

## Genesis 20:1 – 18

<sup>1</sup> Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar. <sup>2</sup> Abraham said of Sarah his wife, 'She is my sister.' So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. <sup>3</sup> But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, 'Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married.' <sup>4</sup> Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, 'Lord, will You slay a nation, even though blameless?' <sup>5</sup> Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this.' <sup>6</sup> Then God said to him in the dream, 'Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her. <sup>7</sup> Now therefore, restore the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.' <sup>8</sup> So Abimelech arose early in the morning and called all his servants and told all these things in their hearing; and the men were greatly frightened. <sup>9</sup> Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, 'What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.' <sup>10</sup> And Abimelech said to Abraham, 'What have you encountered, that you have done this thing?' <sup>11</sup> Abraham said, 'Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. <sup>12</sup> Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife; <sup>13</sup> and it came about, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, 'This is the kindness which you will show to me: everywhere we go, say of me, 'He is my brother.''' <sup>14</sup> Abimelech then took sheep and oxen and male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him. <sup>15</sup> Abimelech said, 'Behold, my land is before you; settle wherever you please.' <sup>16</sup> To Sarah he said, 'Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; behold, it is your vindication before all who are with you, and before all men you are cleared.' <sup>17</sup> Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore children. <sup>18</sup> For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

### Historical and Cultural Background

- *Location:* This time, Abraham and Sarah stay within the borders of the land. Kadesh is near the southern border of Canaan, while 'Shur' is usually located farther east, in the desert in the northwest Sinai, next to Egypt. Gerar is a Canaanite city-state towards the western coast of the Mediterranean.
- *Lying Again:* Recall that Abraham made this mistake before, in Genesis 12:10 – 20. Please refer to the chiasmic structure of the story of Abraham and Sarah.
- *Sarah's Attractiveness:* Abraham and Sarah are prosperous, and lead a large following, so despite Sarah's age, she is viewed as quite a catch!
- *Blaming God:* 'God caused me to wander' (20:13): Rather than using the normal term 'to wander' (*'arat*), to describe a journey, Abraham uses a dual-edged verb (*ta'ah*). The word means not only to wander physically but also morally, meaning, 'to err ethically,' or 'to be led astray,' normally with negative connotations, as in 'being drunk' (Isa 28:7). This is a repeat of Adam blaming God, Cain blaming God, and Cain wandering (Gen.3 – 4).

## Questions

1. Take a look at the geography in v.1. Notice that Abraham stops before he goes into Egypt. What do you think stops him? What's going through his mind?
  - a. He knows he doesn't want to go into Egypt again.
  - b. But he encamps near a Canaanite city, Gerar. He might be afraid of the city because of his experience with Sodom and Gomorrah.
2. What happens because of Abraham's lie about Sarah?
  - a. The same thing as what happened in Egypt! Abimelech 'took' Sarah just like Adam and Eve 'took' the fruit. Once again, the same word is used to connote the same moral significance.
  - b. God has to act, and He does in a dream of Abimelech's.
    - i. Why does God show up to Abimelech? Because Abimelech is actually someone who knows God and seeks God. He is like Melchizedek. Abimelech also honors marriage.
    - ii. Does God take away Abimelech's free will? No. Abimelech still has a choice.
    - iii. Does God mean that Abimelech and his whole family and city will just instantly die? No. Adam and Eve started dying gradually, not instantly, and the same is true here. We know that because God closed the wombs of the women (Gen.20:18). And that's because they were threatening the lineage of Jesus, even though they didn't know it. If they took Sarah away from God's promise to her, Isaac wouldn't be born (he is born in the next chapter), and Jesus wouldn't be born, and there would be no salvation of human nature to offer back to people. That's why God has to protect His chosen people. And when Abimelech or anyone threatens to kill them or rip them from God's plan, they are committing suicide. So the threat of death is actually a mirror. God is saying, 'This is what you're doing to yourself.'
  - c. Abimelech asks God if judgment will fall on a nation even though he is blameless, just as Abraham did with Sodom and Gomorrah in Gen.18.
  - d. Abimelech is a man of integrity, which is what Abraham was called to be in Gen.17:1.
  - e. Nevertheless, God calls Abraham a prophet in 20:7 and tells Abimelech to get prayer from Abraham
  - f. Abimelech asks Abraham in a piercing and stinging question, 'What have you encountered, that you have done this thing?' That was probably a painful question since the last thing Abraham had encountered was the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. Perhaps Abraham was projecting the corruption of Sodom and Gomorrah onto Gerar. This was unjust and unfair. Abraham's own standards was to not group the unrighteous with the righteous. He learns a painful lesson here.
  - g. But Abimelech is also acting like God. After Adam and Eve fell into corruption, God asked them piercing and stinging questions. God did the same thing with Cain. Abimelech is asking questions like God asked questions.
  - h. Abraham and Sarah were also in a more soft-hearted space, because they now believed God (Gen.17 – 18). So they don't need God to come down any harder. These questions from Abimelech, who they made totally wrong assumptions about, were challenging enough!
3. What do you think of Abraham's response?
  - a. Abraham owns up to his false perception and prejudice in v.11, 'Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' Abraham turned out to be far off the mark. His confession was probably insulting to Abimelech because it turned out that Abimelech was quite principled, and upheld marriage more than Abraham did!
  - b. He tries to excuse his lie by saying it was a half-truth in v.12, 'Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife.' However, by holding back the whole truth, he was guilty of deception that would have led to adultery, death, and chaos.
  - c. He also blames God in v.13, 'When God caused me to wander from my father's house...' The term 'wander' is not just physical but also moral. So he is blaming God for his own vulnerability and moral failure. Like Adam blamed Eve and God for his own failure. Abraham is subtly accusing God of being the real reason for his mistakes.
  - d. Abraham's repentance is sheepish. 'His floundering self-justification is a terrible model of repentance.' (Brian Morgan)
4. Because this was not Abraham's first offense, we might expect a swift and hard response from God. Why is that not so?

- a. Perhaps because this was Abraham's deepest and most abiding fear. It was a long-time strategy that he relied on from long ago. Some of our deepest sins are triggered by fears and we just go into auto-pilot mode.
- b. How would you describe God's response, moving through the conscience of Abimelech?
  - i. Sarah is restored as Abraham's wife (v.14 -16). Abimelech's generosity toward Sarah is amazing. He honors her far more than Abraham did! He gives a thousand shekels of silver. Wenham says, 'Fifty shekels was the maximum ever asked for in bride money (Dt.22:29). The typical old Babylonian laborer received a wage of about half a shekel a month.' (Gordon Wenham, Genesis 16-50 (Waco, Texas: Word, 1994), 69 – 74). Abimelech's disdain toward Abraham can be detected in his added little barb, 'I am giving...to your *brother*.' Then he adds that this is for her "vindication," literally, the "covering of eyes," perhaps suggesting "that they no longer look at her as a compromised woman." Sarah is now fully vindicated and restored to her proper role as wife, a term the narrator sings seven times in this text. Abimelech's actions are designed to shame Abraham into not 'wandering' again. It does seem like Sarah is vindicated but Abraham is not completely vindicated. He had more power in this situation, and blew it.
  - ii. Abraham is restored as God's prophet (v.17 – 18). God wants to bless Abimelech for his honor, and use Abraham in the process. God uses Abraham to restore the fertility – life-bearing – of Abimelech's household. In this way, Abraham and Abimelech are restored a bit in bearing God's image.
- c. Illus: Me learning to accept authority at Canaan. Being under authority has always been a difficult thing for me, because I learned from my early life – my dad being an angry alcoholic, and my mom being a critical woman – that I need to protect myself from all authority figures. There were repeated times that I had to learn to accept authority – both when it felt good and when it didn't. One time, I was at a church where I didn't really respect the leadership. I had made some commitments and obligations, though, and I chafed and struggled against it. One day, one of the church leaders invited me over to dinner with him and his family. I wound up liking their family and sympathizing with his position. I saw how the situation at this church was more complex than I had thought. It made me learn yet another lesson about my own deepest defensiveness and fears. And during that time, as I taught Sunday school, the group grew. I had non-Christian friends come out to hear me teach. People thanked me for it. And I trained people to teach after me. I learned a great deal about how God wanted to bless others, and continue healing me.
- d. What we learn about God is that He can be surprisingly gentle. He always wants to bless and bring life.
- e. Furthermore, God often uses mirrors to us in the form of people we are called to be. Pastor Brian Morgan says:

'Since Abraham has masked his own identity for fear of his life, God uses a pagan king as a mirror to expose his true identity. Abimelech plays the role of the new Abraham. He is the one who has the dream. He argues with God for justice. He walks before God in "integrity" (20:6; 17:1). It is he whom God has "kept back" from sin (20:6; 22:12). Abimelech, not Abraham, is moved by the fear of God and exposes the truth. He is the hospitable host who serves much more than a meal. He gifts Abraham with a permanent settlement within his kingdom. But, most important of all, it is Abimelech who exalts Sarah in her role as wife (the word rings out seven times in the text), treating her like the queen mother for all to see. Sarah as wife will be exalted. And in every echo of Abimelech's name, Abraham is reminded that "my father is king."

This is God's method. God is the master of mirrors. When we leave our calling, he woos us back through the most unsuspecting instruments to make us jealous for who we truly are. Have you beheld God's mirrors in your life? God used them constantly with wayward Israel. For the fearful Israelite spies, there was the harlot Rahab. For bitter Naomi, there was the Moabitess, Ruth. For David, the adulterer, there was Uriah the Hittite, who projected a reflection back to David of his own tenacious faith when David killed Goliath. For the hardhearted Jonah, there were the repentant Ninevites. And for the disciples of little faith, there was the Syrophenician woman who had unprecedented faith. And today, for all the Jews who cannot recognize Messiah, there are the

countless Gentiles in every country who are supposed to be playing their role, like Abimelech, to make the Jews jealous. Oh, how God uses mirrors to awaken us from sleep!

But the grace of God is even greater. Abraham is finally backed into a corner and forced to admit his wrongdoing. His repentance is less than exemplary, but that still does not stop God in the healing process. Even after that poor admission he thrusts Abraham back into the role of prophet. As he takes his place there, praying for others, everyone in the story is healed. The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. The very person who may shame you may, in fact, turn out to be the one for whom God asks you to intercede. God's grace is a marvelous thing. It woos us, like reluctant Jonahs, to be all that God intends us to be. That is very good news indeed.'

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