INTRODUCTION

A. In 1984, during the presidential campaign that pitted Ronald Reagan and George Bush, Sr., against Walter Mondale and Geraldine Farraro, there was a phrase spoken by Reagan during the Presidential debates that became somewhat of a trademark of his. On several occasions, when Reagan accused Mondale of stretching the truth, he said, "There he goes again!"

I am going to borrow Reagan's phrase for my message title this morning. I think it fits. I think you will see why in a few moments.

B. Please turn with me to Genesis 20. I must confess to you that when I first read this next portion of Scripture in Genesis 20 in our ongoing study of the life of Abraham, I decided to leave it out of the series. It just sounded too familiar. I reasoned that we had already heard what is recorded here – at least we had heard something very close to it. Yet as I plowed through the following chapter, chapter 21, something was bugging me. Proverbs 30:5 says, "Every word of God is pure. [tested]") Ultimately, I decided to return to chapter 20 and do the necessary work to find what was put there for us to learn. I was not disappointed.

C. As we work our way through Genesis 20 this evening then, we are going to read some familiar words. It will seem as though you have heard them before. Yet do not write them off as I nearly did. There is useful truth here.

D. All of us would like to believe that when we have paid the price and learned a lesson the hard way, we will never again make the same mistake. Yet as we look at Abraham in this passage, all that can be said is, "There he goes again."

E. I do not want to depict Abraham as less faithful than he was, yet I do not see how we can call what is described here anything more than:

DISCUSSION

I. A RELAPSE.

A. Genesis 20:1. We left Abraham last time at an overlook. He was staring down, in horror I am sure, at the smoking remains of Sodom and Gomorrah. Whether he was ever reunited with his nephew, Lot, or his two grand-nieces, the only three who escaped the overthrow of Sodom, Scripture does not say. We do know that ultimately, as is reported here, for whatever reason, Abraham traveled down through the Negev, that is, the south country, and entered Gerar, the capital city of the land of the Philistines, near the Egyptian border. Archeological excavations reveal that Gerar was a prosperous city which controlled a lucrative caravan route. It may be that this was a business trip for Abraham, as he was by this time a wealthy tribal leader. Whatever his reason for going there, it seems to me that every time Abraham left Canaan, he ended up in trouble. This trip would be no exception. It is hard to imagine how the event described here could have happened even once. Yet here we see it happen a second time.

B. Genesis 20:2. Sound familiar? "There he goes again!" Recall those 25 years before this, as described in Genesis 12, Abraham told the same lie to the Pharaoh of Egypt and nearly lost his wife. We noted in our study of that passage that no specific reason was given for that act other than that Sarah was an extremely beautiful woman (GE 12:11) and that Abraham did it to preserve his own life. GE 12:13. One thing to puzzle over here is this apparent attraction Abimelech had for Sarah. By this time she was a ninety year old woman! Not too many ladies stop traffic at that age. There are several possibilities to explain it. The first is in remembering that God rejuvenated both Abraham and Sarah in some way when he promised the birth of Isaac. Though both were, as stated in Genesis 18, "old, advanced in age" and "Sarah was past childbearing,"
(GE 18:11) their biological clocks were turned back in some way. Did this include changes in their appearance? It is possible.

The second possibility is in realizing that in that day they lived about twice as long as people live today. Thus, it could be that they aged only half as fast. Thus, Sarah would have perhaps been the equivalent of a very attractive, 45 year-old woman. As for this issue of saying that Sarah was Abraham’s sister, we learn from verse 13 of this chapter that this was actually done according to a pre-arrangement between Abraham and Sarah.

C. Genesis 20:3. This was not simply a cowardly, spur of the moment, act. It was a lifelong plan of action. While I am not about to say it was a wise plan, let me see if I can give a possible rationale. Abraham and his family were nomads. As shepherds, they moved frequently, driven by the need to pasture their animals. Various tribes of people populated this land. Some were peaceable. Some were not. It was not uncommon for several tribes to band together to attack others living in the land, slaughtering them and taking their belongings. This potential bred a lot of mutual mistrust and suspicion. Thus, it might be considered a threat when large groups like Abraham’s passed near a camp or a city – especially a group with a reputation of effectiveness in war like Abraham probably had since the days when he defeated Chedorlaomer. One of the ways to protect yourself in that day was by making treaties and alliances. The giving of women from one tribe as wives to the men of another strengthened such a treaty. Such intermarriage would make the two tribes kindred. As a result, war between them would be much less likely. The presence of one or more marriageable women in a tribe then, was a sort of insurance policy for a positive reception when traveling among people who were not well known. Gestures would be friendly, based on the hope of procuring more women. Thus, this scheme of Abraham and Sarah. It was a reasonable plan. Abraham could always stall, making gestures of alliance, until he could clear out of the area, thus preserving his wife’s chastity. It was a reasonable plan except for two things. First, it showed that Abraham lacked faith that God would protect Him. Second, it did not factor in the possibility that someone might come and forcefully take the women, which is exactly what happened in the case of Pharaoh 25 years before this and here, in the case of Abimelech king of Gerar. The truth is, this act was a human scheme of last resort that flew in the face of faith. It amounted to what we would call today "walking in the flesh" rather than "walking in the spirit." "Yes, God, I trust you, but I have my backup plan ready, just in case you do not come through." Surely God would have protected Abraham and Sarah, especially since the promise had been made so recently that, within a year the child of promise was to be born which would come forth from their own bodies. That is why I call this incident a relapse.

D. Some have suggested that Abraham may have doubted God's ability to take care of him outside the land of Canaan, as though God were merely some regional God among many other God's, who lost His power outside His own realm. Whether Abraham believed this way or not, I do not know. I do know that it is exactly what some people do today. They trust God in things pertaining to "the church" but they do not trust him out in "the world." There, out in the world, they feel they must fend largely for themselves. Thus, they live by two standards. They are devoted to God in the "sacred" things, but they do not believe that the laws of God are relevant in the "secular" world. I despise those words "sacred" and "secular." No, not the words themselves, but the false notion that there is such a division in our lives between what is "sacred" and "secular." Please listen. Many people live as though there is such a division. As a result,
they live by two different standards. They deal justly and tell the truth when among God's people in the church because that is a "sacred" time, but then they lie, cheat, and cut corners at other times, feeling justified because they must compete in a "secular" world. When in "Rome," to borrow the old cliché, they believe they must live like Romans. (Las Vegas!). If that is the way any of us think, then I have some news: It is all sacred! When in Rome we need to live like Christians, not Romans, just as we should always do in every circumstance.

E. Listen to Paul on that. Colossians 3:17; 1 Corinthians 10:31. It is all sacred - whether we glorify God in singing and prayer here in the assembly of Christians or whether we glorify God by our honest and upright dealings in our business or employment. What you do when you leave here is as important as what you have done here. It should all glorify Him. Said with our Genesis text in mind, God is the God not only of Canaan, but also of every part of our world. Abraham has blown it now a second time. His wife is headed for another king's harem because he did not trust God and tell the truth.

II. WE SEE NEXT THEN, OF NECESSITY - A RESTRAINT.

A. Genesis 20:3-7. It is a sobering thing to see God intervene in the affairs of man like that, is it not? Why did God stop Abimelech from touching Sarah? Because it would jeopardize the promised offspring of Abraham.

B. Let me give you a big piece of the puzzle of Bible understanding that will help all of us better discern what Bible is saying. Back in Genesis 3:15, in that section that describes the first sin, God made a promise to the devil. After cursing him to crawl on his belly, listen to what God said to him. That enmity (deep seated mutual hatred) can be seen at every turn as you read through the pages of God's word. Today we understand that the Seed of the woman was Christ. GA 3:16. It was He who would ultimately bruise the serpent's head (a fatal injury to a snake) after himself being bruised on the heel (Jesus was temporarily injured when He was crucified.) Thus God foretold to the devil himself that he would ultimately be defeated by One referred to here only as the "Seed" of the woman. So Satan knew what was coming, but he did not know the identity of the Seed! Thus we see him from that point onward to the death of Christ, opposing God's fulfillment of Genesis 3:15 at every turn.

C. Think through it with me. Adam's son Abel proved to be a godly man. Maybe he was the Seed! So Satan raised up Cain to kill him. God, however, took the lineage of the Seed through a third son, Seth. The genealogy of the true Seed can be followed from there down to Noah. In Noah's day, since Satan did not know who the Seed was, he stirred up the "sons of God" to intermarry with the "sons of men." If he could not destroy the Seed, maybe he could dilute it. The result was the destruction of that entire generation. Yet God spared Noah and his three sons and the blood line of the Seed was preserved through Noah. Satan then stirred up Ham, one of Noah's three sons, and caused him to be cursed and driven from the family. God, however, kept the line going through one of the other sons, Shem. In Shem's day, Satan stirred up men to build the tower of Babel, perhaps with the hope that God would destroy them because of their arrogance, and in the process, destroy the Seed. Instead, God confused their language and the bloodline of the Seed was preserved through Shem down to Abraham. Since we started this series, we have seen the serpent opposing the plan of God to deliver the Seed through Abraham. God called him out of Ur and told him to leave his relatives. Perhaps it was Satan who persuaded him to take Lot. God made the promise to Abraham that through his descendants, all the nations would be blessed. I am pretty sure the serpent must have recognized that as being another promise of the Seed. Thus, when there was a
famine in Canaan, it was probably Satan who persuaded Abraham to go down to Egypt where he told that first lie about Sarah being his sister. If Abraham’s wife were taken into the harem of a pagan king, that would be the end of the Seed. God rescued the purity of Sarah, however, by striking Pharaoh’s house with a plague until he released her. Then Satan persuaded Lot to live in Sodom, probably with the plan of luring Abraham in with him. When that did not work, he raised up Chedorlaomer to kidnap Lot, knowing that Abraham would make a rescue attempt and perhaps be killed in the process, thus ending the line of the Seed. God intervened again, empowering Abraham so that he not only rescued Lot, but also removed the invading army from Canaan entirely. The serpent did not miss a beat, though He had the king of Sodom on hand as Abraham returned from the battle to try again to entangle him in the sin of Sodom and perhaps pollute the Seed. Abraham, as you remember, refused to commit himself to the king of Sodom, choosing instead to commit himself to God’s priest, Melchizedek. The Serpent then tried again to dilute the seed by introducing the Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, into the mix. If he could just mix the Seed with that of an idolatrous nation, perhaps that would destroy to One who was to come. Though Abraham faltered, God promised that the Seed would come through Sarah, and one who was soon to be born who would be called Isaac. Now we see the Serpent at work again, only a few months after the promise of the birth of Isaac, trying to dilute the Seed by having Sarah taken again into a pagan king’s harem. So God again intervenes. I could go on and continue telling the story of the "enmity" between the serpent and the descendants of the woman that God predicted in Genesis 3:15, but I think you probably get the picture. In fact, the struggle that I am talking about, once understood, helps us comprehend what the Bible is really saying. Ultimately, the Seed, Jesus, the Savior would be born. The Serpent would pull out all the stops in a last-ditch effort to kill Him, ultimately succeeding. (I suspect that is why we see such demonic activity taking place in that last few years before the sacrifice of Jesus.) Finally, Jesus was crucified. Satan thought he had won at last. But God got the last word because Jesus was actually the "Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world," (JN 1:29) and Satan, in all his fierce opposition, in that final move of the struggle, was the one who offered Him up. Satan actually brought about his own defeat! The resurrection, of course, was what made that otherwise fatal injury inflicted by the Serpent in the crucifixion, a minor injury. Jesus’ sacrificial death and resultant atonement for sin, took back the power of death from Satan and dealt him a crushing blow from which he can never recover. He no longer has the power of death over God’s people.

D. What we see here in Genesis 20 then, is much more than the preservation of the purity of the wife of an obscure Old Testament character. It is the preservation of the Seed who was to come who would ultimately deliver those who wish to live for God from the curse of sin and death. Had Isaac been born with a Philistine father, namely the king of Gerar, all bets would have been off.

E. The force of God’s intent is clearly seen in verse 7 which we have already read.

III. ABIMELECH KNEW WHEN IT WAS TIME TO MOVE AND HE MOVED QUICKLY IN WHAT WE CAN CALL NEXT - A RESTORATION.

A. Back in verse 6 we read that God prevented the king from touching Sarah. Down in verses 17 and 18, we learn just how He did it. Note in verse 17 that God healed both Abimelech and his wife and maids. They were all stricken. Some suggest that both the men and women were perhaps infected with some disease that would hamper their sexual function. At any rate, it is clear that God meant business! So Abimelech, suffering
the wrath of God, has asked Abraham, "What have you encountered, that you have done this thing?"

B. Genesis 20:11. Is it not interesting that Abraham’s conclusion was that there was no fear of God in that place, yet all around him now, there is abject terror of God! I guess the lesson there is that we should never conclude that a situation is hopeless until we know for sure. Back in September 1970 before Linda and I became Christians, we received a telephone call from my brother-in-law who asked for a Bible study with us after we had attended the services. I said, “Let me ask Linda.” I told Linda, “You know what they want.” She said, “It’s OK with me.” After our study they asked Linda what did she want to do and she said, “I am ready to be baptized when you get through asking Bobby’s questions.” You cannot tell ahead of time.

C. Genesis 20:12-18. I have already covered the first seven verses of the next chapter in Genesis, so I will just read them quickly, since they contain what I view as the perfect conclusion of my message this morning.

IV. THE CONCLUSION - A REALIZATION.
A. By "realization" I mean, the realization of the promise God made to Abraham so many years before this.
B. Genesis 21:1-7. The birth of Isaac was one critical link in a chain of links that stretched between that Genesis 3:15 promise so long ago in the Garden of Eden and the death of Jesus Christ.

CONCLUSION
A. What have we learned from this passage? Let me see if I can pull it all together for you.
1. We learned first, perhaps, not to ignore any portion of Scripture, even if it seems familiar to us.
2. We learned that for us, there is no difference between the sacred and the secular.
3. We learned, though the lesson was brief, that you really cannot guess whether a person fears God until you find out for yourself.
4. We learned a bit about the struggle between God and the Serpent, a struggle that we should look back on with gratitude. God has gone to great lengths to offer salvation to us.

B. The struggle to deliver the promised Seed to the world is over today. Yet another struggle continues – the struggle to decide who will accept Him and who will reject Him.

C. We accept the Seed when we obey the gospel. We confess our faith in Jesus Christ, turn away from our sins in repentance, and are baptized into Christ to have our sins forgiven. From there we live lives of faithful service to Him. Have you done that today? Are you living for Him? No one can do it for you. You must do it yourself.