

## A BIT OF THE OLD NATURE

**F.B. Meyer:**

"Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said unto him, What hast thou done unto us? and what have I offended thee, and thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin?" Genesis 20:9.

For long years an evil may lurk in our hearts, permitted and unjudged, breeding failure and sorrow in our lives, as some unnoticed and forgotten sewer may secretly undermine the health of an entire household. In the twilight we overlook many a thing which we should not allow for a single moment if we saw it in its true character; and which, amid the all-revealing light of the perfect day, we should be the first to fling away in horror. But that which escapes our ken is patent in all its naked deformity to the eye of God. "The darkness and the light are both alike to Him." And He will so direct the discipline of our lives as to set in clear prominence the deadly evil which He hates; so that, when He has laid bare the cancerous growth, He may bring us to long for and invite the knife which shall set us free from it for ever.

These words have been suggested by the thirteenth verse of this chapter, which indicates an evil compact, into which Abraham had entered with Sarah some thirty years before the time of which we write. Addressing the king of the Philistines, the patriarch let fall a hint which sheds a startling light upon his failure, when first he entered the Land of Promise, and, under stress of famine, went down into Egypt; and upon that repetition of his failure which we must now consider. Here is what he said: "And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto my wife, This is thy kindness which thou shalt show unto me; at every place whither we shall come, say of me, He is my brother."

In a certain sense, no doubt, Sarah was his sister. She was the daughter of his father, though not the daughter of his mother. But she was much more his wife than his sister; and to withhold that fact was to withhold the one fact that was essential to the maintenance of his honor, and the protection of her virtue. We are not bound to tell the whole truth to gratify an idle curiosity; but we are bound not to withhold the one item, which another should know before completing a bargain, if the knowledge of it would materially alter the result. A lie consists in the motive quite as much as in the actual words. We may unwittingly say that which is actually false, meaning above all things to speak the truth, and, though a lie in form, there is no lie in fact. On the other hand, like Abraham, we may utter true words, meaning them to convey a deliberate and shameful falsehood.

This secret compact between Abraham and his wife, in the earliest days of his exodus, was due to his slender faith in God's power to take care of them, which again sprang from his limited experience of his Almighty Friend. In this we may find its sole excuse. But it ought long before this to have been canceled by mutual consent. The faithless treaty should have been torn into shreds, and scattered to the winds of heaven. It was not enough that they did not act on it for many years; for it was evidently still in existence, tacitly admitted by each of them, and only waiting for an emergency to arise from the dusty obscurity into which it had receded, and to come again into light and use.

But the existence of this hidden understanding, though perhaps Abraham did not realize it, was inconsistent with the relation into which he had now entered with God. It was altogether a source of weakness and failure. And, above all, it was a secret flaw in his faith, which would inevitably affect its tone, and destroy its effectiveness in the dark trials which were approaching. God could afford to pass it over in those early days, when faith itself was yet in germ; but it could not be permitted, when that faith was reaching to a maturity in which any flaw would be instantly detected; and it would be an unsuitable example in one who was to become the model of faith to the world.

The judgment and eradication of this lurking evil were therefore necessary, and were brought about in this wise.

The day before Sodom's fall, the Almighty told Abraham that, at a set time in the following year, he should have a son and heir. And we should have expected that he would have spent the slow-moving months beneath the oak of Mamre, already hallowed by so many associations. But such was not the case. It has been suggested that he was too horrified at the overthrow of the cities of the plain, to be able to remain any longer in the vicinity. All further association with the spot was distasteful to him. Or it may have been that another famine was threatening. But in any case "he journeyed from hence towards the south country, and dwelled between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar" (Genesis 20:1).

Gerar was the capital of a race of men who had dispossessed the original inhabitants of the land, and were gradually passing from the condition of wandering shepherd life into that of a settled and warlike nation;

afterwards to be known to the Hebrews by the dreaded name, Philistines: a title which, in fact, gave to the whole land its name of Palestine. Their chieftain bore the official title of Abimelech, "My Father the King."

Here, the almost forgotten agreement between Sarah and himself offered itself as a ready expedient, behind which Abraham's unbelief took shelter. He knew the ungoverned license of his time, unbridled by the fear of God (v.11). He dreaded, lest the heathen monarch, enamored with Sarah's beauty, or ambitious to get her into his power for purposes of State policy, might slay him for his wife's sake. And so he again resorted to the paltry policy of calling her his sister. As if God could not have defended him and her, screening them from all evil; as He had done so often in days gone by.

#### **HIS CONDUCT WAS VERY COWARDLY**

He risked Sarah's virtue, and the purity of the promised seed. And, even if we accept the justification of his conduct proposed by some, who argue that he was so sure of the seed promised him by God that he could dare to risk what otherwise he would have more carefully guarded, his faith leading him into the license of presumption, yet, it was surely very mean on his part to permit Sarah to pass through any ordeal of the sort. If he had such superabundant faith, he might have risked his own safety at the hand of Abimelech rather than Sarah's virtue.

#### **IT WAS ALSO VERY DISHONORING TO GOD**

amongst those untutored tribes Abraham was well known as the servant of Jehovah. And they could not but judge of the character of Him whom they could not see, by the traits they discerned in His servant, whom they knew in familiar intercourse. Alas that Abraham's standard was lower than their own! so much so that Abimelech was able to rebuke him, saying: "Thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin: thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done." Such an opinion, elicited in such a way, must have been an unpropitious preparation for any attempt to proselytize Abimelech to the Hebrew faith. "Not so," we can imagine him saying: "I have had some experience of one of its foremost representatives, and I prefer to remain as I am."

It is heartbreaking, when the heathen rebukes a professor of superior godliness for speaking lies. Yet it is lamentable to confess that such men often enough have higher standards of morality than those who profess godliness. Even if they do not fulfill their own conceptions, yet the beauty of their ideal is undeniable, and is a remarkable vindication of the universal vitality of conscience. The temperate Hindu is scandalized by the drunkenness of the Englishman whose religion he is invited to embrace. The Chinaman cannot understand why he should exchange the hoary religion of Confucius for that of a people which by superior armaments forces upon his country a drug which is sapping its vitals. The employee abhors a creed which is professed by his master for one day of the week, but is disowned on the other six. Let us walk circumspectly towards them that are outside; adorning in all things the Gospel of Jesus Christ; and giving no occasion to the enemy to blaspheme, save as it concerns the law of our God.

#### **IT ALSO STOOD OUT IN POOR RELIEF AGAINST THE BEHAVIOR OF ABIMELECH**

As to his original character, Abimelech commends himself to us as the nobler of the two. He rises early in the morning, prompt to set the great wrong right. He warns his people. He restores Sarah with munificent presents. His reproach and rebuke are spoken in the gentlest, kindest tones. He simply tells Sarah that her position as the wife of a prophet would, not in Philistia only, but wherever they might come, be a sufficient security and veil (v.16). There is the air of high-minded nobility in his behavior throughout this crisis which is exceedingly winsome.

It would almost appear as if the Spirit of God took delight in showing that the original texture of God's saints was not higher than that of other men, nor indeed so high. What they became, they became in spite of their natural selves. So marvelous is the wonder-working power of the grace of God that He can graft His rarest fruits on the wildest stocks. He seems to delight to secure His choicest results in natures which men of the world might reject as hopelessly bad. He demands no assistance from us, so sure is He that when once faith is admitted as the root-principle of character, all other things will be added to it.

Oh, critics of God's handiwork, we do not deny the inconsistencies of a David, a Peter, or an Abraham; but we insist that those inconsistencies were not the result of God's work, but in spite of it. They indicate the hopelessness of the original nature --the moorland waste to which He has set His cultivating hand. And shall we blame the Gardener's skill, when, in the paradise which it has created, we encounter a bit of original soil, which,

by force of contrast, indicates the marvel of His genius; and which, before long, if only we exercise patience, will yield to the selfsame spell, and blossom as the rest?

And you, on the other hand, who aspire for the crown of saintliness, to which ye are truly called, take heart! There is nothing which God has done for any soul that He will not do for you. And there is no soil so unpromising that He will not compel it to yield His fairest results. "What is impossible to man is possible to God." The same power in all its matchless energy, which raised the body of our Lord from its sleep in the grave of Joseph, to sit at the Father's side in the heights of glory, in spite of opposing battalions of evil spirits -- is ready to do as much for each of us, if only we will daily, hourly, yield to it without reserve. Only cease from your own works, and keep always on God's "lift," refusing each solicitation to step off its ascending energy, or to do for yourself what He will do for you so much better than you can ask or think.

Let us ponder, as we close, these practical lessons:

#### **(1) WE ARE NEVER SAFE SO LONG AS WE ARE IN THIS WORLD**

Abraham was an old man. Thirty years had passed since that sin had shown itself last. During that time he had been growing and learning much. But, alas! the snake was scotched, not killed. The weeds were cut down, not eradicated. The dry-rot had been checked; but the rotten timbers had not been cut away. Never boast yourself against once-cherished sins: only by God's grace are they kept in check; and if you cease to abide in Christ, they will revive and revisit you, as the seven sleepers of Ephesus reappeared to the panic-stricken town.

#### **(2) WE HAVE NO RIGHT TO THROW OURSELVES INTO THE WAY OF THE TEMPTATION WHICH HAS OFTEN MASTERED US**

Those who daily cry, "Lead us not into temptation," should see to it that they do not court the temptation against which they pray. We must not expect angels to catch us every time we choose to cast ourselves from the mountain brow. A godly fear will avoid the perilous pass marked by crosses to indicate the failures of the past, and will choose a safer route. Abraham had been wiser had he never gone into the Philistines' territory at all.

#### **(3) WE MAY BE ENCOURAGED BY GOD'S TREATMENT OF ABRAHAM'S SIN**

Although God had a secret controversy with His child, He did not put him away. And when his wife and he were in extreme danger, as the result of his sin, their Almighty Friend stepped in to deliver them from the peril which menaced them. Again "He reproved kings for their sakes, saying, Touch not My anointed, and do My prophets no harm." He told Abimelech that he was a dead man; put an arrest upon him by the ministry of an ominous disease; and bade him apply to the intercession of the very man by whom he had been so grievously misled, and who, in spite of all his failures, was a prophet still, having power with God.

Have you sinned, bringing disrepute on the name of God? Do not despair. Go alone, as Abraham must have done, and confess your sin with tears and childlike trust. Do not abandon prayer. Your prayers are still sweet to Him; and He waits to answer them. It is only through them that His purposes can be fulfilled toward men. Trust then in the patience and forgiveness of God, and let His love, as consuming fire, rid you of concealed and hidden sin.