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Again?

Genesis 20:1-18

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After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and the story of Lot, Genesis 20 now takes us back to Abraham. He had been living in a place near Hebron for some time, but owning large flocks and herds required a nomadic life. We can expect that Abraham was on the move regularly. With that in mind, look at verse 1:

From there [from his camp near Hebron or Mamre] Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb and lived between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar.

The Negeb is the most southerly part of Palestine, near its border with Egypt. Abraham migrates south and ends up on the very southern edge of Canaan, probably in the region of Gaza. He establishes a base camp “between Kadesh and Shur”, but as he makes his rounds of the grazing lands he eventually winds up in Gerar. Gerar is about 55 kilometres from Hebron and was the royal city of the Philistines.

What happens next reminds us of Abraham journey to Egypt during the famine of Chapter 12, but this time his wanderings aren't the result of disobedience or a lack of faith; this time he's simply doing what a shepherd would do: he's making the rounds of the good grazing land with his flocks and herds. And yet thinking of Abraham's trip to Egypt, we're suddenly shocked by what we read in verse 2:

And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” And

Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

Passing off Sarah as his sister? Again? Abraham played this game when he went to Egypt and it got him into some pretty significant trouble. In fact, playing this game the last time put God's covenant promise of a son in jeopardy. How could Sarah bear him a son if she was stolen by Pharaoh and put in his harem? Now, again, just before the Sodom and Gomorrah episode, God had made clear his promise of a son. In fact, just a short while before, God had even said that in a year he would return and Sarah would give birth to a son whom they would name Isaac. And now, in the very first instalment of the story after that visit from God, Abraham puts it all in jeopardy just as he had in Egypt. And just as had happened in Egypt, the local king, a man named Abimelech, decides to add the sister of this wealthy shepherd to his harem.

Abraham's status might explain why Abimelech was interested in a woman who was ninety years old. It's probably safe to assume that Sarah was well-preserved for her age, but we also know that there was more to marriage in that culture than romance and sexual attraction. Especially amongst the wealthy, marriages were made for political and economic reasons and this probably explains Abimelech's interest in Sarah. Abraham was someone he wanted as a political and economic ally.

For everyone involved this is a disaster. Sarah was barren when she was taken by Pharaoh, but this time she's fertile and God had just promised that she would have a son within the year. We can assume that she wasn't pregnant yet or Abraham wouldn't have been able to pull off his dishonest ruse. But consider what this situation means for God's promise. Abraham and Sarah lied and now she's in the harem of another man. If she spends even *one* night with Abimelech—even if she doesn't become pregnant by him—the

paternity of Isaac, the promised son will forever be questioned. People will ask: Is Isaac Abraham's son or Abimelech's? Are the Jewish people the children of Abraham or the children of Abimelech? Can you see how important this is?

The good news is that God will let nothing get in the way of his covenant promises. As he did in the situation with Pharaoh, God comes to the rescue of his prophet, even though his prophet has been less than stellar in his faithfulness. And yet instead of going to Abraham and rebuking him for his dishonesty—dishonesty motivated by fear of man rather than fear of God—God instead goes to Abimelech in a dream. And in the dream we can imagine Abimelech in the dock and God confronting him as Prosecutor.

But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, “Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife.” (Genesis 20:3)

Poor Abimelech is confronted by the divine Judge: “Abimelech, you are a *dead* man.” That's a serious pronouncement, but as far as Abimelech knows, he's done nothing wrong. “Why am I a dead man? What have I done?” he thinks. And we can only imagine his horror when God explains to him that his newest wife is actually already the wife of another man. Adultery has become something so casual in our culture that we readily take it in stride even though we know it's wrong. But in the ancient world it was a serious offense; in fact, in the culture of the ancient Near East, adultery was typically punished by the death penalty, which explains God's pronouncement that Abimelech is a dead man.

In response to the charge, Abimelech protests his innocence. In fact, the narrator underscores Abimelech's innocence by telling us that he hadn't

yet consummated his marriage to Sarah. It's not until verse 18, at the end of the episode, that we learn the nature of what had happened: "the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech." Presumably Abimelech was already aware of this situation before God came to him, he simply didn't know why. In that culture infertility was typically seen as a punishment from the gods. Abimelech was probably already appealing to his gods on account of the problem, so it might come as a relief that in his dream he's finally getting an answer. The problem is that the explanation is completely unexpected and Abimelech pleads innocence. Look at verses 4 and 5:

Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, "Lord, will you kill an innocent people? Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this."

In Chapter 18 Abraham had interceded for Sodom asking, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" Now Abimelech makes the same plea: "Lord, will you punish the innocent? If you know that this woman belongs to another man then you must also know that both that man and his wife lied to me! Lord, I have done wrong, but I have done wrong unknowingly and only because I was lied to. Lord, you know that I am a man of integrity."

In God's response we see that his pronouncement of judgement is actually gracious and that Abimelech is being given the chance to right this wrong before his doom comes.

Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. Now then,

return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours." (Genesis 20:6-7)

We don't know the details of this infertility problem, but it seems to be more than God simply rendering the women temporarily infertile. Whatever happened prevented Abimelech from consummating his marriage to Sarah. Some sort of infection or disease that prevented intercourse seems likely. It also seems that whatever it was happened fairly quickly. If it were simply that God had rendered the women infertile it seems that it would have taken at least a couple of months for them to realise what had happened. Considering that God is working on a year-long timeline that ends with the birth of Isaac, any scenario that would take months to play out seems unlikely.

Whatever the case, we see that God has been at work all along. Abraham and Sarah lied and put Abimelech in very bad spot. They also jeopardised the covenant. But God is protecting both. The infertility problem in Abimelech's house turns out to be a gracious intervention—a blessing in disguise. God has spared Abimelech from committing adultery—a crime that would have demanded his death—and at the same time God has protected his covenant so that there will be no question of Isaac's paternity.

And yet God doesn't just tell Abimelech to put Sarah out of his house. He tells Abimelech that plague on his house will be lifted only when Sarah's husband, this prophet, prays for him. Why does God do this? Remember the covenant: God promised that through Abraham the nations of the earth will be blessed. Abraham's mission is to be a blessing, and yet because of his lack of faith and because of his lies, he has brought a

curse on Abimelech instead. God's plan is still to bless Abimelech. We might expect God to give up on Abraham and bless Abimelech in some other way, but that's not how God works. God does not abandon those whom he has called—not even when they sin. Remember, God's mission is to redeem. He redeems sinners and he even redeems the situations in which we fail him. Despite Abraham's sin, he's still the mediator of God's blessing.

In doing things this way, God also holds Abraham accountable. Think of the times that you've sinned publicly. Maybe you've done something dishonest; maybe you've done something obnoxious or been a jerk. And later you think about it and realise that what you did was wrong, but you think, "Wow! I was a real jerk. I sure am glad that person didn't know I was a Christian!" We know that sin hinders our witness and gives Christians a bad name and so we're glad we got away with it in spiritual anonymity; we're glad that no one in the situation knew we belong to Jesus. But every once in a while it all comes back to bite us. That person we sinned against sees us get into the car with the fish sticker on it, or turns up at church and recognises us, or sees us the next week wearing a clerical collar. That's when we have to eat crow, give up our spiritual anonymity, and make things right. It's often God's way of disciplining us, but if we confess and make it right, we also communicate the Gospel to the person who was wronged. Maybe he or she isn't always ready to hear it, but it says something profound when we're willing to humble ourselves and admit our sins to others. That seems to be what happens here with Abraham. God doesn't simply let him take his wife back and leave town spiritually anonymous. Abraham didn't have a clerical collar to be seen in or a camel with a fish sticker to ride off on so God exposes him: "That guy who lied to you, Abimelech. Yes, he's my

man—my prophet.” God slaps a big fish sticker on Abraham’s back—he outs him. You and I may be too proud to admit whom it is we belong to when we shame our Lord, but God isn’t too proud to own us. It’s an opportunity for him to hold us accountable while at the same time declaring to the world that he’s in the business of redeeming sinners.

So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants and told them all these things. And the men were very much afraid. (Genesis 20:8)

Remember those words, “the men were very much afraid,” as Abimelech confronts Abraham.

Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, “What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.” And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What did you see, that you did this thing?” Abraham said, “I did it because I thought, ‘There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.’ Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. And when God caused me to wander from my father’s house, I said to her, ‘This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, ‘He is my brother.’”” (Genesis 9-13)

Abraham justifies his ruse saying that he was afraid that Abimelech had no fear of God, and yet as we’ve seen, Abimelech had great fear of God. He pleaded his integrity before God when confronted. Ironically, Abraham was willing to compromise his witness and his faith with a lie. Abimelech feared God. Abraham, God’s prophet, feared man.

What’s most striking is that Abraham admits to Abimelech that he and Sarah have apparently been lying to everyone—for almost a quarter of a century—as they’ve travelled through Canaan. Abraham says that when God called him to follow him all those years ago, he and Sarah agreed to use this dishonest scheme wherever they went. Do you see the irony? God called Abraham to follow him in faith. More specifically he called to him: “Walk before me and be blameless. Walk before me because you trust me. Be blameless. Don’t be a liar; trust me to take care of things. Seek first my kingdom and my righteousness and I make sure everything else works out.” Abraham had the faith to follow God all the way to Canaan. He had the faith to trust God’s promise of a son and that he would become a great nation. And yet, ironically, he doesn’t have the faith to trust that God will take care of him when he is honest about Sarah being his wife. All this time we’ve been thinking that Abraham pulled this stunt with Pharaoh and learned his lesson, but now we find that he’s continued with this lie throughout his wanderings in Canaan and apparently got away with it until now. And even when Abraham is confronted, the text doesn’t indicate that he showed any remorse. In fact, as we read further in Genesis we’ll see that Isaac and Rebekah pull a similar ruse on Abimelech’s son or grandson. Where did Isaac learn to do this? Maybe he came up with it on his own, but more than likely he learned it from his own father and mother, who may have continued with it long after this episode with Abimelech.

Abraham feared *man*. Abimelech fears *God* and he demonstrates it not only by returning Sarah, but in being very generous with Abraham. Looks at verses 14 to 18:

Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male servants and female servants, and gave them to

Abraham, and returned Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelech said, “Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you.” To Sarah he said, “Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone you are vindicated.” Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife.

Even if God’s prophet was a dishonest schemer, Abimelech wanted to be right by God. Abimelech returned Sarah with all sorts of gifts, including a thousand shekels of silver—more money than an average worker could earn in a lifetime. A thousand shekels was also the bride-price paid by the gods in the mythology of Abimelech’s people.¹ It was a fabulous sum of money that Abimelech paid both to guarantee his word that he had not touched Sarah and to appease the God whom he had unwittingly wronged. Abraham accepts the gifts, intercedes for Abimelech, and the plague is lifted from Abimelech’s house. Notice that even though Abraham had sinned, he didn’t cease to be God’s chosen prophet. Abraham had sinned, but God still mediated his salvation to Abimelech through him. Abraham had sinned, but God still called him to intercede on Abimelech’s behalf.

That points to the application of the story for us. We can be very prone to casting the great people of the Bible as plaster saints. As I’ve been studying Genesis, I’ve been reading commentaries from throughout Christian history, from the Church Fathers to modern Bible scholars. One of the frustrating things with most

¹ John H. Walton, Victor H. Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downer’s Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2000), p. 52.

of the Church Fathers is that they almost universally twist these stories of the patriarchs in ways that absolve them of all wrongdoing. They simply couldn't imagine that Abraham, the father of the faithful, would so blatantly lie about his wife. They ignore the fact that Abraham was just like us: a redeemed sinner. Just as we do, he had his own spiritual blind spots and his own besetting sins. We see one of those sins here. Despite his faith in God to take care of him as he journeyed to a new and strange land, despite his faith that God would provide a son for him, despite his faith that God would see that his children would inherit Canaan, despite God's call to walk before him and to be blameless, Abraham failed to trust God to take care of him and his wife and he routinely lied about their relationship. Did he know it was wrong? Or was it a spiritual blindspot? I suspect that it started out as a blindspot, but after being confronted by Pharaoh it became a sin of wilful faithlessness and rebellion.

How many sins like that do you and I have in our lives? A major part of the Christian life is a spiritual search and destroy mission. When the Holy Spirit enters our lives he begins to expose our sins and then gives the grace to stamp them out. And, of course, the longer we walk with him, the more dark corners he exposes, often revealing sins that we hadn't even realised were there. The mission never stops. We all have those dark corners and blind spots no matter how mature we are in Christ. Some of those sins that the Spirit exposes are easy to stamp out. Some are hard to deal with, but we work at it because we come to hate that particular sin in our lives. But we all have sins we cling to. Maybe it's a secret sin that gives us pleasure: some kind of sexual impurity. Maybe it's an attitude: responding to others in anger, an unwillingness to forgive, or holding onto and cultivating bitterness in our lives. Or maybe it's living some part

of our lives in a way that is faithless, as we see with Abraham: an unwillingness to trust God with some part of life and as a result holding it back or even being dishonest about it.

Brothers and sisters, these are the sins we most need to purge. It's not easy, because they're usually the sins we like, that we cling to, in which we find satisfaction or security. They're the sins that ought to cause us to ask: Which do I love more: God or my sin? In what do I find my fulfilment and my security: in God or in my sin? When I come to church on Sunday and sing songs of thanks and praise to God; is that thanksgiving for God's salvation hypocritical in light of secret sins that reveal my deliberate faithlessness and wilful rebellion? These are the sins that ought to cause us to lean ever harder on God's grace rather than presuming up on it. Even though we don't want to give them up, they call us to pray, asking God to teach us to appreciate his loving-kindness and grace more and to hate sin with a passion we too often lack.

And yet, as the gravity of our sins weighs us down and as we're tempted to become discouraged by our lack of holiness, Abraham's story also reminds us that God's claim and call on our lives doesn't depend on us. We are saved by his grace. We who are unrighteous sinners to our core have been redeemed by the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ. It is the Son whom the Father sees when he looks at us. It is the Son whom the Father sees when he calls us to do the work of his kingdom. As he called Abraham—a sinner just like you and me—as he called him to be a prophet and through him to reveal himself to the world, so he calls sinners like us to carry the Gospel message to the world. The more closely we walk with God in holiness the more effective our witness will be, but because God is gracious, he will never cease to use us. There may be times when our most powerful witness comes at the point

when we have sinned before the watching eyes of the world and now have to admit our failure. But brothers and sisters, in that situation we can point to the world all the more to our Saviour, through whom we have been forgiven and through whom they too may find forgiveness for their own sins. As we carry out our Gospel mission, let us never forget where we've come from; we are most effective in carrying God's redemption to others when we remember that he first redeemed us.

Let us pray: Gracious and merciful Father, thank you for not giving up on sinners. Thank you for the reminder we have in Abraham that you never give up on those whom you have chosen. Father, work in us by your Holy Spirit, we ask. Make us holy. Deal with the sin in our lives. But let us never become so discouraged by our imperfection that we cease to do the work of your kingdom. Instead, remind us of your love, your mercy, and your grace. Remind us of the saving work you have done in our lives that we might desire all the more to share your Good News with others. We ask this through our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Amen.