GENESIS

Chapter 20

*Abraham and Abimelech*

**Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, 2 and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, “She is my sister.” Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her. 3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, “You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman.” 4 Now Abimelech had not gone near her, so he said, “Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? 5 Did he not say to me, ‘She is my sister,’ and didn’t she also say, ‘He is my brother’? I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands.” 6 Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her. 7 Now return the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all yours will die.” 8 Early the next morning Abimelech summoned all his officials, and when he told them all that had happened, they were very much afraid. 9 Then Abimelech called Abraham in and said, “What have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should not be done.” 10 And Abimelech asked Abraham, “What was your reason for doing this?” 11 Abraham replied, “I said to myself, ‘There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.’ 12 Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. 13 And when God had me wander from my father’s household, I said to her, ‘This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, “He is my brother.” ’ ” 14 Then Abimelech brought sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham, and he returned Sarah his wife to him. 15 And Abimelech said, “My land is before you; live wherever you like.” 16 To Sarah he said, “I am giving your brother a thousand shekels of silver. This is to cover the offense against you before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated.” 17 Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife and his slave girls so they could have children again, 18 for the Lord had closed up every womb in Abimelech’s household because of Abraham’s wife Sarah.**

**20:1** MOVED FROM THERE – No reason is given why, after living for twenty years in one place, Abraham should have moved. Abraham was not a landowner, but a nomad. (PBC)

*between Kadesh and Shur.* See notes on 14:7; 16:7. (CSB)

*Gerar.* Located at the edge of Philistine territory, about halfway between Gaza on the Mediterranean coast and Beersheba in the northern Negev. (CSB)

**20:2** SHE IS MY SISTER – Abraham essentially made the same mistake he had made 20 years before (12:13). (TLSB)

This lapse on Abraham’s part was especially fateful just at this time, because of God’s earlier promise: “Within a year Sarah will give birth to the son I promised you.” On the very eve of the fulfillment of God’s promise, Abraham imperiled the precious hope. Once again the sovereign mercy of God appeared on the dark background of sinful human frailty. (PBC)

*Abimelech.* Probably the father or grandfather of the later king who bore the same name (see 26:1). (CSB)

SENT…TOOK – He took Sarah for his harem, to make an alliance with rich and powerful Abraham. (TLSB)

To take the sister of a rich man into his harem would enhance the king’s prestige. Behind the king’s action we see the prince of hell, seeking to pollute the womb of Sarah. Once again we see God’s arch-enemy working in undying enmity against the Descendant of the woman. (PBC)

**20:3** *dream.* Once again God intervened to spare the mother of the promised offspring. Dreams were a frequent mode of revelation in the OT (see 28:12; 31:10–11; 37:5–9; 40:5; 41:1; Nu 12:6; Jdg 7:13; 1Ki 3:5; Da 2:3; 4:5; 7:1). (CSB)

God spoke to the king in a miraculous dream, a dream which allowed for an interchange of thoughts and questions and answers. (PBC)

DEAD MAN – Abimelech may already have been ill as a result of taking Sarah (cf V. 17). (TLSB)

Although the king had acted in good faith, God threatened so drastically because His plan and His promise were at stake. If He had not intervened here, to this day an element of doubt would cling to the ancestry of our Lord. Moses does assure the reader, however, that Abimelech had not approached Sarah sexually. (PBC)

**20:4** NOT GONE NEAR HER – Perhaps due to his illness (cf. V 17), Abimelech had left Sarah alone. Thus when Sarah later conceived, her child was clearly Abraham’s son. (TLSB)

One is reminded of some similar details in the account of our Lord’s birth (Matthew 1:25; Luke 1:34). The Holy Spirit surrounds thf our redemption with intimate detail. (PBC)

**20:5** DID HE NOT SAY – Abimelech professed his innocence in the matter of taking another man’s wife, and God acknowledged it. It is regrettable that, judging buy human standards, there are unbelievers who act more responsibly than some who bear Christ’s name. (PBC)

**20:6** I HAVE KEPT YOU FROM SINNING – Perhaps by means of Abimelech’s illness (cf. V. 17). (TLSB)

Because of Abraham’s dishonesty, God had sent a providential sickness which incapacitated the entire royal household. (PBC)

**20:7** *prophet.* See note on 18:17. Abraham was the first man to bear this title (see Ps 105:15). (CSB)

Abraham was truly a prophet because God revealed Himself to him and he preached God’s Word. (TLSB)

God’s miraculous conversation with Abimelech had one important message: “Return the man’s wife, for he is a prophet.” Although his behavior hadn’t shown it, Abraham was a friend of God, a man to whom God had revealed His will, a man who spoke to people for God and who spoke to God for people. (PBC)

HE WILL PRAY FOR YOU – This was another role of a prophet. (TLSB)

**20:9** WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO US – There’s nothing very pretty about seeing Abraham raked over the coals by someone who, on the scale of spiritual blessings, ranked much lower than he. (PBC)

**20:11** *fear of God.* A conventional phrase equivalent to “true religion.” “Fear” in this phrase has the sense of reverential trust in God that includes commitment to his revealed will (word). (CSB)

Without fear of God, there is less respect for human rights. Practically speaking, genuine fear of God is nearly always necessary for sound public morality. (TLSB)

**20:12** *she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother.* Abraham’s half-truth was a sinful deception, not a legitimate explanation. (CSB)

Abraham and Sarah were both fathered by Terah but had different mothers. (TLSB)

**20:13** WHEN GOD HAD ME WANDER…EVERYWHERE WE GO…SAY – This was not just a case of Abraham’s being caught off guard, either. He and Sarah had rehearsed this lie in advance. He had not learned from the incident in Egypt (12:10-20), but persisted in thinking that his ingenuity was a surer guarantee of success than the promise of God. (PBC)

**20:14–16** Abimelech’s generosity was a strong contrast to Abraham’s fearfulness and deception. (CSB)

**20:14** In strong contrast to Abraham’s fearfulness and deception, Abimelech gave goodwill gifts to God’s prophet, gifts fitting for a nomad prince. (TLSB)

**20:16** *shekels.* Though not in the Hebrew, the word is correctly supplied here as the most common unit of weight in ancient times. Originally the shekel was only a weight, not a coin, since coinage was not invented till the seventh century b.c. (CSB)

COVER THE OFFENSE – This generous gift removed any doubt regarding Sarah’s moral conduct. (TLSB)

20:17-18 God went to great lengths to assure that the parenthood of the promised Seed was kept safe: He allowed a disease to afflict the king and his entire household, making it impossible for them to conceive until Abraham prayed for their healing. (TLSB)

**Ch 20** Abraham is deceptive in pretending that Sarah is only his sister, but God intervenes to protect him from the harm of his own doing. Left to our own devices, our scheming makes a mess of our lives and brings affliction to those around us. For Abraham and his promised offspring, a dream and an accompanying illness set matters straight again. For us and for the entire world, the future promised Offspring, Christ, set matters straight again, reconciling us to God. • Gracious God, thank You for intervening in our lives in Your promised Offspring, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. (TLSB)