

When we last saw Abraham in Genesis chapter nineteen, he was gazing down upon the smoldering region where the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah once stood ([Genesis 19:28](#)). That detail takes on added significance when we consider the destruction that befell those cities. You see, Genesis 19:24 tells us that **“...the LORD rained down burning sulfur on Sodom and Gomorrah” (NIV)**.

Sulfur produces an extremely unpleasant odor that resembles the stench of rotten eggs. So anyone who lived close enough to see what remained of those cities probably lived close enough to smell what remained of them as well. With this in mind, we might reasonably expect someone like Abraham to explore alternative living arrangements- and that’s exactly what he did...

“And Abraham journeyed from there to the South, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur, and stayed in Gerar. Now Abraham said of Sarah his wife, ‘She is my sister.’ And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah” (Genesis 20:1-2).

So Abraham moved to a town near the Egyptian border named Gerar. But once he arrived, Abraham repeated the same unfortunate mistake that had [caused him trouble in the past](#): ***“Abraham told everyone that his wife Sarah was his sister. So King Abimelech of Gerar sent men to take Sarah” (GW)***.

Since Abraham's wife was approximately ninety years old at this time, we might ask why King Abimelech held any interest in her. The answer probably has to do with the societal customs of that era. Remember that God had blessed Abraham with a position of wealth and prominence. Therefore, the act of setting up a family alliance with Abraham's “sister” represented a shrewd political move for a governmental leader like Abimelech.

But much like his predecessor, Abimelech was about to discover an important detail he hadn’t been told.

“But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, ‘Indeed you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man’s wife’” (Genesis 20:3).

So God essentially told Abimelech that he was as good as dead. This message reminds us that God takes marriage seriously, and it is a grave transgression to take liberties with someone else’s spouse.

“But Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, ‘Lord, will You slay a righteous nation also? Did he not say to me, ‘She is my sister’? And she, even she herself said, ‘He is my brother.’ In the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands I have done this’” (Genesis 20:4-5).

Abimelech’s response undoubtedly reflected his awareness of God’s judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah. In saying, ***“Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation?” (NIV)***, Abimelech clearly expressed his belief that Sodom and Gomorrah deserved their punishment, but he had done nothing to warrant a similar response.

The following verse gives us God's reply...

“And God said to him in a dream, ‘Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart. For I also withheld you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her’” (Genesis 20:6).

In saying, ***“Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience...” (NIV)***, God acknowledged the fact that Abimelech acted unknowingly. But what God *didn’t* say is almost as important as what He *did* say. For instance, notice that God did not acknowledge Abimelech's innocence.

Even though Abimelech acted in the integrity of his heart, he still accrued guilt, even though he was not consciously aware of it. This explains why it may be unwise for someone to rely solely upon his or her conscience when making decisions. While a good conscience can offer valuable guidance when it is

led and informed by God's Word, our consciences are not infallible. Even so, God recognized the fact that Abimelech did not commit any intentional wrongdoing. This explains why God protected him from additional trouble by preventing him from going any further with Sarah.

So here's how God instructed Abimelech to correct his unintentional mistake....

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

Genesis 20:17 represents the first appearance of the word “prophet” in the Scriptures. We can define a Biblical prophet as someone who possessed the God-given ability to communicate divinely inspired information concerning a specific circumstance or future event. So even though Abraham’s trust in God fell short in this situation, God remained faithful to His call upon his life.

“So Abimelech rose early in the morning, called all his servants, and told all these things in their hearing; and the men were very much afraid.

And Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, 'What have you done to us? How have I offended you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done.' Then Abimelech said to Abraham, 'What did you have in view, that you have done this thing?'" (Genesis 20:8-10).

Unfortunately, this situation had a negative impact on Abraham’s reputation, and it certainly didn’t reflect very well upon his relationship with God. If we were to rephrase Abimelech’s response in a more contemporary manner, we might do so by saying, “*Abraham, what were you doing?!? What were you thinking?!?*”

You see, Abimelech was right when he said, “***You have done things to me that should not be done***” (**NET**). This event should therefore serve as a warning and example for those who seek to follow God. Abraham misrepresented God to a person who was unfamiliar with Him, thus painting a distorted picture of God's character. That led to an adverse outcome for a group of individuals who were not deliberately at fault.

We should also note that God used the person who had suffered wrong (Abimelech) to correct one of His followers (Abraham). Abraham thus put himself in a position where God employed a pagan leader to reprimand him and address his inappropriate conduct.

So while Abraham's life offers many good examples to follow, this is one that God’s people should seek to avoid.

Here is how Abraham responded to Abimelech's request to explain his actions...

“And Abraham said, 'Because I thought, surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will kill me on account of my wife. But indeed she is truly my sister. She is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife'" (Genesis 20:11-12).

It turns out that Abraham was telling a literal half-truth in these verses. Sarah was actually Abram’s half-sister since they had the same father, but different mothers. So while Abraham was telling the truth (at least to some extent), there’s little question that he was also attempting to deceive these government officials with the implication that Sarah was only his sister and nothing more.

“And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father’s house, that I said to her, ‘This is your kindness that you should do for me: in every place, wherever we go, say of me, ‘He is my brother’” (Genesis 20:13).

It's important to note Abraham's instructions to Sarah in this verse. One rendering of those instructions reads as follows: ***“If you really love me, you will tell everyone that I am your brother” (CEV)***. We can rephrase that directive in the following manner: *“If you want to show your love for me, this is what you will do...”* We can also make an educated guess at the motivation behind Abraham's approach: *“I’m going to use your feelings for me as leverage to influence your actions.”*

If that sounds overly harsh, we should recognize that similar types of manipulative behaviors still occur within relationships today. Those who truly love one another will not attempt to manipulate each other in such a manner. Nor will they ask each other to “prove their love” by doing something questionable. Unfortunately, that’s what Abraham did: he pressured Sarah into going along with a partial truth for his benefit.

”Then Abimelech took sheep, oxen, and male and female servants, and gave them to Abraham; and he restored Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelech said, ‘See, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you’” (Genesis 20:14-15).

Since Abraham had a long-standing fear that others might try to kill him in order to seize his wife ([Genesis 12:11-13](#)), he misrepresented his relationship with Sarah to the municipal officials of Gerar by telling them, ***“...She is my sister” (Genesis 20:2)***.

But once Abimelech learned the truth about this situation, Genesis 20:14-15 tells us that he immediately acted to make things right. So even though Abraham was someone who was responsible to accurately represent God before others, it seems that Abimelech acted more honorably toward Abraham than Abraham acted toward him.

“Then to Sarah he said, ‘Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; indeed this] vindicates you before all who are with you and before everybody.’ Thus she was rebuked.

So Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his female servants. Then they bore children; for the Lord had closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife” (Genesis 20:16-18).

It’s unfortunate that we don't possess the ability to gauge Abimelech's tone of voice in these verses. Perhaps Abimelech adopted a sarcastic inflection when he said to Sarah, *“I’m giving your so-called ‘brother’ a thousand shekels of silver to make up for everything that happened.”* While this monetary gift served to compensate Sarah for any wrong she may have suffered, it also constituted an agreement that settled any claims and held Sarah blameless.