

An Imperfect Saint Abraham lies to Abimelech

Genesis 20:1-7 HCSB From there Abraham traveled to the region of the Negev and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While he lived in Gerar, (2) Abraham said about his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." So Abimelech king of Gerar had Sarah brought to him. (3) But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "You are about to die because of the woman you have taken, for she is a married woman." (4) Now Abimelech had not approached her, so he said, "Lord, would you destroy a nation even though it is innocent? (5) Didn't he himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' I did this with a clear conscience and clean hands." (6) Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know that you did this with a clear conscience. I have also kept you from sinning against Me. Therefore I have 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, know that you will certainly die, you and all who are yours."

Introduction

For those of you who are new to my preaching style, I'd like to point out that I often use a very ancient system called "PARDES".

Pardes is an acronym that stands for Peshat, Remez, Derash and Sod. The word itself is Hebrew for "orchard" implying that this method of study will yield great fruit.

- **Peshat** – (peh-SHAT); The simplest meaning of a passage of Scripture. It's most literal, historical and grammatical meaning.
- **Remez** – (pronounced reh-MEZ); Remez means "hint". A method of Biblical interpretation based on finding hints in the Torah for various concepts. We ask ourselves, "what principle does the peshat imply?"
- **Derash** – (duh-RASH); From the root that means "to interpret." The application of a verse.
- **Sod** – (sode); The spiritual, symbolic or metaphorical meaning of a Scripture passage.

So, I'm going to walk you through these seven verses of Genesis 20, acting as a tour guide, pointing out various characteristics and occasionally indicating one in particular and asking, "Look at that! Doesn't that seem significant?" Once we've walked through the Peshat and Remez of the passage, I'll quickly outline several Derashot. I don't always move on to the Sod but today I have something very cool I'd like to share with you. Something the Lord taught me a few weeks ago.

After the backdrop is painted in vv. 1–2, the passage describes in detail the encounter a Philistine king had with God in a dream (vv. 3–7). This nocturnal revelation, to a foreigner no less, points out that God gives all nations the opportunity to repent. As the prophet Jonah discovered,

- **Jonah 3:10 HCSB** Then God saw their actions--that they had turned from their evil ways--so God relented from the disaster He had threatened to do to them. And He did not do it.

Abimelech's reversal contrasts with the pigheadedness of the wicked Sodomites, whose depravity was incorrigible.

Here is another case where Abraham's treatment resulted in agreement with the earlier promises regarding the nations.¹

¹ Also consider Genesis 18:18 and 22:18

- **Genesis 12:3 HCSB** I will bless those who bless you, I will curse those who treat you with contempt, and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

The irony of the story is that Abraham occasioned both curse AND blessing for the Philistine: curse for obtaining Sarah, resulting in a barren household, and blessing by the intercession of the patriarch, eliciting the healing of the court's women. By the way, the implication of the language is that as a result of the healing, the king's family would be prodigious!

Remez : Sarah's preservation and the blessing on the Gerarites illustrate again the surpassing grace of God, who ensures that the promises He makes to His people will come to pass. In answer to Abraham's rhetorical question "Won't the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" ² we can absolutely, unequivocally state "YES!"

20:1–2 – Let's examine the first two verses.



³Abraham moved again, for whatever reason, into the region of the Negev (v. 1). As Genesis 12:9 indicates, such migrations characterized the man's habits. An important feature of the story of Abraham is his vagabond life as an alien (*gēr* in Hebrew). We recently saw how a traveler could be molested by wicked men (i.e. Sodom); now another kind of hostility threatened the survival of Abraham's family.

Abraham journeyed "between Kadesh and Shur" (v. 1), which is the region where earlier Hagar had fled.⁴ It is generally agreed that it was located in the western Negev near Gaza. Gerar (*gērār*) marks the southern boundary of Canaan according to Genesis 10:19.

"Abimelech", which means "my father is king", is identified as "king" of Gerar in v. 2. Now since the very same name occurs later in chap. 26, when Isaac attempts the same deception, I believe that like the name Pharaoh, "Abimelech" may be the throne name for the Gerarites. It's not his personal name – it's his title or office.

That Abraham repeated his wife-sister deception suggests that wife stealing was a common threat. After all, the abduction of Sarah is reported briefly and without reason (v. 2) as though it was a common occurrence that would need no explanation.

The prior Egyptian incident credits Sarah's beauty for her abduction⁵ as does Rebekah's in the later Isaac-Abimelech episode,⁶ but the silence of the passage on this crucial count may indicate that another consideration, such as forging an economic relationship with the Abrahamite clan, was the king's true motive. This is particularly true when we see

- **Genesis 21:22-23 HCSB** At that time Abimelech, with Phicol the commander of his army, said to Abraham, "God is with you in everything you do. (23) Now swear to me here by God that you will not break an agreement with me or with my children and descendants. As I have kept faith with you, so you will keep faith with me and with the country where you are a resident alien."

Besides, the chronology requires that Sarah was ninety years old,⁷ and even SHE describes herself as "worn out".⁸

20:3 – Let's turn our attention to verse 3.

God confronted Abimelech in a dream and announced his imminent death. The reason for the death sentence is stated clearly: the man took for himself a "married woman."

² Genesis 18:25

³ <http://i.pbase.com/u17/mattsummers/upload/42324958.desert1.jpg>

⁴ Genesis 16:7, 14

⁵ Genesis 12:14–16

⁶ Genesis 26:1–13

⁷ Genesis 17:17

⁸ Genesis 18:11-13

However, because God included the cause of his impending death along with the threat, it implied that the Lord was granting him a way of escape.

Contrary to popular mores, Mosaic legislation required the death penalty for adultery, both the man and the woman.⁹ The Scriptures term adultery a “great sin” and treat it as a sin against God.

- **Genesis 20:6 HCSB** Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that you did this with a clear conscience. I have also kept you from sinning against Me. Therefore I have not let you touch her.
- **Psalms 51:4 HCSB** Against You--You alone--I have sinned and done this evil in Your sight. So You are right when You pass sentence; You are blameless when You judge.

Since Abimelech did not challenge the morality of the charge, only his innocence of the crime, we may deduce that adultery was also considered a sin in the Philistine’s eyes. Kidnapping was also an offense in Israelite law, meriting the ultimate penalty.¹⁰

Ancient Near Eastern law codes outlawed adultery which sanctioned execution of the offenders. In Hittite law, only the adulterer who could prove his ignorance of the woman’s marital status at the time of the offense was acquitted. That was Abimelech’s chosen line of defense (v. 5).

Remez : Unfortunately, ignorance alone doesn’t absolve man in God’s eyes; there must be a return of the woman and a mediation by her husband (v. 7).

As to the duration of the time between the seizure of Sarah and the dream, the passage is not clear. It had to be a fairly short period since the annunciation of Isaac¹¹ only permits one year, including her pregnancy by Abraham. The sense of the passage is that the dream occurred soon after the abduction.

It says in verse 7 that he was physically afflicted to the point of death. And in verses 17-18 we determine that Abimelech, along with his wives, needed healing. The failure of the king to consummate the marriage with Sarah indicates to me that whatever the identity of his fatal disease, it was also impacting his sexual function (vv. 7, 17–18).

Remez : Anyway, it was the Lord’s intervention alone that in fact saved him from committing adultery (v. 6); in effect, he was saved from himself! What a truly gracious and merciful God!

20:4–5 – As we move on to verses 4 and 5 we see that:

Abimelech contended on the basis of his ignorance that he had been judged too harshly. He believed this would be a mitigating factor because it demonstrated that he had acted with a clear conscience. The couple themselves had misled him, and hence he behaved in good faith. The Holy Spirit confirmed his story for we are told by Moses that Abimelech “had not approached her” (v. 4). “Approached” or “gone near” translates the Hebrew *qārab*, which is used to describe illicit sexual relations in Hebrew law.¹² And God agreed, stating categorically that no sexual offense had occurred (v.6). It was enough for God, however, that the man took the woman, and thus she must be returned unharmed (v. 7).

I find it humorous that Abimelech (v. 4) poses a rhetorical question which means he assumes that this “Lord” would not condemn him if only He knew the facts, for God acts justly toward an “innocent” (“righteous,” *tzaddîq*) nation. Abimelech’s appeal to divine justice recalls Abraham’s same concern for the “righteous” (*šaddîq*) at Sodom.¹³ Abimelech’s appeal

⁹ Leviticus 20:10; Deuteronomy 22:22

¹⁰ Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7

¹¹ Genesis 17:21; 18:10, 14

¹² Leviticus 18:6, 14, 19; 20:16

¹³ Genesis 18:23–32

corresponds with the typical polytheism of the ancient Near East. He did not know initially which of the gods was confronting him.

With respect to the crime of adultery, Abimelech explained that he acted without malice, “with a clear conscience and clean hands” (v. 5). The former expression is literally “with a perfect heart,” meaning an upright conduct. The word “perfect” (*tom*) indicates wholeness and integrity,¹⁴ and “heart” (*lēbāb*) often represents the human intellect.¹⁵ “Clean hands” (*niqyōn kappay*) means behavior that is free from guilt.¹⁶

20:6 On to verse 6.

At this point, God countered the defense of the king; in effect, God answered: “I know all this; in fact, I am the one who kept you from committing an irreparable transgression. You are a dead man anyway, unless you return the woman immediately!” His speech began “I also,” *gam ’ānōkī* which was a direct rebuttal to Abimelech’s charge, “Will you destroy a nation though [*gam*] innocent?” (v. 4b). God knew as well as Abimelech the circumstances of the abduction.

The second rebuttal has the same “I also,” (*gam ’ānōkī*); God himself was the one restraining (*ḥāśak*) Abimelech’s sexual appetite so that he did not permit the king even to “touch” (*nāga*) Sarah.

The Hebrew word *ḥāśak* (“keep in check”) describes divine interference in the evil actions of humans. For instance, consider

- **1 Samuel 25:39 HCSB** When David heard that Nabal was dead, he said, "Praise the LORD who championed my cause against Nabal's insults and restrained His servant from doing evil. The LORD brought Nabal's evil deeds back on his own head." Then David sent messengers to speak to Abigail about marrying him.

The word “touch” in Genesis 20:6 recalls the plagues (*nāga’/nega’*) suffered in Pharaoh’s house for his crime. The king at Gerar in Isaac’s day decreed that no one shall “touch” (*nāga*) Rebekah or he will die.¹⁷

Remez : God was explaining that the Philistine’s “clear conscience” occurred only by the gracious intervention of God. This is a clear demonstration of the provenience of God. God is always first. If we are saved it is because God provided the way. If we had sufficient faith in that method, it is because God provided the faith. If we even KNEW of the way, it is because God provided the messenger. Let no one be misled in this: God is ALWAYS first – whether we acknowledge it or not.

20:7 – Let’s examine verse 7

Since Abimelech did not compromise Sarah sexually, there remained the possibility of forgiveness through restitution and intercession (v. 7). The king had to return Sarah to her lawful husband, who as a prophet may pray for the condemned man.

We already observed Abraham’s intercessory function in the Lot-Sodom narratives.¹⁸ Here the divine revelation to the Philistine confirms that Abraham was indeed a “prophet” (*nābī*), which by the way is the first occasion of the word in Scripture. Will someone from my Ironworks class tell me why that is important? Correct! It is the

First Mention Principle: God indicates in the first mention of a subject the truth with which that subject stands connected in the mind of God.

¹⁴ Genesis 6:9

¹⁵ Genesis 6:5; 8:21

¹⁶ Psalm 26:6; 73:13

¹⁷ Genesis 26:11

¹⁸ chaps. 13–14; 18–19

Abraham is considered a prophet by virtue of his mediatorial role. He is not the founder or model of the prophetic institution of Israel as Moses was in Deuteronomy 18. However, he is the first in Scripture to intercede with God on behalf of others.¹⁹

So ironically, Abimelech's salvation lay with the husband whom he had offended; the "nation" (*gôy*) could not survive apart from the benevolence of this chosen mediator of God. In this I believe Abraham was serving as something of a foreshadow of the ultimate Prophet – our Master the Lord Jesus. Today the nation's only hope of salvation lies in the intercession of the Mediator that they crucified! Now that's true vulnerability!

No sickness is named to explain the sentence of death though we observed that "touch" may be an allusion to "serious diseases" as were suffered by Pharaoh for the same offense.

- [Genesis 12:17 HCSB](#) But the LORD struck Pharaoh and his house with severe plagues because of Abram's wife Sarai.

Verses 17–18 of today's text report that the king and his household are healed, but it is ambiguous as to what ailed them. That Abraham's intercession means that Abimelech "shall live" and that "God healed him" suggests he suffered a fatal illness.

Abraham mediated divine healing which enables the king's wives to bear children; in Genesis, blessing typically means a numerous offspring.²⁰

Verse 7's "For he is a prophet" explains to the king why Abraham's mediation can save him, but more is involved here. The passage assumes that as a chosen prophet Abraham enjoyed special protection that the king had unwittingly transgressed.

Remez : Opposition to God's prophets has always resulted in divine retribution.

- [Jeremiah 11:21-23 HCSB](#) Therefore, here is what the LORD says concerning the people of Anathoth who want to take your life. They warn, "You must not prophesy in the name of the LORD, or you will certainly die at our hand." (22) Therefore, this is what the LORD of Hosts says: "I am about to punish them. The young men will die by the sword; their sons and daughters will die by famine. (23) They will have no remnant, for I will bring disaster on the people of Anathoth *in* the year of their punishment."
- [Amos 2:12-14 HCSB](#) But you made the Nazirites drink wine and commanded the prophets: Do not prophesy. (13) Look, I am about to crush *you* in your place as a wagon full of sheaves crushes *grain*. (14) Escape will fail the swift, the strong one will not prevail by his strength, and the brave will not save his life.
- [Amos 7:16-17 HCSB](#) Now hear the word of the LORD. You say: Do not prophesy against Israel; do not preach against the house of Isaac. (17) Therefore, this is what the LORD says: Your wife will be a prostitute in the city, your sons and daughters will fall by the sword, and your land will be divided up with a measuring line. You yourself will die on pagan soil, and Israel will certainly go into exile from its homeland.

This is the psalmist King David's interpretation, when he remembered this incident while praising God for his protective mercies.

- [1 Chronicles 16:19-22 HCSB](#) (19) When they were few in number, very few indeed, and temporary residents in Canaan (20) wandering from nation to nation and from one kingdom to another, (21) He allowed no one to oppress them; He rebuked kings on their behalf: (22) "Do not touch My anointed ones or harm My prophets."

¹⁹ Genesis 18:22–32

²⁰ Genesis 17:20; 22:12; 26:24; 28:3; cp. 1 Samuel 2:20

In a parallel passage in the book of Psalms, he goes on to describe the consequence of touching or harming God's chosen messengers.

- **Psalms 105:12-16 HCSB** When they were few in number, very few indeed, and temporary residents in Canaan, (13) wandering from nation to nation and from one kingdom to another, (14) He allowed no one to oppress them; He rebuked kings on their behalf: (15) "Do not touch My anointed ones, or harm My prophets." (16) He called down famine against the land and destroyed the entire food supply.

Derashot

1. **God extends His helping hand to all the nations.** We can rest assured that though certain tribes may be "lost", "undiscovered" or "forgotten" by humans, they most certainly are not beyond God's loving concern. We may not know what that plan is but we can be sure that the God who "does not desire that any should perish but that all have everlasting life" absolutely has a fair, just and trustworthy plan.
2. **We never sin alone.** Our decisions have consequences that spill over into the lives of loved ones and strangers alike and we are responsible for those consequences, no matter how unintentional they may be.
3. **Sin, even though unconscious or unintentional, will have consequences.** In this the saying "ignorance is bliss" is definitely untrue.²¹
 - **Leviticus 5:15 HCSB** "If someone offends by sinning unintentionally in regard to any of the LORD's holy things, he must bring his restitution offering to the LORD: an unblemished ram from the flock by your valuation in silver shekels, according to the sanctuary shekel, as a restitution offering.
 - **Psalms 19:12-13 HCSB** Who perceives his unintentional sins? Cleanse me from my hidden faults. (13) Moreover, keep Your servant from willful sins; do not let them rule over me. Then I will be innocent, and cleansed from blatant rebellion.
Abimelech was judged for his sin and was on the very verge of death, even though he didn't know God, and wasn't fully aware of what he had done! We are responsible to seek out God and to know what it is He wants from us. That He seeks us out and protects us from unintentional sin is a demonstration of His grace and mercy – not His responsibility.
4. **God's prevenience should provoke constant gratitude.** We believers often thank Yahweh Yireh for His provision; for things that we can discern were given to us. I believe we should be thankful even when we do not perceive anything out of the ordinary being given to us, for who knows how much harm God has prevented from coming into our lives. That we are ignorant of said harm simply points up the fact of His greatness as our shepherd. How many sheep do you think are fully aware of every danger that the Good Shepherd has kept at bay? We must discipline our hearts and minds to constant grateful praise. As we pray for forgiveness of unconscious, unknown sin, so we should praise God for unknown services. Adonaic Christians should be characterized by grateful, joyful hearts.

Sod: I would like to wrap this midrash up by pointing out a problem I had with the text and encourage you with what the Holy Spirit replied when I asked for help on the matter. I struggled with the fact that Abraham had already pulled this stunt once before with Pharaoh in Genesis 12. He was caught in the lie, and managed to escape unscathed. In the intervening chapters we see:

Chap. 13 Abraham chose Canaan over Sodom's valleys.

²¹ For unintentional sin see also Leviticus 4:2, 22; Numbers 15:25

Chap. 14 Abraham rescued Lot and was blessed by Melchizedek

Chaps. 15-17 Abraham received the Lord's blessing

Chap. 18 Abraham intercedes on Sodom's behalf demonstrating his influence with God

Chap. 19 Abraham's intervention results in an angelic rescue of Lot

So now in chapter 20, we see what appears to ME as Abraham backsliding into his old ways. He doesn't completely leave Canaan as he did when he travelled to Egypt but he does go to Canaan's southernmost border. He still succumbs to fear, even though he had recently beaten 4 kings in combat and must surely know by now that he enjoys the Lord God's favor.

Abraham sins once again, and yet again escapes not only unscathed, but with his lot improved! He's not even rebuked by God for his faithlessness and deceit! What's up with that?

I struggled and struggled with this, trying to wrap my brain around it. I finally went out into my yard and started weeding, just me and the Holy Spirit. I had some serious words with the Spirit of the Lord and was finally (about 35 feet of weeded beds later) given the answer. Let me share with you some of the encouraging news this passage provides.

5. **God is very patient.** He understands our weakness and expects us to fail. It's not an excuse to fail, but it is encouraging to know that we won't get zapped as we struggle to overcome our yetzer hara.
6. **God has priorities.** God was more interested in Abraham's ability to forgive and pray (as he did with his nephew Lot and for Sodom and now for Abimelech) than he was in Abraham's boldness. You may need to quit a certain habit, but God may want you to take care of some other things first. You can't change everything at once? That's all right. Work on what you can and ask God for help and deliverance from the other things when He feels the time is right.
7. In a strange way, **God has "low" standards.** He doesn't expect a whole lot out of us. We can stumble and fall and still be considered prophets. Several of you have asked me "How can I be called to ministry when I still struggle with sin?" Here we see a clear biblical answer to that question. There is no one who is without sin. The one who claims that is a liar! We should not rest contentedly in our sins, but when we do sin, we should quickly turn to the forgiving God, humbly ask for forgiveness and restoration to our ministry abilities.