



BEGINNINGS

A Study of the Book of Genesis

Sanctuary Bible Studies – Woodbury Lutheran Church

Session 16, Abraham and Abimelech (Genesis 20)

Genesis 20 gives us Abraham for a second time giving Sarah, his wife, to a ruler on the false premise that she is his sister. (See Genesis 12:10ff. for the first time.) Both times his motivation was fear for his own life. The story here serves two purposes in the greater story of the covenant. First, it reveals Abraham to be flawed and willing to jeopardize the covenant for personal safety. If the covenant is fulfilled, it will be because of God, not Abraham. Second, it calls for God's intervention and grace to be sure Abraham is indeed the father of the promised son, Isaac.

1. SAME LIE, TAKE TWO

- Vs. 1: Abimelech was a powerful king of a nearby Philistine city. His name is not a personal name but an inherited title, meaning, "my father is king." Gerar was halfway between Gaza and Beersheba in the northern Negev Desert, 35 miles from Hebron. It was probably a temporary site used by Abraham to graze his livestock. He lived at Hebron but took his herds to Gerar.
- Vs. 2: "Took her" indicates that Abimelech added her to his harem (even at the age of 90!). Repeating what he did in Genesis 12, Abraham allows Abimelech to take his wife on the promise that she was Abraham's sister. Abraham's own words in 20:13 reveal that this was a plan developed by Abraham for all of his travels. It is possible, therefore, that Abraham and Sarah did this more than twice. Watch Isaac repeat his father's strategy in Genesis 26:1, 7.
- Vs. 3: God comes to Abimelech in a dream. God often uses dreams in the Bible to communicate His will. Other dreams in Genesis occur in 28:12; 31:10-11; 37:5-9; 40:5; and 41:1. Historians have found records of other ancient kings having dreams, including Egyptian king, Thutmose IV (15th Century), Hittite king, Hattushilis (13th Century), and Babylonian king, Nabonidus (6th Century). Here the dream is not just images but an actual two-way conversation. See Joel 2:28 and Acts 2:17 for the promise and fulfillment of dreams in the Messianic age. Here God brings a dream to a king outside His covenant. "As good as dead" likely refers to God's bringing impotence to Abimelech to protect Sarah and the covenant. See vss. 17-18.
- Vs. 3: God's accusation here concerns adultery. Adultery among the neighboring nations was often referred to as "the great sin," and was seen as detrimental to society. Hittite laws, Assyrian laws, and the Code of Hammurabi all contain prohibitions against adultery. Amazingly, what ancients knew was harmful we still practice with little sense of the costs of adultery. See Hebrews 13:4.
- Vss. 4-7: These verses clearly assure that Abimelech did not have sexual relations with Sarah and that Abraham, therefore, is Isaac's

father. Further, all of this is God's doing: "That is why I did not let you touch her" (vs. 6).

- Vs. 7: The LORD makes the Sarah issue a matter of life and death for Abimelech, reflecting His assurances in Genesis 12:3. Those who "curse" Abraham will be cursed by God. For the first time, the title "prophet" is used in the Scriptures, here for Abraham. See Psalm 105:12-15 for a reference to this incident.

2. ABRAHAM ON THE DEFENSIVE (20:8-13)

- Vs. 8, "Early the next morning" shows the impact of the dream on Abimelech's conscience. He knows he and his nation are at risk.
- Vss. 9-10: The language here is strongly accusatory. One senses the combination of fear, anger, and disappointment in Abimelech.
- Vss. 11-13: Abraham's defense is a mixture of truth and lie. He admits his fear of being killed so that Abimelech could take his wife and the strategy to which he and Sarah had agreed. Yet in vs. 12 he offers a weak argument that Sarah is indeed his "sister," since they have the same father. Yet a lie rests not just in what is not said but in what is withheld. Half-truth is a lie when the motive is wrong and the consequences significant.

2. MAKING THINGS RIGHT (20:14-18)

- Vss. 14-16: Abimelech seeks to make things right between himself and Abraham (and Abraham's God!). He sends Abraham and Sarah off with the following:
 - Sheep and cattle
 - Slaves
 - Permission to live anywhere in his kingdom
 - 1000 shekels (about 25 lbs) of silver to Sarah's "brother" (A shekel at this time was a weight, not a coin. Coinage begins in the 7th Century B.C. 1000 shekels is more than a lifetime of wages for a common worker at this time.)
- Vss. 17-18: Prayer for healing occurs here. James 5:16b may have this event in its background. As promised in vs. 7, Abraham's prayer brings the desired healing of what was likely Abimelech's impotence. All along God had been protecting the integrity of His promise that Abraham and Sarah would be the parents of Isaac.

BEGINNINGS

- 1. Lies are most often strategies born of fear.**
- 2. Dreams are worthy of our attention.**
- 3. Adultery's assault on marriage has high costs for individuals and society.**
- 4. It helps to have a prophet on your side.**
- 5. Half-truth is a lie when the motive is wrong and the consequences significant.**
- 6. The time to make a wrong right is ASAP.**
- 7. God protects the unfolding of His promises, even when we fail to trust Him.**