

Bethel Bible-Presbyterian Church
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DHW
LESSON 14

THE BOOK OF GENESIS
CHAPTER 20

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, we saw Abraham at his best when he interceded for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. But here in this chapter, we will see Abraham at his worst when he once again told a half-truth about his relationship with Sarah. However, the greatest comfort and encouragement is that God is ever faithful to His covenant-promises. He intervened so that His plan and purposes would be fulfilled and He did it in ways that are gracious and edifying so that the protagonists did not compromise or sin.

This chapter shows that a godly man also has moments of weakness. We may ask the question: "Is God still faithful when we do not keep faith with Him?" Abraham and Abimelech found themselves in a dangerous situation mainly due to Abraham's foolish ways. The two of them were brought into direct confrontation. How they solved the problem and saved themselves is a valuable lesson which we can all learn.

The chapter can be divided into the following sections:

1. King Abimelech took Sarah because Abraham declared that she was his sister (vv. 1-2);

2. God warned Abimelech to restore Sarah to her husband or be punished (vv. 3-7);
3. Abimelech confronted Abraham over the latter's deception (vv. 8-13);
4. Abimelech restored Sarah to Abraham and graciously treated him (vv. 14-16)
5. Abraham interceded for Abimelech and the divine judgment was withdrawn (vv. 17-18)

STUDY THE WORD

King Abimelech Takes Sarah

Abraham decided to move south to sojourn in Gerar. Once there, he arranged with Sarah to commit the same lie that she was his sister because he feared for his life. If there was one weakness in Abraham's walk with God, it was this fear. Interestingly, Sarah was by now ninety years old (17:17). She must have been a woman of exceptional beauty for we were told that Abimelech¹ took her. In Hebrew the word *took* (v.2b) is a strong word. It implied that Abimelech intended to take possession of Sarah as his concubine.²

¹ The name "Abimelech" is a dynastic title like Pharaoh. It is not the personal name of the king, which is not given. It is equivalent to modern day "President."

² Some suggest that this incident and that in Genesis 12:10-20 were the same, suggesting that the story was handed orally in two different forms. This interpretation is untenable for it does not take into account the role of the Holy Spirit who guards God's Word against any error. The plain sense of the account must be taken. There are clear differences between the two incidents: the king here was Abimelech, whereas the other was Pharaoh; the place here was Gerar, whereas in the

Abraham's fear for his life was so overwhelming, that he jeopardised God's covenant promise of a son for him. God had just declared to him that the time had arrived for him to have a son of his own. Isaac was to be born soon. Apparently, Abraham was plagued by this besetting sin of lying about his relationship with Sarah in order to save his life. Abimelech's taking of Sarah as his concubine would thwart God's plan and purpose.

God Warns Abimelech

God would not allow man to hinder His promises. The conjunction "But" in verse 3 is significant. God then intervened. God used a variety of ways to communicate with people in those days. In this case, He appeared to Abimelech in a dream in the night. He straightaway recognised God as a superior personality than he was for he addressed Him as *Lord* (v.4). God went straight to the point saying that he was as good as *a dead man* because he had taken another man's wife (v.3). The divine writer commented that Abimelech, however, *had not come near her*. Abimelech quickly defended himself by charging that the LORD surely would not slay a righteous people. He further added that it was not only Abraham but also Sarah who had declared that she was his sister. Abimelech reasoned that he acted with a clear conscience and with clean hands. He was indeed telling the truth, and the truth saved him.

God agreed with him revealing that He had withheld him from sinning against

Him by not having sex with Sarah. God commanded him to return Sarah back to Abraham for Abraham was a prophet and he would pray for him that he might live. But if Abimelech refused to restore Sarah back to Abraham, God pronounced that he would surely die together with all his household and servants. God revealed His holiness, power and mercy. He did not judge Abimelech unjustly for he had not "touched" Sarah. But he would be liable if he persisted in keeping Sarah. God gave Abimelech fair warning and His intention if he sinned against God.

Abimelech Confronts Abraham

Abimelech took God's word seriously. He was a righteous man, who feared God. He took every appropriate action to correct the situation. Early in the morning the next day, he called all his servants. He shared with them all the things that had happened – the situation he was in although it was not his fault, and that God was not pleased with him. When he had finished his explanation, his servants were *sore afraid* (v.8). They knew that if anything happened to their king, they too would be affected. In those days, the king represented the nation, and when the king sinned against God, the punishment would not only be meted out solely to the king but also to all his subjects.

Then Abimelech called Abraham. He demanded from Abraham why he had brought this evil thing to him. He lambasted him with a series of questions, one after another: *What hast thou done unto us? and what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my*

other was Egypt; Abraham came to Gerar freely without any compulsion, whereas he went to Egypt because of the famine in Canaan. The only consistent element was Abraham's lie to escape death.

kingdom a great sin? thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done. . . . What sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing? Abimelech appeared to be more righteous than Abraham. Abraham must have felt very small and a bad person. In this regard he had also brought Sarah down. His response to all these questions was very feeble. He admitted his concern for his own safety. He *thought* that Abimelech might kill him because of his wife (v.11). However, in order to justify his actions, he said that Sarah was indeed his sister (half sister), who was of the same father but of a different mother. In those days, it was customarily acceptable to marry one's next of kin. Abraham might be technically right but his action was wrong. When he married Sarah his half-sister, their marital status took precedence over their blood relationship. Abraham should have told Abimelech in the first instance when he came to Gerar that Sarah was his wife. He did not trust God. He lied again for fear of his life. He got the shameless audacity to say that he had made this kind of arrangement with Sarah since the day God called him out of his father's family. Imagine Sarah willingly submitted to such a ploy. Would today's woman accept this plan of action?

Abimelech Restores Sarah

Abimelech did not get a good response to all his questions. Nevertheless, he was technically wrong by taking Sarah, the wife of Abraham. God had told him to restore Sarah to her husband, and assured him that Abraham was a prophet and he would pray for him so that everything would be well with him and his people. Abimelech showed his

generosity for the sake of God, and had respect for Abraham who was God's prophet. He compensated Abraham with gifts of sheep and oxen, male and female servants in addition to restoring Sarah back to him. He gave Sarah a thousand pieces of silver and said that she was free from blame and that her reputation was untarnished in the public eye (v.16). Abimelech made a further gesture of goodwill towards Abraham. He allowed Abraham to stay wherever it pleased him in his land. All these things show that Abimelech had amply compensated Abraham because the latter was God's prophet in spite of the fact that the former was wronged by him.

Abraham Intercedes for Abimelech

Although Abimelech may be more just than Abraham in this chapter, he still needed to approach Abraham for prayers. God did not cast Abraham out from His service but graciously spoke of him as His prophet. God told Abimelech that Abraham would pray for him so that he would be blessed; specifically, God would heal him, his wife and his female servants that they would bear children. The truth was that the LORD had shut the wombs of these women folks because of Sarah.

PRACTICAL VALUE

Are there Abimelechs today who have been used by God to check the wrong doings of His children? One can never be sure but definitely there are. As Christians we must be mindful of such people who will tell us straight in the face that we have sinned. And even he is not a Christian; we

ought to see such happenings as God's way of chastising His children.

We learn one of the most precious lessons about God. Even when we sin in ignorance, like Abimelech who almost sinned by taking Sarah, Abraham's wife, we will be punished. However, God may intervene so that we do not sin against Him. In this case, God had to directly intervene. In other times, God may use a variety of ways by using someone, a Christian or even a non-Christian to warn us of our wrong action. We need to be discerningly sensitive to these happenings so that we do not sin against God.

Prayer is God's appointed way of speaking to Him and man can confidently approach Him for grace and help in time of need. God told Abimelech that Abraham would pray for him and he would be healed. This teaches us the power of praying to God. Let us remember that the inherent power is not in prayer itself, it is the power of God as an outcome of praying to Him. So it is important that we pray aright to God who will hear His people who approach Him with pure hearts and clean hands. So, if we sin, it is proper to repent and have our sin washed away by the blood of Christ, before we pray. Otherwise, God will not incline His ear to hear us.

God is faithful to His Word and promises. When His word and promises are in danger of being hindered by the foolish actions of man, there will be divine intervention. If you know any of God's promises, do not despair if the answer may not be instant. If it is in God's will, God cannot take back His Word, but His promise will come true. What we need is patience.

Does God judge unrighteously? No. We learn that we can reason with God by presenting our case to Him. He hears and understands. He agreed with Abimelech who had innocently sinned. God knew that and He showed Abimelech how he could deliver himself. Similarly, we can reason with Him, and be guided by His Word, His leading and guidance. AMEN