

Our Covenant God – Part Ten

Abraham and Abimelech

Today we are looking at something that happened between Abraham and Abimelech. Who was Abimelech? He was the king of a land that Abraham journeyed to which was called Gerar. Abimelech may or may not have been his first name. Abimelech means “My father is king” and many scholars consider it to have been a generic title given to kings, in much the same way as Pharaoh was also a kingly title. Abimelech was the king of the Philistines.

We must remember that this incident followed on from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Genesis 20:1-21:7 (NKJV) 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.

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.” 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.” 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. 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.”

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?”

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

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.” 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.

And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him—whom Sarah bore to him—Isaac. Then Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Now Abraham was one hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, “God has made me laugh, *and* all who hear will laugh with me.” She also said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? For I have borne *him* a son in his old age.”

Our Covenant God – Part Ten

There are a few very important points to take note of in this account. Firstly, let's take a look at Sarah:

It appears that God had rejuvenated Sarah

Abraham believed that men would want Sarah as a wife because of how beautiful she was. Think about that for a minute. This was the second time that Abraham had passed Sarah off as his sister instead of his wife. The first time that Abraham did this, Sarah was at least 65 years old. On that occasion Pharaoh took her to be his wife in Genesis 12. It is hard but not impossible to believe that a woman might be that physically desirable at 65. The second incident, being the one with Abimelech, occurred when Sarah was 89 years old! Both Abraham and Sarah had described her as being 'old' and laughed at the idea of her bearing a child in her old age.

Genesis 12:11-13 (NKJV) And it came to pass, when he was close to entering Egypt, that he said to Sarai his wife, "Indeed I know that you *are* a woman of beautiful countenance. Therefore it will happen, when the Egyptians see you, that they will say, 'This *is* his wife'; and they will kill me, but they will let you live. Please say you *are* my sister, that it may be well with me for your sake, and that I may live because of you."

In those days men took wives because they wanted to establish and enlarge their kingdoms. They wanted their wives to have as many children as possible. A barren wife was considered accursed. Understanding that, it seems incredible that a king of a land would take a woman as his wife if he knew that she was too old to bear children! Thus, is it possible that a woman of eighty-nine years of age could be so breathtakingly beautiful that kings would desire her as a wife? In the natural this would seem impossible – even in today's world with its abundance of plastic surgeons! But it certainly appears that something supernatural had happened to Sarah!

I believe that God had rejuvenated Sarah as He had said He would in Genesis 18:10 where God told Abraham "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son."

Sarah's beauty at 89 years of age seems to be proof that God was in the process of bringing what was dead back to life.

Sarah obeyed Abraham because of chesed

Why did Sarah obey Abraham's request? The answer to this is found in Genesis 20:13 And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said to her, 'This *is* your **chesed** that you should do for me: in every place, wherever we go, say of me, "He *is* my brother."

This is the second time we see the word chesed in the Bible. The first time we saw it was when God rescued Lot from Sodom because of God's chesed towards Abraham. Now we see that Sarah's obedience to Abraham was because of her chesed towards him.

Abraham had appealed to Sarah on the basis of chesed. His appeal was to her covenant devotion and faithfulness to him. It seems ironic because by her obeying his appeal to her chesed, he placed her in a position where she could have been unfaithful to him by becoming another man's wife.

Homework Question #1: What does Sarah teach us about chesed?

Our Covenant God – Part Ten

Abraham teaches us a couple of lessons in this story as well:

Abraham's faith journey

Before judging Abraham for his seeming lack of integrity and wisdom, we must remember that this incident with Abimelech occurred straight after Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed.

Think about what happened in New York on 11th September 2001. Planes loaded with helpless passengers were flown into the Twin Towers by terrorists. The world watched in horror as their television screens showed the drama being played out. Bodies flew through the smoke-filled air as panic-stricken survivors fled the scene. I can remember exactly where I was when it happened. I remember what I was doing. I remember being glued to the television screen and sobbing for days on end, grief-stricken for people I had never even known. I also remember that it took me a while before I could book a plane ticket without feelings of trepidation.

I believe that Abraham felt the same way after seeing the smoke of Sodom and Gomorrah. Perhaps he could even smell the terrible stench of burned flesh and sulfur that terrible morning. And what was Abraham's reaction? He packed up his tent and left the area, settling in Gerar, the land of the Philistines. He ran away from the sight of death and came face-to-face with that same threat when Abimelech sent for Sarah to be his wife.

Look closely at Genesis 20:11. Abraham said that the reason he had lied about Sarah being his sister was because he was certain that he would be killed on account of men wanting to take Sarah to be their wife.

Hebrews 11:1, 6 (NKJV) Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. But without faith *it is* impossible to please *Him*, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and *that* He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Hebrews 11:8-12 (NKJV) By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as *in* a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker *is* God. By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as *many* as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore.

What is faith?

I was pleasantly surprised when I studied the Greek word for faith. You can do it too. Get a Strong's Dictionary and check it out for yourself. What I discovered when I did so was that faith is not some mystical, intangible thing. Instead, to have faith means that you have been persuaded by God's acts of faithful friendship towards you as He has actively pursued you.

Homework Question #2: Abraham is called the Father of our faith. How could a man have faith and yet be scared to die?

Our Covenant God – Part Ten

Homework Question #3: Notice in Hebrews 11 that God doesn't point out Abraham or Sarah's mistakes, doubts or fears that they experienced on their faith journey. He only focuses on the end result of how their lives eventually turned out. What does that tell you about God's heart towards people and how does that encourage you personally?

The power of praying for others to be healed

Just like Pharaoh, Abimelech was captivated by Sarah's beauty and took her to be his wife. Just like Pharaoh, Abimelech did not have a chance to consummate the marriage. Just like with Pharaoh, Abimelech's household suffered because God protected Sarah. Pharaoh's household suffered plagues, while God closed the wombs of all the women in Abimelech's household. What this means is not completely clear. Robert Alter's commentary states that it appears that from God's conversation with Abimelech that it was not actually the women that were affected but it was indeed the men who were rendered impotent while Sarah was in Abimelech's household. Either way, the women in Abimelech's household were unable to have babies as a result.

Abimelech returned Sarah to Abraham. Abraham then prayed for him and the members of his household were all healed. As soon as the members of Abimelech's household were healed, God opened Sarah's womb as well and she conceived and bore Isaac.

Genesis 20:17-21:3 Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife and his slave girls so they could have children again, for the LORD had closed up every womb in Abimelech's household because of Abraham's wife Sarah. And the LORD visited Sarah as He had said, and the LORD did for Sarah as He had spoken. For Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him--whom Sarah bore to him--Isaac.

Homework Question #4: After reading Genesis 20:17 - 21:3 explain how the principle of sowing and reaping is demonstrated here. What lesson is there for us in this?

To have faith means that you have been persuaded by God's acts of faithful friendship towards you as He has actively pursued you.
