

**The Journey of Faith**  
**Abraham in the Autumn of Life**  
**The Mistakes we Repeat!**  
**Genesis 20:1-18**

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**Introductory words about a difficult passage**

When I was being trained as a preacher my pastor would give me constructive feedback and one comment he made about some early sermons on Abraham has stuck with me, “You’re expecting too much of Abraham, you’re expecting behaviour at this high level, when we can only expect behaviour at this lower level.” Perhaps when you heard the story read to us from Genesis chapter 20, you found yourself doing the same thing, “What’s Abraham doing marrying a half-sister, what’s with deceiving king Abimelech and sacrificing Sarah for his own safety, and receiving slaves as a gift?”

We could easily all make the young preacher’s mistake and expect too much of Abraham! We must remember, (1) Abraham was born before the Old Testament laws were given, recorded in Exodus & Leviticus and Deuteronomy, so he did not have the law about who you should and should not marry. According to Deuteronomy 27:22, you should not marry half-sisters—but Abraham did not know that. And (2) Abraham was born before the New Testament, so he did not have the indwelling Holy Spirit or the New Testament to guide him. So we can’t expect of him, Christian standards of godliness or sanctification. A man or a woman can only be judged according to the light they have, not according to knowledge they do not possess. It’s a fundamental principle of justice. We can’t expect an unbeliever to behave like a believer, we mustn’t expect a young Christian to behave like an old believer. And in the same way we can’t expect Abraham to behave like a New Testament follower of Jesus!

**The Story**

Abraham is a very special man in the Bible. Because the nation of Israel came through his offspring Isaac—and through that one nation of Israel, came Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the every nation. Abraham is also very special because he was a man of great faith—he trusted in God’s word when there was no tangible evidence to back it up! For example, 25 years before this story in Genesis 20, God told Abraham to leave

his home city, Ur of the Chaldeans (the London, the Beijing, the Tokyo of his day) and set out on a long journey to a land God would give him. God gave him no maps or photos or TripAdvisor Reviews of this new promised land! But Abraham trusted God and left home! God also told him that a great nation would come from him! Even though Sarah couldn't have children Abraham believed God could do the impossible!

Abraham's complete faith in God's Words are legendary in Scripture, he is the archetypal man of faith. "If God has promised it, it will happen and I believe it!"

Of course Abraham had his faith-wobbles, just as we do, and this morning we shall hear about one of those, but Romans 4:20 says, "he did not waver through unbelief regarding he promises of God..."

So Abraham's a really important believer in the Scriptures and we are meant to learn from him. Just as he went on a journey of faith so do we; from the moment Jesus calls us to follow him, we too find ourselves on a journey of faith in God.

In today's episode, Abraham has had to move his household to a new area called Gerar - remember he is a nomad with large flocks of animals and a large band of servants with him.

We're not told why he moved. Was it to get better pasture land, was it because of new dangers in the old area? We do know that ever since he'd left the secure environment of his home city, Ur of the Chaldeans, his life as a wandering nomad had been, humanly speaking, fraught with many dangers.

When he arrived at Gerar, he did something odd: he told everyone that his Sarah was his sister. (The fact that they had no children may have given wings to the deceit.) Abimelech, the local king, heard about this Abraham who has moved into his area and about his single "sister" who is travelling with him.

The king calls for Sarah to join his harem. An unpleasant fate for any woman, no doubt. We're not sure why king Abimelech did this because Sarah was some 90 years old. Could it be the ancient custom of forging peace treaties? "Here's a powerful new man who has come into the area, let's form a peace treaty with him by marrying a close relative"? Could it be that Sarah had retained a striking beauty into old age? Or could this be simply a matter of male lust: powerful men, both then and now, take

whoever they please? We're not told Abimelech's reasons. But we are told that the whole of the king's household, including the king himself, were immediately struck with a sudden disease or condition of infertility or impotence.

And then God appeared to king Abimelech in a dream and told him that he and his household were as good as dead, because this Sarah was a married woman. The king argued with God in the dream, "How could God destroy an innocent nation, because both Sarah and Abraham had told him they were brother and sister!?" "This was all done innocently."

God acknowledges that the king did not know Sarah was a married woman—and that's why God had prevented anything from happening—presumably by striking him and his household with impotency. But the Lord commands the king to send Sarah back, if he does not, he and his people will die. When the king tells his officials the dream they were terrified. The king summons Abraham and gives him a proper royal ticking-off, "What have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you brought this great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should not be done. What was your reason for doing this?" Abraham gives the king three explanations for calling Sarah his sister, rather than his wife:

Reason 1, he reasoned that since the people in this area did not respect God they would not respect humans and would kill him to get Sarah.

Reason 2—Sarah was in fact his sister, they share the same dad.

Reason 3—and I don't think Abraham is blaming God here—he says that when God called him to leave the security of his home city, Ur, at that moment, he made a pact with Sarah, "This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."

So Abimelech returns Sarah, allows Abraham to live wherever he pleases on his land, gives him lots of gifts including a gift of 1000 shekels of silver (worth approximately £8000) about which he says to Sarah: "I am giving your brother ("well, that's what you called him!") 1000 shekels of silver to cover the offence against you before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated." All these gifts and words were Abimelech's way of trying to cover up and put behind this embarrassing episode.

The story ends with Abraham praying for the pagan king and his household to remove the disease of infertility or impotence. There are at least three vital lessons from Abraham's journey that we need to learn for our journey:

### **(1) Let's learn to trust God in everything!**

When you drill down into this story you find that the root problem here, is that Abraham does not trust God to protect him. He is convinced that when some powerful prince or king, sees Sarah, he will not only take her away, but kill Abraham too. So to protect himself he comes up with this pact with Sarah, "This is how you can show your love for me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother." This man who trusts God in so many areas of his life, does not trust God for personal security!

Abraham trusts God for guidance, because he obeyed God's call "Leave Ur of the Chaldeans and go to the land I will show you."

Abraham trusts God for material needs; remember how he gave nephew Lot the choice of the best land, knowing that if Lot chose the best land for his flocks—which he did! - God would meet his own needs. God did! Abraham didn't go hungry!

But in the area of personal security, Abraham does not yet trust God, and so he came up with his own PPP or personal protection plan rather than trusting God's sovereign power! "This is how you can show your love for me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother." It is just so selfish is it not?—Abraham is prepared to sacrifice his wife for his own security! (But let's remember Abraham did not have the Bible or the power of the Holy, Spirit or the example of Jesus!)

But listen, whenever we come up with our own arrangements, rather than trusting in God, those schemes are bound to be, like Abraham's, selfish and sinful. How does the apostle Paul put it, "Everything that is not from faith is sin." (Romans 14:23)

The lesson for us all, no matter how long we have been on the road is this: let us learn to trust God in everything! Is there some area of your life, you man of faith, woman of faith, where you do not yet trust God? And so you have come up with some scheme, some human plan to protect yourself, to provide for yourself, to lead yourself? Perhaps you've even begun to justify your plan in your head? "She is my sister" "there are no God-fearers in this land" "God made me wander away from the safety of my home city,

Ur.”

Do we trust God with our futures, our money, our families, our relationships, our careers, our children?

Here’s a Christian who wants to get married, but God’s taking way too long to bring along a Christian partner, so they come up with their own PPP, Personal Partner Plan—they will marry an unbeliever and convert her to Christ!

And may I ask husbands and wives: is there an ancient no-faith-in-God pact you made many years ago (it’s over 20 years ago Abraham made this deal with Sarah) that needs revisiting today? “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, lean not on your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight.” (Proverbs 3:5,6)

Let’s learn to trust God in everything! He is trust-worthy!

## **(2) Let’s seek Gods help not to repeat former mistakes!**

Some twenty years previously, recorded in Genesis chapter 12, Abraham made exactly the same mistake with the king of Egypt?!

Twenty years on, it’s as if the Lord is saying, “Abraham, I’m giving you a second chance to trust me to protect your life, here it is, trust me and watch how I will defend you and Sarah! Don’t you remember Abraham, I told you “I am your shield” (Genesis 15:1), Shield means protection?” But Abraham did not trust God - again!

Have you found this? God sends our way, what shall we call them Groundhog Day trials? Tests that return to our lives, so that we can learn—this time round—to trust him, rather than come up with our own schemes as we did last time? Is someone listening today passing through a present test; you’ve been here before, perhaps you messed up last time, but the Lord is wanting you to say with Paul this time round, “I can do all things through him who gives me strength.” (Philippians 4:13)

## **(3) Let’s thank God for his amazing grace!**

In spite of Abraham's failure to trust God for protection, God protected Sarah from

harm. God was merciful to Sarah and struck the household of the king with a temporary disease of impotence so that Sarah's turn in the wretched royal harem never came about, and both she and her dignity was spared.

God loves his children so much, his promise to keep them to the end so certain, his power so great, that nothing, not even our weaknesses, our foolishness, and even our sin, can prevent his good saving purposes from being fulfilled in our lives!

Do you believe in "The Perseverance of the Saints"? It's the Bible doctrine that teaches that Christ is able to save us to the "*uttermost*" all who come to God through him, (Hebrews 7:25), it's the confidence that "*he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ*" (Philippians 1:6) and the assurance that "*nothing can separate us from the love of Christ... Nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*" (Romans 8:35), not even our repeated, mistakes!

*"The work which his goodness began, wrote the poet Augustus Toplady,  
The arm of his strength will complete  
His promise is yes and amen  
And never was forfeited yet  
Things future, not things that are now  
Nor all things below or above  
Can make him his purpose forgo  
Or sever my soul from his love.*

Weak fearful saints are utterly safe if they rest in the great love of Jesus! How great is that love? Well 2000 years after Abraham's selfish mistake, another Husband was born. And this divine Husband did the opposite of Abraham, out of his boundless love for his bride, the church, Jesus laid down his life for us: he died so that we might live. And in his great love we are completely safe. "I give unto them eternal life," says Jesus, "and they shall never perish, neither shall anyone pluck them out of my hand." (John 10:28)

To God be all the praise! To God be all the glory! Amen.