

Here We Go Again

Genesis 20:1-18

Here we go again. When Abraham entered Egypt, he did something that was hard to understand. He lied about the identity of Sarah, his wife. Because he feared for his life as a foreigner with a beautiful wife, he told people that she was his sister. He lied. This, soon after God had promised Abraham the blessings of his covenant.

Sarah was taken into Pharaoh's house as his wife, and Abraham was blessed as the honorable older brother--until the Lord struck Pharaoh with plagues because of Sarah. Pharaoh immediately put her out, gave her back to Abraham, and banished both of them from Egypt.

But some twenty years have now past. The covenant with Abraham has been graciously inaugurated, and the promise of Isaac has been given specifically. Sarah would give birth to a son within the year. She may already be pregnant. But when Abraham and Sarah journey to the Philistine nation of Gerar, they repeat this awful lie.

v.1-2

This is one of the most difficult chapters in the Bible to understand. The story is simple enough, but the question is, "How could they do it again?" Finally, after all the years of waiting, they were about to have their long-promised son! How could this be?

Well, commentators which we would call "liberals" don't see a problem at all. They just see this as a repeat of chapter 12, the same story just told by a different author. And since it is a different author, and since the Bible isn't infallible, the fact that

many of the details of the story are different doesn't really matter to them.

But, it does matter. The fact that there are different and contradictory details means that we must have two separate incidents. And the Bible is infallible. There are no mistakes anywhere. And, sadly, this event did happen. And it really isn't that hard to understand, for anyone of you who has ever repeated a sin from the past can understand how it came about.

In this case, from a human perspective, Abraham actual imperils the precious hope of a son. He places in jeopardy God's covenant promise, because of his own foolishness. He gives up Sarah to King Abimelech. But that's not the main point of the story. That is not why it is here before us today. The subject of this chapter is not Abraham's foolishness, but God's mercy. As one commentator says, "the sovereign mercy of God is made to stand forth as supreme, that no flesh may glory before God."

Another writes that "the very promise is put in jeopardy, traded away for personal safety. If it is ever to be fulfilled, it will clearly have to be achieved by the grace of God." And that is the point. The promised son, and the promised line of Abraham, will clearly be achieved by the grace of God.

So let's study God's mercy, shown to each of the three players in this great drama. First, Abimelech. Then Sarah. And finally Abraham.

I. GOD IS MERCIFUL TO SPARE ABIMELECH.

Abimelech was guilty of sin. He had, in his royal harem, the wife of another man.

v.3

Now, we'll get to Abimelech's defense shortly, that he was actually ignorant of Sarah's identity, unaware that she and Abraham were married, but ultimately, in the courtroom of God's justice, ignorance is not a defence. He was subject to death.

A. God's justice demanded death as the penalty for sin.
v.3

"You are a dead man." God told him why. He had taken a married woman. Now, this account doesn't deal with the whole issue of multiple wives, or of the assumed right of kings in those days to take whatever women they wanted to be in their harem. There is no approval for those things given by God here. But even in the sinful inappropriateness of having a harem in the first place, the offense here was that a married woman was taken!

And the wages of sin is death. As it has been ever since the Garden of Eden, when God spoke to Adam, saying,

Gen.2:16 "And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; 17 but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

But the purpose of God appearing to Abimelech in a dream was to rescue him from that penalty. God appeared to Abimelech, in a supernatural revelation, to call him to repentance. And the mercy of God is explained by the proclamation that,

B. Genuine repentance would bring an end to the demands of God's justice.

Abimelech offered his defense to God, which as far as it went, was accepted by God. God recognized Abimelech's relative innocence.

v.4-6

And actually, God, in his mercy, had protected Sarah by keeping Abimelech from touching her. No physical immorality took place. And we'll see shortly how that is God's protection for Sarah. But here, it is God's protection for Abimelech. He was kept from the more heinous sin of sexual immorality. He actually hadn't touched her yet.

But then God said, "Make it right." "Give her back."
v.7

Such a restoration is part and parcel with the call to repentance. And God's demand is clear. Repentance means making the situation right. Abimelech did not have the freedom to go on keeping Sarah in his harem. In fact, the warning is reissued. If he fails to return Sarah to her husband, then he would be killed.

But that warning, by its very existence, is a demonstration of God's mercy. When God threatens punishment, he reveals his mercy, because he withdraws the warning when there is repentance.

So it is throughout Scripture! We read in,

Ezek. 18:21 "But if a wicked man turns away from all the sins he has committed and keeps all my decrees and does what is just and right, he will surely live; he will not die. 22 None of the offenses he has committed will be remembered against him. Because of the righteous things he has done, he will live. 23 Do I take any pleasure in the death of the wicked? declares the Sovereign LORD. Rather, am I not pleased when they turn from their ways and live?"

Further,

Ezek. 18:25 "Yet you say, The way of the Lord is not fair."

Hear now, O house of Israel, is it not My way which is fair, and your ways which are not fair? 26 When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness, commits iniquity, and dies in it, it is because of the iniquity which he has done that he dies. 27 Again, when a wicked man turns away from the wickedness which he committed, and does what is lawful and right, he preserves himself alive. 28 Because he considers and turns away from all the transgressions which he committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. 29 Yet the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is not fair.’ O house of Israel, is it not My ways which are fair, and your ways which are not fair? 30 “Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways,” says the Lord GOD. “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. 31 Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? 32 For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord GOD. “Therefore turn and live!”

That is nothing less than the call of the gospel! It’s repeated in the language of the NT also,

2Pet. 3:8 But, beloved, do not forget this one thing, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. 9 The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. 10 But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up.”

The call to repentance is given by a merciful God who takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. And God’s mercy is revealed so clearly in this occasion, for we read that,

C. The hand of God’s discipline would be withdrawn. v.17-18

God had brought discipline to Abimelech and his household, because of the presence of Sarah in his harem. It was a rather severe discipline, demonstrating God’s power over life and death. He closed up every womb in Abimelech’s household. Not one of his wives could get pregnant. While not as severe as the plague that came to Pharaoh, nonetheless it demanded Abimelech’s attention. Something was drastically wrong.

We read that, “God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his female servants. Then they bore children.” Such is God’s mercy. God is merciful to spare Abimelech. Then Sarah.

II. GOD IS MERCIFUL TO PROTECT SARAH.

I’ve already noted the main point, that you must not miss. God protected Sarah even in the midst of the foolish lie that she and Abraham had presented. Even in the midst of their folly, this woman who would become a model of godliness and womanly honor, was protected.

A. God protected Sarah from physical harm.

The point is made repeatedly.

v.4

We read that God actually kept Abimelech from touching Sarah.

v.6

And then again, to refer to the healing of Abimelech’s harem which I just read in verses 17-18, let me emphasize that that healing was necessary because of God’s discipline brought about “because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife,” as we read at the end of verse 18.

God actually disciplined Abimelech's house because of Sarah's presence. He brought discipline upon them in order to protect Sarah. God's purpose was to restore Sarah's honor, and so he commanded Abimelech,
v.7a "Now therefore, restore the man's wife"

Similarly,

B. God protected Sarah from public embarrassment.
v.16

Admittedly, this is a difficult verse to interpret. Let me attempt to explain it. Abimelech gave Abraham 1000 pieces of silver. That was a lot of money, for 30 pieces would have been the standard payment for a slave. A thousand pieces was a lavish sum. It was to serve the purpose of being literally a "covering of the eyes," a more specific translation than merely "vindicates." The ESV translates it, "It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone you are vindicated."

The effect of this generous gift was to give a token of the extremely high esteem in which Abimelech held both Abraham and Sarah. Those in her household, those traveling together with the group, would have no cause to cast scornful or embarrassing glances upon Sarah. Her honor was vindicated by this large gift. As verse 16 ends, "before everyone you are vindicated."

The word "vindicated" does sometimes mean reproved, giving the impression that Abimelech actually reproved or rebuked Sarah. But I think the context better fits the idea that he honors her, along with her husband Abraham. Indeed, this money was a gift, not a punishment, a gift which reestablished the honor of this godly woman. In spite of the indignity suffered, Sarah's honor was restored in the eyes of others.

And I ought to say at this point that never again do we find Sarah nor Abraham faltering. God's grace and the demonstration of his mercy had its intended effect. They grew in grace, they matured in faith, and they learned to live by that faith in obedience to God.

Such is always the intention of God's mercy. If God has shown mercy to you, as he has, let that mercy stir within you greater love and greater devotion to him. Let the awareness and understanding of God's sovereign grace in forgiving your sins, and even in protecting you in your sins, lead you to hate your sins all the more.

God is merciful to protect you, also. And me. Even in my sinfulness. Even in your foolishness. God is merciful.

And the greatest example of that here is Abraham, so I wanted to end with him. The real focus of this chapter is on God's covenant to Abraham, a promise which he will keep despite the foolishness of the man. In that context, listen to these incredibly encouraging words from Paul written to his son in the faith, Timothy,

2 Tim. 2:11 "This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, We shall also live with Him. 12 If we endure, We shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us. 13 If we are faithless, He remains faithful; He cannot deny Himself."

"If we are faithless, he remains faithful, he cannot deny himself." That's a commentary on Genesis 20, where we see that,

III. GOD IS MERCIFUL TO BLESS ABRAHAM.

God promised to bless Abraham. He entered into a covenant with Abraham. He gave Abraham the land, unmeasurable land.

He promised him with uncountable descendants. But Abraham didn't always remain faithful. Yet God cannot disown himself, and he swore on oath, by his own name, to fulfill his promise. "If we are faithless, he remains faithful, he cannot deny himself."

This blessing of Abraham is entirely of grace! It is not tied to Abraham perfect obedience. In fact, in this account,

A. Abraham is blessed despite his faithless excuses.

Abimelech received that inspired dream from God, as we've seen, so he now knows the truth. And he approaches Abraham in order to rebuke him, to lead him to repentance.

v.8-10

Abimelech had reason to be upset with Abraham. His rebuke was appropriate and well worded. Actually, he's just obeying God's instructions, for he is clearly giving Sarah back to Abraham. And Abraham just makes up excuses. He really comes up with some good ones. It's really quite incredible how he defends himself, when confronted by Abimelech.

Yet Abraham is clearly blessed, as we'll see, with honor and spiritual privileges. But he is blessed in spite of his own faithlessness. It takes great mercy to bless a man given to making up excuses for his foolish sinfulness! God has such mercy. Clearly, don't imitate Abraham's example of making excuses; rather, let me encourage you with this proclamation of God's mercy. God will be merciful to you, too.

So let's look at the excuses. Three of them. First,
v.11

Fear. Fear is his first excuse. "They will all kill me." "There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife."

Now, this fear may have been realistic, humanly speaking. That is, Abimelech may well have killed Abraham to take his wife. At least the possibility of that existed. But still, the response is "so what?" As we studied last week, the appropriate response of faith to such fear should be the confidence which David expresses in,

Ps. 27:1 "The LORD is my light and my salvation; Whom shall I fear? The LORD is the strength of my life; Of whom shall I be afraid? 2 When the wicked came against me To eat up my flesh, My enemies and foes, They stumbled and fell. 3 Though an army may encamp against me, My heart shall not fear; Though war may rise against me, In this I will be confident."

Perfect love removes such fear. The fulness of faith puts away such fear. "The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?" The answer of a mature faith is, "No one." Yet, Abraham's excuse for lying about Sarah's identity is fear. Fear of man

Then his second excuse. This one's clever. It's the whole idea of a half-truth.

v.12

Evidently, Sarah really was Abraham's sister. His half-sister. They had different mothers, but were fathered by the same man. Let me say, first of all, that such marriages among close relations were not yet specifically forbidden. That would come later in the written law of Moses. So we can't criticize Abraham for this marriage. We can't define it to be incestuous, in any sinful way.

But, we can find fault with Abraham for this deception of giving a half-truth. It was been well stated that a "half-truth masquerading as the whole truth becomes a complete untruth." And this was a lie. He was bearing false witness. The fact that she was his sister was of far less importance than the fact that

she was also his wife. And it was against the law to have another man's wife. This half-truth is an empty excuse, a foolish lie.

Then the third excuse.
v.13

There seems to be a complaint in that verse, a complaint against God. Abraham is following the example of his forefather Adam. Blameshifting. "God caused me to wander from my father's house"

God did it. It was God's fault. Abraham says to Abimelech, "The reason that I lied to you is because God made me wander about aimlessly." What a horrible thing to say! To blame God for your own sins.

But we all do that, don't we! For we believe that God is sovereign in all circumstances, that he directs and controls all that happens to us. So when something difficult happens, something that might cause us to react in fear or even faithlessness as Abraham did here, we, too, might try to blame God.

We might use God's sovereign decree over all the events of our lives as an excuse for our own foolishness, too. But it's a very weak excuse. Empty, and vain. Nonetheless, Abraham is blessed.

Do you get the picture? God is merciful! Despite these excuses,

B. Abraham is blessed with undeserved honor.

From the hand of Abimelech! The one who was sinned against brings a tribute to the one who sinned against him! As a demonstration of God's mercy.

v.14-15

This isn't like Pharaoh at all, who gave Abraham what he deserved--banishment from Egypt. No, this time, in God's providence, as an expression of God's own mercy, Abraham is allowed to stay. With honor. Undeserved honor. Sheep, and cattle. Slaves. And, of course, his wife returned. And if that wasn't enough, Abraham received land, too. "Live wherever you like."

Then, as we've already seen, he also got a handsome sum of money.

v.16a

I would dare to say that this pattern has likely been repeated in every one of your lives, in one way or another. God richly blesses, despite what you have done. Therefore, let this bestowal of incredible honor and rich blessing demonstrate for you the mercy of God shown to miserable sinners.

One more blessing for this man of God, this man whose foibles are plain for us all to see, but whose faith becomes a model for everyone among us and who is declared to be the father of us all. One more blessing.

C. Abraham is blessed with spiritual privileges.

Notice what God says to Abimelech, back in,
v.7

"He is a prophet." The first time that word is used. And here, according to God's definition, the prophet is one who prays, who intercedes. "He will pray for you and you shall live."

No doubt this is the basis for the exhortation in,

Ps. 105:15 Saying, “Do not touch My anointed ones, And do My prophets no harm.”

Abraham was God’s chosen man. A prophet. He would receive God’s own hand of protection, despite his apparent sinfulness. Abraham had great spiritual privileges, and they were well used in this circumstance,
v.17-18

Abraham prayed, and God answered. God brought healing to Abimelech and his family. They would again bear children. As an answer to Abraham’s prayer.

Again, let me emphasize. In this particular situation, Abimelech is the righteous party, relatively speaking, and Abraham is the disobedient one. You would have expected the blessings and the honor to come to Abimelech, and the discipline and humble position to come upon Abraham. You would expect to find Abimelech praying for Abraham.

But the opposite is what actually happens, for Abraham was chosen by God to be blessed with these spiritual privileges. He was chosen by God to be the father of all nations, the father of all whose faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ.

So where does that leave us? With a nearly incomprehensible demonstration of God’s mercy. He spares Abimelech. He protects Sarah. And he blesses Abraham.

He does the same for each one of us. He has spared us from his justice, which we deserve for our sins. He protects us, from evil and from the devil himself. And he richly blesses us, with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms. All of that is done for us in Christ. And all of that is represented before you this

morning in the Lord’s Supper.

So, with this great reminder of God’s mercy, let me reinforce to you that none of you, in yourself, is worthy of this sacrament. None of you, in yourself, is worthy of the salvation which is yours in Christ. In the words of the Apostle Paul, writing to Titus, we realize that,

Titus 3:3 “For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another. 4 But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, 5 he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, 6 whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, 7 so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. 8 The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.”

This morning, worship the God who has shown mercy upon you. And join Paul’s great doxology of praise which beings the book of Ephesians,

Eph. 1:3 “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ.”