



Lesson 11 | God's Grace for Our Repeated Failures

Genesis 20:1-18

Have you ever made a foolish, sinful decision from which God rescued you, only to turn around and make the same sinful choice later? Have you ever found yourself saying, "What a relief, I'll never do that again!" only to do it again? It can be all too easy in such situations to lose hope, to think that we've blown it for the last time and God must be done with us. But the story we are looking at today gives us hope because it shows us that God gives grace to repeat offenders. In this account from Abraham's life, we see Abraham makes the same mistake we saw him make earlier. Yet through this mistake we see God's incredible grace at work in the life of Abraham and everyone else in the story.

Why do you think God continues to show grace and mercy to Abraham despite his repeated failures?

As we study the life of Abraham, it's important to remember that God is both working *in* Abraham and *through* him. God is working in Abraham to bring about faith and the kind of character we would expect from a life of faith. But God is also working through Abraham to bring about God's promises of worldwide blessing through Abraham. That will happen ultimately through Abraham's seed, that is his offspring (particularly through Jesus), but we also see it happening in Abraham's life as he is first brings a curse but then ultimately a blessing to Abimelech and his nation.

Abraham's Sinful Decision (20:1-8)

The opening of this account tells us that Abraham is now living now in Gerar, a city in the southern portion of the land of Canaan. Once again, Abraham is a foreigner, an alien wandering about in someone else's country. For this reason, Abraham is fearful that the people of the nation he is living among will wrong him if he is not careful.

Abimelech Takes Sarah (20:1-2)

Abraham sins again by lying about his relationship with Sarah. This time it is to Abimelech king of Gerar, whom we will later learn is king of the Philistines (cf Genesis 26:1).¹ This lie leads to the very result that should have been expected – his wife is taken away from him by a foreign ruler.

What are some reasons why this an especially foolish choice for Abraham?

Abraham's decision here is a disaster on so many levels. First, he's seen what God does to other nations who dare to touch his wife, and yet he is once again exposing others to harm because of his cowardice. Second, Abraham has seen God be faithful over and over again throughout his wanderings, including the last time he was afraid someone would take his wife. Finally, God has promised Abraham that within a year Sarah will have his child, and now she is once again living with a foreign king!

Why do you think that Abraham still did not trust God enough to tell the truth about Sarah?

How are we like Abraham in continuing to show a lack of faith when we should know better?

God Warns Abimelech (20:3-7)

In the previous account of Abraham and Pharaoh, we get very few details. Here, however, the biblical author slows down and gives us a lot more information about how this whole incident played out. God comes to Abimelech with some strong words – “You're a dead man for taking another man's wife.” Abimelech responds with all the panic you would expect from someone who has just been told they were about to die – “I had no idea!” Abimelech protests his innocence and pleads that he and his country are righteous. Abimelech feels deceived, pointing out that even Sarah herself had told him this was the case!² God acknowledges that Abimelech is right – what Abimelech did was done in innocence. He tells Abimelech that He had prevented him from touching Sarah for this very reason, and then instructs Abimelech to ask Abraham to pray for him.

Why do you think God wanted Abimelech to ask Abraham to pray for him?

Why would God threaten Abimelech if He knew that what Abimelech had done was done innocently?

¹ Some have raised the question of how Abimelech could have been interested in both Sarah and Rebekah, especially since Sarah had Isaac after the incident with Abraham and Abimelech, Isaac was 40 when he married Rebekah, Rebekah was barren for a while, and Jacob and Esau appear to be grown by the time Isaac lies about Rebekah. Three possible answers may be given to this problem: (1) Abimelech might have had a very long life, like Abraham who lived to be 175 (2) Abimelech might be the son of Abimelech (how many King Henry's were there in England?) (3) Abimelech means “my father is king” and might have been a royal term for the king of the Philistines. In any case, the ruler of Gerar appears to be associated with the Philistines, the nation which will one day come to be quite a problem for Israel.

² The Hebrew here is interesting, Abimelech literally says “she, even she said ‘he is my brother.’” It's as if Abimelech is stumbling over his words to protest his innocence before God.

Abimelech and His Servants React (20:8)

Later in this story, Abraham will tell Abimelech that he lied about Sarah because he didn't think that the nation feared God. This verse shows us how greatly mistaken Abraham was in making that assessment. Early the next morning Abimelech shared what God had told him and everyone became greatly afraid of what God said.

How is the response of those living in Gerar different from the response of the Egyptians? Why do you think this is?

Abimelech Confronts Abraham (20:9-13)

After the encounter between God and Abimelech, Abimelech comes to Abraham to ask him what he has done. It becomes clear that Abimelech is quite upset, and understandably so. It also becomes clear that Abraham can only offer weak excuses for his behavior.

Abimelech Asks Abraham What He Has Done (20:9-10)

Abimelech calls Abraham and immediately starts firing off questions. "What have you done?" "What did I do to offend you that you would do this?" "What did you see that made you want to do this?" Such questions show the frustration that Abimelech had and highlight the guilt of Abraham in this whole mess. Abimelech makes it quite clear how he views this whole situation. He rightly sees Abraham as wronging him by causing the nation to innocently commit a great evil. Abraham had not considered the harm he was doing to others by this little ruse. We live in a culture that argues we don't pay enough attention to ourselves and our needs. The Bible argues the opposite – our problem is we are too self-focused so that we often fail to see how our actions will impact those around us.

How can we avoid having a self-focus that leads to thoughtless actions which hurt others?

Abraham Defends Himself (20:11-13)

Abraham essentially gives a three-fold defense for why he has done what he did, and all his reasons are weak.

How would you summarize the arguments of Abraham, and what are the problems with them?

(1) He begins by making a backhanded accusation. Abraham says that he didn't think the people in Gerar feared God, and therefore they would simply kill him and take his wife. The story so far has already shown us how very wrong that assessment was. (2) Next, Abraham tells Abimelech that what he had told him was technically true – Sarah was his half-sister. This might have made Abraham feel better about saying what he said, but he had deceived Abimelech and his entire kingdom by insinuating that he and Sarah were *only* siblings, which was obviously untrue. (3) Finally, Abraham explains this is what he always has done. We might be surprised to read two stories that seem so similar in Genesis 12 and Genesis 20, but if this was really Abraham's pattern we should be surprised we don't have more stories like it. As far as

excuses go, this one might be the worst. What Abraham has been doing is a terrible idea, and it isn't less terrible because Abraham did it frequently.

What Abraham is doing here isn't unusual or rare. When Adam and Eve were confronted with their sin, they responded by immediately making excuses. From the dawn of time humans have been excuse-making machines. We all are experts in making excuses, even bad excuses, for our own fearful, selfish, sinful decisions. Too often we are like the lazy person in Proverbs complaining that he cannot do work because "a lion is in the streets" (Proverbs 22:13; 26:13). Part of living a life of faith means recognizing our sinful tendency to excuse our sins and failures, and by God's grace resisting that urge and taking responsibility for our actions.

Why do we make excuses rather than accepting responsibility?

How can we seek to avoid this sinful tendency?

A Grace-Filled Ending

God had promised Abraham in Genesis 12 that he would be a blessing to the nations. Immediately after, Abraham goes down to Egypt and causes problems for them. This story starts in a much similar way, but by the end things are a lot better for everyone than they were in Egypt. Despite Abraham's repeated sin in this area, God is able to bring good out of a bad situation.

Abimelech Makes Restitution (29:14-16)

Abimelech knows he has a death sentence hanging over his head unless Abraham prays for him, so he goes above and beyond to make things right. First, he gives flocks and herds to Abraham to compensate him. Then he tells Abraham to settle in whatever part of the land looked the best to him. Finally, he pays a large sum of silver to Abraham to vindicate Sarah. Although the language with this last item is a little tricky, the idea seems to be that Abimelech is paying this great sum of money as a public testimony of Sarah's innocence and purity.³ Once again, God blesses Abraham, not because of his disobedience, but in spite of it.

Why is it important for the story that Abimelech makes clear that nothing inappropriate happened between himself and Sarah?

Abraham Prays for Abimelech (29:17-18)

Finally we see Abraham be a blessing to the people. Abimelech and his people are once again able to have children, and so Abraham's prayer makes them fruitful. Through a bizarre set of circumstances, God uses Abraham's deception to bring him around to the point where he is doing what he should have been doing from the beginning – blessing the nations. God has called us as sons of Abraham to be His agents of grace

³ "He is a covering of the eyes" could also be "it is a covering of the eyes" referring to the silver. While this is peculiar language, the silver is probably meant to be a vindication of Sarah. In fact, the last phrase could be translated, "and so she was vindicated." Abimelech is trying to make things right, so it makes more sense that this is to preserve Sarah's honor rather than call her out for her part.

in the world. Sadly we, like our spiritual father, can become so focused on our own affairs that we fail to be the blessing God desires us to be.

How can we seek to be a spiritual blessing to those around us?

This account from the life of Abraham is a powerful, humbling account of the goodness and grace and mercy of God in the life of Abraham and for the city of Gerar. It's a beautiful picture of God's grace in our lives even when we mess things up. Now, we want to be careful not to presume on God's grace. As the Puritan Thomas Watson put it, "Mercy is not for those who sin and fear not – but for those who fear and sin not." We should never walk away from a lesson like this and think, "Oh good, so it doesn't matter if I sin." Rather we should walk away with an overwhelming gratitude towards the God who shows us grace in our messes, even in our repeated messes.

How should we respond to the message that God is patient, good, and kind even in the face of our repeated failures?

Why do you think God is so patient with us in our repeated failures?