

Review

Last time, we looked at the familiar story of God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah and His rescue of Abraham’s nephew Lot and his family out of Sodom.

Lot and His Daughters

God rescued Lot from the destruction of Sodom for Abraham’s sake. In [that study](#), we saw that Lot’s behavior was far from perfect. Although he stood up against the men of Sodom to prevent them from seizing and raping the angels God had sent to the city (as if they really could), Lot’s “solution” to the problem was to offer up his own virgin daughters to be gang raped by the men of the town in place of the angels. We couldn’t really say that Lot was a great father to his daughters, could we? Now after God rescued Lot and his family from the cities’ destruction, we find that the whole family acted despicably – at least to our modern sensibilities regarding incest.

30Now 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. 31And 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. 32Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, that we may preserve offspring from our father.” Genesis 19:30-32 (ESV)

To our modern mind, the very idea proposed by Lot’s firstborn is repulsive. But let’s take a moment to consider it carefully. In Genesis 4:17 we find the seemingly innocuous statement, “**Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch.**” Remember that Cain’s wife must surely have also been his sister. In Genesis 9 & 10, we read about Noah’s descendants. But notice that for the most part in Biblical genealogies only the male line is listed. We are well familiar with Noah’s sons Japheth, Shem, and Ham along with their sons. But have we ever stopped to think about Noah’s grandsons’ wives? They must all have been their husbands’ 1st cousins or sisters.

Later, God laid out some very detailed and strict provisions in the Law of Moses concerning sexual relations within families, but at the time of Lot and Abraham, these prohibitions had not yet been formally established. How could they be? After all, Cain had only his sisters to choose from as wives, and the available population of marriageable women was very sparse for several generations after the flood. So, before we condemn Lot and his daughters out of hand, we need to consider the circumstances in which they found themselves.

With that said though, it would seem that neither Lot nor his daughters were entirely comfortable with what they were about to do, as we shall soon learn.

33So 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. Genesis 19:33 (ESV)

Okay. I have said before and should reiterate now that I am a firm believer in the inerrancy of God’s Word. If God said it, I believe it.

However...

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I must admit that I'm finding it very difficult to believe most of this story. First, just how did Lot's daughters "make" him drink wine? This smacks of the age-old "devil made me do it" excuse. Furthermore, if Lot's firstborn really felt justified by necessity in "going in" to her father so his line would be carried forward through her, why did she need to get him drunk first? Finally, how could Lot have been so drunk he wasn't even aware when his daughter came in to him and when she left, yet still somehow have been physically able to impregnate her?

34The 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." 35So 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. 36Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father.

Genesis 19:34-36 (ESV)

Well, I guess if you'll buy one tract of swamp land unseen, you'll buy another, right? But pressing on...

Either these girls were almost in synch with their monthly cycles, or they lay with their father who was obviously quite a virile man on multiple occasions.

The Sons of Lot

37The firstborn bore a son and called his name Moab [מֹאָב mō'āv - of his father]. He is the father of the Moabites to this day. 38The younger also bore a son and called his name Ben-ammi [בְּנֵי-אֲמִי ben-'ammî - son of my people]. He is the father of the Ammonites to this day. Genesis 19:37-38 (ESV)

The Ammonites and Moabites were idolaters. The worship rites of the Ammonite god Molech (also called Moloch in God's Word) and the Moabite god Chemosh both included human sacrifices. Tradition holds that worship rites of Molech involved building a fire under the outstretched arms of Molech's stone image into which infants were placed and burned alive. Israel too eventually fell into this egregious form of idolatry. Several passages in the Bible speak of this practice – e.g. Leviticus 18:21, 2 Kings 23:10, Jeremiah 32:35, and Ezekiel 23:37.

Because of these things, it is difficult to understand God's purposes in allowing Lot to father these two children by his own daughters. We simply trust that God's will is always perfectly righteous even and especially when He seems to allow events that appear wicked from our limited perspective.

Because of their idolatry, and because the Moabites didn't offer passage and succor to the Israelites when they returned to Canaan from Egypt, God forbade any Ammonite or Moabite from entering His assembly forever.

3"No Ammonite or Moabite may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter the assembly of the LORD forever, 4because they did not meet you with bread and with water on the way, when you came out of Egypt, and because they hired against you Balaam the son of Beor from Pethor of Mesopotamia, to curse you.

Deuteronomy 23:3-4 (ESV)

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So, it is intriguing and a little confusing that Ruth – a Moabite woman – became King David’s great-grandmother (Ruth 4:21-22, Matthew 1:1-6). Ruth and her husband Boaz must certainly have been part of the assembly of the LORD in their local synagogue despite Ruth being a daughter of Moab.

Before we move on in our study of Genesis, it is worthwhile taking some time to explore the history of these peoples whose progenitors were Lot’s sons.

Ammon

Look at the [Cities of the Valley map](#).

The land of the Ammonites lies to the east of the Mountains of Gilead some thirty miles east of the Jordan. It contains the headwaters of the River Jabbok (called Zarqa today) which flows northward through Ammonite territory until it enters the gorge through the Mountains of Gilead to its inflow into the Jordan River. Today, the river flows through the capital city of Jordan – Amman.

God commanded the Israelites not to disturb the Ammonites when they arrived back in the area to conquer Canaan after their 40-year wilderness wandering.

19And when you approach the territory of the people of Ammon, do not harass them or contend with them, for I will not give you any of the land of the people of Ammon as a possession, because I have given it to the sons of Lot for a possession.’ Deuteronomy 2:19 (ESV)

Throughout the time of the judges and kings, both Moab and Ammon fought against Israel. King David eventually subdued the Ammonites and received tribute from them (2 Samuel 10). In fact, it was during the siege of the Ammonite capital Rabbah that King David ordered Joab the commander of his army to withdraw from Uriah the Hittite during the heat of battle hoping to cover up David’s adultery with Uriah’s wife Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11).

In the latter part of his life, King Solomon (David’s son by Bathsheba) led Israel into idolatry with the various gods of his foreign wives and concubines including the Ammonite god Molech and the Moabite god Chemosh (1 Kings 11:1-7). Although King Josiah later destroyed the sites of idolatrous worship throughout Judah (2 Kings 23), Israel continued to engage in such idolatry right up to the time of the Babylonian captivity. When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon besieged Jerusalem (597 BC) during the reign of King Jehoiakim, combatants from Moab and Ammon took part in the siege (2 Kings 24). When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem during the reign of the Persian King Artaxerxes, Tobiah the Ammonite incited his people to resist the rebuilding of Jerusalem’s walls despite the orders of the Persian king (Nehemiah).

Moab

Look at the [Cities of the Valley map](#) and the [Israelites’ Journey from the Wilderness to Canaan map](#).

The descendants of Moab settled the land east of the Dead Sea, south of the Ammonites, and north of the lands that Jacob’s (Israel’s) twin brother Esau (Edom) later settled. But by the time of Israel’s return from Egypt to Canaan, the Amorite King Sihon had taken the land of the Moabites as far south as the River Arnon. As with the Ammonites, God directed the Israelites not to engage in battle with the Moabites south of the Arnon.

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⁸So we went on, away from our brothers, the people of Esau, who live in Seir, away from the Arabah road from Elath and Ezion-geber.

“And we turned and went in the direction of the wilderness of Moab. ⁹And the LORD said to me, ‘Do not harass Moab or contend with them in battle, for I will not give you any of their land for a possession, because I have given Ar to the people of Lot for a possession.’ Deuteronomy 2:8-9 (ESV)

So, Israel skirted around the Moabite territory on the way to their eventual crossing of the Jordan east of Jericho. The Amorite King Sihon and Og King of Bashan (called the Golan Heights today) opposed them but Israel defeated them in battle (Deuteronomy 2 and Numbers 21:21-35).

After their defeat of Sihon and Og, Israel camped at Shittim on the plain of Moab east of the Jordan – the same fertile plain Lot had chosen when he and Abram first separated in Genesis 13. Fearing that Israel would then turn south against Moab, the Moabite King Balak hired Balaam son of Beor – a prophet from Mesopotamia – to curse Israel. But God prevented Balaam from doing so and caused him to bless Israel instead (Numbers 22-24). Nevertheless, while camped at Shittim, many of the Israelite men began to fornicate with the women of Moab and worship their god Baal of Peor. Therefore, God brought a plague upon Israel which eventually killed 24,000 before those who had worshiped Baal of Peor were purged from the nation (Numbers 25:1-9).

Mt. Nebo from which God showed Moses the promised land, lies within the original territory of Moab prior to the conquest of the Moabites by the Amorite King Sihon. After Moses died, God himself buried him in the valley of Moab near the mountain (Deuteronomy 34:1-8). Like the Ammonites, there was frequent war between the Moabites and Israelites during the time of the judges and kings. At the height of Israel’s power, King David subdued both peoples and exacted tribute from them. As we have seen, late in his reign David’s son Solomon established idolatrous worship in Israel of the gods of his many foreign wives including human sacrifices to Chemosh the Moabite god. During the Babylonian exile, some of the Israelites left behind in Judah including some of the priesthood took Moabite wives, and Nehemiah purged them from the assembly of the LORD when he returned to Jerusalem (Nehemiah 13).

Abraham Lies Again About Sarah

Recall from [our study of Genesis 12](#) that when Abram and Sarai went down to Egypt briefly due to a famine in Canaan, they lied to Pharaoh saying she was Abram’s sister rather than his wife. Well, apparently neither of them learned their lesson from that embarrassing chastisement by the LORD.

¹From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb [נֶגֶב *negeb* - south country] and lived between Kadesh [קָדֵשׁ *qādēš* - holy] and Shur [שׁוּר *šûr* - wall]; and he sojourned in Gerar [גֵּרָר *grār* - a lodging place]. ²And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.” And Abimelech [אַבִּימֶלֶךְ *’ābîmelek* - my father is king] king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. Genesis 20:1-2 (ESV)

Look at the [Patriarchs in Canaan map](#). Following the destruction of the cities of the valley, Abraham moved his tent from the oaks of Mamre southwestward into the Negev desert somewhere along the way to Shur (northeast Egypt) south of Kadesh. Although Abraham lived south of Kadesh at this time, these verses say that he also sojourned in Gerar. The precise location of Gerar is unknown. It was somewhere in the Negev to the southeast of Gaza. Why Abraham sojourned there is unknown. Most of

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the peoples of southwest Asia in the time of Abraham were nomadic herdsmen. Some still are. Perhaps Abraham had some sort of trade relationship with the people of Gerar that brought him and Sarah to their city now and again.

The name Abimelech (אַבִּימֶלֶךְ *'ābîmelek*) is a hereditary title like “Pharaoh.” Despite the LORD’s intervention when they had told the same lie to Pharaoh years before, Abraham and Sarah persisted in their habit of telling strangers they were brother and sister. This is reminiscent of the proverb...

“Like a dog that returns to his vomit is a fool who repeats his folly.” Proverbs 26:11 (ESV)

Praise God that His mercy and grace are infinite. Recall that God credited Abraham’s faith as righteousness. Proverbs also proclaims that God lifts up those He has clothed with His righteousness even in our failures, and places us back on the path of obedience.

“for the righteous falls seven times and rises again, but the wicked stumble in times of calamity.” Proverbs 24:16 (ESV)

One might well ask why I keep referring to Abraham and Sarah’s little conspiracy as a sin. After all, God had not yet codified His commandment against bearing false witness, right? Recall from [our study of Genesis 12](#), that when Pharaoh – thinking Sarai was Abram’s sister – took her into his harem, God afflicted Pharaoh’s household with great plagues. Our sins have consequences not only for ourselves, but for other people. Abraham and Sarah should have remembered the lesson God taught them in Egypt years before and not attempted to deceive the people of Gerar in the same way.

ASIDE – Although Biblical narratives are not always chronological as we know, if this one follows chronologically the destruction of Sodom recounted in the previous chapter, it’s pretty funny when we think about it. At the time, Sarah would have been nearly 90 years old and pregnant with Isaac. Nevertheless, we’re told that Abimelech sent for her and took her into his court. Perhaps he did so with **all** the sisters of sojourners in his land. Maybe this encounter with Abimelech happened sometime before. If not, one would think the people of Gerar might have questioned where Sarah’s husband was, since by this time it would have been obvious that she was carrying Isaac.

“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.’ Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, ‘Lord, will you kill an innocent people? 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.’ 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. 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 20:3-7 (ESV)

As He did when Abram and Sarai lied to Pharaoh, God once more stepped in to pull their proverbial bacon out of the fire. Remember that whether or not this episode occurred chronologically with the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, God had determined since before the beginning of creation to

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bring forth Jesus His מְשִׁיחַ *māšīaḥ* for the rescue of all mankind out of death in our sins through the child Isaac that Sarah would bear as an heir to Abraham. God's plan of salvation could not have continued to unfold with Sarah living as Abimelech's concubine. In a sense then, God had no choice but to rescue Abraham and Sarah (and Abimelech) from the consequences of their lie.

Furthermore, God the righteous judge didn't punish Abimelech or his people for their own unknowing offense despite their not being among His "chosen" people. Thus, they are an image of Gentile Christ followers. Like Abimelech, we are invited to partake of the same salvation out of sin that Israel – God's chosen – may through simple faith in Jesus' Gospel and repentance from our sins.

BTW – Isn't it intriguing that Abimelech – the king of an idolatrous society – recognized the God of Abraham who appeared to him in this dream. God's Word contains many instances in which God spoke to someone or appeared to someone in a dream. Does God still do this?

⁸So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants and told them all these things. And the men were very much afraid. ⁹Then 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."¹⁰And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What did you see, that you did this thing?" Genesis 20:8-10 (ESV)

Although Abraham and Sarah were blinded to any potential harm from their "little white lie," Abimelech clearly understood the consequences and called it the sin that it was to Abraham's face. As He did with Pharaoh, God used a Gentile idolater to point Abraham and Sarah's sin out to them. They should have learned their lesson years before in Egypt, but apparently, they had not. Furthermore, they failed to teach their son Isaac this lesson as we shall learn later in our Genesis study.

There is a lesson here for us as well. God can and does use others to make us aware of our failings. Christ followers desiring to be the lights of the world so that our Father may be glorified when the world sees our good works need to be open and accepting of the discipline God brings to us regardless of the source. One of our brothers or sisters in Christ may often bring us a word from God. But God also uses people and circumstances we might ordinarily deem as "outside" our Christian circle to bring us His admonishments. We need to be alert for His leading regardless of the mechanism and committed to obey His call regardless of the source from which we hear it.

¹¹Abraham 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.'¹²Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. ¹³And 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."¹⁴" Genesis 20:11-13 (ESV)

What a lame excuse! Doesn't Abraham's statement that there was no fear of God in Gerar sound a little "holier than thou?" As it turned out, Abimelech showed more fear of God than Abraham (just as Pharaoh had years before)! Furthermore, the fear of God didn't and doesn't preclude reprehensible

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behavior even among the people of God. For example, consider the despicable story of the men of Gibeah in Benjamin gang raping the Levite's concubine (from which she subsequently died) after the Levite's host refused to give them the Levite himself (Judges 19).

At least Abraham didn't bother to try to make the excuse that they had lied for Sarah's sake as he did when they lied to Pharaoh (Genesis 12:13). At least Abraham was being honest enough to admit he had put Sarah up to it once again to save his own skin.

When we examined Abram's genealogy in Genesis 11:27-32, we found no mention of Abram's father Terah's wife or wives. Nor do we read anything about Sarai's family there. If Terah had a second wife who was Sarai's mother, Sarah was indeed Abraham's half-sister as well as his wife just as he says here to Abimelech. Even so, Abraham didn't initially tell Abimelech the **whole** truth about his relationship with Sarah – thus leading Abimelech and his people into the consequences of this “sin of omission.”

But if we reflect a little about this miserable episode and Abraham's tap dancing in response to Abimelech's chastisement, we can see a little of ourselves in him too. Aren't we all at least a little apprehensive of those outside our own circle? Aren't we all willing to “bend the rules” when necessary to preserve our own lives? Most of all, we are capable of the wildest rationalizations to convince both others and ourselves of the righteousness of our unrighteous behaviors! Perhaps Abraham – having been caught with his hand in the cookie jar – was attempting to convince himself that lying to Abimelech was justifiable.

14Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned Sarah his wife to him.

15And Abimelech said, “Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you.” 16To 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.” Genesis 20:14-16

(ESV)

Abimelech's kindnesses to Abraham and Sarah despite their sin against him and his people reminds me of Paul's teaching in Romans...

17Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. 18If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. 19Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” 20To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” [Proverbs 25:21-22] ***21Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*** Romans 12:17-21 (ESV)

Abimelech's benevolence toward Abraham and Sarah was meant primarily as a sign to his people rather than a blessing for Abraham and Sarah themselves. In doing so, Abimelech was showing his people Abraham's and Sarah's righteousness and worthiness even though the three of them knew privately that Abraham and Sarah had acted wrongly toward both Abimelech and his people.

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Although I can't prove it from the text itself, I think Abimelech was being a little jokingly sarcastic toward Sarah when he referred to Abraham as her "brother." We can almost see him winking at her as he told her about the silver.

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

It's unclear exactly what affliction God healed Abimelech of in response to Abraham's prayer (apart from death). No details of this affliction are given in the preceding narrative except that God told Abimelech he would die if he persisted in keeping Sarah as his concubine.

Notice that God answered Abraham's prayer in the way that He had told Abimelech in the dream that He would. This is a great encouragement for us as well. God's answer to Abraham's prayer wasn't a reward for Abraham's righteous behavior – far from it! God answered Abraham's prayer just as He does our own – in His own way, in His own time, for His own purposes and glorification – not because we are deserving of His benevolence, but despite the fact that we are not!

Looking Ahead

Next time, we'll finally read about the birth of Abraham's promised heir Isaac.