

GENESIS

Chapter 20

Abraham and Abimelech

From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb and lived between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. 2 And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. 3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife." 4 Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, "Lord, will you kill an innocent people? 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." 6 Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. 7 Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours." 8 So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants and told them all these things. And the men were very much afraid. 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 my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done." 10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What did you see, that you did this thing?" 11 Abraham said, "I did it because I thought, 'There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' 12 Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. 13 And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, "He is my brother."'" 14 Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned Sarah his wife to him. 15 And Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you." 16 To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone you are vindicated." 17 Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. 18 For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

20:1 *journeyed* – 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)

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 approached 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 to me* – 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 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*. 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 is indeed 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 caused me to wander* – 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 *a thousand pieces of silver*. 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)

vindicated – 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)