

Text: Genesis 20:1-18

Title: Abraham and Abimelech

Truth: We learn about trusting God in dangerous situations, and more.

Date/Location: Sunday January 22, 2023 at FBC

Introduction

After the incident of Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham “goes on with life” and resumes moving about the land that God had deeded to him (v. 1). The first incident narrated for us is about the interaction of Abraham and Abimelech. In it we learn:

I. Abraham Misleads Abimelech, v. 1

- A. Just like in Gen. 12:10-20, Abraham once again misleads others about the identity of his wife—and she participates, which is very awkward, besides wrong. It had been his practice to do this in his travels (“in every place” where they traveled, 20:13), and he rationalized it because she was his half-sister (v. 12). She participated in the lie too (v. 5). He thought doing so would save his neck at least two times, but it ended up being a great embarrassment, and is even recorded in the Bible. Remember—don’t lie! Live on principle, not pragmatics. It may be that the lie sometimes worked but when it did not work, it failed spectacularly, twice in the space of two decades.
- B. The word *Abimelech* means “my father is king.” It seems to be a title for the Philistine king of Gerar. The word is used of this man in Genesis 20-21, as well as another of the same title in Genesis 26. This latter Abimelech was probably the son or grandson of the earlier one, because these incidents were separated by about 75 years. How do we know this? Between chapters 21 and 26 are the birth of Isaac, the passage of 60 years until Isaac has his first two children, and the coming of age of the two boys up to the birthright incident in chapter 25. It seems unlikely that the same man was king in Gerar 75 years later, although it is possible.
- C. Abraham was doing the same sin again as he did in Gen 12:10-20. And *that* with his 90-year-old wife! Even more amazing is that in Genesis 18:10, God promised that within a year’s time, Sarah

would have a child. Abraham was 99/100 in both 17:17 and 21:5, so that we know the events of chapters 19 and 20 took place within a year's time. Sarah may have been in the early stages of pregnancy when this business with Abimelech happened! What was Abraham thinking?!?

- D. But you would not criticize Abraham too harshly, would you? You know that patterns of sin are hard to break. Also, patterns of mistrusting the Lord are hard to stop.
- E. Abraham was not trusting in God, nor in God's promises in this matter. God had promised to protect him, bless him, keep him, etc. He had nothing to fear, not even from some guy who wanted his wife. It seems strange in a way, but we do the same thing: trusting God for eternal life, but in far less important matters we do not trust Him.

II. God Protects the Philistine of Gerar, v. 2-7

- A. I am operating on the assumption that Abimelech already had one or more wives and was adding Sarah to his harem. This time it is not Pharaoh who was deceived, but the Philistine king of Gerar named Abimelech.
- B. Then, in what a stunning event in the life of Abimelech, God appeared to him in a dream and said that he had taken another man's wife (v. 3). This was wrong and he would be punished for it if he persisted in this path (v. 7). Remember—it is wrong to take another man's wife. It is often done today, but it is still just as wrong as it has ever been. I wish God would protect every marriage like He did for Abraham and Sarah. On this, see 1 Thess. 4:6.
- C. At this, Abimelech protested that he was (relatively) innocent in the matter. He had taken another wife (a sin) but not knowing she belonged to another man (a compound sin). Abimelech behaved as he did based on a lie, so this *part* of the situation was not his fault. Abraham's lie caused him to sin and be on the verge of even greater sin (v. 9). He was doing something sinful, but he did not initially know that it was a sin. What he *should know* was a sin was taking another wife in addition to the one he already had.

- D. Abimelech in 20:4 asks God basically the same question that Abraham asked God in Gen. 18:23. The image of God in man calls for justice and right judgment. Even the pagan Philistine knew this.
- E. In verse 6-7 God agrees and tells Abimelech to restore Sarah to her rightful place and the punishment that was coming (death) would be avoided.
- F. God says that He “withheld [Abimelech] from sinning against [God].” This teaches us that God prevents wicked deeds. He has control over everything, including sin (whether it is permitted, to what extent it is permitted, etc.) We learn the general principle that God restrains sin. In this case, He intervened before it turned into all-out adultery. Thank God when you experience His limitation in your life. Pray that He will continue to frustrate your flesh so that you will not go down a wrong road.
- G. Such sin was a sin “against Me,” God says—and that is ultimately true for every wrong thing that you do. It is against God (Psalm 51:4).
- H. God limits the extent of sin in the world, otherwise it would be total anarchy, even worse than before the Flood in Noah’s time (Gen. 6:5, 13). One major instrument of that limit on sin is the Holy Spirit working in His people the church. As the influence of the church declines in society, sin rises. We see it today. When the church is removed in the future rapture, all manner of sin will break out.
- I. But God does not always restrain sin in the life of individuals. The effect of God’s restraining hand is lessened whenever God “hands someone over” or “gives them up” to the hardness of their own heart (Romans 1:24, 26, 28; see Exodus “hardening of the heart” passages, especially chapters 7-9).
- J. In the ancient near east, it was custom that if a man took another man’s wife on a journey with him, he would be in trouble. It was presumed that he had bad intentions for her.
- K. Adultery had the death penalty in this era—at least God thought so (v. 7)! God did not flinch at that notion because He said it to the

King of Gerar. This being the case, just how serious do think you God takes marriage?

III. Abimelech Rebukes Abraham, v. 8-13

- A. Early in the morning after the dream, Abimelech did just what God told him to do (vv. 9-18).
- B. Abimelech rebuked Abraham, and rightly so. Note that the Abrahamic covenant does *not* elevate Abraham and Israel to a place above rebuke. If they do wrong, it is only right to call them out on that wrong. It is *not* the case that Israel can “do no wrong.” They certainly can and do from time to time.
- C. In this case, Abraham had brought a great sin upon another person. That is right—though Abimelech was guilty, Abraham *caused him to be guilty*. Your sinful actions do impact others negatively!
- D. Abimelech demanded an explanation. As king of the region where Abraham was a guest, the king deserved a truthful answer.
- E. Abraham admits he calculated wrongly. He thought there would be no fear of God in the place and they would kill Abraham to get his wife. But in fact, there was *some* fear of God there, unlike in Sodom. Here’s another lesson for us: do not be *too pessimistic* about the people around where you are living, or in any place for that matter. They might not be quite as bad as you think. There might be—in fact is—more common ground than you realize.
- F. Abraham made excuse for his half-truth that obscured the whole truth. As MacDonald says, “When a half-truth is presented as the whole truth, it is an untruth” (*Believer’s Bible Commentary*, p. 57-8). Long ago, Abraham should have—certainly after the first embarrassing incident with Pharaoh—stopped his “in every place” policy where he asked Sarah to lie, saying that she was his sister. God could protect him without this subterfuge.
- G. Even though Abraham had sinned, this does not absolve Abimelech of wrongdoing. Same with us—the sin of another does not give us a pass for our own sin. “But he did this...or she did that!” NO! Imagine today some gullible young person getting roped into a scheme or a gang based on lies, and then subsequently doing some

criminal act. The initial deception does not absolve them from the wrong they did.

- H. Abraham pinned some blame God when he said, “When God caused me to wander from my father’s house.” The reality is that God told him to go to the promised land and to reside there. God did not make him “wander” in some completely aimless way into the midst of danger where he had to lie to protect himself.
- I. Abraham should have said, “You are right. *Mea culpa*. Please forgive me, and I owe you some restitution.” But he did not. Handling sin this way shows immaturity in the person. How *you* handle sin shows how mature you are.
- J. Despite all this, Abimelech was generous—he told Abraham to stay wherever he wanted to. This was quite different than Pharaoh, who in 12:19-20 told Abraham to get lost.
- K. Verse 18 tells us that the Lord had closed the wombs of the women in Abimelech’s family. It must have been that Abraham and Sarah’s charade went on for a while because it takes several months to see a pattern of infertility like what was happening. It was a result of God’s judgment.

IV. Abimelech and Abraham Fix the Mess, 14-18

- A. Back in verse 7, God told Abimelech that Abraham was a prophet and would speak to God on Abimelech’s behalf. Usually, a prophet speaks *from* God *to* people, but in this situation the prophet is speaking *to* God *on behalf of* a person.
- B. Because of the threat of death hanging over him, Abimelech would be incentivized to straighten out the situation and get Abraham to pray for him to God so that he would not be judged by God. So, after the rebuke, he gave an offering to Abraham as an apology for his sin, as a fine. He may also have given 1,000 pieces of silver to Abraham, or it may be that he summarizes what he did in monetary terms by meaning that he gave 1,000 pieces of silver worth of stuff to Abraham.
- C. How is it that Abraham was enriched even more? Why did he not refuse those things or give it back to Abimelech? It seems *he*

should have paid Abimelech in some sense. Yet we cannot judge how things went in that culture. We are far removed and do not understand the nuances of the culture to be able to make a good discernment. We can simply trust God's word that the events happened as recorded and that they were appropriate.

- D. Why did the king pay 1,000 pieces of silver to the lying person? Because the Philistines had for some months become infertile—which was a corporate judgment for taking another woman as wife, and that a woman who was already married. The payment was a fine or compensation for the wrong done, even though it was done under false pretenses.
- E. What is the justification or vindication of Sarah? She certainly did wrong and deserved rebuke for her part in participating in the lie that her husband told her to do. But she had not actually cheated against her husband with this man. The fine/compensation seems to suggest that the wrong has been made right, and everything is back to the way it should be.

Conclusion

We have learned a lot in this narration of failure in Abraham's life.

Abimelech taking Sarah was a threat to the fulfillment of God's promise that a son would come to her via Abraham. God was dead serious about His promise. He is just as serious about the integrity of marriage.

We see a worldly pagan king rebukes a follower of God. This is a sad testimony of the behavior of God's people, and it happens too often (2 Samuel 12:14, Rom. 2:24, 2 Peter 2:2).

Your sin can lead others to sin.

Patterns of sin are hard to overcome.

God restrains sin. Ask Him to restrain your own sinfulness. Pray that He leads you *away* from temptation.

Handle sin maturely by confessing it and making it right. Do not make excuses for it.