

Shabbat Shuvah

" She is my sister "

[For those online, there is the text of Scripture at the end also more links/ resources]

Introduction

Shalom dear friends. Today is shabbat shuvah, the Sabbath between Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. It's a day to continue the repentance theme, and we have a great text to remind us of our sins. It's Genesis 20. Today I'm borrowing heavily from two sources. One is the NIV Commentary on Genesis. The second is from Adam Clarke's commentary on Genesis.

This story today is almost laughable. Which makes sense since we are dealing with the child who would come who is the fulfillment of a promise to Abraham. The child is of course Isaac and we will see him come along (finally) next week. In today's story almost 90 year old Sarah is brought into the harem of an enemy king, and yet the royal family of Abraham is protected again. The focus of this chapter seems to be the relationship between Abraham and the nations. Abraham's role is as a prophetic intercessor and interpreter of God, as in the promise "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (12:3). He prayed for the Philistines (20:7), and God healed them (v. 17). In the narrative today Abimelech plays the role of a "righteous Gentile" with whom Abraham could live in peace and blessing. There is an implied contrast in the narratives between the last chapter, which we studied a fortnight ago, chapter 19 (Lot, the one who pictures the mixed multitude) and 20 (Abimelech, the righteous sojourner).

Clarke says, "It is very likely that this holy man was so deeply affected with the melancholy prospect of the ruined cities, and not knowing what was become of his nephew Lot and his family, that he could no longer bear to dwell within sight of the place. Having, therefore, struck his tents, and sojourned for a

short time at Kadesh and Shur. He fixed his habitation in Gerar, which was a city of Arabia Petraea, under a king of the Philistines called Abimelech, my father king, who appears to have been not only the father of his people, but also a righteous man."

Today we will learn about Abraham's sin of lying about the truth, and what we can admit about our own sins in this season of repentance. We will learn about God's plan for the Gentiles as well.

Let's read Gen 20. (from the Torah and then the Bible)

1 Abraham left the "great trees of Mamre" (18:1, 33) and traveled into "the Negev" (i.e., "southward") to sojourn in Gerar, which is in the "land of the Philistines" (21:34). IN other words, this is the Gaza strip in today's language.

2 Sarah was taken into Abimelech's house. The narrative here is much briefer than the similar event in ch. 12. Clearly the focus is not so much the fate of Sarah as it is that of the Philistines and of Abimelech himself. Many of the details are withheld until Abraham is given an opportunity to speak on his own behalf (vv. 11-13). At that point his actions cast more light on the Philistines' inner motives than on his own. Abraham's words show that he had mistakenly judged the Philistines to be a wicked people, but their actions proved otherwise. Sarah was now about ninety years of age, and probably pregnant with Isaac. Her beauty, therefore, must have been considerably impaired since the time she was taken in a similar manner by Pharaoh, king of Egypt. She was probably now chosen by Abimelech more on the account of forming an alliance with Abraham, who was very rich, than on account of any personal accomplishments. A petty king, such as Abimelech, would naturally be glad to form an alliance with such a powerful chief as Abraham was. Remember his recent defeat of the four confederate Canannitish kings. And don't forget, word would probably have gotten around the area about Abraham's connection with the defeat of Sodom and Gomorrah.

3-16 The story goes to great lengths to demonstrate the innocence of Abimelech, making it clear that "Abimelech had not gone near her." Thus

Abimelech's claim to be "innocent" (lit., "righteous"; Tsakik) and his appeal to his innocence contrast sharply with Abraham's deception. Thus we find that persons who were not of the family of Abraham had the knowledge of the true God. Indeed, all the Gerarites are termed גוֹי צַדִּיקִים goy tsaddik, a righteous nation. Indeed, in v. 6 God himself concurred with Abimelech's plea of innocence. Had Abimelech any other than honorable views in taking Sarah, he could not have justified himself thus to his Maker. These views were of the most honorable kind, God himself, to whom the appeal was made, asserts in the most direct manner, "Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart."

Abimelech, however, was in immediate need of a warning lest he lose his innocence by his mistreatment of Abraham's household. Abraham's wife was to be returned, and Abraham the prophet must pray in behalf of the life of Abimelech.

Let's talk about this word, first time used in the Bible, prophet. In Hebrew it's Navi. Like the prophets section of the Tenach, n'viim. The word prophet means, in its general acceptance, one who speaks of things before they happen, i.e., one who foretells future events. But that this was not the original notion of the word, its use in this place sufficiently proves. Abraham certainly was not a prophet in the present general acceptance of the term, and for the Hebrew נָבִיִּים nabi, we must seek some other meaning. The proper ideal meaning of the original word is to pray, entreat, make supplication, etc. You can see that both from its application in this place, and from its pointed use in the case of Saul, mentioned 1 Samuel 10, and from the case of the priests of Baal, 1 Kings 18.. There prophesying most undoubtedly means making prayer and supplication. As those who were in habits of intimacy with God by prayer and faith were found the most proper persons to communicate his mind to man, both with respect to the present and the future. Hence, נָבִיִּים nabi, the intercessor, became in process of time the public instructor or preacher, and also the predictor of future events, because to such faithful praying men God revealed the secret of his will. Hence St. Paul, 1 Corinthians 14:3, seems to restrain the word wholly to

the interpreting the mind of God to the people, and their instruction in Divine things, for, says he, "he that prophesies speaks to men to edification and exhortation and comfort."

The surprising outcome of God's visit of Abimelech is that he responded immediately by rising early in the morning and declaring his dream to his servants and then to Abraham.

Abraham's reply seems intended not only to justify his action with Sarah in the present narrative but also to provide a larger picture for understanding his similar actions while in Egypt in ch. 12. At the same time, by tracing the plan back to the very beginnings of his sojourning from his father's house, he showed that the plan in this instance was not based on an actual assessment of the Philistines' religious life; rather, it was simply a part of a larger scheme. Thus an explanation is given as to why Abraham misjudged the Philistines. Though we have followed the life of Abraham closely since he left his father's house in ch. 11, this is the first we have heard of such an overarching strategy on Abraham's part or of this aspect of his relationship with Sarah. In the last analysis we are left only with the opinion of Abimelech himself, who undoubtedly accepted Abraham's explanation and faulted only himself in this unfortunate situation. Just how sincerely Abimelech accepted Abraham's story can be seen in the fact that in speaking to Sarah he called Abraham "your brother," showing that he accepted the explanation and in turn was attempting to restore the broken relationship with expensive gifts.

Nachmanides in his commentary severely denounces Abraham's conduct on the ground that it again imperiled his wife. And he adds that it makes no difference whether Abraham told Abimelech the truth in calling Sarah his sister. He actually suppressed the greater bit of information didn't he? He forgot to tell him that Sarah was his wife. Scripture, according to Rabbi Hertz in his Chumash notes, "Impartially relates both the failings and the virtues of its heroes." (page 70)

Clarke says, " In this place it may be proper to ask, What is a lie? It is any action done or word spoken, whether true or false in itself, which the doer or

speaker wishes the observer or hearer to take in a contrary sense to that which he knows to be true. It is, in a word, any action done or speech delivered with the intention to deceive, though both may be absolutely true and right in themselves.

So is it a lie? We'll have more to discuss no doubt about that in Question Time in a bit.

Verse 13 has a curious thing, that is not often addressed. Here the word אֱלֹהִים Elohim is used with a plural verb, (הִתְעַוְּ hithu, they caused me to wander,) which is not very usual in the Hebrew language, as this plural noun is generally joined with verbs in the singular number. Because there is a departure from the general mode in this instance, some have contended that the word Elohim signifies princes in this place, and suppose it to refer to those in Chaldea, who expelled Abraham because he would not worship the fire; but the best critics, and with them the Jews, allow that Elohim here signifies the true God.

Odd isn't it that the Bible can unashamedly use a plural verb with the language of God. God is either plural in yet one, or this is a bad grammar lesson. I believe this is another help to understanding the triune nature of God, Father Son and Holy Spirit.

16. And to Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver; behold, it is your vindication before all who are with you, and before all men you are cleared."

The matter is ended by Abimelech in his righteousness. The ransom is paid, and a bit of a *zetz* is spoken by him to Sarah in the hearing of Abraham. Do you hear it? "Your brother" ought to be satisfied with this pay off. Abimelech is onto them, but he sounds more righteous than our patriarch, doesn't he?

Abraham and the Nations

This is a subtext throughout the record of Genesis, and really something that was always on the heart of God from the beginning of the world. Not only would God deal with Israel as His focus and chosen people. God would also

pour out His grace and love on the goyim, on the nations. He would use Israel to bring that to pass.

That's where we get the understanding of Israel being a 'light to the nations"

Clarke says that the reason Abraham lied about Sarah was that he was a bigot against the Philistines of Gerar. And that he says is of damnable hatred. 'Why the patriarch did not acknowledge Sarah as his wife, was a fear lest he should lose his life on her account, for he said, Surely the fear, i.e., the true worship, of the true God is not in this place. Such is the natural bigotry and narrowness of the human heart, that we can scarcely allow that any besides ourselves possess the true religion. To indulge a disposition of this kind is highly blamable. The true religion is neither confined to one spot nor to one people; it is spread in various forms over the whole earth. He who fills immensity has left a record of himself in every nation and among every people under heaven. Beware of the spirit of intolerance! for bigotry produces uncharitableness; and uncharitableness, harsh judging; and in such a spirit a man may think he does God service when he tortures, or makes a burnt-offering of the person whom his narrow mind and hard heart have dishonored with the name of heretic. Such a spirit is not confined to any one community, though it has predominated in some more than in others. But these things are highly displeasing in the sight of God. HE, as the Father of the spirits of all flesh, loves every branch of his vastly extended family; and as far as we love one another, no matter of what sect of party, so far we resemble HIM. Had Abraham possessed more charity for man and confidence in God at this time, he had not fallen into that snare from which he barely escaped. A hasty judgment is generally both erroneous and harsh; and those who are the most apt to form it are generally the most difficult to be convinced of the truth."

His warning is good for us to hear. As Jewish believers in Jesus we often see the anti Semitism around us in churches, on the streets, in the pubs, etc. God help us from entering the fray and reversing the hatred in antiGentileness. We need to bring God's light and love to all people.

Christopher Wright, new head of the Langham Partnership in the UK, said this about the eschatological vision of the prophets. "The new people of God will have an all-inclusiveness, in which categories of people who on the old criterion would have been excluded or in a very uncertain position will be brought into a full and assured relationship with God as an integral part of 'Israel.'" "Thus," Wright continues, "for example in Isaiah 56.3-8 the doubts of the foreigner who had no stake in the land and of the eunuch who could have no family or posterity are alike allayed by the promise of permanent security in the New Covenant." (Living as the People of God, 1983, page 95)

17-18 Abraham accepted the gifts from the Philistines and offered a prayer on their behalf in return. Only at this point do we discover the nature of God's words to Abimelech in v. 7. The Lord had "closed up every womb in Abimelech's household."

God's plan for the Gentiles is found in 12.1-3 and here in this chapter and in the Psalms and in Isaiah and in fact every major prophet and in Revelation and throughout the ministry of Jesus. He wants all people to enter His grace and love. He wants us to be sharing His message of hope and redemption not only during the 10 Days, but throughout our days. Listen as Moses begins Torah with Chapter 12 and the promise that all nations will be blessed in relation to Abraham, he ends with the solemn warning through the Song of Moses chapter 32 yet with a distinctive reminder of Abraham's global impact.

"For the LORD will vindicate His people, And will have compassion on His servants; "And He will say, 'Where are their gods, The rock in which they sought refuge? 'See now that I, I am He, And there is no god besides Me; It is I who put to death and give life. I have wounded, and it is I who heal; And there is no one who can deliver from My hand. "Rejoice, O nations, with His people; For He will avenge the blood of His servants, And will render vengeance on His adversaries, And will atone for His land and His people." (32.36,37, 39, 43)

Do you notice this expression, "Rejoice o nations with His people?" It's found in the Newer Testament in Romans chapter 15. Hear that phrase and quotes from several Older Testament passages as well

Therefore, accept one another, just as Messiah also accepted us to the glory of God. For I say that Messiah has become a servant to the circumcision on behalf of the truth of God. (He did this) to confirm the promises given to the fathers, and for the Gentiles to glorify God for His mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will give praise to Thee among the Gentiles, And I will sing to Thy name."

And again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people." And again, "Praise the Lord all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise Him."

And again Isaiah says, "There shall come the root of Jesse, and He who arises to rule over the Gentiles, In Him shall the Gentiles hope."

Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (verses 7-13)

Sounds like Paul knew Genesis and Deuteronomy doesn't it? Sounds like we should listen as God tells us that Abimelech's and others who are not of this fold may yet be brought near and we should bring God's truth to them. What do you think?

Summary

Here are some things I see as we conclude today, and you can add your thoughts to your own list.

- 1) God wants us to tell the Truth about situations and about Him
- 2) The nations of the world can and should be responsive to the person of the God of Israel
- 3) Journaling of our best and our worst realities is health bringing
- 4) We too are called to herald God, to proclaim Him to the nations without racism and without partiality

Dear friends, we have eternal life due to the Saviour Y'shua, due to His love and forgiveness. His Resurrection has proven His new covenant. His teaching is great, and yet it goes well beyond that to His life and death. No amount of good works will give us enough information to help us overcome evil. No amount of information will help