

Dear Friends,

We may learn godliness in many ways. Our study passage painfully exposes a dark season for Abraham. No New Testament writer praises Abraham for his Abimelech encounter. For Abraham, this episode was more a matter of shame than of faith. Moses narrates the episode quite efficiently. It takes up less than one chapter. We do not know precisely how long it lingered, but the passage gives us a clue. It lasted long enough that the people in Abimelech's kingdom noticed that they could not conceive children, so it was not a matter of a few days.

We might pile on the criticism. Abraham deserved it. However, Abimelech rebuked Abraham quite sufficiently. Let's study this episode and apply it to our own lives. Have we ever responded to a frightening or challenging situation in the fear of man? Indeed we have. What can this episode from Abraham's life teach us?

Blessings,
Joe Holder

Abimelech Rebukes Abraham—Abraham Prays for Him

So Abraham prayed unto God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bare children. For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife. (Genesis 20:17-18 KJV 1900)

A highly instructive study of Scripture appears in Genesis 20, "*The sins of the saints.*" This shameful event falls on Abraham; God doesn't cause or orchestrate every event in our lives. We, not God, are responsible for such sins. His providence, His timely intervention and care, often protects and blesses us, but we can never blame Him for our sins. Genesis 20 does not record a stellar "Faith" event in Abraham's life. No New Testament writer uses this event as an example of Abraham's faith. This chapter rather exemplifies Solomon's wise assessment.

The fear of man bringeth a snare: but whoso putteth his trust in the LORD shall be safe. (Proverbs 29:25)

Abraham reacted with fear of Abimelech rather than trusting God. He intentionally lied to Abimelech and urged Sarah to lie. In this experience, Abimelech shows more integrity than Abraham. Because the Lord had a gracious design for Abraham and his offspring, He mercifully intervened to prevent what would otherwise have been a moral disaster, due to Abraham's fear of man.

Occasionally, people deceive themselves and misread Scripture, thinking that God actually causes sinful events to bring about a greater good. In Romans 3:5-8, Paul addresses this idea and categorically rejects it. God doesn't need or use our unrighteousness to cause a "Greater good," or to magnify His righteousness. James 1:13-15 affirms and clarifies. No man can say, when he is tempted, enticed to sin, that God caused his enticement. James clearly teaches us that our enticement grows out of our own sinful desires, not from God.

God's intervention in this shameful event affirms both these New Testament lessons. God didn't cause Abraham to react in fear, not faith. ***God did intervene to deliver Abraham from himself.*** To prevent Abimelech's sin, not to cause it.

We might judge Abraham in righteous indignation for his shameful abandonment of his faith in God. He deserves the rebuke. However, Abimelech took care of that rebuke quite effectively. Rather than add to the judgment, let's ponder this lesson and turn it to our own lives. Have you and I ever reacted to an event in fear of man? Feared what a powerful man could do to us? Reacted to that fear by denying our faith and looking more to that fear than to our fear of—and our faith in—our God? Oh yes. Perhaps our wise and godly response to this disappointing lesson from Abraham's life would better be to repent of

our own fear-of-man failures, and try to learn from the event so as to grow stronger in our faith for the next fear-of-man event that shall surely confront us.

It is fascinating and highly instructive that God revealed the reality of the situation to Abimelech, and not to Abraham. Abimelech rightly—and righteously—rebuked Abraham for his sin. How sad that a pagan king righteously confronted and rebuke the man of faith! The Lord had sent His judgment already upon Abimelech and his people for his sin. At this point, Sarah was barren; she couldn't conceive. God sent the same condition upon Abimelech's people that Sarah suffered. The lesson doesn't mention how long this episode lasted, but obviously it lasted for some time, long enough for Abimelech's people to realize that they could no longer conceive and bear children. Sarah's deficiency was visited on Abimelech's people.

When the Lord revealed the reality, Abraham and Sarah were husband and wife, not brother and sister, Abimelech confronted and rebuked Abraham. It is painful when unbelievers righteously confront and rebuke believers, isn't it? Ouch! Notice Abraham's excuse, a very lame excuse at that.

And Abraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. (Genesis 20:11)

Abraham adopted the same flawed assessment of Abimelech that so many contemporary Christians make of any stranger they meet. Abraham assumed that Abimelech and his people were immoral pagans who had no sense whatever of moral integrity. How do many contemporary Christians think of every stranger they meet? "He is a lost sinner, and I must do everything I can to save him." First and foremost, you are not their savior! Jesus remains God's one and always effectual Savior. Secondly, how arrogant and prideful it is for a professing believer to think that every stranger they meet is an unsaved heathen. I prefer to learn from Abraham's failure and to think of strangers I meet as likely believers and fellow children in the Lord's family. Treat them like a brother or sister, and not like a heathen.

Study the Lord's counsel to Abimelech.

Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine. (Genesis 20:7)

On many occasions the Lord preserved Abraham from grave dangers. On this occasion, the Lord preserved this "Man of faith" **from himself**. The Lord gave Abimelech words that left no alternative. Restore Sarah to Abraham or face God's hot displeasure. Abimelech immediately restored Sarah, but not before he rebuked her along with Abraham. (Genesis 20:16)

No believer, even an Abraham, will always respond to every situation in faith. Abraham and the Lord occasionally had good and meaningful dialogue. On this occasion, Abraham remains understandably quiet. When you realize such a faith failure, how do you react to the Lord? Rationalize why you failed? Blame someone or something else for your failure? Perhaps we might wisely learn from Abraham. When we realize our own failures, quiet repentance is in order. How did your faith-failure come to light? Perhaps it was not a pagan king, but a family member, or a work associate. In Abraham's case, the shamed man of faith left and didn't go back. In our case, often we continue to live with the same people who confronted our faith-failure. How should we live with them? By all means, strive to manifest that you truly did recognize your failure, and prove to them daily that you learned your lesson and have no intention of ever repeating it. In one of Paul's watershed passages on godly repentance, he made a powerful point, a true characteristic of Biblical repentance.

For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death. Believers and fellow-children in the Lord's family, treat them like a brother or sister, and not like a heathen. (2 Corinthians 7:10)

Do not miss Paul's focused point, "...*not to be repented of.*" Because the Lord makes a powerful change in us in the new birth, a change that directly impacts our view of God and of moral or immoral conduct, we live with a sense of what is wrong and right. That permanent change in us weighs every thought, word, and deed in the scales of a new moral/spiritual balance. When we do godliness, that change affirms our conduct; when we sin, it accuses and convicts us. (Romans 2:15) In light of that conviction, many children of God are ready to confess, but sadly often go right back to the sinful conduct. That is not Biblical repentance. It is likely Biblical conviction, but Biblical repentance means a lasting change in our attitudes *and conduct* toward the sin that snared us.

Why is this repentance "*not to be repented of*"? Simple. We listen to that convicting, accusing voice within, and we take the Lord seriously. We strive and make every effort, even asking for help from others, when necessary, to avoid slipping back into those old sins. If you need to continually repent of the same sin, you never truly repented of it, did you? You felt conviction, you may have even confessed it, but you didn't take the steps necessary to wholly and permanently remove it from your life, so that you never repeat it again—thereby needing to repent of it yet again.

There is yet another lurking danger to our faith in stubborn patterns of sin. Although Isaac was not yet born at the time of this incident, it may well have been discussed in the family circle. Hopefully, Abraham used the incident to teach Isaac the error of ever fearing man instead of obeying the Lord. However, when Isaac faced a similar danger later in his life, how did he react? (Genesis 26) Isaac followed Abraham's bad example and repeated the same sin. How often do our sins leave their stain on the minds of other believers, so that we thereby leave them a similar bad example?

Abraham needed much repentance when confronted with his unbelief and fear of man. But his best response to God was simply to obey. If the Lord directed him to pray for Abimelech and his people, Abraham would go to his knees and pray for them. Repentance manifests itself best in our godly habits after our failures, not in empty confessions alone.

How did the Lord respond in the end to Abraham and Sarah? Our minds might think the Lord should have gotten in Abraham's face and given him the "Talk of his life." Abraham's praying for this pagan king gives us ample evidence that the hero of faith learned his lesson, repented, and returned to his faith. Did the Lord know what was truly in Abraham's heart? Of course, He did. So how did the Lord respond? This sad experience is reported in Genesis 20. What is the big event in Genesis 21? God went right on with His work of multiplying Abraham's seed after him. Sarah finally conceived Isaac! Paul graciously reminds us that it is the *goodness* of our Lord that leads us to repentance. (Romans 2:4b)

When we come face to face with the conviction of conscience for our sins, we may well think first of the Lord's righteous chastening. And our failure to repent will introduce us to that chastening. However, the strongest possible incentive to godliness appears in the Lord's amazing goodness. He forgives! He heals our hearts! And He blesses! Have you thanked Him recently for being such a gracious Lord?

Changing circumstances may alter our vulnerability to sin. In one setting, Sin "A" trips us; in a different setting, Sin "B" besets us. Have we seen different kinds of enticements during COVID-19? Likely so. Our God helps us avoid all of them.

Elder Joe Holder