



The Problem of Recurring Sin

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study Series from Jerry Vines Ministries
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Let's Begin

Unfortunately, we routinely see sprinkled over the television screen the sad pictures of fallen leaders. Though no leader is immune to failure, it is inevitably "newsworthy" when a leader falls, especially a Christian leader like a pastor or para-church organizational head. The Apostle Paul clearly warned us, "Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

A sad chapter of Abraham's life is recorded in Genesis 20. One may wish this unflattering scene was not on record. Yet, the Bible tells the whole truth about its heroes. Indeed from the Biblical portraits themselves, we discover Noah was a drunk; Moses possessed an extremely short emotional fuse; King David

was an adulterer, if not a downright murderer (consider Uriah's planned death); and Peter was a Christ-denier. Understand: these sad scenes from God's saints are not recorded to condone our sin but caution us against sin. In Genesis 20, we find Abraham repeating a sin committed earlier. (cp.12:10-20).

Therefore, as we explore the theme of recurring sin in the believer's life, note the outline we will follow below:

- I. The Recurrence of an Old Sin (vv. 1-8)
- II. The Repetition of an Old Shame (vv. 9-16)
- III. The Relief of an Old Solution (vv. 17-18)

I. The Recurrence of an Old Sin (vv. 1-8)

Genesis 20 begins, "And Abraham journeyed from thence toward the south country, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah" (vv. 1-2). Whether because of fear for himself or his wife, Abraham decided he would rather change the truth than face the consequences Abimelech's request meant. A serious caution exists here for every believer. On the one hand,

no matter how spiritually mature one thinks he/she is, it remains possible to fall into the same sins with which you were tempted at the beginning of your walk with Christ. Our spiritual health is not dependent upon our spiritual progress, but upon the keeping power of God (cp. 1 Cor. 10:13). The only reliable hope we have is relying solely upon God's grace. Hence, what we see in Abraham's action in these verses is the recurrence of an old sin.

Note again the Biblical text, "But God came to Abimelech

in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, thou *art but* a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife ... Now therefore restore the man *his* wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore *her* not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that *are* thine. Therefore Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ears: and the men were sore afraid" (vv. 3-8). The truth is, Abraham must face



this sin and deal with it before the promised son can be born. However, let us take a quick look at the circumstances which led to Abraham's sin.

First, notice Abraham's *mistake*—"sojourned in Gerar" (vv. 1-2). Gerar is southward in the direction of Egypt. "She is my sister" may be an agreement Abraham and Sarah made before they had left Ur. They reasoned that if they were in danger, it would be better if he were perceived to be her brother rather than her husband whom they would have immediately put to death in order to have his wife. Whatever the case, Abraham was not living by faith but by his own ingenuity. In other words, Abraham was depending on the old man more than the God Who had called him and promised him he would be the father of a great nation.

Reflection Connection:

Would you distort the truth to save yourself? Explain.

We too still deal with our sinful flesh after we are born again (Eph. 4:22; Rom. 6:6; Col. 3:9). While before salvation, we live "in the flesh" (Rom. 7:5) where "no good things" dwell (Rom. 7:18); nor may we please God (Rom. 8:8). But on the cross, Jesus dealt with our flesh (Rom. 8:3), nailing it to the cross (Col. 2:14). Consequently, while believers no longer are "in the flesh" (Rom. 8:9), they nonetheless can "walk after flesh" (Rom. 8:1) and "live after flesh" (Rom. 8:12-13).

Abraham may have thought his old life was dead and buried. However, if we do not deal with our hidden, unjudged sin, the effects will undoubtedly burst out in our life one day, bringing sorrow and remorse.

Second, notice God's *message* (vv. 3-8). Abimelech was, before God, "a dead man." A more apt picture of a sinner's condition before God remains impossible—"dead in trespasses and sin" (cp. Eph. 2:1-3). Abraham's God

is sympathetic to Abimelech; he seems to have been a man of some integrity even though lost. Honestly, there exist times when people who are unsaved act morally better than people who profess Christ as Lord and Savior. Notice also that God holds Abimelech back. In other words, God was protecting Abraham. He would not allow anyone or anything to ultimately thwart His plans.

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II. The Repetition of an Old Shame (vv. 9-16)

Let us continue with the Biblical text, "Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said unto him, What hast thou done unto us? ... And Abraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. And yet indeed *she is my sister*; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife ... And Abimelech took sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and womenservants, and gave *them* unto Abraham, and restored him

Sarah his wife. And Abimelech said, Behold, my land *is* before thee: dwell where it pleaseth thee. And unto Sarah he said, Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand *pieces* of silver: behold, he *is* to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that *are* with thee, and with all *others*: thus she was reproved" (vv. 9-16).

The first thing Abimelech did was *confront* Abraham. The saved man incurs the wrath of the lost man. Our sin also incurs our suffering, not to

mention the shame which usually follows (v. 11). Abraham's lies risked Sarah's virtue. Indeed he jeopardized the promised seed by his own selfish plans. Hence, Abraham dishonored God. God's prophet failed to make a good showing for himself. Abraham marred his testimony. How could he be a credible witness to Abimelech when his actions failed so miserably to honor the God whom he served? Christians can not give a positive witness for the Lord if they live under the influence of the old man.



Next, Abimelech *chastises* Abraham (vv. 14-15). “Thy brother” appears to be said with a sneer on his face expressing a note of sarcasm. However, Abimelech shows unusual generosity in the circumstances.

God’s caution to him in his dream the night before worked on Abimelech’s conscience. In addition, recall again that sometimes lost people act better than saved people, a tragic irony in the Kingdom of God.

III. The Relief of an Old Solution (vv. 17-18)

Not only do we find Abraham dealing with recurring sin and the repetition of an old shame, but also we must notice the relief of an old solution. Note the Biblical text, “So Abraham prayed unto God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bare *children*. For the LORD had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham’s wife” (vv. 17-18). While Abraham was surely wrong in his decision to lie about Sarah, he nonetheless received good news from his Creator-God. There also exists good news for us. When we sin, we can be forgiven and restored. Regardless of our sin, God remains faithful (2 Tim. 2:13). The text says “Abraham prayed ...” Even when his witness was compromised, Abraham could still pray. Prayer is the means God gives the believer to restore his relationship to Himself. John writes, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us *our* sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). James similarly concludes, “Confess *your* faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of

a righteous man availeth much” (James 5:16). From Abraham’s experience with God and in light of the New Testament texts, we may discover a three-fold path to follow when the old man returns.

Reflection Connection:
How often do you have a time of confession before the Lord? Do you spend time making excuses for sin? Explain.

First, we must *confess* our sin (1 John 1:9). The term translated in the English Bible as “confess” is a Greek word which means “to agree.” Therefore, when we confess our sin, it means to agree with God about our sin. We call it what God calls it. Confession means we offer neither excuses for our sin nor rationale about our sin. Biblical confession means we say the same thing God says about it.

Second, when we sin, we not only *confess* our sin, we also *condemn* our sin. Note what Proverbs says, “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh *them* shall have mercy” (28:13). Forsaking our sin carries the idea of sending our sin away (cp. 1 Cor. 11:28-32; Rom. 8:13). Our goal is to die to sin in our life.

Not only do we find Abraham dealing with recurring sin and the repetition of an old shame, but also we must notice the relief of an old solution.

Third, when we sin, we are finally to *commit* our life totally to the Lord. There must be a total surrender to the Lord every day of our lives. Believers begin the day confessing and judging any sin which may have crept into their life. Jesus is confessed to be Savior and Lord every moment. Only then is our life yielded completely to God. God makes us a promise that whatever temptation we face, He will enable a way to escape its deadly snare (1 Cor. 10:13).



Wrap Up

From every indication we find in the Scriptures, Abraham somewhere found a place of prayer, and consequently dealt with his old sin and the return of the old man. He brought it out in the open, confessed it, and subsequently judged it. He then committed himself afresh to the Lord Who first called him out of Ur. Do we need to do the same?



WHAT EVERY PERSON NEEDS

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Let's Begin

There is a close connection between the closing verses of chapter two and chapter three. People “believed,” but Jesus was not committing Himself to them. Being the Son of God, Jesus could peer into the heart of any human being He met. Unfortunately, for many of those who professed they believed in Him, He saw their faith was superficial and shallow. Jesus simply would not commit Himself to that kind of faith.

If someone could peer perfectly into your heart right now, what do you think they would see? Would your faith be healthy or would it be sick? Would it be existent or non-existent?

Today, we meet a man—a Pharisee of all people—Jesus perceived as a genuine seeker. I think we can learn a lot from this man named Nicodemus. As we explore John chapter three together, let's follow the outline below:

- I. The Greatest Deficiency We Possess (vv. 1-12)**
- II. The Greatest Description God Deserves (vv. 13-21)**
- III. The Greatest Difference Jesus Makes (vv. 22-30)**

I. The Greatest Deficiency We Possess (vv. 1-12)

From the man Nicodemus we learn perhaps the greatest deficiency each of us must face—spiritual lifelessness. Jesus clearly told the most religious man of the day these words: “ye must be born again” (v. 7).

Let us observe, the *must of the new birth*. Jesus said the new birth is absolutely essential in order to go to Heaven (vv. 3, 5). No option exists. Being born from above is not a luxury but a non-negotiable necessity. Why is that? One reason is the nature of the human heart.

Already, John mentioned a startling revelation of what Jesus saw concerning the human heart: “But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all men, and needed not that any should testify of man: For he knew what was in man” (2:24-25). Now, Jesus receives a guest “by night” who wants to talk about the meaning of faith.

Interestingly, all three references to Nicodemus on record remind us he came to Jesus “by night.” Darkness seems ever to be a picture of the human heart (cp. Ephesians 4:18).

Most importantly, that darkness is indicative of a sinful nature into which we are all born. Do you ever wonder why we must teach our children to tell the truth but never teach them to tell lies? While that is only one example, it nevertheless subtly suggests the sin nature about which Jesus referred. We are all born into it.

Another reason we must be born again is not only because of the nature of our heart, but also because of the nature of Heaven. To fit Heaven, one must be changed. The way we are—possessing nothing but a sin nature—we are no more suitable for Heaven than a fish is suitable for dry land. The new birth is necessary; it is a *must* be not a *may* be.

Reflection Connection

What do you think people at large believe about the term “born again”? Do you think it's readily understandable? If someone asked you if you were “born again” how would you answer?



Second, let us notice the *meaning of the new birth*. Jesus compared becoming a member of God's family to a physical birth. Birth, of course, is an ingenious symbol to speak about life in Christ. Birth brings life. Babies are not manufactured; babies are born. When one is born into God's family, a never-before-spiritual-life arises in us (cp. Ephesians 2:1).

We must be very cautious at this point. It would be easy to confuse the new birth with an attempt to stop sinful habits. However, the new birth is not reformation of the old life. It is not an *improved* you but a *new* you (cp. 2 Corinthians 5:17)!

Nor is the new birth a refocusing of one's life to be more religious. Consider how religious Nicodemus was! No person in the Bible qualifies for higher religious activity and sincerity than Nicodemus. He is the model. Yet, to him Jesus is clear: "Ye must be born again." If Nicodemus could not qualify, no one could qualify.

New birth is about a new dimension of life that only God can produce.

Being born again is unique. The new birth is about a new dimension of life that only God can produce. We did not produce our own physical birth and therefore there remains no hope we can produce our spiritual rebirth.

Third, notice the *mystery of the new birth*. Jesus indicates this mystery by alluding to the wind blowing. Wind goes undetected by the human eye. It is observable only by the effects it produces. Similarly, the new birth is brought about by the wind of God's Spirit.

Next, we observe the *means of the new birth*. Just how does the new birth take place? If we cannot produce it, what then are we to make of the means of the new birth?

Jesus refers to the image of water and spirit: "unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God" (v. 5). Clearly, Jesus is not referring to water baptism, as some would have us believe. Nicodemus would hardly possess a reference point for understanding such. Besides, baptism in scripture is a symbol of death, not life.

In referring to being born of water, perhaps Jesus was initially alluding to His image of physical birth. One must be born physically—that is, of water—to live physically. In a similar way, one must be born spiritually—that is, of the Spirit—to be suited for Heaven.

If this is the focus, the new birth is more likely akin to a second birth. We have all heard of "twice-born" believers.

However, there is another, more likely view. When Jesus referred to being born of water, He was using water as a metaphor for the Word of God. Scripture abounds with references to this effect (cp. Psalm 119:50; 1 Corinthians 4:15; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23). The Word of God, then, is the instrument God uses in producing the new birth. The Spirit of God employs the preaching of the Gospel to spiritually make all things new.

Reflection Connection

If someone were to ask of you "How can I be "born again?" how would you answer them? Be prepared to share with the group.



Reflection Connection

Pause and discuss the many ways we use the term “love” to describe our affection for both things and persons. I “love” the Atlanta Braves. I “love” apple pie. I “love” my pickup. I “love” my church. I “love” my dog. I “love” my wife. I “love” my Savior.

II. The Greatest Description God Deserves (vv. 13-21)

John 3:16 has been called the greatest verse in the Bible. This verse is the Gospel in a nutshell, for the whole Bible is spelled out in one verse.

As we look at this section whose core theme is found in verse 16, we discover the greatest description of God’s character found anywhere in God’s Word. It is the one word “love” that stands as that description.

Note in this passage the *source of God’s love*. “God so loved” Jesus emphasized. In that love, we find the essence of God. Love makes God Who He is and what He is about. Love is His very nature. If you think of God without also thinking of love, it may be doubtful that you are actually thinking of the God of the Bible at all.

Love is not found in the heart of the natural man; instead lust, lingering hate and longing for the world seem to possess us. Yet love is always found in the heart of God.

If love speaks of the *essence* of God, the little word “so” speaks of the *extravagance* of God. Volumes exist in such a small word—God *so* loved. Know also that God’s love isn’t like a leaky faucet; instead it’s like a bottomless ocean. It doesn’t flicker like a lightning bug; His love blinds like the sun!

He loves each of us as if we were the only ones in the universe.

We also see in this passage the *eternality* of God. Here Jesus is most clear. He doesn’t say God *will* love us but that He *does* love us. While there was a moment when husbands began to love their wives, and children began to love their parents, there was never a time when God began to love us. In eternity past, God so loved us!

Second, let’s note the *scope of God’s love*. No person exists under God’s radar. “Whosoever” means any person and all persons remain within the boundaries of God’s love. Both the totality of the human race as well as the individuality of the human race is implied in God’s love. He loves each of us as if we were the only ones in the universe. If you had been the only person in the world, God would have sent His Son just for you.

Third, we discover in this passage the *sacrifice of God’s love*. Here is the centerpiece of the Gospel message: *God so loved us that He gave his Son*. The Son given was God’s best. He had only one Son and the only Son given is the Son He sacrificed. This was an action necessary if God’s forgiveness to us was to be actualized. Three times “must” is used in this chapter. Jesus *must* be lifted up (cp. 8:28, 12:32, 34).

Next, note the *surrender of God’s love*. The one that “believeth” is the one who receives life (v.16). To surrender to God’s love involves three things. First, it means one begins to *comprehend* His love: “light is come into the world” (v.19). To surrender also means *conviction* of one’s heart. Our inner lives are touched

Reflection Connection

Do you think it is true or not true that God loves all people? Why or why not?



when surrender takes place. Surrender also means *commitment*. One must believe (cp. 2:24).

Last, we find the *sufficiency of God's love*. God's love is sufficient to keep us from perishing. God gives us everlasting life! It's a free gift. Take it today!

III. The Greatest Difference Jesus Makes (vv. 22-30)

At no junction is the truth so clear in this chapter as here: *Jesus makes an undeniable difference when one surrenders to Him*. This thread runs throughout this chapter.

As Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about the new birth, He revealed specific marks the new birth makes. *First, notice that people who are born from above don't practice sin*. This is especially clear from John's explanation in his first letter (cp. 1 John 3:9; 5:18). It is not that sin is completely absent. We realize in a fallen world that, short of Heaven, sin will remain possible. Rather, for people born again, sin is not their habit of life.

Another mark which Jesus revealed to Nicodemus is the presence of love in the heart (cp. 1 John 4:7). The Holy Spirit sows God's love deeply within the person's heart (Romans 5:5). Also, we know that those born from above overcome the world (cp. 1 John 5:4). Jesus clearly revealed to Nicodemus that Love was Heaven's theme. In the most precious-not to mention most popular-verse of all time, our Lord says: "For God so *loved* the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life" (3:16, emphasis added). "God is love" John would later say (1 John 4:8). A person who is born again cannot fail to have love dwelling in his heart.

With this as the backdrop, consider the passage concerning John the Baptist and his disciples. John's words contain the key to the Christian life. Jesus ascribed greatness to John (cp. Matthew 11:11). The key verse for us to consider sums up well John's own heart—"He must increase, but I must decrease" (v. 30). Indeed, the entire Bible captures with precision the undisputable difference Jesus makes.

Observe three significant areas where the difference Jesus makes never fails to appear.

First, our attitude toward others is visibly affected (v. 27). We have a tendency to judge, harbor jealousy and covet the blessings of others. We are naturally good people watchers—especially when it comes to watching their faults.

But John makes clear Jesus must increase while he continues to decrease. Indicative of our change in attitude toward others, comes the realization that God deals with each person on an individual basis. No two people are alike. God makes no duplicates. This is true in nature, such as in trees and in snowflakes. It is also true among men. God chooses and uses men as He pleases.

We also learn that God bestows gifts upon each individual. John received one gift and his disciples another. It is no different with us. We too possess varying gifts through which each of us in our own way may honor the Lord.

Reflection Connection

Reflect on one specific difference Jesus makes in your life. Be prepared to share with the study group.

“He must increase, but I must decrease.”



Furthermore, we see that every man is responsible to Heaven only. God is the only one in a position to pass judgment upon us or our work. Consequently, it is not for us to be critical or pass judgment upon the life's work of another. This is a challenge each of us must ponder.

Second, our attitude toward ourselves is different (vv. 28-29). Every one of us needs to know our place in life. How do we find such? The presence of Christ assures us we will find it. John knew who he was and what he was sent to do: "ye yourselves bear me witness that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him" (v. 28).

*We not only
renounce
ourselves,
we also exalt
Jesus.*

John was the forerunner. It was his job to present the Savior to the world. And, it is only through Jesus that any person can truly know themselves. Once we know ourselves, it becomes our duty to be faithful to our place. John remained true to his calling. He continued to baptize as that was his mission (v. 23).

When we are faithful to our purpose, it promises to bring us great and lasting joy. In fact, joy will be the experience of every believer who is born of God's Spirit. The encouragement we take from today's lesson is to be faithful to the Lord and our places of service. It will be then that joy will be fulfilled (v. 29).

Finally, our attitude toward Jesus is completely changed: "He must increase but I must decrease (v. 30). He is the word; you become the voice to speak it. He is the light, but you are the lamp stand. He is the Lamb of God given for the sin of the world; you are the spokesperson.

As Jesus is now the center focus of your life, the difference He makes produces a renunciation of self. We see this so vividly in John the Baptist. He began to fade out of the picture. He left men talking about Jesus Christ. Do we do so?

This was the attitude of Paul (cp. Philippians 2:17). Paul exalted Christ and if others got the credit and he remained unseen, so what? He was perfectly content with such an arrangement.

Perhaps the biggest problem we face is learning to say no to ourselves. According to Jesus, the first requirement to being a disciple is to deny one's self (Matthew 16:24). Each of us must come to terms with whether we live a life of *denying* ourselves or *indulging* ourselves. If it is the latter, we should seriously ponder our relationship to Christ.

We not only renounce ourselves, we also exalt Jesus. As we decrease, He increases. To "increase" means to grow bigger and bigger. In short, it means to be magnified.

Know when we magnify Jesus, we are only doing what the Father already does. (cp. Philippians 2:9). Jesus will be exalted in history (Revelation 11:15) and He certainly wants to be exalted in your life (Psalm 34:3, Luke 1:46). The Apostle Paul was clear in his desire for Christ to be magnified: "Christ shall be magnified in my body..." (Philippians 1:20). No matter how Christ is magnified in our lives, we are to take Him and make Him big to this world, to bring Him near to this world.

Reflection Connection

What are some ways that assist the Christian to live a life of self-denial? Be specific.



Golden Greek Nugget

Jesus told Nicodemus “ye must be born again” (vv. 3, 5, 7). The term translated “again” possesses different meanings, but the primary one literally means “from above.” Thus, it seems that Jesus was speaking clearly about a spiritual reality the origin of which is Heaven. However, note as well that Nicodemus’ question seems to suggest that Jesus meant a second birth: “How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother’s womb, and be born?” (v. 4). Perhaps it is not too much to suggest that both meanings are included. Being born *from above* is being born a *second time*.

Wrap Up

Every person on the globe needs the truths we find in John three because all people are deficient in their hearts. Empty of all spiritual life, we lack the will and the power to make things right with God.

In light of such, God’s love reaches down to us through Jesus Christ. He gave His only Son whose life was taken in order to bring life to us. That is the love of God.

Consequently, our life becomes totally different, changed by the power of Jesus Christ. Is your life changed? Has Jesus made a permanent difference in your life?

