

CCLEB SERMON NOTES



SUNDAY SEPTEMBER, 2025
GENESIS 20:1-18

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FALLING BACK INTO OLD WAYS



When I was a young teenager growing up in western Brazil we lived in a house that had windows that were sliding shutters and they were almost always open because of the intense heat and no AC. That house, common for Brazil at that time, also didn't have ceilings.. only walls that went up to normal ceiling height, then just space from there up to the roof. So between the windows being open and no ceilings sound traveled really easily. I could hear my mom singing while she worked, our pet parot named "Caramba" trying to sing along with my mom. I could hear my dad talking on his HAM radio to other missionaries; noises from outside on the busy road, and if the radio or tv were on in our house or anywhere near by you could hear that too. But I could also hear intense conversations between my dad and my older brother. I used to listen to my older brothers get in trouble with my dad - typical teen stuff, and that was uncomfortable for me to listen to that, but what really bothered me was that they kept doing the same things over and over and getting in trouble in time. Being the youngest I would listen to this, I would think to myself, "Why do they keep doing the same old thing? That's dumb!" Now, did I learn from that? (So-so..)

In our lesson today we see Abraham falling back into the same old thing, old ways. Anyone relate? Old ways of acting, old ways of interacting, old ways of self-preservation. All of the old ways Abraham engaged in were tied to old ways of thinking. **Romans 12:2**. If old ways of thinking are the sources of old ways of acting.. than what can change old ways of thinking? How does changing the way you think happen?

Let's see what we can learn from this story of Abraham falling into his old ways of thinking that can help us with changing our ways of thinking.

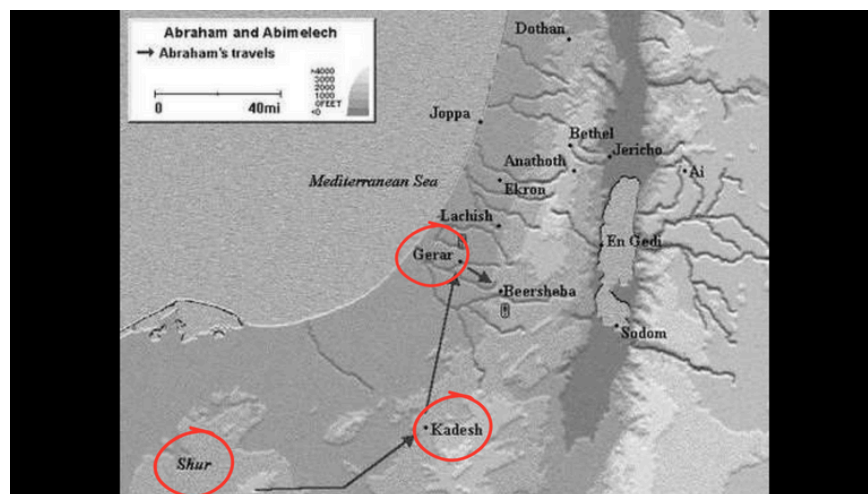
In **verse 1** it says, "Abraham moved south...". In **Genesis 19:27-28** the last place we saw Abraham was the scene of Abraham standing in the Judean hill country, the place where he bargained with the LORD. And we see Abraham, alone, looking down at the complete utter destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah... note columns of smoke. That's where we left Abraham in **chapter 19**.

And **Genesis 20:1** opens with Abraham moved away from there and he is headed “south toward the Negev”. The text doesn’t tell us why Abraham moved south from where God had called him, but this story is eerily similar to what happened in **Genesis 12:9** where Abraham went “south toward the Negev” and ended up in Egypt. That’s where he deceived Pharaoh regarding Sarah being his sister. That was the first time Abraham lied about his wife being his sister. Twenty four years later, Abraham lies again about his wife being his sister. Old way of acting, old way of interacting, old way of thinking.

The first time Abraham lied about his wife being his sister resulted in Abraham becoming wealthy by the hand of the pagan king Pharaoh. While from a worldly standard that may seem good, from a spiritual standard, Abraham was not provided for by the hand of the LORD. Abraham was provided for by the world. Abraham became wealthy by deception. And this tremendous worldly wealth from the hand of Pharaoh cost Abraham a massive division of his family that resulted ultimately in last week’s story where Abraham’s nephew Lot loses everything, is drunk in a cave, sleeps with his daughters, and the descendants of those incestuous unions - the Moabites and Ammonites, became the enemy of Abraham’s descendants.

In **Chapter 20:1**, 24 years after the first time journey south toward the Negev, Abraham for a second time, journeys South toward the Negev – and again lies about Sarah being his sister. This begs the question that we all can connect with – Why does Abraham’s story repeat? How can nearly the exact thing happen twice? The story repeats because Abraham fell back into old ways. Old ways of acting, old ways of interacting, old ways of self-preservation, all tied to old ways of thinking.

In **verse 1** when Abraham went south, it tells he lived for a while between Kadesh and Shur and then moved on to Gerar.



Now it was not uncommon for people with large herds to be semi-nomadic because they needed a lot of pasture land and water for the animals...so they moved often – for water and pasture. But to move towards the Negev desert, less water less pasture, and to be wandering? It doesn’t add up. It leaves the impression that Abraham is not in a good place. Think of the times in your life where you have been wandering around and where you are wandering doesn’t make sense for your life.

Now we don’t know what is going on in Abraham, but from what he does and what he says, something is not right! Perhaps it’s grief over Lot, perhaps he is trying to come to grips with the massive divine judgement, the total death and devastation he witnessed at Sodom and Gomorrah.. we just don’t know. But we see him in **verse 1** wandering where he shouldn’t be. Something in his thinking is not right.

Now the names of the places Abraham wandered to in have significance and add texture to the story. Kadesh and Shur were both places mentioned in chapter sixteen when Hagar was running from Sarai - and the LORD found her.

- “**Shur**”: means “wall”, and was the fortified boundary on Egypt’s northern border.
- “**Kadesh**” means “holy - set apart, consecrated”.
- “**Gerar**” means “temporarily sojourn - lodging place - as a stranger.”

“Shur”: means “wall”, and was the fortified boundary on Egypt’s northern border. Hagar, the runaway servant, was from Egypt and she was running home.

“Kadesh” means “holy - set apart, consecrated”. Kadesh is where the LORD found Hagar in **chapter 16** at the well near “Kadesh”.

“Gerar” means “temporarily sojourn - lodging place - as a stranger. Gerar was a Canaanite city-state in western negev.

So Abraham, the sojourner or wander, is traveling between holiness (Kadesh) and the wall (Shur), dwelling temporarily as a stranger (Gerar).

Summary

So Abraham, the *sojourner or wander*, is traveling between *holiness* (Kadesh) and *the wall* (Shur), dwelling temporarily as a stranger (Gerar).

Did Abraham belong there? No.. Abraham was called in **Genesis 12:1** to “go to the land I will show you” (Canaan). Abraham should not be wandering, he should not be between holiness and the boundary wall of Egypt, and he should not be living somewhere temporarily as a stranger. God called him to Canaan and gave him the God-given identity of “Abraham - exalted father of many nations”. It’s as if Abraham had abandoned the place of his calling and abandoned the holiness God called him to and his actions were saying, “Oh, I’m not going to go the whole way to Egypt this time, I’m just going to wander about near the wall of Egypt”. Will that scenario ever end well?

Well we see in **verse 2** that when Abraham arrived in Gerar there is a repeat of Abraham’s self-protection thinking. At Gerar Abraham deceives the King of Gerar, Abimelech, just like he deceived Pharaoh in Egypt, telling Abimelech that Sarah was his sister. Abraham lying about his wife is a man-made plan to protect himself. Man made plans don’t end well. The reason Abraham had to protect himself because he didn’t feel safe. He didn’t feel safe because he left the safety of God’s calling and God’s purpose for his life. Here is the truth - The safest place to be is in the will of God.

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It is ironic that Abimelech's name means "my father is King" because that is who Abraham through deception is putting his trust in Abimelech. Abraham was not putting his trust in the true King, the LORD God who called Abraham to Canaan and gave him an identity and purpose.



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We see in the end of **verse 2** that Abimelech then, eyes on Sarah, sent men and took Sarah. The text does not hide Abimelech's intent with Sarah. The word "took" is the same word used with the sons of God "taking" beautiful woman as their wives in **Genesis 6:2**. It's the same word "took" that was used of Shechem taking Dinah and raping her in **Genesis 34:2 NASB**. It's the same word "took" used of David taking Bathsheba in **2 Samuel 11:24 NASB**. All of those images are powerful men "taking", "seizing" woman for their pleasure. – Abimelech is one of them.

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Interesting context though – Sarah, Abraham's wife, is 90 years old here. So with Sarah at 90 years old, would Abimelech's motivation really be pleasure? Some suggest Abimelech is motivated by the possibility of political alliance with Abraham, after all Sarah is "sister" to the great and wealthy and influential Abraham.

To have Sarah then as a wife would mean peace and prosperity between the house of Abimelech and house of Abraham. Whatever the motivation, Abimelech takes Sarah (by force) and has Sarah in his household.

In **verse 3 NASB** we see God intervene – the verse starts with two powerful words.. “But God...”. This is a beautiful instance where God is watching Abraham’s choices and God steps through the curtain of eternity into the scene that is unfolding in real time and God intervenes. Abimelech is asleep, and thru a dream God speaks to Abimelech. And God tells Abimelech that he is a “dead man” for taking another man’s wife.

The Hebrew word for dead is the same as where God tells Adam that if he eats of the forbidden fruit he will die. So God is making it clear to Abimelech and us the readers that taking Sarah and making Sarah his wife is “eating forbidden fruit” – taking and eating forbidden fruit that results in death. That is exactly what happened in **Genesis 3:6**. So just as Adam & Eve took and ate, and died, so also will Abimelech die. Abimelech already took, but if he eats, he will die.

Now Abimelech in **verse 4** still in the dream, in response to God telling him he is a dead man for taking another man’s wife, begins to defend his innocence. The text tells us that Abimelech had not slept with Sarah – and based on that he defends himself with the question “Lord (Adonai – master) will you destroy an innocent nation?” This is a very similar question to what Abraham asked the LORD about “sweeping away both the righteous and the wicked” in **Genesis 18:23**. In essence both Abraham and Abimelech appealed to the justice of God to save the righteous or innocent. Abimelech, fighting for his life, was arguing that God’s character of being a just God demands that God spares the innocent. That’s the same argument that Abraham used in **Genesis 18:25b** “Should not the judge of all the earth do what is right (just)?” It’s almost as if Abraham’s argument of God being just requiring God to spare the innocent became case-law that Abimelech used in his own defense.

And with God being just established, Abimelech tells God what God already knew – that Abimelech didn’t know that Sarah was Abraham’s wife – therefore he is innocent in taking her. In the end of **verse 5** Ab says “I acted in complete innocence, my hands are clean”. And God confirms Abimelech’s innocence.

And here we learn a very important gospel foundation truth, Sometimes impending divine judgement is conditional.



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The divine judgement was that Abimelech was going to die for taking Sarah. For the impending divine judgement not to happen, for the stated “death” not to happen conditions have to be met, meaning change has to happen. And the change that God wants from Abimelech to avoid the impending judgement of death in **verse 7** is that Abimelech must return Sarah to Abraham. And then God reinforces what he is requiring – using the exact same wording he said to Adam about the forbidden fruit **Genesis 2:17b** “but if you don’t return Sarah, you will certainly die”.

Note this is God as a father, displaying parenting at its best! God the Father warns his son Abimelech of the danger and consequences of Abimelech choices. But God the Father doesn't stop Abimelech from choosing and doing wrong, rather God the Father let's Abimelech choose to do right or wrong. God gives his children choice. There comes a time where parents have to let their children choose.

On a side note here, God calls Abraham a prophet in **verse 7**. This is the first time in Genesis that the word prophet is used. "Prophet" in Hebrew is navi- meaning "one who speaks for God". The root word of navi implies "speaking under inspiration". Yet in this story the prophet Abraham's words are lies and self-justification. These lies and self-justification are not inspired by God, but rather inspired by Abraham's own fears. Another interesting thing about "prophet" is that the first action in the bible associated with the word "prophet" is "pray". Implying that a prophet's first action is not speaking, it is praying for others.

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Back to our story, after God gave Abimelech the choice to live by returning Sarah to Abraham, we see Abimelech in **verse 8** awake from the dream, and taking action. Abimelech tells his family and servants what God said in his dream-which terrifies them, and then Abimelech confronts Abraham. And he launches into a torrent of questions **verse 9**.

I imagine this scene - Abimelech nose to nose with Abraham, yelling this torrent of questions at Abraham, and Abraham's hair and beard from the force of the wind coming from Abimelech's mouth, look like someone with a long hair and a beard riding a motorcycle.



Abimelech wants answers. Now I would at this point hope Abraham would say "Oh my goodness! What was I thinking?" - then take full responsibility for his actions, apologize to Abimelech for bringing judgement on him and his kingdom, and especially apologizes to his wife." But that is not what happens.

In **verse 11-13**, Abraham answers Abimelech by lamely rationalizing and deflecting responsibility. And pay attention here to what Abraham says in his lame response because the lies in his thinking, the thinking errors are revealed.

Verse 11 NASB. We don't have to guess what he is thinking, he tells us. Because we know that that thoughts direct choices and thoughts direct behavior, we need to look for the lies in Abraham's thinking, the thinking errors that lead to his choices and actions.

The lies in Abraham's thinking:

1. Abraham "thought" Abimelech and his kingdom were "godless" (wicked). **Genesis 20:11**
2. Which led to Abraham thinking they would kill him and thus he had to protect himself. **Genesis 20:11**
3. Abraham then rationalized (thinking) his lie – justifying it because it was a half-truth. **Genesis 20:12-13**

1. Abraham "thought" Abimelech and his kingdom were "godless" (wicked). **Genesis 20:11**
Interesting from what we saw prior in Abimelech's interaction with God, the innocence of Abimelech served to highlight the godlessness and wickedness of Abraham using his wife as a human shield.

2. Which led to Abraham thinking they would kill him, feeling unsafe, and thus he had to protect himself. **Genesis 20:11**

3. Abraham then rationalized (thinking) his lie – justifying it because it was a half-truth. **Genesis 20:12-13** Guzik says "a half truth is a full lie". When a person lives by rationalizing behavior and telling half-truths they are in a bad place. The rationalizations and half-truths show they are well on their way back to their Egypt or perhaps there already.

In **verse 13** we see that this plan to lie about Sarah and use her as his human shield was Abraham's back up plan, his scheme all along. And in this we see another of Abraham's thinking errors.

4. Abraham held onto his godless back up plans, his old scheme. As long as Abraham had this back up plan, this scheme in his tool belt, he could always reach for it when needed. My friends, this thinking error is the downfall of many. Abraham should have thrown out that tool of lying to protect himself and never picked it up again. And replaced that tool with the tool of "I trust in God".

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Take a moment to inventory the tools in your toolbelt. Are any of them godless? Are any of them what you have turned back to again and again? If you have a godless tool in your toolbelt, before God, right now -stop and throw it out. Replace the godless tool with "I trust in God".

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In **verse 13 NASB** (God caused me to wander) we see more lies, more thinking errors. Abraham said "God caused me to wander..." He shifts blame to God.

5. Abraham blamed God instead of taking responsibility. Ever do that?

5. Abraham blamed God instead of taking responsibility.

Even in Abraham's blaming God for his wandering it reveals another error in his thinking. God did not call Abraham to wander about, God called Abraham to Canaan - the land of promise.

6. Abraham changed the narrative from truth to justify his wandering near Egypt. This is another form of rationalization, rewriting history, changing a narrative, to justify current (bad) choices.

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Now we don't know if Abimelech bought any of Abraham's story or not, but we see in **verses 14-16** that Abimelech does all he needs to do, as per God's instructions, and then some.

So Abimelech, just like Pharaoh in **chapter 12**, gives Abraham sheep, oxen and servants, which makes Abraham even more wealthier from the hand of a pagan king, worldly wealth, and Abimelech returns Sarah as per Gods instructions. And as if he had not given enough, in addition, he gives Abraham 1000 pieces of silver.

IVP Bible Background Commentary says that “in Ugaritic literature (from this time period) 1000 pieces of silver is the amount of a bride price paid among the gods. The value would be more than a worker would expect to make in a whole life time.” In Abimelech’s thinking he was probably not giving all the herds and servants and land and silver to Abraham for Abraham’s benefit, but rather to appease the god who could take his life. That’s was how pagan religion’s operated Canaan, one had to appease angry gods to live. But **verse 16** tells us the 1000 pieces of silver was also to satisfy the public opinion that Abimelech was innocent – and that Sarah had been “untouched”.

But what Abimelech really needed was for the reluctant prophet Abraham to pray for Abimelech so that he and his household and kingdom would be healed. That’s what happened in **verse 17-18**. Apparently God had “closed the wombs” of all the women in his family and household – and because eventually all would die, there would be no descendants.

The “closing of the wombs” tells us this story doesn’t play out in a day or two, rather it was probably months. How else would they know that they couldn’t get pregnant? That takes time.

But in the end of **verse 17** - God is faithful to heal Abimelech, as he said he would in **verse 7b** “he will pray for you and you will live”. Note here that God is faithful to heal Abimelech even when the prayer for healing comes from an unfaithful servant – Abraham. That is comforting to me.

Thoughts for meditation and application:

I know that my thinking is off. I know it. I also know that my perspective is off, and I know that my heart is off. How do I know that? Because I am a fallen person. Saved, redeemed, made into a new person? Yes... but living in a body with a mind that is not yet perfected and will not be perfected this side of eternity. I do not yet understand things perfectly and will not understand things perfectly till eternity - and I live with this tension of knowing my thoughts and perspectives and heart are off. So my only pathway forward is humility - I purpose to everyday acknowledge my limitations before the Lord and ask him to correct, an align my thinking and perspective to His thinking and perspective – which is truth.

Some of that correction and alignment deals with old ways of thinking. If old ways of thinking are the sources of old ways of acting, than what can change old ways of thinking, so that we don’t fall back into them? How does changing the way you think happen? **Romans 12:2**. Read out loud with me.

We have to identify the lies, the thinking errors, and replace them with truth. That requires humility. The tools God gives us for identifying the lies, and replacing them with truth are:

The tools God gives us for identifying the lies, and replacing them with truth are:

- In humility compare your thinking to God’s word - that is truth.
- In humility allow God’s Spirit to show where your thinking is off.
- In humility allow the body of Christ, other believers to lovingly challenge your thinking – friends- mentors – pastors – counselors.
- In humility recognize that Jesus offers freedom from old ways of thinking and acting – Jesus sets us free from that!

SUPPLEMENTAL

NOTES:

1. **Sarah's age** in this story: some argue that because God told Abraham in the previous chapters that they would have a son within a year, that Sarah is probably early on her pregnancy in chapter 20.

2. **Mushroom fun fact:** The largest living organism in the world is actually a mushroom. It's a honey fungus in Oregon that covers 2,300 acres – all connected by one underground network of mycelium.

3. **What death would Abimelech have died?** We don't know how the death God said would happen to Abimelech is defined. Some suggest that end of the chapter implies that Abimelech and his household would "die" meaning "die out" because they could not have any more children. "Die out" meaning every generation of Abimelech and anyone from the house of Abimelech would suddenly become barren – infertile – no hope for future descendants, thus "die out".

4. **"Closing the womb".** Scholars Robert Alter and others have suggested that the "closing of the wombs" in this story, which is an idiom for "not able to procreate and have children", was also a plague of impotence in the men – which would explain why Melchizedek "had not come near" Sarah.

5. **Joke:** Did you hear about the man that asked God for patience and he wanted it right away?