

Chapter 13: The Correction of Abraham

Genesis 19:30–20:18

In the wake of Sodom’s destruction, it is tempting to think that good has now decisively triumphed over evil. The men of Sodom “were wicked, great sinners against the LORD” (Gen. 13:13), but if they are now gone, then only the righteous are left: Lot and Abraham. As this next passage shows, however, indwelling sin remains even in the righteous. So, even though the Apostle Peter three times calls Lot “righteous” (2 Pet. 2:7–8), we now see Lot descending into horrifying sins of drunkenness and incest. Not even righteous Abraham (cf. Gen. 15:6) comes through this passage unscathed. Here, we see him falling back into his old con of lying about Sarah’s relationship to him as a wife that we saw back in Genesis 12:10–20. Then, Abraham informs us that this is a lie that he has passed along everywhere they have travelled (Gen. 20:13).

If the corruption of sin extends even to righteous men like Lot and Abraham, then what hope do ordinary believers like you and I have? Furthermore, how does God react to our sin? Does our sin surprise him? Does he consider abandoning us and moving on to more worthy objects of mercy? Absolutely not, for God promises that he will never leave us nor forsake us. If so, then does God ignore and minimize our sin, sweeping it under the rug? Does keeping his covenant promises mean that God will show favoritism toward us by downplaying and excusing our sin? Not at all. Instead, the Scriptures testify that God reveals his covenant love toward us by *disciplining* us: “For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives” (Heb. 12:6; cf. Prov. 3:12). In Genesis 19:30–20:18, we see the way God disciplines three figures whom he loves: Lot, Abimelech, and Abraham. From this passage, we see a wide variety of ways in which *God disciplines those whom he loves*.

God Disciplines us by Consequences (Gen. 19:30–38)

The destruction of Sodom was horrific, but sadly, the dark story of Sodom continues. Earlier, Lot shamefully lingered in the city because of the grip that Sodom had over his heart. Now, the sinful effects of the city remain in his heart even after its destruction: “Now Lot went up out of Zoar and lived in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to live in Zoar. So he lived in a cave with his two daughters” (Gen. 19:30). Throughout Genesis 19, we have seen fear as the primary motivation behind Lot’s actions. Fear of what might happen in the town square seems to have driven him to press hard on the two visitors to Sodom, urging them to stay in his home (Gen. 19:3). Fear for the safety of his visitors drove Lot to offer his own daughters for the sexual gratification of the lusty mob (Gen. 19:8). Fear that the disaster would overtake him led him to Zoar (Gen. 19:19–20), and now fear leads him to leave Zoar (Gen. 19:30).¹

Fear sometimes arises as a *natural* response to the threat of death, so that even Jesus experienced fear as he entered fully into our humanity (cf. Luke 22:41–44; John 12:27).² Lot, however,

experiences *unnatural* fear, which “arises from treachery of reasoning and want [i.e., ‘lack’] of faith, and ignorance of the hour of death, as when we are at night affected by fear at some chance noise.” The judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah is over, and the Lord mercifully saved him from that judgment. Lot has nothing to fear, and yet, like Cain (cf. Gen. 4:13–17), fear drives him to wander across the face of the earth in search of safety. Fear is a consequence of Lot’s long-standing distrust of the Lord. His trials should prompt him to turn to the Lord in faith; however, because Lot has never really trusted God in all things, he struggles to trust God now.

Lot’s Greed

Only at two points have we seen Lot acting on the basis of something other than fear: (1) when he shuts the door behind him to face the crowd of Sodom alone (Gen. 19:6–7); and (2) when he lingers in the city he has come to love, unable to flee its coming destruction (Gen. 19:16).⁴ The first point is to his credit, and stands behind the Apostle Peter’s willingness to call Lot righteous three times (2 Pet. 2:7–8). The second point, however, illustrates the larger heart problem in the life of Lot. Lot has been reduced to a weak-minded, fearful fool, but the beginning of his life seemed to suggest a different trajectory. Before Lot moved to Sodom, Lot was blessed along with Abraham, becoming so wealthy that the fertile land of Canaan could not support the flocks, herds, and tents of Lot and Abraham at the same time (Gen. 13:5–7). Caves, on the other hand, were used only for “graves (25:9) or by refugees (Josh 10:16; 1 Sam 13:6).”⁵ Lot’s final home, then, illustrates his extraordinary fall from the success and prosperity of his youth. What brought about Lot’s downfall, then? As we see Lot in this final, pitiful state, the narrative directs us to remember Lot’s original choice to move away from Abraham. When Abraham allowed Lot to choose where to live, Lot ignored the promises that Yahweh had made to Abraham concerning the land of Canaan, and instead chose to live in the place that appeared to be the best for advancing his career and his wealth:

[10] And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar. (This was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) [11] So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other. [12] Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. [13] Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD. (Gen. 13:10–13)

Lot may be a man driven by fear now, but the *root* of his problem is greed. Lot pursued wealth at the cost of living in wicked Sodom. While God mercifully carried him out of Sodom’s destruction (Gen. 19:16), Lot’s final chapter is a direct consequence of his earlier choice to prefer the wealth of Sodom over the promise of God. How might greed be driving *you* to make similar compromises with God’s word for the sake of career and wealth? How might those choices end up impoverishing you both physically and spiritually, as in the case of Lot?

The Culture of Sodom

If Lot’s greed was the *root* of his problem, then the long passage of time in the city caused a *shoot* of Sodom’s wickedness to grow up, affecting his entire family—a shoot that Lot hardly pruned, and

certainly never uprooted. Lot's sons-in-law refused entirely to come out of the city, believing that their father-in-law was only joking (Gen. 19:14). Lot himself lingered in the city, even though he knew full well that judgment was near (Gen. 19:16). Lot's wife began to depart from the city with Lot and their daughters, but ultimately she turned back and was turned to a pillar of salt (Gen. 19:26). Now, we now read the shocking story of how the the culture and values of Sodom affected Lot's daughters:

[31] And the firstborn said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth. [32] Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father." [33] So they made their father drink wine that night. And the firstborn went in and lay with her father. He did not know when she lay down or when she arose.

[34] The next day, the firstborn said to the younger, "Behold, I lay last night with my father. Let us make him drink wine tonight also. Then you go in and lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father." [35] So they made their father drink wine that night also. And the younger arose and lay with him, and he did not know when she lay down or when she arose. (Gen. 19:30–35)

While the narrative of Genesis tells us that all the other members of Lot's family (Lot included) struggled to leave their beloved city of Sodom, we did not read anything like that about the daughters of Lot. Perhaps they believed the warnings of the visitors and, fearing for their lives, eagerly escaped the coming judgment. Remember, Lot's daughters had to leave their husbands-to-be behind in the city, and yet we do not read that the young women protested their departure at all. Nevertheless, while the daughters of Lot departed *physically* from the city, we discover here that they have carried the *culture* of the city in their own hearts. The root of greed grew up into the shoot of Sodom's values in Lot's family. Now, Lot reaps the *fruit*.

The firstborn daughter, therefore, begins to her wicked proposal by observing a true fact: "Our father is old" (Gen. 19:31). Most likely, this means that they believe Lot will never marry again, in contrast to Abraham whom Yahweh blesses in his old age (Gen. 24:1), so that Abraham even starts a second family after the death of Sarah (Gen. 25:1–2).⁶ To this fact of Lot's old age, the firstborn daughter draws a false conclusion: "and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the earth" (Gen. 19:31). Is this young woman so driven by desperation for a child that she is willing to exaggerate "the effects of the recent catastrophe"?⁷

Primarily, Lot's older daughter desires a child: "...that we may preserve offspring from our father" (Gen. 19:32). Before we explore the horror of the method she proposes, we should first recognize that she is seeking a *good* outcome.⁸ God recognized the importance of offspring to carry on a family heritage, so that the law of Moses contained provisions for raising up offspring when a woman's spouse has died. In Deuteronomy 25:5–10, the law commands that a man must marry his dead brother's widow if the woman has no son. Then, the first son born to the remarried widow will "succeed to the name of his dead brother, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel" (Deut. 25:6). For a man to refuse to build up his dead brother's house was considered a shameful abdication of his duties (Deut. 25:8–10; cf. Gen. 38). This provision stands at the heart of the story of Ruth. After Mahlon (Ruth's first husband) died, Boaz is considered honorable for doing the duty of

building up the name of Mahlon (Ruth 4:10).

The Wickedness of Incest

It is entirely different, however, for Lot's daughters to seek offspring from their father. They propose a wicked kind of incest that the law of Moses forbids (Lev. 18:6, 17). Even in the New Testament, Paul describes the sexual immorality of a son with his father's wife (most likely, his step-mother, unrelated by blood) as "a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans" (1 Cor. 5:1). The narrative here in Genesis 19 does not need to give an explicit condemnation of this act, but we do find a several clues to confirm that this is sinful. First, she says that "there is not a man on earth *to come in to us after the manner of all the earth*" (Gen. 19:31). The phrase "to come in to us" is a "respectable term for marriage (cf. Deut 25:5)," and the phrase "after the manner of all the earth" speaks to the universal, healthy, God-ordained institution of marriage for child-bearing. These young women know (along with all the earth) what is right, good, and healthy, in contrast to what they are about to do instead. Second, the fact that she proposes getting their father drunk underscores that they know what they are doing is wrong.¹⁰ Third, they speak of sex with their father differently than they speak of normal, healthy sexual reproduction within marriage: "...and we will lie with him..." (Gen. 19:32): "For though 'to lie with' sounds like an innocent euphemism for sexual intercourse, it is rare for it to be used except in the contexts of illicit relationships (e.g., 34:2, 7) or female desperation (30:15, 16)."¹¹

Fourth, their wicked deed takes place at night. We previously observed the difference between the broad daylight when the three visitors came to Abraham (Gen. 18:1) and the evening when the two visitors came to Sodom (Gen. 19:1).¹² Here, this act of incest takes place not only at night (Gen. 19:33), but in the dark of a cave: "They are already in a cave, which is quite dark. To be in a cave at night is about as dark a place as one could find."¹³ Fifth, we should not miss the irony that "a drunk Lot carried out the very act which he himself had suggested to the men of Sodom (19:8)—he lay with his own daughters."¹⁴ What horrified us in Sodom should horrify us in the cave. Sixth, the text tells us twice that Lot did not "know" (Gen. 19:33, 35) when each daughter lay down or when she arose. In part, this word "highlights the slickness of his daughters, in contrast with their father's befuddled ignorance."¹⁵ More than that, we find here another use of the word "know" that previously described God's holy knowledge of Abraham (Gen. 18:19; ESV: "chosen") as well as the wicked proposal of the Sodomites to "know" the two visitors sexually (Gen. 19:5).¹⁶ This close parallel of the word "know" shows how similar the wickedness of Sodom is to the wickedness of the daughters of Lot. Tragically, these young women share "the warped morality of the city from which they had all escaped."¹⁷

Seventh, this whole scene of Lot's sinful drunkenness after escaping the judgment of God should remind us of Noah's drunkenness after escaping the judgment of the world through a flood (Gen. 9:20–27):¹⁸ "In both, the heroes drink too much. In both, when their father is drunk, the children sin against him, and this has consequences for future generations."¹⁹ Noah, however, "knew what his youngest son had done to him" (Gen. 9:24), while Lot remains "in the dark" about what his daughters have done.²⁰ Lot never matches up well with Noah's righteousness (cf. Gen. 6:9), but Lot does not even match up well with Noah's sin.

The Rebirth of Sodom

The daughters of Lot get exactly what they want from their sin:

[36] Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. [37] The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab. He is the father of the Moabites to this day. [38] The younger also bore a son and called his name Ben-ammi. He is the father of the Ammonites to this day. (Gen. 19:36–38)

Both daughters become pregnant by their own father. The daughters of Lot, shaped by years of living in Sodom, devise and execute a plan for gross sexual sin. They have exported the lust of Sodom into the new world, so that Allen Ross calls this episode “the rebirth of Sodom in the cave.”²¹ This sin will bear evil fruit for years through the nations of the Moabites and the Ammonites. The Moabites “provide the worst carnal seduction in the history of Israel (that of Baal-Peor, Num. 25)” and the Ammonites provide “the cruelest religious perversion (that of Molech, Lev. 18:21).”²² Molech is the name of the god whom the Scriptures call the “abomination of the Ammonites” (1 Kgs. 11:7) because he demands child sacrifice (Lev. 18:21; 20:2–5; 2 Kgs. 23:10). Molech ensnared God’s people when Solomon builds a high place for worshiping Molech (1 Kgs. 11:7), and we even discover that some Israelites eventually sacrifice their own children to him, despite God’s direct prohibition against such a detestable practice (Jer. 32:35). This origin story prepares the way for understanding the wicked histories of the nations of the Moabites and the Ammonites.²³

Because our sin cuts against the grain of God’s good ordering of the world, painful consequences arise naturally from the root of our sin. More than mere punishment, however, God intends the great pain of our consequences to demonstrate our great need to repent. At some point, Lot must have figured out what his daughters have done. Did that drive him to recognize how far he has fallen? Did it drive him in repentance back to God? Or, did he set his face like flint *against* recognizing what was going on around him, as he did for so many years in Sodom. While the text does not tell us what happened to Lot, the text certainly expects us to think through what Lot should have done at this point. All of us should pay careful attention to the painful consequences we experience. Instead of digging our heels in further to our previous patterns and habits, consequences should lead us to broken repentance before God’s grace and mercy.

God Disciplines us by Condemnation (Gen. 20:1–7)

Sometimes, Christians are tempted to read stories of great wickedness dismissively. “*Those people are wicked!*” we remark, and then move on with our lives, content in the fact that we are not engaging in widespread homosexual debauchery (like the Sodomites) or drunken incest (like Lot). The next chapter, however, reminds us that sexual sins exist even in the household of faith, so that the Scriptures warn us, “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12). We must remain ever vigilant against the tempting tactics of our Enemy:

[1] From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb and lived between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. [2] And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. (Gen. 20:1–2)

The verbs “journeyed” and “sojourned” in Genesis 20:1 appeared together in Genesis 12:9–10, where

Abraham sinfully left the land of Canaan to sojourn in Egypt during a famine.²⁴ In that story, Abraham faithlessly instructed Sarah to say that she was merely his sister (Gen. 12:13), leading Pharaoh to take Sarah into his house as a wife (Gen. 12:15). God intervened by sending great plagues on Pharaoh and his house because of Sarah (Gen. 12:17), leading Pharaoh to rebuke Abraham for his deception and to deport Abraham from Egypt (Gen. 12:18–20).

Indwelling Sin

Sadly, Abraham now falls into the same sin of scheming once again, with many of the same consequences. Once again, Abraham instructs Sarah to say that she is Abraham's sister, and once again the king of the region takes Sarah as his wife (Gen. 20:2). Much has happened since Genesis 12 to increase Abraham's faith: God has not only reinforced his promises (Gen. 13:14–17), but has solemnly sworn his promises with a covenant (Gen. 15) that he further ratified with the covenant sign of circumcision (Gen. 17) and a covenant meal (Gen. 18). Abraham has defeated powerful kingdoms (Gen. 14) and interceded with God for the preservation of his nephew, Lot (Gen. 18:22–33). Certainly, Abraham has stumbled into sin along the way, especially in his failure with Hagar (Gen. 16). Nevertheless, shouldn't we expect Abraham to be beyond the point of such sin now? Apparently not, for by these two, nearly identical stories, "the Scriptures are showing that the postcovenant Abraham, for all his spiritual maturation (e.g., Gen. 15:6), is still much like the precovenant Abraham."²⁵ In fact, this second wife-sister episode is in some ways worse than the first, since here, "on the brink of Isaac's birth-story here is the very Promise put in jeopardy, traded away for personal safety."²⁶ With Isaac's promised birth less than one year away (Gen. 18:10, 14), how could Abraham and Sarah do this?

Indwelling sin is an ongoing reality, even for believers who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus. Indeed, anyone who is in Christ is a "new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come" (2 Cor. 5:17). Nevertheless, this promise, like many promises in Scripture, combines an *already* reality with a *not yet* deferral. *Already* are we a new creation, where the old has begun to pass away, but *not yet* has this taken place entirely. Most vividly, the bodies of believers still suffer the effects of our old, corrupted natures so that we waste away and eventually die (2 Cor. 4:16). Furthermore, we all still have sin, and anyone who says that they do not have sin is a liar (1 John 1:8, 10).

So, the Scriptures do not tell us that God will finalize the work of replacing our *old* nature in Adam with our *new* nature in Christ will entirely in this life. Instead, while we have a new, living nature by the Spirit in Christ, we retain vestiges of our old, sinful nature that will never completely fall away: "This corruption of nature, during this life, doth remain in those that are regenerated; and although it be, through Christ, pardoned, and mortified; yet both itself, and all the motions thereof, are truly and properly sin."²⁷ Instead, the Scriptures testify to the ongoing war within us between our old and new natures. The Apostle Paul, for example, writes this: "[22] For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, [23] but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members" (Rom. 7:22–23). Elsewhere, he writes this: "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do" (Gal. 5:17).

The *Westminster Larger Catechism* summarizes well the nature of this ongoing battle between our

growth in grace toward holiness (sanctification) against the ongoing, old lusts and remnants of sin:

The imperfection of sanctification in believers ariseth from the remnants of sin abiding in every part of them, and the perpetual lustings of the flesh against the spirit; whereby they are often foiled with temptations, and fall into many sins, are hindered in all their spiritual services, and their best works are imperfect and defiled in the sight of God.²⁸

There are two important points to recognize from this. First, we must never let down our guard against sin. When we gain a certain measure of victory over a certain sin, it is not because the old, sin nature that remains in us has somehow improved. We cannot reform the old nature; we can only progressively kill it, by the grace of God: “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Rom. 8:13). Keep putting to death the deeds of the flesh, and keep presenting your bodies as instruments for righteousness as the new nature God has given you through Christ blossoms, grows, and flourishes (Rom. 6:13). Over time, our old nature must decrease as our new nature increases (cf. John 3:30).

Second, as we seek to minister to one another, let us have holy compassion on one another. We must never wash our hands of people who fall into sin, for our attitudes should reflect the admonition of Paul: “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted” (Gal. 6:1). We must not only demonstrate compassion to one another, continuing to pick one another up as we fall. Additionally, we must keep watch on the temptations that will come to us as we seek to restore fallen brothers and sisters. For example, our compassion should never descend into complacency or a libertine tolerance of sin, so that someone who professes to be a believer and yet persists unrepentantly in their sin must be purged from the church through the processes of church discipline, including eventual excommunication (1 Cor. 5:11–13). Also, we may fall into sin by refusing to forgive those who do repent—even if they repent after their excommunication (2 Cor. 2:5–11). Rather, we must continually remind ourselves that we are fellow sinners who are co-recipients of God’s grace. As such, we must hold professing believers accountable, since true fellowship arises only when when we all walk in the light (1 John 1:7). Then, we must continually reaffirm our love and extend forgiveness to repentant sinners who are grieved not merely by the worldly grief of getting caught for their sin, but who are moved to godly grief toward true, sorrowful repentance for their sin (2 Cor. 7:8–12).

God’s Condemnation

In Genesis 12, God intervened to set Sarah free from her bondage in the house of Pharaoh. Here in Genesis 20, God intervenes again: “But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, ‘Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man’s wife’” (Gen. 20:3). Notice the high penalty for adultery: *death*. Throughout the ancient world, adultery merited the death penalty, including in Israel (e.g., Lev. 20:10; Deut. 22:22).²⁹ Here, God directly expresses “his high displeasure against adultery.”³⁰ Literally, the phrase “for she is a man’s wife” might be translated as “for she is owned by an owner”: “A wife is seen as much more than the property of her husband: she is his *alter ego* and one flesh with him (cf. 2:18–24...); she is at least her husband’s most precious possession, and to take her is the worst kind of theft.”³¹ Our culture’s casual

approach to adultery—including even celebrating adultery in some cases—would be considered reprehensible throughout history.

While God’s words may sound harsh, they demonstrate loving kindness in two ways. First, God is speaking this word of condemnation not as a finalized judgment, but with a view of leading Abimelech to repentance. This is the first use of the law, where God uses the condemnation of the law as a schoolmaster to teach us of our great need for repentance and faith. Second, God condemns Abimelech here in order to restrain Abimelech from further evil. The king should not have taken Sarah as a wife, but God intervenes to prevent Abimelech from consummating the marriage. This is the second use of the law, where God restrains the world from engaging in all the evil that it could, left to itself. By this word, God protects Abimelech and invites Abimelech to repentance and faith.³²

Abimelech’s Intercession

Intriguingly, Abimelech intercedes for himself and his innocence:

[4] Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, “Lord, will you kill an innocent people? [5] Did he not himself say to me, ‘She is my sister’? And she herself said, ‘He is my brother.’ In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this.” (Gen. 20:4–5)

Right away, the narrator tells us that Abimelech has *not* approached Sarah—that is, approached her sexually (Gen. 20:4). There is no similarly direct statement in Genesis 12:10–20, which could suggest that Pharaoh *did* approach Sarah sexually before Yahweh intervened to set Sarah free.³³ Regardless of what may or may not have happened in Egypt, the narrative depends on our knowledge that Abimelech did not consummate this marriage.

On this basis, Abimelech uses strong language to protest his “righteousness” (*tsaddiq*, Gen. 20:4; ESV: “innocence”), and the “integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands” (Gen. 20:5). These words do not mean that Abimelech is claiming to be perfect in all regards, but, rather, he uses the words in “a narrow sense” to plead that (1) he was not aware that Sarah was married, and (2) he did not actually touch her sexually.³⁴ As evidence, Abimelech points to Abraham’s claim that Sarah is his sister, and to Sarah’s claim that Abraham is her brother (Gen. 20:5). Furthermore, Abimelech intercedes not only for his own sake, but for the sake of his entire people: “Lord, will you kill an innocent people?” (Gen. 20:4). He is essentially making the same argument in his prayer that Abraham used in Genesis 18: “God had been prepared to spare a whole town for the sake of just ten righteous (18:31) people in her. Should he now kill one righteous man, who represents a nation?”³⁵

After Abimelech’s response, God seems to soften his tone to demonstrate that repentance, rather than condemnation, was his ultimate purpose:

[6] Then God said to him in the dream, “Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her. [7] Now then, return the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.” (Gen. 20:6–7)

First, God acknowledges that he knows Abimelech's integrity of heart (Gen. 20:6). Second, God states that *he* was the one to keep Abimelech from sinning by not letting him touch her (Gen. 20:6). There is an interesting wordplay with the word "touch" (*naga'*) which clearly refers to sexual touching in this context. In Genesis 12:17, the same verb appeared to describe how God "afflicted" (*naga'*) with great "plagues" (*nēga'im*): "It will not be necessary for God to send any *nēga'im* (plagues) on Abimelech, for Abimelech has not *naga'* (touched) Sarah."³⁶ Nevertheless, God also declares that he will not relent from his threat: if Abimelech does not return Sarah to Abraham, then he and "all who are yours" shall die" (Gen. 20:7).³⁷ In fact, the phrase "you shall surely die" is the exact same phrase found in Genesis 2:17 for the warning against eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.³⁸

To this warning, God adds a gospel promise: "for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live" (Gen. 20:7). This is the first use of the word for "prophet" in the Bible, although here, the "role of the prophet here is that of intercessor."³⁹ Certainly, Abraham has acted as a prophet in the sense of receiving and proclaiming revelation from God up to this point. At this point, though, the important role that Abraham must resume is to pray for Abimelech in the way that he prayed for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18. This is also the first use of this specific biblical word for "pray": "'Pray' is used particularly of intercessory prayer (e.g., Num 11:2; 21:7; Deut 9:20; Jer 7:16; 11:14), whereas 'to call (on the name of)'...is a less precise term for prayer used quite often in Genesis (4:26; 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 26:25)."⁴⁰

The prayer that God demands sets up an odd situation. Abraham is at fault in this situation, while Abimelech is "righteous" in the "integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands" (Gen. 20:4–5). Nevertheless, Abimelech is threatened, while Abraham will be the source of Abimelech's salvation. Furthermore, Abimelech must now ask for salvation from the husband whom he unwittingly offended. As bad as Abraham is in this scene, God continues working to bless the nations through the means he has appointed: the "chosen mediator," Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:3).⁴¹

God Disciplines us by Correction (Gen. 20:8–18)

After speaking with God during the night, Abimelech speaks to his servants and to Abraham the next morning:

[8] So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants and told them all these things. And the men were very much afraid. [9] Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done." [10] And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What did you see, that you did this thing?" (Gen. 20:8–10)

Abraham will later explain that he lied because he worried that "There is no fear of God at all in this place" (Gen. 20:11). It is possible that Abraham was unjustified altogether in this belief.⁴² On the other hand, it is also possible that there *was* no fear of God until the Lord appeared to Abimelech in a dream.⁴³ Regardless of what may have been before this dream, there is no question that there is plenty of the fear of God in Gerar now. Rather than quietly returning Sarah to Abraham, Abimelech makes

public everything that has been related to him, risking great embarrassment.⁴⁴

Then, Abimelech summons Abraham to confront him over his deception. Abimelech's first question, "What have you done to us?" is identical to Pharaoh's question (Gen. 12:18), which echoes God's question to Eve in the garden: "What is this that you have done?" (Gen. 3:13).⁴⁵ Clearly, Abraham was only thinking about how this ruse would help him, and he did not think about the consequences for the people against whom he sinned.⁴⁶ The only difference between Pharaoh's question and Abimelech's question is Pharaoh asks "What have you done *to me*?" while Abimelech sees this sin as against his entire nation: "What have you done *to us*?"⁴⁷ Regarding the severity of sinning against a nation, Victor Hamilton observes, "If a city can be saved by the presence of ten virtuous people, an empire can be dismantled by the actions of one guilty person."⁴⁸

Introspective Confrontation

Abimelech's next words also go beyond Pharaoh's. Pharaoh only asked why Abraham had lied (Gen. 12:19), but Abimelech seems to wonder if *he* may have some guilt in the matter: "And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin?" (Gen. 20:9): "The very phrasing implies his moral earnestness. Abimelech suggests he must have behaved terribly badly to provoke Abraham to make him fall into a 'great sin,' a well-known Near Eastern description of adultery."⁴⁹

In this scene, God uses Abimelech to discipline Abraham by correction. Here, Abimelech applies God's law against adultery and lying to Abraham, asking Abraham to give an account for what he has done. This demonstrates the third use of the law, where God's law teaches us to live in a way that pleases him. In this case, God uses a Philistine king to remind Abraham of his law, as he often uses *us* to correct one another when we see our brothers and sisters going astray from God's word. Abimelech demonstrates godly rebuke in his words to Abraham.⁵⁰

Indeed, Abimelech's final question suggests some level of self-reflective introspection: "What did you see, that you did this thing?" (Gen. 20:10). John Calvin marvels at the way Abimelech handles this confrontation:

Now, it is no common sign of a just and meek disposition in Abimelech, that he allows Abraham a free defense. We know how sharply, and fiercely, they expostulate, who think themselves aggrieved: so much the greater praise, then, was due to the moderation of this king, towards an unknown foreigner. Meanwhile, let us learn, by his example, whenever we expostulate with our brethren, who may have done us any wrong, to permit them freely to answer us.⁵¹

Certainly, Abraham has committed a great evil: "You have done to me things that ought not to be done" (Gen. 20:9), a phrase that is used elsewhere for "flagrant sexual misbehavior" (Gen. 34:7; 2 Sam. 13:12).⁵² Nevertheless, it is also true that sometimes when we believe that we have been wronged, we tend to overlook the perspective of the other person entirely. Sometimes what we perceive to be exclusively a wrong committed against us is, in fact, something that we ourselves have prompted in some way. Therefore, when we confront other people, it is helpful to maintain this kind of humility and openness to be corrected. One helpful line to consider using is to ask, "What am I missing here?", which allows the other person an opportunity to show us where we may have

contributed to the overall problem.⁵³ Abimelech models this humble attitude well.

Abraham's Weak Reply

After Abimelech's thoughtful and courageous rebuke, Abraham's reply comes off as weak and self-justifying:

[11] Abraham said, "I did it because I thought, 'There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' [12] Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. [13] And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, "He is my brother."'" (Gen. 20:11–13)

Derek Kidner summarizes the weaknesses of Abraham's reply well: "Abraham's reply confessed to a pattern of mistaken choice which is in essence every man's with its fallibility in the realms of facts (11), values (the casuistry of 12) and motives (the cowardice of 13)."⁵⁴ Abraham may not have believed that there was the fear of God in Gerar, but Abimelech has proven otherwise. Then, Abraham may have been technically correct to say that Sarah was his sister, and there was not anything wrong at that point in history with marrying Sarah.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, that doesn't change the fact that Abraham lied about the full scope of his relationship with her. Finally, when Abraham confesses to a long-standing conspiracy of lying about his relationship to Sarah, we wonder why Abraham would live under so much fear, since God has blessed him at every turn.⁵⁶ Furthermore, we are "at a loss," since this is the first we have learned that Abraham has repeatedly done this beyond his sojourn in Egypt.⁵⁷ Or, is Abraham lying about how often he has used this excuse?⁵⁸ We really don't know. In comparison with Abimelech, Abraham comes off very poorly.

Abimelech's Grace

Even so, Abimelech responds graciously to Abraham's weak reply:

[14] Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned Sarah his wife to him. [15] And Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you." [16] To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone you are vindicated." (Gen. 20:14–16)

Just as in Egypt, Sarah's other husband gives Abraham extensive gifts to Abraham (Gen. 20:14; cf. Gen. 12:16), but this time Abimelech gives Abraham Sarah at the same time that he gives his gifts. We do not know Abimelech's spiritual condition fully, but he clearly responds obediently to the word of God, especially since God promised that Abraham would heal Abimelech through prayer if Abimelech returned Sarah. Furthermore, these additional gifts go far above and beyond what God required, suggesting that Abimelech not only wants to comply with God's word at the bare minimum level, but that he desires to be blessed through Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:3). John Calvin writes: "It is indeed of little advantage for the sinner to present to God only what fear extorts. But it is a true sign of penitence,

when, with a composed mind and quiet conscience, he yields himself, as obedient and docile, to God.”⁵⁹ The fruit of Abimelech’s generosity demonstrates that he is truly repentant.

Importantly, Abimelech tells Abraham to dwell anywhere in Abimelech’s land that pleases Abraham (Gen. 20:15). We should probably see this as an important step in Abraham’s receiving the land of Canaan by promise: “Admittedly, this is not the same as possessing the land through purchase (Chap. 23), but it does represent a stage nearer that goal.”⁶⁰ Finally, Abimelech gives one thousand pieces of silver to vindicate Sarah’s innocence in the sight of all (Gen. 20:16).⁶¹ Still, we should probably hear some sarcastic irony when Abimelech says that he has given this money to “your brother” rather than to her “husband.”⁶² Abimelech both deals generously and realistically with Abraham through this sin.

Abraham’s Intercession

As promised, Abraham prays for the man against whom he has sinned, and God heals Abimelech:

[17] Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. [18] For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife. (Gen. 20:17–18)

Through this prophetic intercession, God blesses the nations through Abraham (cf. Gen. 12:3).⁶³ Notably, we discover here the full significance of God’s threat to kill Abimelech and his household: “you shall die, you and all who are yours” (Gen. 20:7). Here, we see that God had closed all the wombs in the house of Abimelech: “Thus God’s words ‘you are about to die’ are interpreted by the context to mean that Abimelech’s household would not continue.”⁶⁴ Still, it is likely that God also intended to put Abimelech to death directly if he did not return Sarah to Abraham.⁶⁵

What exactly happened here? God’s *closing the wombs* of the house of Abimelech uses the same language that Sarah spoke to describe her inability to become pregnant (Gen. 16:3), although this phrase can also refer to the inability to deliver a baby (Isa. 66:9).⁶⁶ In the Bible, medical conditions are often described in terms of *symptoms* rather than in terms of *causes*, so that a variety of causes may stand behind the ultimate symptom of the inability to bear children.⁶⁷ Since the text tells us that God “healed Abimelech,” this likely means that Abimelech became impotent or sexually dysfunctional in some other way, which may explain why he did not actually approach Sarah even though she became his wife.⁶⁸ Still, the healing of the women also suggests that the women also developed some issue that prevented normal child-bearing.⁶⁹

Still, this chapter closes on an odd note. Yahweh has now reopened the wombs in all the house of Abimelech, which were closed “because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife” (Gen. 20:18). Nevertheless, the womb of Sarah herself has been closed for her entire lifetime, and she still has not conceived.⁷⁰ Will the Lord open Sarah’s womb soon too? Indeed, after her rescue, the time has come for Sarah to receive the child of promise, as we will see in our study of the next passage (Gen. 21:1–2).

Discussion Questions

1. Brainstorm as many values of our surrounding culture (good, bad, and indifferent) as possible. By what means do the values of our culture reach us? How do those values influence us? What sins are

we tempted to treat lightly because of our culture? What godly virtues do we tend to minimize because of our culture? From what do you need to repent?

2. What role do consequences play in our sanctification? In what ways do we ignore and suppress the consequences that arise from our sin? What does Israel's history with the Moabites and the Ammonites teach us about the extent and severity of consequences that can arise from our sin? What consequences are you ignoring and suppressing right now?

3. How do we reconcile God's word of condemnation with God's love toward us? What does God want from speaking his word of condemnation to us? What would happen if God did not speak a word of condemnation toward us? How does God's word of condemnation from the law magnify his love toward in the gospel and the glory of Christ?

4. How many ways have you seen God correct you? How does God use others (including unbelievers) to correct you? What does Abimelech's humble, introspective rebuke to Abraham teach us? What would be lost if Abimelech had quietly returned Sarah to Abraham without any rebuke? Whom might you need to confront in a loving, humble, and introspective way?

Notes

1. Kidner, *Genesis*, 146.

2. "...fear is natural when the soul is unwilling to be separated from the body, on account of the natural sympathy and close relationship planted in it in the beginning by the Creator, which makes it fear and struggle against death and pray for an escape from it." (John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, trans. S. D. F. Salmond (London, UK: Aeterna Press, 2016), 120 (chapter 23).)

3. "This our Lord did not assume. Hence He never felt fear except in the hour of His passion." (John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 121 (chapter 23).)

4. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 51.

5. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 60.

6. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 51.

7. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 61.

8. "The intent to 'preserve our family line' (vv. 32,34) was honorable, but the means of incest was deplorable (e.g., Lev 18:6–18; cp. Tamar 38:13–26)." (Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 245.)

9. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 61. Wenham, however, goes on to say that "but 'as they do in all the world [area]' (lit. 'the way of all the world') is a suspect phrase, for it stands in contrast to 18:19, 'the LORD's way.'" In my judgment, however, it seems better to recognize this phrase as a contrast between legitimate sexual reproduction in marriage and illegitimate sexual reproduction by incest through their father.

10. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 245.

11. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 61.

12. Kidner, *Genesis*, 142.

13. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 52.

14. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 174.

15. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 61–62.

16. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 52.

17. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 64.
18. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 174.
19. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 60.
20. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 52.
21. Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 364.
22. Kidner, *Genesis*, 146.

23. “This report provided Israel with a glimpse into the origin and nature of their rivals, the Moabites and the Ammonites. The writer could develop a feeling of disdain for these tribes by including this account. The story justified the belief that lewdness (Num. 25) and the lack of natural feeling (2 Kings 3:26–27)—which appear to be fundamental to the character of both nations—were inherited from their ancestors. Moreover, the connection of the story to the judgment of Sodom prompted the proper response to such characteristics.” (Ross, *Creation and Blessing*, 364.)

24. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 69.
25. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 59–60.
26. Kidner, *Genesis*, 148.
27. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 6.5.
28. *Westminster Larger Catechism*, #78.
29. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 70.
30. Calvin, *Genesis*, 523. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxvi.i.html>>
31. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 70.

32. “Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin, together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the perfection of his obedience. It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin: and the threatenings of it serve to show what even their sins deserve; and what afflictions, in this life, they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law. The promises of it, in like manner, show them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works. So as, a man's doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourageth to the one, and deterreth from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law; and, not under grace.” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 19.6)

33. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 61.

34. “The moral terms *righteous*, *integrity*, *sinning*, etc., are clearly used here in a narrow sense, which throws some incidental light on the emphatic claims of innocence in certain Psalms.” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 148.)

35. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 71.

36. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 63. I have simplified the transliterations from those used by Hamilton.

37. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 70.
38. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 254–55.
39. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 64.
40. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 71.
41. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 254.
42. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 72.

43. “Like the sailors and the king of Nineveh in the book of Jonah (1:16; 3:6–9), the Philistines responded quickly and decisively to God's warning. Like Jonah, however, Abraham in this narrative was a reluctant

prophet.” (Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 175.)

44. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 67.

45. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 72.

46. “Abimelech’s three questions in 9, 10 make it clear that Abraham had only asked himself ‘What will this do for me?’, stifling the reflections ‘What will it do to them?’ ‘What do they deserve?’ and ‘What are the facts?’ (*What sawest thou?*, 10, AV, RV).” (Kidner, *Genesis*, 149.)

47. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 72.

48. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 67.

49. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 72.

50. cf. “The Goals of Speaking the Truth in Love,” Paul Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer’s Hands*, 199–218.

51. Calvin, *Genesis*, 528–29. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxvi.i.html>>

52. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 72.

53. This question, and a host of other practical wisdom that I would recommend on the topic of speaking truth in love, come from the book *Crucial Conversations* (Kerry Patterson, *et al.*, (New York City: McGraw-Hill Education, 2011), p. 147).

54. Kidner, *Genesis*, 149.

55. “Marriage within the family (endogamy) characterizes the practices of the patriarchs. For example, Nahor married his niece Milcah; Isaac married Rebekah, his second cousin; and Jacob married sisters, Leah and Rachel, who were his cousins. The early practical effect of endogamy is preservation of the family’s religious tradition (chap. 24). Mosaic legislation, however, repudiated certain forms of endogamy, such as a man’s marriage to his sister and marriages to sisters (Lev 18:9,11,18; Deut 27:22).” (Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 257.)

56. “But in the broader context of the Abraham cycle, he has even less justification for his fears. Divine blessing and success have accompanied him ever since Gen 12:1–3; he has been shown to be capable of defeating kings (Gen 14) and to be on intimate terms with the Almighty (cf Gen 17; 18). It is surprising that he should now take fright, the more so since he had escaped unharmed from Egypt in quite similar circumstances. Abraham’s harking back to this occasion here and in v 13, while it may mollify Abimelek, has the opposite effect on the reader.” (Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 72.)

57. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 175–76.

58. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 73.

59. Calvin, *Genesis*, 532. Available online: <<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom01.xxvi.i.html>>

60. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 75.

61. Kidner, *Genesis*, 149.

62. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 70.

63. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 75.

64. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, 176.

65. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 259.

66. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Volume 2*, 74–75.

67. Walton, *Genesis*, 495.

68. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 260.

69. Walton, *Genesis*, 495.

70. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, 71.