



## Part 46 – Our Failures, God’s Faithfulness

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### Genesis 20:1-18

Lot walks off the pages of human history and the focus of Genesis returns once again to Abraham. We have witnessed great acts of faith and courage from Abraham since God called him out of Ur. But we have also seen Abraham’s faith and courage falter and fail (12:10ff).

Though Abraham’s greatest act of faith is yet to come, here he fails once again. “Though the human partner is unfaithful, God does not cast aside his flawed saint but restores him in order to work his elective purposes through him.”<sup>1</sup>

**Vs. 1** – “From there” refers to the region of Hebron which was Abraham’s base of operations so to speak (18:1). Abraham traveled through the extremely arid southern part of Palestine. Keep in mind that Abraham was a wandering nomad in occupied territory. Shur was a region bordering Egypt. He traveled to the royal city of Gerar perhaps because of favorable pasture land for his flocks.<sup>2</sup>

**Vs. 2** – The present situation closely parallels that which is recorded in 12:11-16. The reason for Abraham’s deception regarding Sarah was the same as before. He was afraid for his life and not without cause (vs. 11). One rabbinic tradition holds that Sarah’s youthful beauty had been rejuvenated.<sup>3</sup> More likely, Abimelech, desiring an alliance with a man as wealthy as Abraham took as one of his wives the woman he believed was the man’s aged sister.

**Vs. 5** – No man is “innocent” before God in the strictest sense. However, Abimelech is innocent of adulterous intentions with Sarah and he appeals to God’s justice for vindication.

**Vs. 7** – This is the first use of the word “prophet” in the Bible. Abraham was chosen by God to receive revelation and then mediate that revelation. Abimelech was called to prove his integrity by taking actions to correct the wrong that was done.

**Vs. 9** – Abimelech repeatedly expresses concern not just for himself but all those in his kingdom. There is every indication that he was an honorable ruler. This does not however alter God’s sovereign choice of Abraham to be the bearer of the Covenant of Grace.

**Vs. 13** – Abraham seems to be equivocating here. He appeals to a strict technicality to shade the greater truth that Sarah is his wife.

**Vs. 16** – Abimelech took seriously God’s warning and was doing his utmost to remove any blame that might still be attached to him and his people.

**Vs. 17** – Though as far as we can tell, Abimelech is an honorable man, he is nevertheless a sinner in need of the intercession of God’s covenant partner Abraham.

**Vs. 18** – In order to open the womb of Sarah with the promised son, God closed the wombs of many other women. He is the Lord of childbirth as he is of everything and everyone else.

Theology Applied:

#### 1. Don’t lie.

- By lying Abraham sinned and failed to trust God. But we must be cautious to not judge Abraham too harshly. Keep in mind that Abraham lived in a hostile land where powerful pagans would certainly have been willing to kill him for any number of reasons not least of all to add Sarah to their own households. We must ask ourselves whether we would lie to lessen threats to our lives. Abraham allowed fear to drive him to lie to Pharaoh (12:10ff). For the same reason he repeats the lie to Abimelech. Abraham employs a technicality to undermine the truth. Lying is almost always a response to a perceived fear: fear of harm, fear of losing status, fear of consequences, etc. In the end, lying is a failure of faith in God.

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001) p. 282

<sup>2</sup> Sarna, 141

<sup>3</sup> Waltke, p. 285

**2. Honor marriage as God designed it.**

- In lying about his relationship to Sarah, Abraham dishonored both his wife specifically and marriage more broadly. In building a harem, Abimelech dishonored God's design for marriage (Hebrews 13:4). Interestingly, even though the pagan Abimelech practiced plural marriage he understood that adultery was a great wrong. It was common among the pagan peoples to condemn adultery even while allowing many other sexually degrading practices. But those ancient condemnations of taking another man's wife were generally considered a wrong done to the husband. In verse 6 God points out to Abimelech that ultimately, adultery is a sin against Him for He is sovereign over marriage.
- Attempts in our day to redefine marriage are a grave sin. Unbelievers and believers alike are fully accountable to God's design for marriage. Marriage is only ever a covenant relationship between one man and one woman. This God given design is meant both for the good of humanity and the glory of God. Marriage is meant for companionship and procreation (Genesis 2:18ff). It is also designed to illustrate God's commitment to and love for his people (Ephesians 5:22ff). These purposes can only be accomplished through marriage between a man and a woman. Therefore, all efforts to redefine, undermine, or adulterate marriage are sins against God (verse 6).

**3. Recover courage as a necessary Christian virtue.**

- Abraham's failure of courage here is in stark contrast to his bravery seen in the events described in chapter 14. We rightly hear much about the chief Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love (1 Corinthians 13:13). But there are many other necessary Christian virtues. Among those virtues is courage. We see courage in those great exemplars of faith in the Bible from Noah to Abraham to Moses to Esther to Nehemiah. We see courage in the great prophets like Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel, and Ezekiel. The New Testament is filled with examples of courage as well. From John the Baptist to Mary and Joseph to the apostles and, of course most stunningly in the Lord Jesus. Two thousand years of church history is filled with moving examples of courage from Polycarp to the Oxford Martyrs to those in our own day in places like Nigeria, China, and Iran.

**4. Don't allow pluralism to keep you from your obligation to unbelievers.**

- That Abimelech appears to be an honorable man and that Abraham failed does not change the fact that Abraham is God's covenant partner and Abimelech is not. In other words, neither the behavior of unbelievers or believers change God's sovereign purpose in election. The presence of many religions (pluralism) does not change the fact that God has provided a single way for sinners to be saved. One of the most scandalous things about the message of God's salvation revealed in Scripture is its exclusive nature; that there is one way of salvation, one Savior of sinners. The prophets of the Old Testament repeatedly condemned the worship of any other gods. In the first century Christians were persecuted for their proclamation of Jesus Christ as the one way for sinners to be saved. We must not be seduced by the pluralism of our world. We must remain steadfast in our concern to make Jesus known to all the nations.

**5. God's people are a channel of blessing to their neighbors.**

- We may want to fuss at God about the way he used Abraham to intercede for Abimelech. We may even think it ought to be the other way around! But God is sovereign in his grace. He chose Abraham to be the unique channel of blessing to the nations; His covenant partner. That blessing would come ultimately through Abraham's greatest descendant, Jesus Christ. While we do not play the unique role of blessing as did Abraham, we are still channels of God's blessing to those around us. We are to embody the love of Christ to our neighbors beginning in our own households. We are to be intercessors for the world in which we live pleading for God's mercy to be extended to our family, our church, and our neighbors.

**6. Have faith in God, not in your faith.**

- Our faith will and does fail. Sometimes our failures are crushing. That is why our faith must never be in our power to remain faithful. Rather, God is to be the object of our faith. We are assured of our salvation not because of our power to hold on to God but because of his faithfulness to hold us (2 Timothy 2:13). God is our loving and sovereign Father. He alone is our Redeemer and Lord. Our faith will falter until that day we see Jesus. He shed his blood to cover the shame of our failing faith. So let us look to him not only to save us then but to keep hold of us now.