



THE FEAR OF GOD AND THE FEAR OF MEN

SERIES: THE LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS

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Genesis 20:1-18

13th Message

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Our text on the life of Abraham reveals how God responds to our repeated failures. Are you discouraged by weaknesses that never go away? You have been walking by faith for many years, yet you seem to succumb to the same pitfalls again and again. Genesis 20 has much to say about human weakness and why we are so prone to failure. It shows how God changes people by having us face our failures, even against our will at times.

In chapter 18, two angelic visitors miraculously gave Abraham and Sarah the gift of fertility. The next day, Abraham witnessed the terrible judgment of God on Sodom and Gomorrah. In our text today we will see the impact of these two events on Abraham as he sets out on a simple business trip.

I. God's Word to Abimelech (Genesis 20:1-7)

A. Introduction: Deception Driven By Fear (20:1-2)

Now Abraham journeyed from there toward the land of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur; then he sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." So Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. (Gen 20:1-2, NASB)

Following the terrible destruction of Sodom, Abraham is on the move again. He is probably in search of a more abundant water supply and fertile grazing land for his large flocks. Instead of heading outside the border of Canaan for his material needs, however, this time he stays within the borders of the Promised Land, on the southeastern edge, between Kadesh and Shur. "Kadesh is near the southern border of Canaan, while 'Shur' is usually located farther east, in the desert in the northwest Sinai, adjacent to Egypt."¹ As Abraham approaches the Egyptian border the memory of the time he spent there may have jarred his spiritual senses. This may explain why he does not cross over into Egypt. Instead, he turns abruptly north and settles in Gerar, a Canaanite city-state toward to the western coast of Canaan.

Thus far Abraham's memory is working for his good. To his credit, he does not rely on Sarah to alleviate his fears by asking her to lie on his behalf, as he did previously. But though the geography is different, and he makes no provision for compromise, when the pressure comes he caves in to his original fears. Once again he lies to conceal Sarah's true identity as his wife. As a result, Abimelech, the king of Gerar, feels at liberty to take her as his wife. His name, which means, "my father is king," may have been a throne name for all kings of Gerar rather than a personal name, much like Pharaoh of Egypt.

The event has so many similarities to Abraham's previous stay in Egypt and his deception of Pharaoh (12:10-20), that many scholars see this as a mere literary doubling of

that event. But that view misses the point, I believe. Abraham's dual failure is highly instructive about the nature of sin and weakness, and God's gracious determination to work through such failures to change people. No matter how much we grow, no matter where we find ourselves, sin still lives in us, and these tendencies take very little prodding to reawaken and overtake us.

Even more shocking is the fact that Abraham's lapse comes just after God's long awaited gift of Sarah's fertility and the patriarch's righteous pleading for Sodom. Why do we seem so prone to failure, even after we have just experienced intimate fellowship with God? The text will answer this question. But the greater issue addressed here is how faithful God is to get us back on track again after we succumb to our fears and disguise our true identity. Typically, God's methods are surprising. From this point on, Abimelech, the king of Gerar, takes center stage.

The narrator begins by transporting us into the king's bedroom.

B. Abimelech's Dream (20:3-7)

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." (20:3)

Abimelech goes to bed, just as he did every night, but on this occasion the God of Abraham appears to him in a dream. For the first time in Scripture, God reveals himself to someone by means of a dream. Abraham's grandson, Jacob, will have several significant dreams; indeed, dreams will become standard fare for Joseph, and normative for all of Israel's prophets. We remember God's word to Moses:

*"Hear now My words:
If there is a prophet among you,
I, the LORD, shall make Myself known to him in a vision.
I shall speak with him in a dream."* (Num 12:6)

It is ironic that although there is a chosen prophet in Gerar, a wandering immigrant, he is not the one who dreams of God. Abimelech, a pagan king, is the first recipient of this dream-like revelation. The dream is rather short. A mere nine words in Hebrew describe it. Without introduction, God gets right to the point with these penetrating words, "Behold, you are a dead man! You know that woman you just took? She is married!" Abimelech's dream sounds like a nightmare! God's little speech certainly gets his attention.

We, too, should let God's words echo in the chambers of our hearts. Ancient cultures held marriage in much higher esteem than we do today. They understood how serious a matter it is when two people become one flesh. That is why many ancient societies, Israel included (Lev 20:10;

Deut 22:22), decreed the death penalty for adultery. What a contrast with our society, where adultery is not only condoned, but promoted and flaunted.

The text continues with Abimelech's response:

Now Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, "LORD, will you slay a nation, even though blameless? 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." (20:4-5)

The shell-shocked Abimelech manages to gather his senses and courageously argue his innocence. Clothing his words in humility, he addresses God as "LORD." Then, like a good attorney, he states his summary conclusion in his opening statement, asking, in the form of a rhetorical question, "Will you slay a nation even (though) blameless (lit. 'righteous')?" This was the same question that Abraham put to God concerning Sodom. Abimelech goes on to document his innocence by reviewing his investigation of the matter. As king he did not act on impulse or hearsay evidence; he personally investigated the situation. And his inquiry was thorough. Leaving nothing to chance, he questioned Abraham and Sarah, and both confirmed that she was Abraham's sister. Abimelech concludes that he is innocent not only of the deed but of any evil intent.

Recognizing Abimelech's rhetorical skill and moral standards, we come now to God's response.

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. 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." (20:6-7)

God agrees with the king's plea of innocence. Abimelech is a man of "integrity" (as Abraham was called to be in 17:1). His word could be counted on. His character and veracity were sound. There were no loose ends in this affair. Because of his integrity, God said that he was intervening to prevent the king from doing something terrible (the same term is used by David, in 1 Sam 25:33). Had Abimelech touched this woman, who was now pregnant with the holy seed in her womb, God would have killed him.

Now that God has been gracious to him, Abimelech must act quickly and decisively to restore this woman to her proper position as Abraham's wife. In so doing he will discover Abraham's hidden identity as a prophet. As such he will pray for Abimelech, and the king will be blessed with life and fertility. But if Abimelech does not obey, God has decreed that he and his entire family will die. The death warrant is placed in the most emphatic terms in Hebrew: "*dying you shall die.*" So Abimelech is left with a clear choice between life and death.

II. Abimelech Brings God's Word to Abraham (Genesis 20:8-13)

A. Abimelech's Charge to Abraham (20:8-10)

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. Then Abim-

elech 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." And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What have you encountered, that you have done this thing?" (20:8-10)

Abimelech probably didn't sleep much that night. Unlike Lot, whom the angels had to awaken, Abimelech is up at the crack of dawn, ready to carry out the Lord's command. At once his entire household is called in for a family meeting. As the word goes out about the nature of his dream, the whole house is filled with the fear of God. No man dared lay a hand on Sarah. Once Abimelech sets his home in order he take care of the secondary issue, dealing with the perpetrator of the crime. He feels betrayed by this foreigner, Abraham. He has every right to be livid with anger. But though he is angry, he is not heavy handed.

Abraham is summoned, and Abimelech fires his questions at him. They go right to Abraham's gut: "What have you done to us? How did I sin against you that you practically destroyed my whole kingdom?" His questions betray his sense of moral earnestness. Then comes the rebuke that no man wants to hear: "You have done things to me that ought not to be done." Abraham's crime is universally condemned. And his guilt is all the greater, since he is supposed to be the light to the nations.

Like a child caught red-handed, Abraham stands mute. Shame has silenced him. Abimelech breaks the quiet with another penetrating question, "What have you encountered that you have done this thing?" The crime seems so serious to Abimelech that he questions Abraham as to what in the world happened in Gerar to provoke such an appalling thing.

The word "*encountered*" means, literally, "*seen.*" Abimelech's question about Abraham's perception is probably all the more painful in that the last event the patriarch had "*seen*" was the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. He must have heard God's voice in those words, "Had could you have done such a thing, after what you have just seen? How could you fear man more than me?"

Pinned to the wall now, Abraham is forced to give an account of his actions.

B. Abraham's Defense to Abimelech (20:11-13)

And Abraham said, "Because I thought, surely there is no fear of God in this place; and they will kill me because of my wife. Besides, she actually is my sister, the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife; 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."'" (20:11-13)

Abraham conjures up three rather sheepish excuses for his inexcusable behavior. But all three miss the mark. First, he explains that he thought there was no fear of God in Gerar. His statement does not describe their religious belief (the narrator would have labeled it, "the fear of the LORD"). It is a more general term describing the commitment of a culture to bedrock, universal moral standards. Abraham considered Gerar to be on a moral par with So-

dom, and therefore concluded that as an immigrant, his life was at risk because of his beautiful wife. The accusation that there was no fear of God in Gerar would not have been a very complimentary statement to make in the presence of the king, and it was far from the truth. His society held the marriage vow in high esteem, and was quite capable of being deeply moved by the fear of God (20:8).

Then Abraham explains that what he said was really not a lie, it was merely a half-truth. Sarah was the daughter of his mother, but not his father, so he hadn't lied. However, by holding back the whole truth he was guilty of deception that could have led to adultery, and ultimately multiple death.

Finally, Abraham says that this had been his standard operating procedure since the time God "caused him to wander" from his father's house. Rather than using the normal term "to wander" (*'arat*), to describe a journey, Abraham uses a dual-edged verb (*ta'ah*). The word means not only to wander physically (and normally, with negative connotations, as in "being drunk," Isa 28:7), but also morally, meaning, "to err ethically," or "to be led astray." This is a veiled slap at God, as Abraham subtly accuses God of being the real cause of his "wandering" ways. He concludes by explaining that both he and Sarah agreed that in their travels she would rely on her former identity to him as his sister, and hide her true identity as his wife, in order to protect him from the threat of death. Abraham tells Abimelech that this act was Sarah's supreme expression of her loyalty to him as her husband; it was not deception.

Abraham's words may speak well of Sarah, but they do not vindicate his actions. This is a low moment for him. His floundering self-justification is a terrible model of repentance. Like Adam in the garden, he passes his responsibility on to others, masks his own guilt with fabricated innocence, and ultimately blames God. The real problem is that Abraham fears men more than God. The result was that he could not see the fear of God in men. Thus he jeopardized his wife's sanctity, placed a whole city at risk, and threatened God's holy seed.

Because this was not Abraham's first offence, we might expect swift judgement. But instead, the text continues the saga of God's tenacious grace, concluding not with judgement, but restoration.

III. The Restoration of Relationships (Genesis 20:14-18)

A. Sarah Restored as a Wife (20:14-16)

Abimelech then took sheep and oxen and male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him. And Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; settle wherever you please." And 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." (20:14-16)

Abimelech proves to be a merciful and generous monarch. He could have had Abraham killed post haste, but instead, he treats him with angelic-like generosity. He not only restores to Abraham his wife, he gives him gifts as an act of restitution –much more than God required. Finally, in an act of supreme generosity, he gives him a blank

check to settle anywhere in his land, so that he need not "wander" ("err") anymore.

Abimelech's generosity toward Sarah is remarkable. She receives a thousand shekels of silver. Wenham comments: "fifty shekels was the maximum ever asked for in bride money (Deut 22:29); the typical old Babylonian laborer received a wage of about half a shekel a month."² Abimelech's resentment toward Abraham can be detected in his added little barb, "I am giving...to your brother." Then he adds that this is for her "vindication," literally, the "covering of eyes," perhaps suggesting "that they no longer look at her as a compromised woman."³ Sarah is now fully vindicated and restored to her proper role as wife, a term the narrator sings seven times in this text. Abimelech's actions are designed to guarantee that Abraham's "wanderings" will not be repeated.

Once Sarah is restored as a wife, Abraham is restored as a prophet.

B. Abraham Restored as a Prophet (20:17-18)

And Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his maids, so that they bore children. For the LORD had closed fast all the wombs of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife. (20:17-18)

We might think that, having committing the same offence twice, Abraham would be disqualified for future ministry, but in his facing his weakness, God chooses to make him even more effective. This is the grace of God at work. Even after his sheepish display of repentance, Abraham is fully restored to the man that God called him to be "for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable" (Rom 11:29). This restoration is critical for Abimelech. He desperately needs Abraham's intervention, because God had closed all the wombs in his household over Sarah. Though Abimelech is a man of integrity he will not find salvation without a relationship with Abraham, so the prophet offers a prayer of intercession, the first of its kind in the Bible. And his prayer is effective, as fertility is restored to Abimelech's family.

Our text, which began in deception and damaged relationships because of the fear of men, ends with complete restoration because of the fear of God that exposes the truth. Once Abraham is restored to his proper role he continues to have a positive influence in this community. In the sequel to the story (Gen 21:22-34), Abimelech comes to Abraham to sue for peace, acknowledging that "God is with you in all that you do" (21:22). The text concludes with Abraham planting a Tamarisk tree at Beersheba, which may picture his integrity taking root in the land of promise, giving shade to future generations.

Two lessons stand out from Abraham's stay in Gerar.

IV. Lessons From Gerar

A. The Nature of Our Weakness

First, we see the frailty of our humanity. No matter how far we have come in our journey, no matter how mature we think we have become, we are still prone to weakness. No matter how many great acts of God's wondrous salvation and judgments we have seen, we still carry sin within our bodies. And it takes very little to stir that sin into mo-

tion. Abraham set out on a simple business trip. He even made a considerable effort not to end up in the same place as he had earlier, yet in an instant his deep-seated fears took over and he ended up in the very "place" where he didn't want to go. For a second time he compromised and masked his identity. Lot masked his identity for pleasure, Abraham masked his out of fear. Driven by the fear of men, he compromised his wife and his future family, and brought a curse upon those he was supposed to bless.

It is a good thing to be keenly aware of our fears and to publicly articulate them. This is what happens at meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous, when people introduce themselves by admitting they are alcoholics. Even if they have been dry for five years they know they are but one drink removed from disaster. In the public declaration of their weakness they find acceptance and mutual protection.

What are your fears, and when do they attack you? I confess that at the very core of my being I am a man-pleaser. Though I may preach and teach boldly from the pulpit, when I am with close friends or family I am timid about sharing the gospel, because I fear I will be rejected. This goes back to my being rejected by my father when I first became a Christian. Although that was thirty years ago, I find that my "fears" always lurk just below the surface. Like Abraham, I am tempted to mask my true identity to be approved by others. Nevertheless, my ability to articulate my fears has been helpful to me. The good news of our text is that though we may be weak, God is faithful, and he is stronger than our weaknesses. His grace works through them to restore us and heal the damaged relationships we have left in our wake.

B. The Nature of God's Grace

When Abraham gives in to his fears for the second time, God doesn't wag his finger in his face and say, "You always lie, Abraham. I'm disgusted with you. You're never going to change. I'm sorry I ever 'married' you!" No. God loves this man, and by his grace he is going to get him back on track. This is the attitude we should display to others, whether it is a spouse, a child, or a friend. We need to demonstrate that we believe they are new creations, and trust the work of God's grace in their lives, no matter how often they fail.

And how marvelous is God's method! Since Abraham has masked his own identity for fear of his life, God uses a pagan king as a mirror to expose his true identity. Abimelech plays the role of the new Abraham. He is the one who has the dream. He argues with God for justice. He walks before God in "integrity" (20:6; 17:1). It is he whom God has "kept back" from sin (20:6; 22:12). Abimelech, not Abraham, is moved by the fear of God and exposes the truth. He is the hospitable host who serves much more than a meal. He gifts Abraham with a permanent settlement within his kingdom. But, most important of all, it is Abimelech who exalts Sarah in her role as *wife* (the word rings out seven times in the text), treating her like the queen mother for all to see. Sarah as wife will be exalted. And in every echo of Abimelech's name, Abraham is reminded that "my father is king."

This is God's method. God is the master of mirrors.

When we leave our calling, he woos us back through the most unsuspecting instruments to make us jealous for who we truly are. Have you beheld God's mirrors in your life? God used them constantly with wayward Israel. For the fearful Israelite spies, there was the harlot Rahab. For bitter Naomi, there was the Moabitess, Ruth. For David, the adulterer, there was Uriah the Hittite, who projected a reflection back to David of his own tenacious faith when David killed Goliath. For the hardhearted Jonah, there were the repentant Ninevites. And for the disciples of little faith, there was the Syrophenician woman who had unprecedented faith. And today, for all the Jews who cannot recognize Messiah, there are the countless Gentiles in every country who are supposed to be playing their role, like Abimelech, to make the Jews jealous. Oh, how God uses mirrors to awaken us from sleep!

But the grace of God is even greater. Abraham is finally backed into a corner and forced to admit his wrongdoing. His repentance is less than exemplary, but that still does not stop God in the healing process. Even after that poor admission he thrusts Abraham back into the role of prophet. As he takes his place there, praying for others, everyone in the story is healed.

The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable. The very person who may shame you may, in fact, turn out to be the one for whom God asks you to intercede. God's grace is a marvelous thing. It woos us, like reluctant Jonahs, to be all that God intends us to be. That is very good news indeed.

*O where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
And settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
Even there your hand shall lead me,
And your right hand shall hold me fast. (Ps 139:7-10)*

1. Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1994), pg. 69.
2. Wenham, 74.
3. Wenham, 74.

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