

Genesis 20 • Abraham—A Work in Progress

Introduction

Even the best human spiritual examples provided in the Bible led imperfect lives. Just like us, they grew in their relationship with and knowledge of the Lord. Often we only look at the end result of, say, someone like Abraham and think it's impossible to be what they ultimately became in the Lord; but in reality, they provide us the personal example of the path that leads away from the old life to the new life, with some areas that need work along the way. Abraham's journey from the land of his father to the promise of God his Father is the same journey we're on as we slip further away from the old life towards the new.

¹Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar.

²Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

[Read v.1]

Q: This is not the first time the city of Gerar is mentioned in the Bible. What do we know about it and its inhabitants? (Hint: review the "Table of Nations" in Genesis chapter 10:1-20.)

A: Gerar is a city of the Canaanites. It is located at the southern end and will be allotted to Judah in Israel to come in an area called the Negev about 9 miles southeast of Gaza and is now known as Tel Haror. The descendants of Canaan occupied what was later called "The Promised Land," the very land that God has promised to Abraham (12:6-7; 15:17-21). The Canaanites were under a curse from God (Genesis 9:18-27). With the exception of a very few (e.g., Melchizedek, King of Salem; 14:17-23), the Canaanites were a godless, ruthless and wicked people who, as archeology has shown, practiced such rituals as child sacrifice.

[Read v.2]

Q: Abraham tells Abimelech (not an actual name, but a dynastic title meaning "my father is king") that Sarah is his sister. Why?

A: [See verse 11.] Abraham feared for his life because, according to Genesis 12:11-14, Sarah was a beautiful woman. Abraham may not have known whether Abimelech was like other rulers, who commonly rose to power through ruthless acts, and would think nothing of murdering an unknown sojourner and taking his riches for his own, including his wife, children and servants. Abraham was, after all, a wealthy man.

Q: Also in verse 2, who is in the position of power and authority, Abraham or Abimelech, and who is having the greatest amount of fear?

A: Obviously, Abimelech is in the position of power and Abraham is the one who is afraid.

Q: Why was Abraham's calling Sarah his sister a half-truth?

A: [See verses 12-13.] Abraham married his half-sister. Telling this half-truth was prearranged.

Q: Had Abraham told this half-truth before, and, if so, why do you think he resorted to this tactic a second time?

A: Yes. [See 12:10-20.] He used it previously with Pharaoh while in Egypt. Abraham used this tactic a second time because it worked the first time!

³But 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.”

⁴Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, “Lord, will You slay a nation, even though blameless? ⁵Did 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.”

⁶Then 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.

[Read v.3]

Q: What does this verse tell us about the sovereignty of God?

A: God is able to reach into the mind of even a godless, cunning ruler and speak directly to him.

Q: How does Abimelech respond to God in his dream?

A: He calls him “Lord” which in the Hebrew is not the proper name for the God of Abraham (LORD = Yahweh) but “Adonai,” (“Lord”) also meaning “Master.” This is a strong indication that Abimelech was not a righteous man that fully followed God.

[Read v.4-5]

Q: Why do you suppose Abimelech is threatened by the fact that Sarah “is married”? That is, God did not say, “She is a blessed (special, chosen, holy) woman,” did He?

A: Actually, that’s exactly what God said. The NASB translates the passage “for she is married” with a footnote, “married to a husband.” The Hebrew is *ba’alat ba’al* which can also be translated “wife of a lord” (“wife of a *ba’al*”) as well as “wife of a husband,” depending on the context. *Ba’al* was a common Canaanite word used for their gods. Based on Abimelech’s reaction, “wife of a lord” would seem more appropriate. Thus, Abimelech’s terror and defense here is amplified by more than just adultery.

[Read v.6]

Q: What three lessons do we learn about the nature of God in this verse, and how should this bring comfort to us?

- God is able to read our hearts (“I know that in the integrity of your heart....”) and not only our hearts, but the hearts of all men. He knows our good thoughts and intentions as well as our evil thoughts and intentions.

For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.

—1 Corinthians 2:11-13

- God is able to keep us from sinning against Him (“I also kept you from sinning against Me....”). Compare with “lead us not into temptation” in the Lord’s prayer.
- God is able to intervene on our behalf (“Therefore, I did not let you touch her.”) God protected both Sarah and Abraham from Abimelech’s innocent mistake. This should also give us assurance that God’s promises never fail.

⁷Now 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."

[Read v.7]

Q: Why does God have Abraham pray for Abimelech?

A: This act verifies that Abraham is a prophet, a chosen vessel of God. Most likely, the word will get around the surrounding area and Abraham will be guaranteed protection from his enemies. It would be considered a curse to bring harm to a prophet. And prophets themselves were capable of pronouncing curses (Numbers 22:6). Also, note the results of Abimelech's acts of esteem and generosity in verses 15-16.

Q: Compare verse 7 with verse 2. Now who is in the position of power and who is carrying the greatest fear?

A: The roles have reversed. Abimelech, thinking himself in a position of power is now the one who is carrying the greatest fear. Abraham, at first the one carrying great fear, has now assumed the position of power. What is the difference? God is the difference. The one who is blessed by God is the one who is in the position of power and need have no fear. Compare with these verses:

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ,
—Ephesians 1:3*

*I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might
—Ephesians 1:18-19*

*just as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord, and you have become her children if you do what is right without being frightened by any fear.
—1 Peter 3:6*

*But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. And do not fear their intimidation, and do not be troubled,
—1 Peter 3:14*

[Read v.8-18]

Q: What possible benefit to Abimelech and his town of Gerar came about as a result of this whole affair? (The key is in verse 11).

A: Whereas "there is no fear of God in this place," there is now a **great** fear of God. For it was not Abraham who threatened Abimelech, but God Himself. This incident, born by a questionable half-truth, God has redeemed to become an evangelistic event.

⁸So 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. ⁹Then 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."

¹⁰And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What have you encountered, that you have done this thing?"

¹¹Abraham said, "Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. ¹²Besides, she actually is my sister,

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the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife; ¹³and 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."'"

¹⁴Abimelech then took sheep and oxen and male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him. ¹⁵Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; settle wherever you please."

¹⁶To 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."

¹⁷Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore children. ¹⁸For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

⁷Now 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."

¹⁷Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore children.

[Read v.7 and v.17]

Q: What key words are first found in this chapter in the Bible?

A: "Pray" and "prayed." This is the first mention of prayer in the Bible.

Application: *There are a number of lessons that can be learned from this very interesting chapter in the Old Testament.*

Q: What does Abraham's half-truth tell us about his trust in the LORD?

A: It tells us that Abraham was still in the process of faith-building. He did not trust the LORD enough to rely solely upon His intervention and protection, and felt that he needed to resort to human tactics to protect himself. His faith was incomplete. It will be completed in chapter 22 when he offers Isaac in sacrifice.

Q: Can you name any instances in which you've resorted to half-truths to protect yourself or to gain an advantage? (E.g., in the workplace, concerning financial issues, concerning relationships with the opposite sex?) What does this tell us about our ability to trust God for the outcome?

Q: How does the word "manipulation" fit into the category of half-truth? Why do we tell half-truths instead of the whole truth or plain truth?

A: A half-truth is not an out-and-out lie; therefore, we feel justified. But is that fully trusting God?

Q: What is the point of Abraham's half-truth to Abimelech?

A: He didn't need to resort to a half-truth. He could have told the exact truth, that Sarah was his wife. Could God not have protected him? Can God not protect you and grant you the promise of Romans 8:28? *"And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose."*