

## Introduction

Abraham was being treated unfairly as he sojourned among the unbelieving Philistines:

^ In verse twenty-three Abimilech wants Abraham to swear an oath that he "will not deal falsely." Abimilech is remembering the earlier episode in which Abraham *did* deal falsely with him. Even though God had dealt with Abraham's failure, Abimilech unfairly holds onto it, and holds it against him.

% In verse twenty-five you learn that some of Abimilech's servants had unfairly seized a well of water that Abraham had dug.

Abraham was being treated unfairly as he sojourned among the unbelieving Philistines. His good name was defamed, and he was defrauded of his goods.

*You* are often treated unfairly as you sojourn among the unbelievers of this world! *Your* good name is defamed, and *you* are defrauded of *your* goods. How are you supposed to react when treated unfairly?

You can learn three strategies from Abraham on how you can react when treated unfairly by unbelievers:

#1 You Can Let Yourself Be Defamed  
When Treated Unfairly By Unbelievers

#2 You Can Let Yourself Be Defrauded  
When Treated Unfairly By Unbelievers

#3 You Can Learn To Be Discerning  
When Treated Unfairly By Unbelievers

#1 You Can Let Yourself Be Defamed  
When Treated Unfairly By Unbelievers  
(v22-24)

"Defame" means to attack the good name or reputation of someone. "Slander" and "libel" are other words that have similar meanings. You know what I'm talking about: Unbelievers have a tendency to speak evil of you, no matter how hard you try to have a good testimony among them. If, like Abraham, you *do* fail, they never seem to forget it - always holding on to it, always holding it against you.

The natural reaction to being defamed is to debate! You want to clear your name and will go to great lengths to do so. A seldom used strategy is to let yourself be defamed - as Abraham did - and wait upon the Lord to clear your name.

Abimilech obviously thought of Abraham as a liar, as a man who deals falsely with his neighbors. Regardless of God's dealings with Abraham in restoring him from his failure, Abimilech held on to this opinion and held it against the man of God. The whole basis for his coming to Abraham and entering into an agreement with him was his opinion that Abraham could not be trusted.

It is unfortunate that Abraham had given Abimilech reason to feel this way. But I've noticed that, even without good reasons, unbelievers delight in holding such opinions of God's children and in defaming them. Sometimes the proper strategy is to let yourself be defamed.

Genesis 21:22 And it came to pass at that time that Abimelech and Phicol, the commander of his army, spoke to Abraham, saying, "God *is* with you in all that you do.

There is a passive side and an active side to this statement, "God is with you in all that you do."

^ Passively, Abraham's failures could not overshadow God's faithfulness! It seems to annoy Abimilech that God could and would bless such a man. While you should strive to remain faithful in your walk, when you fail remember that God remains faithful. God will be "with you" - never leaving you or forsaking you - as a testimony of His love and forgiveness.

%o Actively, Abraham had grown in his faithfulness since the earlier episode with Abimilech and was more obviously committed to God's involvement in his life. It should be obvious to others that you submit your decisions and desires to the Lord. There should be no area of your life where He is not obviously "with you" in the sense of your seeking His mind and will.

Genesis 21:23 "Now therefore, swear to me by God that you will not deal falsely with me, with my offspring, or with my posterity; but that according to the kindness that I have done to you, you will do to me and to the land in which you have dwelt."

Abimilech thought very highly of himself, taking credit for Abraham's safety and prosperity in the land. While he recognized a "religious" aspect to Abraham's life, he considered Abraham indebted to him, speaking of the "kindness" he had done to him.

Unbelievers often have an inflated view of themselves:  
v If you are an employee, for example, your unbelieving employer often thinks he or she is doing you a favor by having you work for them.

v If you are an employer, the opposite is frequently true. Your unbelieving employees are certain that the business would fail without their help.

The same is true in other relationships with unbelievers. In fact, often the unbeliever sees your relationship with God as a *hindrance* to success. Their own way of doing things, they think, would be much more productive and prosperous. When you uphold biblical principles, they are offended and begin looking for failures in your life that they can hold on to and hold against you. They begin looking for ways to defame your good name.

Genesis 21:24 And Abraham said, "I will swear."

The whole basis for this agreement is Abimelech's opinion that Abraham is deceitful. Abraham offers no debate. He lets himself be defamed.

Is this really a biblical strategy for dealing with unbelievers? It *can* be, in certain circumstances:

= In Second Samuel Sixteen, King David is fleeing for his life. Along the trail he is defamed by a man named Shimei. Listen as I read the story.

2 Samuel 16:5 Now when King David came to Bahurim, there was a man from the family of the house of Saul, whose name *was* Shimei the son of Gera, coming from there. He came out, cursing continuously as he came.

2 Samuel 16:6 And he threw stones at David and at all the servants of King David. And all the people and all the mighty men *were* on his right hand and on his left.

2 Samuel 16:7 Also Shimei said thus when he cursed: "Come out! Come out! You bloodthirsty man, you rogue!"

2 Samuel 16:8 "The LORD has brought upon you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have reigned; and the LORD has delivered the kingdom into the hand of Absalom your son. So now you *are caught* in your own evil, because you are a bloodthirsty man!"

2 Samuel 16:9 Then Abishai the son of Zeruijah said to the king, "Why should this dead dog curse my lord the king? Please, let me go over and take off his head!"

2 Samuel 16:10 But the king said, "What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruijah? So let him curse, because the LORD has said to him, 'Curse David.' Who then shall say, 'Why have you done so?'"

2 Samuel 16:11 And David said to Abishai and all his servants, "See how my son who came from my own body seeks my life. How much more now *may this* Benjamite? Let him alone, and let him curse; for so the LORD has ordered him.

2 Samuel 16:12 "It may be that the LORD will look on my affliction, and that the LORD will repay me with good for his cursing this day."

2 Samuel 16:13 And as David and his men went along the road, Shimei went along the hillside opposite him and cursed as he went, threw stones at him and kicked up dust.

David was able to look beyond the defamation he was suffering to the deliverance of God. Nothing David or his followers would say could change Shimei's opinion. They would have to cut off his head to change his mind! David's reputation was not that important to him.

= If David doesn't appeal to you as a good example, look instead at Jesus! He was publicly thought of as an illegitimate child...He was accused of being a drunk...He consorted with prostitutes and was undoubtedly suspected of sexual involvements with them...He was said to be demon-possessed. He nevertheless went to the Cross for the very people who so defamed Him!

I can't tell you when you should debate and when you should simply bear-up under defamation. I can only suggest to you, from the text in Genesis, that to let yourself be defamed *is* sometimes an option - God's option. In those times you must patiently wait upon God for your deliverance.

## #2 You Can Let Yourself Be Defrauded When Treated Unfairly By Unbelievers (v25)

Genesis 21:25 Then Abraham rebuked Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech's servants had seized.

A well that Abraham had dug had been violently seized by Abimelech's servants. In verse twenty-five he brings it to Abimelech's attention - but not before he has allowed himself to be defrauded for some period of time! That's the key thought here; Abraham *lets* himself be defrauded when treated unfairly by unbelievers. He eventually has his well restored, but it is in God's timing. He doesn't immediately pursue the matter.

The natural reaction to being defrauded is to defend yourself! You want to recover your "well" at all costs. A seldom used strategy is to let yourself be defrauded - as Abraham did - and wait upon the Lord to restore your goods.

The writer of the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament says, "...[you] took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance." Those first century believers were being defrauded of their goods and property by unbelievers. They took it joyfully, looking toward their reward in heaven.

What "well" have you dug that you are being defrauded of? It could be anything material that you've worked hard for. Now, unfairly, it is being taken from you. Should you defend it? or should you let yourself be defrauded?

Again, I can't tell you when to defend yourself and when to be defrauded. I'm only suggesting that being defrauded *is* sometimes an option - God's option. In those

times you must patiently wait on the Lord to either restore your goods or reward you later for suffering their loss.

#3 You Can Learn To Be Discerning  
When Treated Unfairly By Unbelievers  
(v25-34)

Abraham's good name had been defamed for some time by Abimelech. He had let himself be defrauded of his goods. He had probably wondered *why* God allowed his good name to be defamed and *why* God had allowed him to be defrauded of his goods. Now an opportunity presents itself for him to clear his good name and recover his goods at the same time! God was teaching him to exercise discernment and to thereby get the most spiritual benefit from his adversities. The situation he now finds himself in is better than any debate of his good name or defense of his goods could have been in its affect upon the unbelieving Abimelech.

Genesis 21:25 Then Abraham rebuked Abimelech because of a well of water which Abimelech's servants had seized.

Abimelech had held a low opinion of Abraham's integrity. Now he learns that Abraham is a man of such high integrity that he will even suffer loss to maintain peaceful relations with others.

Genesis 21:26 And Abimelech said, "I do not know who has done this thing; you did not tell me, nor had I heard *of it* until today."

Abimelech responds as unbelievers normally do. He says that the accusation, while perhaps true, is unfair towards him. After all, he had no prior knowledge of this dispute. There is a hint in his response that, had the situation been reversed, he would have handled things differently.

That's precisely the point God is trying to make - believers and unbelievers should handle similar situations *differently*. While the unbeliever may think you are wrong for remaining passive, they will nevertheless be challenged, realizing that they could not have found the resolve to act that way.

Genesis 21:27 So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two of them made a covenant.

Genesis 21:28 And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves.

Genesis 21:29 Then Abimelech asked Abraham, "What *is the meaning of* these seven ewe lambs which you have set by themselves?"

Genesis 21:30 And he said, "You will take *these* seven ewe lambs from my hand, that they may be my witness that I have dug this well."

Genesis 21:31 Therefore he called that place Beersheba, because the two of them swore an oath there.

Abraham suggests that they enter into a more binding agreement with one another concerning the well. It's a good example for us to follow in our business dealings with believers as well as with unbelievers! Don't assume anything...Expectations get you into trouble when goods and services are involved.

Genesis 21:32 Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba. So Abimelech rose with Phichol, the commander of his army, and they returned to the land of the Philistines.

In the end, Abraham had cleared his good name and he enjoyed the restoration of his goods.

Genesis 21:33 Then *Abraham* planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there called on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.

Genesis 21:34 And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines many days.

You are left with a picture of Abraham's sojourn in the land of the Philistines - Working, Worshipping, and Waiting:

= Working

Abraham planted a tree; some translate the Hebrew as a grove of trees. He settled down to work among the other unbelieving inhabitants of the area.

= Worshipping

He established a place for worship and led his own family and servants in worship.

= Waiting

He stayed there "many days," waiting for the Lord to fulfill His promises.

Working among the unbelievers...Worshipping with God's people...Waiting upon the Lord...All these summarize our own sojourn on earth.

Why did Abraham take this opportunity to confront Abimelech, after having previously waited? I can only think that God had given him discernment. In Ecclesiastes 3:7 you read, "...[there is] a time to keep silence, and a time to speak..." You need to learn to discern when to keep silent - as Abraham did at first; you need to learn to discern when to speak - as Abraham did at the last.

The discernment we are talking about is the wisdom we need to respond to unbelievers in the way that will most manifest God's love for them. Only Jesus knows

the heart of the unbeliever who is treating you unfairly. While there may be times to debate for your good name, or to defend your goods, there are other times when being defamed and defrauded will be the Lord's strategy. Jesus can easily clear your good name and restore your goods. Your reputation and resources are not nearly as important as being God's instrument for reaching the unbeliever with God's love! That's why you need to learn to be discerning, to look beyond your loss to the lost condition of those who are treating you so unfairly.

### Conclusion

Dr. Jay Adams says,

"Cats meow and dogs bark. You don't expect to hear a dog meow or a cat bark. Each animal acts according to its nature. It should be no surprise to you when unbelievers act like unbelievers. That...should be expected. They act according to their natures."<sup>1</sup>

*You will* be treated unfairly by unbelievers as you work, worship, and wait. Expect it! They are acting according to their old natures.

*You* should act according to your new nature! There are times when debating your good name and defending your goods are God's will. There are also times when being defamed and defrauded are in God's will. Remember that those who are treating you unfairly are eternally lost; your temporary loss might put you in a position later to reveal God's love to them.

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<sup>1</sup>Jay Adams, From Forgiven to Forgiving, p. 83