

TELL ME YOUR WIFE STORY

GENESIS 20:1-18 FEBRUARY 9, 2022

In 2020, doctors treated a man for a lesion on his tongue that had been bleeding for weeks. It was either cancer, a benign tumor, or a self-inflicted injury. Based on the patient's history, they had a sneaking suspicion it was the latter. So, they asked questions, evaluated his mouth, and set to solving the problem. In the end, it was a pyogenic granuloma - a small area of inflammation, brought on by a cellular overreaction to trauma. The man was relieved to find his condition wasn't fatal, though- the lesion needed to be cut out. The doctors wrote, "Although we wouldn't state that we gave the patient a 'tongue-lashing,' we strongly advised him that he return to his dentist and abstain from tobacco, alcohol, drugs, and taste-testing scalding food directly from the pot." (All things the patient had a history of indulging in and contributed to the affliction.)¹

In Genesis 20, Abraham's mouth leads to some serious health trouble. Trouble that caused some real danger to his family and was potentially *fatal* to an entire nation. In the end, he'll be on the mend, thanks to the intervention of the Great Physician, but before the story is over, Abraham will receive a thorough and embarrassing tongue-lashing from a pagan king.

Of course, we know that Abraham has made this mistake before. We expect him to have learned and grown enough to not slip up this way again. But here he is, relapsing into an old lie.

Though we're new creations in Christ, we still fall short of His example and our potential. While it's a comfort to see that - like us - the heroes of the faith were not perfect, human weakness is *not* an excuse for sin. There's grace, but should we sin that grace might abound? God forbid we settle for that sort of mentality. Episodes like this reveal how disappointing, how distasteful, and how detrimental it is when God's people scheme, rather than surrender in trust to the Lord.

Genesis 20:1a - From there Abraham traveled to the region of the Negev and settled between Kadesh and Shur.

Why did Abraham move? At Hebron, Abraham had known intimate fellowship with God. Now he's back in the south. Some say that he never should have left. On the other hand, all the valley, all the cities of the region save one had just been obliterated by fire and brimstone. It was a disaster area - like Chernobyl. When Mount Saint Helens blew it took 230 square miles of forest with it.² Many roads were closed for weeks.³ Crops were destroyed. The region was laid waste.

Abraham's herds needed food, but everything around him was ash and salt. At the end of our text, he's going to stay in the Negev, with no mandate from God to return. So, we can't say that it was wrong for Abraham to sojourn there. In fact, we can see *some* maturity in his choice. One pastor

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7170169/>

² <https://earthobservatory.nasa.gov/images/82151/life-reclaims-mount-st-helens>

³ <https://pubs.usgs.gov/gip/msh/impact.html>

points out that, at least this time around, Abraham didn't go to Egypt!⁴ He stayed within the boundaries God had previously given him. So, it's not the *going* that was the problem. This was:

Genesis 20:1b-2 - While he was staying in Gerar, ²Abraham said about his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." So King Abimelech of Gerar had Sarah brought to him.

Gerar was the royal city of the Philistine king, called Abimelech. It was a good spot for grazing herds and it was near the coast.⁵ Who doesn't want to live in a place like San Diego?

As Christians, we know that God has specific intentions for us, but He does not always give us an explicit diagram. In the wilderness, Israel followed the pillar of cloud wherever it went. We don't have that sort of visible beacon. Rather, we walk by faith, applying the Word of God to our choices. But, sometimes, we're going to have to make life decisions without a conspicuous directive telling us what to do. The *good* news is that, when a person is walking with God, *anywhere* they go they can be a blessing. Abraham could honor God in Hebron or in the Negev. In Romans 14 we see that a Christian can promote peace and joy and righteousness no matter where they are, as long as they are walking in the Spirit and trusting the Lord.

But, Abraham is *not* in a mindset of trust. He's making decisions based on fear. He is not thinking about how he can bless the people around him, but how he can protect himself. So, rather than being a source of blessing, Abraham chooses to lie and thereby become a *detriment* to the community around him.

Genesis 20:3 - ³But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "You are about to die because of the woman you have taken, for she is a married woman."

Many other translations render God's message as: "You're a dead man!" This raises some big questions. Why did God appear to Abimelech and not Pharaoh? More importantly: Why doesn't God do this *now*? Aren't there Abimelechs all around us who could use a cage rattling like this?

In reality, every person is Abimelech. We are *all* guilty before God and condemned to death. God has revealed this but also His desire to save sinners. So, why He doesn't just give everyone a dream like this - especially when we see how effective it was in this situation?

The truth is, God *has* revealed Himself, not in a dream but in other *better* ways. In Abraham's time, there was no Bible. Christ had not become Incarnate. There were only a few oral traditions passed down through a very minute number of people. And so, God spoke in various ways to reveal Himself. *Now*, we are at a point in history where God has spoken to us by His Son. Jesus said, "If you've seen Me, you've seen the Father." And we're told that He has come in the volume of the book.⁶ God now sends *His people* out to go and spread this life and death message. Why doesn't

⁴ Warren Wiersbe *Be Obedient*

⁵ *Bible Knowledge Commentary*

⁶ Hebrews 10:7

God just appear in a dream? Because it is *your* task to go and preach the Gospel. Just as we recognize it should have been Abraham proclaiming his testimony to Abimelech.

On top of that, we know that a personal visit from Jesus would *not* convince everyone. We know that's true because the crowds shouted, "Crucify Him." The One who raised the dead before their eyes, the One who gave sight to the blind and spoke as no one had ever spoken before, the One who could tell them the very thoughts of their hearts, Him they refused and tortured and killed.

By the way, notice how God highlights the significance and sanctity⁷ of marriage. He doesn't say, "I need this woman for a providential project I'm working on." He says, "she is a *married* woman." God takes marriage very seriously. It is a set apart relationship as far as God is concerned - unique in depth and in benefit, meant to be carefully guarded and lovingly developed. Though God's people were treating it casually, the Lord was not. We should take that to heart.

Genesis 20:4-5 - ⁴Now Abimelech had not approached her, so he said, "Lord, would you destroy a nation even though it is innocent? ⁵Didn't he himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' I did this with a clear conscience and clean hands."

For a Philistine, this guy is alright! He's worried about innocence and justice - at least *his* definition of it. He is genuinely surprised and scandalized by God's accusation.⁸ He says, "I have a clear conscience and clean hands!" When God responds, He says, "I know you have a clear conscience," but He leaves out the part about clean hands. In this particular situation, Abimelech hadn't *knowingly* transgressed, yet, he was still guilty. He *didn't* have clean hands and neither do we. All have sinned. We all, like sheep, have gone astray. If you're not a Christian here tonight, you can try to justify or rationalize the mistakes you've made, but you have offended the perfect and holy God. You've committed countless acts of treason against the King of the universe. You are *not* innocent, you are guilty and under the wrath of God. Luckily, God has a plan to save you from your guilt!

Genesis 20:6 - ⁶Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you did this with a clear conscience. I have also kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I have not let you touch her."

He kept Abimelech from sinning? Then, why-oh-why doesn't God simply keep everyone from sinning all the time? God has given human beings a freed will. Paul speaks to Philemon about his "own free will." Ezekiel 18 talks about people choosing the course which leads either to death or to life in the end. The Lord, in His all-powerful sovereignty, has given us this freedom because He is a God of love who is looking for those who will love Him in return. In Hosea 6 God says, "I desire faithful love." He has done all that is necessary to save us, He does all the work, but He waits for those who respond to His call and invite Him in. He gives us the choice to obey or disobey.

⁷ Bruce Waltke *Genesis: A Commentary*

⁸ Robert Alter *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation With Commentary*

So, why did God stop *this* particular sin? This is where God's will and providence come into play. You see, God had revealed a particular plan for how the Messiah would come through a certain couple. He had told Abraham, "Sarah is going to have a baby in the next year." And then, within that window of time where the son of promise would be conceived, Abraham makes the horrifying decision to send Sarah into the harem of a pagan king! This has dire implications. While God allowed Abraham the freedom to make this bad decision, He would *not* allow His work to be derailed by it. It was providentially essential that Abimelech not become intimate with Sarah. So, God stopped it from happening. Again, we see in Genesis ample evidence to forever dispense with the repulsive theory of meticulous determinism.

Genesis 20:7 - ⁷Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, know that you will certainly die, you and all who are yours."

God gives mankind a choice: Repent or die. Sometimes the Lord gives people *decades* to decide. We think of the sin of the Canaanites or the generations leading up to the flood, even the Jews during the split kingdom. *Decades* of patience and opportunity. Other times, God gives only *days*. Jonah showed up to Nineveh and said "40 days until you're destroyed!"

We don't know whether we have days or decades left to walk with God. Let's encourage each other daily, while it is still called today, so that none of us are hardened by sin's deception.⁹

So, Abimelech had this choice - repent or die, go to the prophet and be healed - but there's a problem: This 'prophet' was a *liar!* Think of what an obstacle this would have been for Abimelech. The hypocrisy of Christians is a favorite complaint that unbelievers bring up. It's often just an excuse. But, it can be a real hindrance. Why should a person believe if, instead of bringing joy and peace and righteousness with us we bring strife and cheating and anger and resentment?

Genesis 20:8 - ⁸Early in the morning Abimelech got up, called all his servants together, and personally told them all these things, and the men were terrified.

The women of Gerar (and perhaps the men, too) had been afflicted by a plague. They didn't know much about God, but they could tell He was serious. They *feared* Him. That was the beginning of wisdom. Sometimes we water down the idea of fearing God, saying it's just about 'respecting' Him or 'reverencing' Him. Sure, as children of God we need not fear that He will hurt us or mistreat us - He won't - but God is absolutely serious about judgment and wrath. We should be careful not to ignore the reality of wrath when we're preaching to people. God is going to *crush* those who are not saved and they *should* fear Him. "It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God."¹⁰

Genesis 20:9-10 - ⁹Then Abimelech called Abraham in and said to him, "What have you done to us? How did I sin against you that you have brought such enormous guilt on me and on

⁹ Hebrews 3:13

¹⁰ Hebrews 10:30

my kingdom? You have done things to me that should never be done.”¹⁰ Abimelech also asked Abraham, “What made you do this?”

Abimelech was a pagan, but he had some sense of right and wrong. Romans speaks of morality being written on human hearts. It’s why Cain murdered Abel in secret. All cultures and societies recognize there are rights and wrongs. They don’t always *agree* on what they are, because man is in rebellion and loves his sin, but even the most savage societies have a sense of the existence of right-doing and wrong-doing. Consider the Waorani people in Ecuador. They are one of the most extreme examples of what human society will permit. Often choosing raid, rather than trade.¹¹ They have the “highest rate of homicide of any society known to anthropology.”¹² Killing is a regular part of their culture. Yet, when one of them is killed, they recognize this as demanding revenge. Though bloodshed is commonplace, researchers found that many Waorani dream of escaping the cycle of death their culture is trapped in. A sense of right and wrong is engraved on their hearts. They’re addicted to murder, yet wish to be free of it.

Abimelech had been wronged. He is very direct, saying, “What made you do this?”

What is motivating our decisions? Why are you doing the things you’re doing? Christianity is not simply a list of things to do and not do, or a collection of doctrines we should agree with. It is walking in personal relationship with a Savior who transforms who we are. Not just our behaviors, but our mindsets and our attitudes and every part of our lives. The Bible gives us the why and the what and the how of life so that we might not only receive all that the Lord wants for us, but also so that we can be a blessing to the world around us, rather than a curse.

Genesis 20:11-13 - ¹¹ Abraham replied, “I thought, ‘There is absolutely no fear of God in this place. They will kill me because of my wife.’ ¹² Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. ¹³ So when God had me wander from my father’s house, I said to her: Show your loyalty to me wherever we go and say about me, ‘He’s my brother.’ ”

Abraham makes his defense, but it doesn’t hold up. If the place really was as bad as he’s saying, why go there? There are other spots he could graze. He makes this lame attempt to say, “Well, *technically*, she’s my sister. Ok, she *was* his father’s daughter, but Abraham did not *actually* think of Sarah as his sister. He’s lying to himself at this point. That’s what we do when we try to rationalize our sin. We start spinning things in our minds. “She *became* my wife.” As if he really just wanted to stay her brother. Abraham *should* have repented. He should’ve acknowledged that he was not honoring God in this situation and that, as a result, he had wronged Abimelech and almost destroyed his family life *again*. Instead, he tries to excuse himself. And, in maybe the saddest development, he even seems to back away from God. Hebrew scholars point out that when he says, “God made me wander” he uses a plural noun and a plural verb. What he *actually* said was,

¹¹ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/waorani>

¹² <https://www.pnas.org/content/106/20/8134>

"When *the gods* told me to wander." He speaks to Abimelech like a polytheist. This is a complete breakdown of Abraham's faith.

Genesis 20:14-16 - ¹⁴Then Abimelech took flocks and herds and male and female slaves, gave them to Abraham, and returned his wife Sarah to him. ¹⁵Abimelech said, "Look, my land is before you. Settle wherever you want." ¹⁶And he said to Sarah, "Look, I am giving your brother one thousand pieces of silver. It is a verification of your honor to all who are with you. You are fully vindicated."

1,000 pieces of silver was the equivalent of (maybe) 100 years of wages!¹³ Abimelech shows humility and readiness to do what God wanted, no matter the cost. I'm sure it was nice to have more possessions, but we remember that the whole point was that Abraham was supposed to be a *blessing* to the nations of the world, not a liability. Abimelech is generous, even merciful, but we see he's offended. He talks to Sarah about, "your *brother*" and "your *honor*" as if they had any left. This is not the kind of evangelism we want to do. If Abraham was our ambassador, we'd recall him.

Genesis 20:17-18 - ¹⁷Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his female slaves so that they could bear children, ¹⁸for the Lord had completely closed all the wombs in Abimelech's household on account of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

Isn't that just like God to take a story of sorry failure and end it with a display of life-saving grace? Abraham had let God down, let his wife down, let his new neighbors down. He had even, perhaps, moved into a level of *denial* of God. And yet, the Lord still loved him and was still going to use him. God restored Abraham. God wasn't *embarrassed* of Abraham. The man just needed correction. He needed to get back on the wagon and trust the Lord and serve the Lord and *represent* the Lord. And as the chapter closes we're reminded again that life comes from the Lord. He is the source all any worthwhile future. His forgiveness stands ready to change hearts and lives. He was ready to forgive Abimelech *and* He was ready to forgive Abraham. He's ready to forgive us for our own shortcomings. But the lesions of sin need to be cut out. We can't just live with them and let them bleed. We have to go to the Lord and allow Him to do what He wants. He is the one that brings help and escape and repair to our hearts and our families and our societies.

The Waorani are known to us as the Aucas. Many of them finally *were* able to escape the cycle of death and bloodshed that they couldn't get free of. It happened when Christian missionaries, two of them named Jim and Elizabeth Elliot, chose to trust the Lord, no matter the cost, to bring the Gospel to these lost people. Because they walked by faith and trusted the Lord, they brought peace to a pagan place. They shared a righteousness and hope and joy that continues to this day. That's our opportunity as well. Don't fall into old sins. Don't try to scheme your way through life. Remember what your pilgrimage is about and allow the Lord to lead the way.

¹³ See Waltke, Judges 17:10