, you are accepting his life for yours. You are accepting his offer to love you, to redeem you with a demonstration of his power, to make you holy.

Jesus treated you as his beloved. How have you treated Jesus?

Conclusion

This is a passage that should both bring us some comfort and unsettle us at the same time. It should bring comfort because Abram’s story did not end here; God was not through with him even though Abram did something awful. God’s will is not thwarted by our failures. This passage should unsettle us because it shows us how we all trip, fall, and sin by not trusting God and conniving schemes to do things our own way.

So, what should you take away with you today? Recognize that God does not give up on you; God has not given up on you. Hold fast to your faith, even when it is uncomfortable to do so. Remember, you are God’s beloved. He has given his life for you. Devote yourself to growing closer to him.

¹ Ray Vander Laan, *That The World May Know*

As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him." (Colossians 3:12-17 NRSV)

That's how to treat God as your beloved. Amen.

Prayer

Hymn: "Crown Him With Many Crowns"

Questions:

1. Who are the heroes you admire? What is it about them you admire? How do you account for their imperfections and failings?
2. How does God deal with your imperfections and failings? How do your imperfections and failings impact how you relate to God?
3. How can you encourage one other person this week to receive God's grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love?
4. When you take communion, you are accepting his life for yours. You are accepting his offer to love you, to redeem you with a demonstration of his power, to make you holy. Jesus treated you as his beloved. How have you treated Jesus?