

## Protecting the Promised Seed – *Genesis 20*

**Introduction** – In Genesis 18, God promised Abraham and Sarah that the same time next year, the couple would have a son (18:10 ESV). This was the promised seed, through which Abraham (“the father of a multitude of nations”) would be a blessing to all nations (12:3). And that promise to Abraham was the ongoing fulfillment of the promise to Eve that her seed would one day bruise the serpent’s head (Gen 3:15). It was time for Sarah to conceive and so this story is about how the serpent tried to ruin that attempt. The story of God’s grace sings a triumphant chorus - that no scheme of the serpent can stand against the sovereign purposes of our mighty and gracious God.

**Framing the Story** – Most commentators take the view that this story (along with Abram’s trip to Egypt during the famine in Genesis 12) are accounts of Abraham’s faith wavering, selfishly protecting his own life at the expense of Sarah’s. The takeaways are that God still uses men who have great shortcomings. They compare these slips with Moses disobeying God and striking the rock, David’s sin with Bathsheba, and Peter denying Jesus. And while these do prove the point that God uses imperfect men (of whom all of us are, including Abraham), those instances all resulted in obvious rebukes and consequences. In both of Abraham’s stories, the tyrants are rebuked, and Abraham is blessed with riches.

Set in the context of Genesis 3:15, 12:3, and 18:10, I think this is the story of Abraham shrewdly outmaneuvering a serpent-inspired tyrant seeking to destroy the promised seed. Consider: (1) Abraham is never rebuked, but Pharaoh and Abimelech are. (2) A tyrant would have little issue killing a husband, but would negotiate with a brother for marital rights. (3) Abraham is blessed with riches in both accounts. (4) This was not a one-off (or two) lapse; verse 13 makes clear this was the calculated plan they had made ever since they were in Canaan.

You can also see the flow of Genesis 20-21: the protection of the seed (20), the birth of the seed (21:1-7), and the separation from the false seed (21:8ff). I am therefore more convinced of the interpretation of the passage thus: Satan acted to prevent Sarah from having Abraham’s child by causing the Philistine king, Abimelech, to take her into his harem, intending to get her pregnant by another man and thereby preventing the heir from being born (HT James Jordan).

**A Sinister Attack** (vv 1-2) – We are not told why Abraham moved from Mamre to Gerar, but some speculate that it was due to the ash and fallout from the devastation upon Sodom. Much of the land had become desolate. When they come to Gerar, Abraham again referred to Sarah as his sister, as was their custom when journeying (v13). Abimelech (a title, probably not a personal name) is a tyrant and “seized” Sarah, threatening the plan of redemption through the seed of Abraham.

This is the story of much of the Old Testament – the serpent is always trying to destroy the seed of the woman, the Messiah. He wants the Messiah, dead, destroyed, corrupted, ruined. When the true Messiah came, Satan tried to have him killed as a baby by means of a tyrant, and of course later, he “succeeded” in having the Son of God crucified.

**The Sovereign Voice of Protection** (vv3-7) – The Almighty, Sovereign God gave this tyrant a bad dream; He said, “*Indeed, you are a dead man...*” – which reminds us of the Lord giving the wife of Pilate a bad dream as well (Matt 27:19). Abimelech defended his innocence, blaming Abraham who had told him, “*She is my wife.*” God agreed that he did not know she was also Abraham’s wife, but Abimelech is not the victim. His intention was to add her to his harem and satisfy his sexual appetite. And God called him out on that (v6). Abimelech was told to immediately return Sarah or he and all that are his would die. Abraham is God’s prophet, the first time this title is used, and God says that he will pray for Abimelech – just as he did for Lot.

God is sovereign over all human actions, even kings (Prov 21:1). God kept Abimelech, a pagan king, from sinning, “*I did not let you touch her*” (v6). It is worth considering, If God is able and willing to help a pagan king against a temptation, how much more is he able and willing to keep a saint from sinning? The answer is, of course, much more (1 Cor 10:13). The question is never “is this true in the situation I am in right now?” but rather, “do I believe it is true, and do I want the way of escape?”

**The Vindication of Abraham** (vv8-16) – In repentance and because he feared God, he rose early and told his servants all he had learned. He calls Abraham and rebukes him for putting him under this sin (keep remembering that it was Abimelech who “seized” Sarah). Abraham, a man of faith, explained how that faith led to cunning plans and actions among those who did not fear God (vv11-13). It is as though Abraham knew that once God had called him to be the one who would bring forth the Messiah, he would be a marked man by the serpent. And so by faith he trusted God to do what only God could do while doing what he could in the process. When Jesus sent out his disciples, he knew they would be marked men with that message

of repentance. And so, he told them, *“I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be wise as serpents and innocent as doves”* (Matt 10:16).

Abimelech repented and made restitution, giving Sarah back to Abraham along with many riches (v14). He also invites Abraham to dwell in his land, wherever he would like. The thousand pieces of silver was declared to be like a veil over Sarah’s eyes, declaring her purity, vindicating her before all (v16).

**Another Prayer of the Prophet** (vv17-18) – Abimelech seemed to have changed, from being a dead man to exceedingly blessing Abraham and God’s plans. Abraham prays and now we learn that God had closed all the wombs of Abimelech’s people and brought some affliction upon Abimelech as well. The serpent had wanted Sarah impregnated by this man, the tyrant had wanted to force himself upon her, and God shut the whole business down. After Abraham’s prayer, this dead land becomes full of fruitfulness. James 5:16 says, *“Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.”* We might even surmise that Abimelech was converted.

***“Even the Devil is God’s Devil”*** (attributed to Martin Luther) – The serpent failed, and even better, God used the serpent’s plans to bring about instead, by his mercy and grace, conversion and blessing to those people and to Abraham. We have mentioned this pattern several times throughout Genesis, and we have mentioned how this was fulfilled in the death of Jesus (Acts 4:27-28). This continues to be the story as the church grows and spreads over the world. But this means that we must remember that the bride of Christ has a target on her. The church has a target on its back for daring to proclaim the truth of God’s Word without excuse or embarrassment. Paul wrote (from prison) that all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution (2 Tim 3:12).

Trials, temptations, and attacks will come from outside yourself and from within your own fleshly desires. Do you have a plan like Abraham had a plan? Are you looking for the way of escape God promises while disciplining yourself to want the way? Will you submit yourself to God and resist the devil, believing he will flee (James 4:7-10)? Will you rejoice when persecuted and pray for those who persecute you (Matt 5:11-12)? And will you do so knowing that no scheme of the enemy can stand against the sovereign purposes of your God and Savior (Psalm 91:1-4)?