

**Abraham's Habitual Sin**  
**Old Testament Heroes**  
**Genesis 20:1-18**

Warm-up Question: What personality traits or habits have you inherited from either of your parents?

<sup>1</sup>Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, <sup>2</sup>and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." Then Abimelek king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her. <sup>3</sup>But God came to Abimelek in a dream one night and said to him, "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman." <sup>4</sup>Now Abimelek had not gone near her, so he said, "Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? <sup>5</sup>Did he not say to me, 'She is my sister,' and didn't she also say, 'He is my brother'? I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands." <sup>6</sup>Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her. <sup>7</sup>Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all who belong to you will die." <sup>8</sup>Early the next morning Abimelek summoned all his officials, and when he told them all that had happened, they were very much afraid. <sup>9</sup>Then Abimelek called Abraham in and said, "What have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should never be done." <sup>10</sup>And Abimelek asked Abraham, "What was your reason for doing this?" <sup>11</sup>Abraham replied, "I said to myself, 'There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' <sup>12</sup>Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. <sup>13</sup>And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, 'He is my brother.'"<sup>14</sup>Then Abimelek brought sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham, and he returned Sarah his wife to him. <sup>15</sup>And Abimelek said, "My land is before you; live wherever you like." <sup>16</sup>To Sarah he said, "I am giving your brother a thousand shekels of silver. This is to cover the offense against you before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated." <sup>17</sup>Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelek, his wife and his female slaves so they could have children again, <sup>18</sup>for the LORD had kept all the women in Abimelek's household from conceiving because of Abraham's wife Sarah (Genesis 20:1-18).

Scripture does not tell us why Abraham chose to move on to the region of the Negev. We can only speculate as to his reasons for moving south and westward. It could be that God's judgment of Sodom was affecting his flocks and herds with the smell of the sulfur emanating from below them in the valley. Whatever Abraham's reasons were, we can assume that he was feeling sad and depressed. We are not told if Abraham was reunited with Lot, or if he even knew where Lot had settled. They did not reunite after the disaster.

Feelings of personal loss may have overwhelmed Abraham at this time. For whatever reason, he decides to leave the Oaks of Mamre and travel to Gerar where old habits repeat themselves. How often do you find that temptations come at a point of weakness, at a time when you are most vulnerable? It is at these low times in our lives when we need to be especially aware of old habits and tendencies, so they don't creep back into our lives.

### **Abraham's Deceitful Bent**

In the passage before us today we read something of Abraham's life that he had not yet conquered. There was a bent in his character, an inclination to a particular sin, which was the sin of deceit. At least twenty five years previously he had made an agreement with Sarah that wherever they went they would agree to deceive whoever they were with by saying that they were sister and brother. They did this, thinking that they were protecting each other instead of trusting God to protect them both. This same lie had caused so much trouble while in Egypt, that Pharaoh had told them to leave his country (Genesis 12:11-19).

We find it hard to conceive how this same habitual sin could still be at work in Abraham's life. After all, he had witnessed God's protection and trusted God many times up to this point. He has a history with God and has even been visited by angels and by the Lord Himself. Why would he do the same thing in Philistine country that got him into trouble in Egypt? Unless a bent in character is owned as sin, renounced (formally declared and abandoned), repented of (a change of mind and direction of life), and forsaken, it can repeat in a person's life and into his family. We can see an example of this bent in Abraham's character repeating in the life of his son, Isaac. At the time of Abraham's deceit over Abimelek, Isaac was not even born yet, but he repeated the same sin with his wife, Rebekah, more than forty years later (Genesis 25:20). The Abimelech you read of in the passage below most scholars believe to be a title, such as Pharaoh, or Caesar, rather than a personal name:

<sup>6</sup>So Isaac stayed in Gerar. <sup>7</sup>When the men of that place asked him about his wife, he said, "She is my sister," because he was afraid to say, "She is my wife." He thought, "The men of this place might kill me on account of Rebekah, because she is beautiful." <sup>8</sup>When Isaac had been there a long time, Abimelech king of the Philistines looked down from a window and saw Isaac caressing his wife Rebekah. <sup>9</sup>So Abimelech summoned Isaac and said, "She is really your wife! Why did you say, 'She is my sister'?" Isaac answered him, "Because I thought I might lose my life on account of her." <sup>10</sup>Then Abimelech said, "What is this you have done to us? One of the men might well have slept with your wife, and you would have brought guilt upon us" (Genesis 26:6-10).

### **A Bad Act is Easy to Follow!**

This same bent of deceitfulness was seen in Isaac's son, Jacob, Abraham's grandson. He deliberately deceived his father Isaac, in order to steal the blessing and the birthright

from his brother Esau, deceiving Esau in the process. Of course, Esau saw no value in the blessing and birthright; perhaps that's why God allowed it to take place. If we do not place value on spiritual things, the Lord will allow those things to slip from our fingers and use someone else for His glory.

<sup>35</sup>But he said, "Your brother came **deceitfully** and took your blessing." <sup>36</sup>Esau said, "Isn't he rightly named Jacob? He has **deceived me** these two times: He took my birthright, and now he's taken my blessing!" (Genesis 27:35-36).

We can look further down Abraham's lineage and see that Jacob's sons also had the same bent in character. Jacob's sons used deceit to weaken the family of Shechem by causing them to be circumcised, before they killed them in revenge for raping and defiling their sister, Dinah:

<sup>13</sup>Because their sister Dinah had been defiled, Jacob's sons replied **deceitfully** as they spoke to Shechem and his father Hamor. <sup>14</sup>They said to them, "We can't do such a thing; we can't give our sister to a man who is not circumcised. That would be a disgrace to us (Genesis 34:13-14).

This is a very interesting and somewhat gruesome story for further study. This is the story, in a nutshell: Shechem, the son of Hamor the Hivite, defiled Dinah, Jacob's daughter, by forcing her to have sex with him. Shechem wanted Dinah as his wife and came to Jacob's family, along with his father Hamor to ask that she be given to him in marriage. They also wanted to set up an understanding with Jacob and his household so that their households could intermarry and coexist. Jacob's sons faked an agreement with Hamor and Shechem. They told them that first, the men of Hamor's family had to be circumcised before they would allow Dinah, or any of the women of Jacob's family to be given to them in marriage. Then, after the men had fulfilled this request, and were recovering from their circumcision, two of Jacob's sons struck them down when they could not rise to defend themselves. This deceitfulness and murder, incidentally, caused Jacob grief (Genesis 34:30). Habitual sin has a way of turning on you and affecting you long after the initial act unless the cycle is stopped. Lastly, we see how the sons of Jacob deceived their father after they sold Joseph into slavery. They deliberately lied to Jacob, deceiving him into thinking that an animal had killed his favorite son, Joseph:

<sup>31</sup>Then they got Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat and dipped the robe in the blood. <sup>32</sup>They took the ornamented robe back to their father and said, "We found this. Examine it to see whether it is your son's robe." <sup>33</sup>He recognized it and said, "It is my son's robe! Some ferocious animal has devoured him. Joseph has surely been torn to pieces" (Genesis 37:31-33).

We can only imagine what grief Jacob suffered, and at the hands of his own children! However, his own personal sins and shortcomings were the very thing that brought all of the trouble back to him. Are you starting to get the picture? It is a bitter cycle that has affected families down through the ages.

Do you think that your personality traits are inherited or learned? Share your thoughts with one another.

## **We Reproduce What We Are**

One of the first things that one learns as a parent is that our children will often copy our words and habits, both good and bad. Sometimes it can even be little traits that we do not think about. I noticed that I often hold my breath when I am concentrating on something, and guess what, the same habit was observed in my daughter by my wife Sandy. Another trait that I picked up from my father is to curl my finger over my mouth as I am relaxing or thinking of something, and we have noticed that my daughter does the same when she is leaning on her elbow. A good trait that I think that I picked up from my father was that he was not a worrier in the slightest. In fact, the name of his commercial fishing boat was the “*Why Worry*.” Sometimes I wished that he would worry a bit more because he often took risks while at sea. Fishermen do crazy things, like never learning how to swim! Like my father, I worked as a fisherman on his boat alongside him without learning to swim. Later on in life I did learn, but only after several years as a fisherman.

After I became a Christian at age 23, I was still working with him on the North Sea and I wanted to communicate to my father how much I loved him. It was a big thing for me, because I had never heard the “*L word*” issued from his mouth, and I realized then that change had to start with me. You know the word, the word *love*. Some people have a real hard time expressing their love to their kids or even to their spouse. I had never heard my dad say that he loved me. I did not want to grow up like that, always afraid of baring my emotions. So, with my heart pounding and my mouth dry I seized the opportunity. We were onboard the fishing boat, the net was being towed along, the fish had been gutted and iced, so it was time to relax. He was sitting at the wheel, staring straight ahead and I came up behind him. “Dad,” I said. “I have something that I really want to tell you”... He turned in his chair to face me. I began to stutter on the words because I was so nervous about saying it. But I managed to get the words out, for the first time ever, (I’m serious). I said, “Dad, you know, I really love you.” His response blew me away. He looked at me, hesitated for a moment and like a good Brit, said, “Well then, stick the kettle on and make me a cup of tea!” His response was not quite what I expected, but that didn’t bother me. I had said it and I knew that I had touched him, whether he wanted to acknowledge it or not. It was something that I was full of joy about, because, even though he couldn’t say it in reply, I had broken through a barrier. I knew that I would be able to say it to my kids someday, and I often tell them that I love them. I’m sure my dad would have liked to say the words in return, but he did not seem to have the capacity to do so, and I understood that. I wish I knew why it was so hard for him to share his emotions. Perhaps it was how my grandfather had fathered him. Often behavior is passed down but it can also be learned from life experiences.

If you are able, copy the following link into your browser to see a short clip in the movie, *Parenthood*, which serves to illustrate this point:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eWeK7MFxiU>

We learn from our parents as well as others who are authority figures around us, and from life experience. We can only learn so much from teachers, but there is more to learn by watching the person. How often have you heard that actions speak louder than words? There is no doubt that what our children see us do speaks louder than what we teach them. This law works in a spiritual sense as well as the physical. And if we don't conquer our own sins, those same spiritual traits will reach down into our children's lives and even further, into their children's lives. For example, J. Oswald Chambers, in his book "*the Spiritual Clinic*" tells about the lives of the Jukes vs. Edward's family.

The father of Jonathan Edwards was a minister and his mother was the daughter of a clergyman. Among their descendants were fourteen presidents of colleges, more than one hundred college professors, more than one hundred lawyers, thirty judges, sixty physicians, more than a hundred clergymen, missionaries and theology professors, and about sixty authors. There is scarcely any great American industry that has not had one of his family among its chief promoters. Such is the product of one American Christian Family, reared under the most favorable conditions. The contrast is presented in the Jukes family, which could not be made to study and would not work, and is said to have cost the state of New York a million dollars. Their entire record is one of pauperism and crime, insanity and imbecility. Among their twelve hundred known descendants, three hundred and ten were professional paupers, four hundred and forty were physically wrecked by their own wickedness, sixty were habitual thieves, one hundred and thirty were convicted criminals, fifty five were victims of impurity, only twenty learned a trade (and ten of those learned it in a state prison), and this notorious family produced seven murderers.

The good news is that we can redeem the situation by our actions. It is not too late to turn the tide and decide which traits will mark our households. Regardless of our own personal economic standing and abilities, we can demonstrate to others what we value by how we live.

What kind of legacy do you want to leave behind? What specific trait would you like to pass down, or if you do not presently have children, in what specific ways would you like to influence others?

### **God Confronts Abimelek**

It is possible that all that Abimelek wanted was a political alliance for we know that Sarah was close to ninety years old and perhaps already pregnant with Isaac. Abraham was a prosperous tribal chieftain that God was highly blessing. Perhaps Abimelek sought to tie Abraham to the area by marriage with Sarah, who he had been deceived into thinking, was Abraham's sister.

God is very gracious to Abimelek. Notice that the Lord knows the whole situation that is going on. He comes to the Philistine king in a dream at night and talks to him in

the dream about the whole situation. He tells him that he is as good as dead because he has taken another man's wife into his household to be his wife. John Courson, the Bible teacher, says that the Hebrew words translated "as good as dead," means to be dead sexually; impotent. God had made the whole family infertile. It is possible that this is what is intimated by the Lord's words to Abimelek that He knew that Abimelek was innocent, saying,

**"<sup>6</sup>Then God said to him in the dream, "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her."**

One wonders how God did not let Abimelek touch her. Perhaps all sexual urges were gone from Abimelek while Sarah was in his household. God is well able to keep his people in all kinds of situations if we will ask him. Why would Abraham have allowed this to go on? Why did he not speak up for his wife when Abimelek asked Sarah to be a part of his household? Knowing the promises of God to both of them, why would Sarah have consented to the deception? There is a lot that the scriptures do not tell us. One thing we do know is that Abraham and Sarah allowed fear to control them at this point. Their fear of man was bigger than their fear of the Lord. And yet, in His mercy for all in this situation, God steps in by speaking directly to the king.

I love this about the Bible, for it never draws a curtain over God's people that are heroes to us in the scriptures. It tells us the complete picture of their growth to be men and women of God. In them we can see our own weaknesses and faults. If we were to call them men and women of God to their faces, I'm sure their response would be, "I'm not a great man of God, just a man of a Great God." There is hope for all of us when we look at the great man of faith, Abraham. He's a man of a Great God, just as you and I.

When Abimelek confronts Abraham as to what he saw in his kingdom that would lead him to do such a thing, he reveals a greater understanding of God than Abraham realized. Abimelek's concern is about the lives that could have been damaged by Abraham's sin. He uses words such as "us" and "me and my kingdom." Sometimes people outside the realm of faith exhibit more character and opposition to sin than God's people, which is a sad state of affairs. In this case, King Abimelek exhibits a fear of God. It is an irony that King Abimelek shows more of the fear of God in this instance than Abraham does! This also shows us that God can use whomever He chooses. At times, God has to use those outside of His kingdom to hold back sin.

Abraham's reply as to his reasoning is disconcerting:

**<sup>11</sup>Abraham replied, "I said to myself, 'There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.' <sup>12</sup>Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife. <sup>13</sup>And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, 'He is my brother.'"**

How wrong Abraham was. There was a fear of God in Philistine country, for Abimelek looks upon it that both he and his kingdom would have been exposed to the wrath of God if he had been guilty of the sin of taking another man's wife to bed. Rulers should know that as goes the king, so go his subjects. Whatever sins the king allows, the people will also practice as well. It is amazing that the king is so patient in his dealing with Abraham. Remember, that God gave him an ultimatum: "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" (Genesis 20:7). Abimelek sent Abraham away with a blessing, but how it diminished Abraham's testimony of being a man of integrity. Thank God his life did not end there!

Do you see a compromise with the truth in the answer that Abraham gave Abimelek? How did he justify his deception?

What consequences do you think Abraham and Sarah may have suffered due to this lie?

### **God Shows Grace to Abimelek**

All was not lost because of Abraham's lapse into a habitual sin. The remainder of the account drips with grace. Abimelek showered Abraham with gifts. In offering Abraham land, the king removed Abraham's alien status. The thousand shekels of silver was an awesome monetary gift. Fifty shekels was the most that could be offered for a bride at the time. This was the price of twenty brides! Abraham's folly was met by amazing grace. And grace also went out to Abimelek. "Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelek, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife (Verses 17, 18). Perhaps this healing grace was a demonstration and precursor of grace to some in that Philistine village. Certainly they saw the awesome power of God. And there was hope for Sarah as well. Some years earlier Sarah had said, "Behold, now, the Lord has prevented [literally, "closed"] me from bearing children (Genesis 16:2). Now her words were echoed in the final words of the account, "For the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife" (Verse 18). Certainly the Lord could open Sarah's womb just as He did for the Philistine women. Sarah, take heart—laughter is coming soon!

Even though Abraham is blessed by King Abimelek and sent away with treasure, he came away with some losses as well. Of course, one wonders if this agreement to deny they were married was the very reason that God had denied them children all this time. If they were not even willing to own their relationship, why should God own it?

We do not know how long Sarah was in Abimelek's household before God intervened. However long it was, it must have been distressing for both Abraham and Sarah to be apart, and to know that it was their own doing. This account speaks to us regarding the patience and longsuffering of God toward Abraham and Sarah. Even after Abraham's lie, God still refers to Abraham as a prophet when He speaks to Abimelek. Incidentally, this is the first occasion that we see the word prophet being used about one

of God's people. Though Abraham's sin cannot be excused, the incident does show us that God does not withdraw His grace because of our failure.

### **Do Not Lean on Your Own Understanding.**

We look at this story and wonder why Abraham thought that he needed to lie to protect both he and Sarah. However, once again, we need to remember that we have the advantage of reading the whole story and seeing the outcome. Abraham had to walk this journey step by step, and the danger must have been very real in order for him to feel that this deception was necessary. He assessed the situation and came up with the wrong conclusion. We can easily do this too, when we limit ourselves by our own perspective. We too, can come up with the wrong conclusions instead of trusting God and seeking His wisdom.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight”  
(Proverbs 3:5-6).

As we conclude this story, I ask you to finish by taking a few moments to apply this scripture to your own life. Is there a situation or an area of your life where you need to trust in God's wisdom? Take time to submit this situation to the Lord and trust Him to guide you. His promise is that He will make your paths straight!

Prayer: Father, would you shine your light into my heart that I might see areas of my life that are places where I habitually fall into the same sin. Please help me overcome so that I might be a good example not only to my family, but also to those around me. Amen!

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