

Genesis 20 (2011)

- You may remember a statement I made at the beginning of our study concerning the story of Abraham
 - I said that Abraham didn't begin his walk with the Lord as Abraham, the father of faith
 - No, he began as Abram, the idol worshipper in Ur
 - But over time God made him into Abraham
 - Likewise, I offered the conclusion that we don't begin as Abrahams either
 - We were all called into faith just as we were, pagans like Abram, prone to sin and failing to trust in God
 - But God began a work in us to move us forward into a life of faith and obedience
 - So that we might ultimately become Abrahams
 - Over the last four lessons, we saw Abraham displaying some strengths
 - He has shown great hospitality to the Lord
 - He made intercession to the Lord on behalf of his nephew
 - And as we left him in chapter 19, he was watching the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah burn, probably unaware that Lot had been saved
- But Abraham still has some old habits left over from his days as Abram
 - He still struggles to trust in the Lord and often reverts to old patterns of sin
 - And now Moses shows us that Abraham is still working through struggles and still has growing to do

Gen. 20:1 Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar.

Gen. 20:2 Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

- Haven't we seen this before? Abraham making Sarah claim to be his sister
 - Abraham had been staying near the Oaks of Hebron, about 18 miles south, southwest of Jerusalem
 - Now he decides it's time to move again and he goes southwest to the Negev
 - He settles in Gerar, the valley region between Kadesh Barnea on the east and Shur on the west
 - This is approximately near the brook of Egypt on the southern border of Israel with Egypt
 - Remember the last time Abraham placed himself on the border of Egypt?
 - When the famine struck, it became that much easier for him to step over the border and run to Egypt, something God did not ask
 - It seems anytime Abraham moves physically near to Egypt, it becomes an opportunity for him to revert to living like the world
 - Just as with the last time Abraham moved near Egypt, Abraham begins to feel threatened and resorts to an old trick to protect himself
 - Abraham tells everyone that his wife is actually his sister
 - You might think that after the last time he would have learned his lesson
 - His wife was abducted so she could marry Pharaoh
 - I can't imagine the "I told you so" looks he was getting from Sarah this time around
 - Yet she remains a stunning example of obedience even as she knows her husband is acting stupidly again
 - She clearly trusts in God to protect her despite her husband's errors
 - And she knows that her best course of action is always obedience to the Lord's direction for her, even if it means enduring these situations multiple times

- Predictably, the king of Gerar takes an interest in Sarah, just as the Pharaoh had in the previous incident
 - The king is called Abimelech, which is not a name but a title
 - All kings of Gerar use this same title, just as all kings of Egypt were Pharaoh and all emperors of Rome were called Caesar
 - Abraham's scheme has resulted in the same terrible outcome for Sarah
 - The possibility that Sarah might become another man's wife and conceive a child by that other man would be devastating for God's plan
 - He has promised that Abraham's child of promise would come specifically from Sarah
 - This child is part of the line that will produce the nation of Israel and ultimately the Messiah
 - But the stakes are even higher this time
 - Last time this happened we knew that Sarah was appointed to give birth to the child of promise, the seed child
 - But the date of that arrival was still in question
 - This time we know that the child will be born in the next year
 - It's a critical time in Abraham and Sarah's story
 - If Sarah is allowed to become a wife of Abimelech, how will anyone know for certain the father of the child?
 - This incident could derail God's entire plan for the seed line
- But God will not permit the sin of Abraham to interrupt His plan

[Gen. 20:3](#) But God came to Abimelech in a dream of the night, and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is married."

[Gen. 20:4](#) Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, "Lord, will You slay a nation, even though blameless?"

[Gen. 20:5](#) "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."

- This passage opens with one of my favorite lines in the Bible
 - God calls Abimelech a dead man because he has taken Sarah as his wife
 - Calling him a dead man is a phrase taken right out of our modern vernacular
 - God means this phrase is two ways
 - First, God is using to mean something like “I promise I am going to kill you...you are as good as dead”
 - Secondly, He means that Abimelech is dead already in another sense
 - God has taken away the ability to produce children from all in Abimelech’s household
 - His body is dead in the same way that Sarah considered her body to be dead and unable to bear children
 - So ironically as God was preparing to bring life back to Sarah’s body, He brings reproductive death to Abimelech’s body
 - And God tells Abimelech clearly in a dream that the cause of this punishment is his taking of Sarah as a wife
 - The potential for Abimelech to compromise God’s plan for Abraham and Sarah was too great, so God prevents the consummation
 - And then He goes a step further and tells Abimelech he must act to correct the problem
- Abimelech responds by defending his actions and challenges the Lord to act fairly
 - He says he acted in good faith
 - Abraham told me she was his sister, not his wife
 - So should he be held guilty for doing this thing?
 - He asks if his innocent mistake should be reason for God to destroy a nation

- If the king's family died or couldn't produce offspring, it would result in a challenge to the throne, and a potentially destructive power struggle
- Notice the similarities in Abimelech's appeal to Abraham's prayer in chapter 18?
 - God is announcing His intent to judge sin and Abimelech seeks mercy for an innocent
 - And like before, God says Abraham must pray before Abimelech will receive God's mercy
 - In the same way God invited Abraham to pray for Lot
 - And there are also similarities to the previous situation in Egypt
 - God struck Pharaoh's household with a plague until Sarah was released
 - Again, God strikes Abimelech's household
- So it seems God is at work here in at least two ways
 - First, He wants to protect Sarah and the child of promise
 - Secondly, he wants to teach Abraham yet another lesson
- And how does God grow us in understanding and maturity in our walk with Him?
 - By revealing Himself to us through His word and then inviting us to join Him in His work
 - And when we make mistakes like Abraham has made here, God is good to show us the consequences of our mistakes
 - And then in mercy, God will give us the opportunity to reach out to Him in prayer and get back on track in following Him
- God then responds in a rather remarkable way

[Gen. 20:6](#) Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that in the integrity of your heart you have done this, and I also kept you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her.

[Gen. 20:7](#) “Now therefore, restore the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.”

- God’s acknowledges that Abimelech is innocent of wrongdoing
 - Furthermore, God says He has been at work already preventing Abimelech from touching Sarah
 - God making clear how important it was that the seed child be protected from paternity disputes
 - But then God presents a solution to Abimelech
 - First, he directs that Abimelech restore Abraham’s wife
 - Secondly, God promises that after he restores Sarah to Abraham, then Abraham will pray for Abimelech and he will live
 - But if Abimelech refuses to follow God’s instructions, then God will carry out the judgment He has pronounced
 - The more we think about this solution, the more interesting it gets
 - First, why did God give Abimelech this dream?
 - Why didn’t God just act like he did in Egypt and strike the nation with a plague?
 - He seems to go out of His way to give Abimelech a warning and a chance to avoid the punishment
 - I think the answer is that Abimelech was an upright man, and unlike Egypt and Pharaoh he wouldn’t have killed Abraham over Sarah
 - He simply saw an opportunity to take a beautiful woman as a wife
 - Had Abraham told the truth about Sarah, it seems Abimelech would have let them alone
 - So the Lord is again showing that He deals fairly

- Secondly, God says He didn't let Abimelech sin against Sarah
 - Yet God still brings this judgment
 - Why didn't He just tell Abimelech to let Sarah go and be done with it?
 - Instead, he tells Abimelech that Abraham must first pray for to heal Abimelech
- God has chosen to resolve the situation in this particular way because He desires to solve Abraham's mistake while teaching Abraham a lesson
 - First, God wants to protect and restore Sarah, the future mother of Isaac
 - Secondly, God wants to ensure that Abimelech has an incentive to respect Abraham despite Abraham's sin
 - Abimelech and his nation of Gerar are a significant presence in the land
 - And if they became enemies of Abraham and his future generations, it would have been a serious threat
 - So the Lord instills the fear of the Lord in Abimelech and tells him that Abraham is a prophet
 - Furthermore, Abraham is the key to Abimelech's survival
 - Now Abimelech has all the incentive in the world to treat Abraham well, despite Abraham's treachery
 - Finally, God wants Abraham to see the consequences of his lying and his failing to trust in the Lord
 - Abimelech will have to meet with Abraham and explain the situation so that he might receive prayer
 - In the process, Abraham will receive a rebuke for his lying
 - And he will come to recognize what God is prepared to do to preserve His seed line and discipline His children
 - Just as God invited Abraham to join Him in His work to judge Sodom, so God will again include Abraham in His work to free Sarah
 - Both times Abraham is called to join by acting as an intercessor on behalf of the righteous

- But in this case, Abraham must also see recognize he was the offender

Gen. 20:8 So Abimelech arose early in the morning and called all his servants and told all these things in their hearing; and the men were greatly frightened.

Gen. 20:9 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 on my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done."

Gen. 20:10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What have you encountered, that you have done this thing?"

- Abimelech rises from the bed in the morning,
 - Immediately, he retells his dream to his servants, and they became frightened
 - Obviously, as he retold the story, he did so in a way that communicated the seriousness of what he had heard
 - Clearly, Abimelech took this dream seriously
 - Next, Abimelech calls Abraham to make an appearance in his court
 - Now remember, Abimelech understands that Abraham is the key to Abimelech's survival
 - What do we suppose Abimelech will say to Abraham?
 - We might expect Abimelech will show great restraint and speak nicely to Abraham, after all Abraham must pray for Abimelech to save him
 - Instead, Abimelech reads Abraham the riot act, so to speak
 - He asks why have you done this to me? What did I do to you to deserve this great sin?
 - He goes on saying what you did should never have been done to anyone, so what reason did you have for treating me this way?
 - These statements are absolutely true, but they are strongly worded and very confrontational - they border on an insult
 - Isn't Abimelech concerned that he will upset Abraham and cause Abraham not to pray for Abimelech?

- I greatly admire Abimelech's courage and righteous anger in the way he confronts Abraham
 - In our world today, we are taught to hide our true feelings about others to be polite or so we might manipulate them into liking us and meeting our desires
 - We don't value transparency near as much as civility
 - But Abimelech speaks frankly and transparently with Abraham
 - He shows no concern for what Abraham might think or how he might respond
 - Abimelech has righteousness on his side, and so he fearlessly rebukes Abraham to his face
- We should remember the example of Abimelech in our own dealings with others, especially our brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ
 - Paul taught us that transparency and accountability are to be valued in the Church body

[1Tim. 5:19](#) Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.

[1Tim. 5:20](#) Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning.

[1Tim. 5:21](#) I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels, to maintain these principles without bias, doing nothing in a spirit of partiality.

- Paul solemnly charged church leaders - before God and Christ Jesus - to hold to these principles
 - In Abraham's case, God orchestrated this encounter precisely because he wanted Abraham to receive this rebuke in a public way
- Because the only way we rise above our sin so we can pursue a life that pleases the Lord is if we are made to face our failings
- And in our relationships within the body, the Lord wishes to bring the conviction that leads to better things
- When we hide our true thoughts and gloss over each other's imperfections, we might feel better...but we won't be better

- Abraham's response follows

[Gen. 20:11](#) Abraham said, "Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.

[Gen. 20:12](#) "Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife;

[Gen. 20:13](#) and it came about, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, 'This is the kindness which you will show to me: everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."'"

- Abraham explains his mistake using three classic excuses for sin
 - First, he claims ignorance
 - He says he thought surely there would be no fear of God in this place
 - How was he to know that Abimelech and his people would respect life and marriage and do the right thing?
 - Moreover, Abraham claims he had no reason to think they might know the Living God
 - Abraham's point is that he was acting reasonably when he lied
 - But is there ever a situation in which we may lie without sin?
 - When our life is in danger? When we are trying to protect others?
 - That's what Abraham is claiming here...that his lie was justified under the circumstances to save his life
 - But at the end of the day, a lie is always wrong because it is proof we don't trust in God
 - Abraham thought a lie would protect him better than God could but God's actions prove this assumption was wrong
 - God acted to preserve Sarah right from the start
 - He was more than capable of handling Abimelech or anyone and so Abraham's lie was completely unjustified

- Secondly, Abraham quibbles over whether it was really a lie at all
 - He begins to explain that Sarah is really his sister, at least a half sister
 - As if that somehow addresses the real issue at hand
 - The issue here isn't whether Sarah is truly Abraham's sister or not
 - The issue is that Sarah was his wife
 - And when Abraham maintained that Sarah was only his sister, he was lying by omission
 - He failed to disclose the obviously important detail that he and Sarah were married
 - This kind of playing with words is simply a sign that repentance hasn't taken hold in his heart
 - Abraham is too busy explaining away his guilt rather than embracing it and learning from it
 - Now we see clearly why the Lord wanted Abraham to experience this encounter
 - If the Lord orchestrates a similar moment in our lives for the good of our own conviction, make sure you don't ruin it by running to pointless excuses
 - Consider the rebuke carefully and accept it as from the Lord
- Finally, Abraham gives the third classic excuse for his sin: he blames God and circumstances
 - Abraham says it was God Who caused him to leave the protection and security of his home
 - Implying that God has forced Abraham into a position where he must resort to this tactic
 - And so in response to God's (obviously unfair) command, Abraham has told Sarah to go along with this charade
 - And notice, Abraham says this was something he expected Sarah to do everywhere they went

- So Abraham has been engaged in this deception as the routine, not the exception
- We've only heard about two occasions because they resulted in these extraordinary outcomes
 - In reality, nothing in God's instructions of Abraham's situation compelled him to make up this lie
 - And especially after he watched God rescue both he and Sarah in Egypt, Abraham should have realized he could trust God to care for him
- Even though Abraham offers Abimelech these pathetic excuses, Abimelech responds based on he fear of the Lord

[Gen. 20:14](#) Abimelech then took sheep and oxen and male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him.

[Gen. 20:15](#) Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; settle wherever you please."

[Gen. 20:16](#) To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; behold, it is your vindication before all who are with you, and before all men you are cleared."

[Gen. 20:17](#) Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore children.

[Gen. 20:18](#) For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

- After this incident, Abimelech must have had little respect for Abraham, but he had plenty of respect for Abraham's God
 - He gives Abraham the keys to the kingdom, including the right to settle anywhere in the land and animals and servants
 - Once again we see God's unconditional promise to bless Abraham at work
 - Though Abraham is faithless at time, God is always faithful
 - Abimelech next restores Sarah to Abraham
 - Abimelech refers to Abraham as her "brother" probably to mock Abraham
 - And then Abraham prays for Abimelech

- God brought Abraham through this moment in the desire to show Abraham how he still fails to trust God fully
 - Abraham has believed God's promises and has been declared righteous on that basis
 - But in the everyday needs of his life, Abraham still runs to the world's methods for protection
- And ironically, God uses the pagan king of a pagan nation to show a prophet of the Living God where he still needed to grow spiritually
 - Don't be surprised when in love the Lord does the same for us