

Abraham: Conflicts Surrounding Isaac's Birth

Genesis 20-21



BSF Lesson 13
Notes
Genesis

Focus Verse

"At that time Abimelek and Phicol the commander of his forces said to Abraham, "God is with you in everything you do." – Genesis 21:22

- The Perpetual Battle With Sin – Genesis 20
- The Promised Son Is Born – Genesis 21:1-7
- The Painful Separation From Ishmael – Genesis 21:8-21
- The Peaceful Solution to Strife – Genesis 21:22-34

Engage

Why is it so easy to sin? Why does trusting God often seem hard? **Even believers who love the Lord and long to obey Him find familiar patterns of sin surface far too easily and naturally.** The sin nature we all inherited from Adam offers a baseline explanation, but this ongoing challenge merits deeper soul-searching. What do you treasure more than God? What does your default response of self-defense, a sharp tongue, fear or insecurity reveal? Where are you particularly vulnerable to sin without stopping to weigh the cost?

Even mature believers struggle with sin. Awareness of sin and the desire to turn from sinfulness to obedience reveals the work of the Holy Spirit. Spiritual maturity does not yield overconfidence regarding sin but rather a healthy caution about our own weaknesses. God will use our failures to awaken us to our desperate need for Him. God had intentionally invested in Abraham's faith and spiritual growth over many years. Yet at a vulnerable moment, Abraham found a quick choice to sin easier than trusting God. Can you relate? **God patiently leads believers to face their sin, seek Him and grow.** God understands human weakness but desires to lead us forward, in His strength alone.

The Perpetual Battle With Sin – Genesis 20

Repeated Challenge, Familiar Sin – 20:1-2

Abraham's story picks up after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, with recent memories of both God's judgment and His promise of a son who would soon be born. **Abraham moved from the Negev, which means "south country," and stopped at Gerar where Abimelek was king.** Abimelek may be a title like Pharaoh, instead of an individual's name.

In a new land but facing an old fear, Abraham again involved Sarah in a lie and declared she was his sister. In Genesis 12, he tried this ploy earlier when he lied to Pharaoh in Egypt. God provided gracious rescue, but not without consequences. With God's record of faithful protection, why was fear now again at work in Abraham? What lessons had Abraham learned about prayer, God's promises, mercy and judgment of sin? In his moment of testing, he defaulted to a familiar human solution that had not worked

well before. Abraham was concerned about himself, not Sarah or the promised heir of the covenant to be conceived and born within the year. And, indeed, Abimelek took Sarah to be his wife.

Deceit Revealed, Disaster Averted – 20:3-7

God is merciful to sinners. He sent messengers to Sodom, though no one repented. And here, God showed mercy to Abimelek, warning him in a dream that he was "as good as dead" because he had taken a married woman as his own. He showed mercy to Abraham and Sarah, as Abimelek had not yet "gone near her." **God acknowledged Abimelek's clear conscience and clean hands, and He intervened to protect all involved.** God moved Abimelek from conviction to command, instructing him to "return the man's wife" or he and his household would die. Abraham, a "prophet," would pray, and his life would be spared.

Righteous Rebuke, Fearful Excuse – 20:8-13

Abimelek, a pagan king, showed remarkable reverence and prompt obedience as he responded to God. He humbly confessed to his officials what had happened, and fear gripped them all. Abimelek went straight to the source of the problem as he summoned Abraham and confronted him with his wrongdoing.

Abimelek's rebuke clearly called out Abraham's sin: "What have you done to us? ... You have done things to me that should never be done." Abimelek's humble response to God demonstrated less pride than Abraham, who lived in covenant relationship with Him. **Abraham's failure brought trouble upon Abimelek and his kingdom.** God's mercy and Abimelek's response prevented further damage and protected Sarah, even when Abraham had not.

Abraham confessed the fear that captured his heart and stole his discernment. Abraham suspected Gerar was not a God-fearing place and that he would be killed because of Sarah. He defended his half-truth, revealing that Sarah was indeed his "sister," though he omitted the important detail that she was also his wife. Abraham even asked Sarah to put herself at risk and tell only part of the truth about their relationship as an expression of her love for him. Scripture says, "... everything that does not come from faith is sin."¹ Abraham regressed, relying on a faulty scheme rather than trusting God. God faithfully protected Sarah and Abraham despite Abraham's unfaithfulness. God is infinitely stronger than human failure.

Generous Gift, Healing Prayer – 20:14-18

Abimelek gave Abraham a generous gift, likely his agreed dowry payment for Sarah. Rather than expelling Abraham, he offered him freedom to live anywhere he chose in Gerar. Abimelek told Sarah he gave her "brother" a thousand shekels (about 25 pounds or 12 kilograms) of silver to cover any offense toward her. Both times Abraham committed this sin, his folly brought shame but also added material wealth. How can that be? Certainly, God allowed these gifts, but they are not evidence of anything but His grace and intention to accomplish His purposes through Abraham. We must not necessarily equate physical rewards with spiritual blessings.

Abimelek's encounter with God convinced him that God's protection was on Abraham and Sarah. Abraham prayed for healing in Abimelek's household. God answered this prayer and the women in the king's household could again bear children. This scene, though caused by sin, pictures God-honoring reconciliation. God, who cares not just for His own people, intervened in grace toward Abimelek and his household. God actively works to draw people to know Him.

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The Promised Son Is Born — Genesis 21:1-7

After 25 years of anticipation and preparation, a few short words record Isaac's birth. God was "gracious to Sarah" and did what He promised. Isaac was born on God's exact timetable. God promised Abraham and Sarah this child and grew their faith to receive this miraculous heir of God's covenant.

Abraham was 100 years old when he circumcised his son into the covenant on the eighth day, as commanded. God chose Isaac's name, meaning "laughter." Abraham and Sarah at first laughed at the impossibility of having a son, yet now laughed with joy. Sarah publicly praised God who removed the cultural shame of her barrenness and brought the child whose birth defied nature. She acknowledged that

God's power at work in her life would cause all who heard to laugh with her.

What is it like to finally hold what has long seemed denied? How does it feel when God finally answers prayers passionately offered to Him over many years? **When we wait on God, He brings what He determines is best, in His perfect timing.** Not every prayer brings our desired outcome, but God promises His presence and sufficiency at every point in our journey. God knows whether we will see our hard-fought battles won in this life or in eternity. Even when our deepest longings go unmet and our prayers seem unanswered, He is faithful. God can be trusted.

The Doctrine of Sanctification

Spiritual growth is a process. When you come to faith in Christ, God immediately credits you with the perfect righteousness of His Son. Your position, clothed in the righteousness of Christ, frees you from the penalty of sin you deserve. But your “practical” righteousness, the daily conquest of sin in your thoughts and behavior, requires a continual dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit. This process is called sanctification. **God delivers you from your sinfulness as He changes your appetite and transforms your behavior by His Holy Spirit.** You must depend on Him and yield to Him constantly to see Christ formed in you practically (Galatians 4:19).

Our journey with Abraham and Sarah helps us understand the process of sanctification. God walked with them, even using their failures as opportunities to grow their trust and obedience. He repeated His promises and called them to active faith. **Only God, through the Holy Spirit, can accomplish anything in us that pleases Him.** But you have an active responsibility in your spiritual growth as well. Your part is to yield to His voice, His truth and actively commit to please Him (1 Corinthians 10:31; Galatians 5:16-26; Ephesians 4:27-5:31; Colossians 3:1-17). When the Holy Spirit convicts you of sin, are you quick to turn from that sin and confess it to the Lord? When the Holy Spirit prompts you to obey a specific command of Scripture in a specific situation, are you quick to obey? When the Holy Spirit enables you to trust God for what you cannot see, do you step out boldly in obedience? God renews our minds and conforms us to His image (Romans 12:1-2). What God commands, He enables through His power alone. As a believer, you no longer live as a slave to sin.

Every day, the Holy Spirit brings opportunities for you to grow to be more like Jesus. God constantly invests in your spiritual growth through your study of His Word, relationships and circumstances. **You can fail to recognize the moments in your days, direction of your thoughts and choices in your life that present opportunities to yield to the Lord and grow.** It is possible to live life as a random sequence of events and not recognize God’s orchestrated plan to grow your faith.

When you understand the Holy Spirit’s continuous work, you recognize God’s loving investment in your sanctification. Your failures help you rightly own your absolute need for God, not more of self. Victory over sin proves God’s work in you and His faithfulness. Have you noticed God aims Scripture passages you are studying at specific growth steps in your life He planned for that day? God graciously measures the sin He reveals to lead you forward in confession and repentance one purifying step at a time. He tenderly reveals enough sin to grow you, but not so much to make you faint in despair. The Holy Spirit within a believer never sits idle but can be “quenched” by our rebellion (1 Thessalonians 5:19). The Holy Spirit invests God’s power in His people, transforming their thoughts and life, one step at a time. And with each step, you prepare for an eternity in His presence where sin no longer exists. How is God molding your faith through what looks like an ordinary life situation? Will you recognize and cooperate with the Holy Spirit? What does God want to do within you right now?

The Painful Separation From Ishmael – Genesis 21:8-21

Hostility Between Abraham’s Two Sons – 21:8-10

Isaac fulfilled God’s covenant promise, but his birth also brought conflict with Ishmael. Opinions vary regarding Isaac’s age at his weaning, but Ishmael was 13 years older than his half-brother. Whatever happened between the boys, Ishmael made life impossible for Sarah and Isaac. Ishmael’s character and choices signaled rebellion toward his father and brother. Sarah demanded Abraham “get rid of that slave woman and her son.” She referred to Ishmael as “that woman’s son” who would never share Isaac’s inheritance.

God’s Counsel to Distressed Abraham – 21:11-13

The conflict in Abraham’s home caused him distress, which he took to God. What should he do? God clearly directed Abraham to listen to whatever Sarah advised. Sarah was correct; the covenant and its promises belonged exclusively to Isaac. Abraham was also correct. God relieved Abraham’s distress and confirmed His care for Ishmael and Hagar. Ishmael would become a nation as God had promised Hagar and Abraham on separate occasions.²

God's Faithfulness to Ishmael and Hagar – 21:14-21

Early the next morning, Abraham immediately obeyed God's clear directions. He did so without harshness or cruelty. He trusted God's command to send Hagar and Ishmael out of his home. Through faith, Abraham sent Hagar away with Ishmael and suitable provisions. Abraham's obedience surely touched him deeply as he watched Hagar and Ishmael disappear into the desert of Beersheba. **Not every step of obedience is easy, but obeying God is always right.**

Hagar had been rejected and alone in the desert before. When she fled from Sarah prior to Ishmael's birth, "the angel of the Lord" met her at a well. Then, He promised to care for her and create a nation through Ishmael for Abraham's sake if she would return to Sarah. She was so moved by God's intimate understanding of her heart that she gave God the name "El Roi," "the God who sees me." **Now, Hagar faced another desperate situation as her water ran out and she did not see a well.** She put her son in the shade

of a bush and sat down a few feet away so she would not have to witness him dying. Yet God was faithful. On this day, God "heard the boy crying." Ishmael's name means "God hears." How encouraging to know that the God of heaven sees the suffering of people on earth.

"The angel of God" called from heaven, "What is the matter, Hagar?" **Merciful God knew Hagar's name and cared about her distress.** God shifted her perspective from hopelessness and rejection to redirection and His unstoppable plan. God would keep His promise to Ishmael. He commanded Hagar not to fear but to act in faith. Then God provided a well for their physical refreshment to continue their journey away from Abraham's household.

God was with Ishmael as he grew up. He gave Ishmael skills in archery and fulfilled the destiny God prophesied for him while in Hagar's womb.³ Hagar chose Ishmael's wife from her homeland, Egypt, rather than from Abraham's household of faith. Genesis 25 records that Ishmael later returned to help Isaac bury their father, Abraham.

Two Women and Two Sons: The New Testament Illustration – Galatians 4:22-31

God's inspired Word, the Bible, weaves together as one story. The Scriptures teach reverence for God and wisdom for daily life. **The New Testament builds on and expands truths from the Old Testament.** God inspired Paul to use the challenging relationship of Ishmael and Isaac as an important analogy in his letter to the Galatians.

Most early believers came from a Jewish background until Paul spread the gospel to the Gentiles. These early Christians struggled with legalism and tried to please God by keeping the Old Testament Law. As Gentile believers joined the Church, they were pressured to practice Judaism, keeping Old Testament laws such as circumcision. Paul knew these Jewish Christians were familiar with Old Testament history, including the account of Abraham's two sons. **Paul used these familiar events recorded in Genesis to teach important spiritual lessons and refute false teaching in his writing to the Galatians.**

Paul pointed to Abraham and events of Genesis as illustrations to explain this truth. Ishmael mocked Isaac, the heir of the covenant. Galatians 4:29 tells us, "At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit." This analogy points to the conflict between the old covenant, the law given to Moses at Mount Sinai and the new covenant in Christ. Paul pled with Christians to reject slavery to sin and law and find freedom in Christ, the Promised One. Paul affirmed that all Scripture proves salvation is by God's grace through faith in Him alone, never by our works (Galatians 3:14).

Serving the Law to Earn God's Inheritance Through Works

Ishmael was born to Hagar, a slave woman. The birth resulted from the human will and self-effort of Abraham and Sarah. They tried to earn God's promised inheritance through their work and own plan that included sin. Paul taught that Ishmael represents those who cannot share in the spiritual inheritance of God's promise. **Trusting human effort leaves people enslaved to the law, their own efforts and sin, just as Hagar had been a slave.**

Serving God With Gladness After Receiving God's Inheritance by Grace Through Faith

Isaac was born to Sarah, a free woman and Abraham's wife. The birth represented God's gift of faith that led Abraham and Sarah to actively pursue God's promise. They received Isaac, God's promise, by grace, not works. God was faithful despite their sin. **Paul taught that Isaac represents those who receive the spiritual inheritance of God's promise through faith, not works.** Faith that Jesus Christ brings salvation through His life, death and resurrection frees believers from sin's control and penalty (4:21-23, 28-31). Believers are set free to joyfully obey God out of love for Him and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Abimelek's Peaceful Relationship with Abraham – 21:22-24

Abraham's neighbors recognized God's presence was with him. Political and military leaders often seek alliances with others who possess influence and power. **Abimelek and his army commander, Phicol, approached Abraham seeking a formal promise that he would treat them with kindness.** Abraham swore he would, honoring God with a spirit of reconciliation and personal integrity. Believers should pursue peace in this world as long as that peace does not involve compromise with God and His Word.

Abraham's Integrity at Beersheba – 21:25-31

Abraham valued peace as he lived in community with Abimelek's people. Abraham went straight to Abimelek to resolve an issue regarding the seizure of one of his wells by Abimelek's servants. So often, people allow issues that could be solved directly and quickly to escalate unnecessarily. **Abraham demonstrated grace and kindness as he paid for possession of a well he already owned.** The place of the treaty was named Beersheba, meaning "well of seven and well of the oath."

Believers should pursue peace in this world as long as that peace does not involve compromise with God and His Word.

Abraham's Worship of God – 21:32-34

Abraham's walk of faith had ups and downs as he grew in his understanding of God. After the treaty and peaceful solution at Beersheba, King Abimelek and his commander returned home. **In gratitude and worship, Abraham planted a tamarisk tree and called on the name of the LORD, "the Eternal God."** Every new name of God recorded in Genesis represents a growing understanding of the multifaceted character of God. We can grow in faith and understanding right along with Abraham and Sarah as we study. They knew, loved, trusted and obeyed God more fully by the end of their lives. Their growth in intimacy with God and godly character proves God's love and care for them.

Abraham believed God but still struggled with fear, doubt and sin. God did not forsake him when he slipped into sinful habits or failed to trust Him fully. Although God's people live out their faith imperfectly, God remains perfectly faithful. **God patiently leads believers to face their sin, seek Him and grow.** He loves us, extends mercy, fulfills His promises and provides peace. He brings His presence into our homes and is with us in all our interactions. We can trust God now and forever.

Take to Heart

Hold Fast

Abraham and Sarah wanted to obey God faithfully and enjoy His pleasure. The pressure of life at times clouded their understanding of the promises of God. God did not abandon them when they failed. God is patient and faithful despite your sins and slow growth in faith. The Bible honestly records the human weaknesses of its heroes. These accounts enable believers in every generation to assess their own motives, actions and progress. **We can take hope that, though we fail, God will not abandon us.**

When Abraham lied to Abimelek, God did not overlook his sin. He patiently arranged another opportunity for Abraham to do the next right thing. He exposed Abraham's sin. He commanded Abraham to pray for those he had wronged. Prayer

should have been Abraham's first course of action. **God showed mercy, undeserved goodness, to all involved.** As the psalmist declared, "He does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love for those who fear him."⁴

Abraham faced a very hard decision when he sent Hagar and Ishmael away. He sought God and humbly and gently did what God commanded. Ultimately, he trusted God would provide the care and blessing he could not. God dealt graciously with Ishmael and Hagar and provided for their needs. God showed Ishmael mercy, even though Ishmael did not receive Abraham's inheritance and carry forward the promise of God. God consistently

shows His patience toward human sinfulness in desiring that people seek peace with Him and one another. **God's relationships with Hagar and Ishmael show His grace is greater than our sin and His plans will always be accomplished.**

Leaders greatly impact those they lead.

Abraham, Sarah and Abimelek all led others in their households and areas of responsibility. Everyone leads someone. While we often like to think our thoughts

and actions are entirely personal, everything we are, think and do impacts someone. When you are tempted to sin or face a decision, do you weigh the impact on those you lead? Consider the impact of your character and personal priorities on those who look to you. God develops leaders for the benefit of others. Leaders can be unaware of their own blind spots. Godly leaders put the needs of those they lead ahead of their own pride and power.

Apply It

Sin comes easily to flawed humans. Abraham fell back into an old lie and hid his marriage to Sarah from Abimelek. Our ongoing battle with sinful desires, responses and actions can be quite discouraging. We often misstep and stumble, even while we earnestly desire to please God. We should not excuse our sin as mere human weakness or an expected reality and neither should we doubt God's power to deliver us from temptation.⁵ How do you respond to your weaknesses? How patient are you when other believers do what is natural and sin? We often extend other Christians far less grace than we depend on quite regularly. How easy it is to shred someone's character for a fault not like our own! This struggle with sin is so real that believers "groan" along with creation to be freed from the curse of sin.⁶

Our ongoing battle with sin requires perpetual dependence on God. We are weak; He is strong. We are sinful; He is holy yet merciful.

Family life tests our character and dependence on God. God intentionally orchestrated human life in family units that offer both needed support and opportunities for character development. Psalm 68:6 says, "God sets the lonely in families." Abraham's family was complicated, and so are ours. Abraham had to seek God and make a hard decision about Ishmael. We also constantly need God's wisdom to lead our families well. We desire joyful marriages and happy families that produce thriving children and productive young adults that make wise, godly choices. But we often face a different reality. God works through family life, no matter what we face. Do you struggle with your family not meeting the ideal you would prefer? How are you seeking Him in the daily realities of the family where He placed you? How is God sanctifying you through your family?

God's promises are certain because God's character is

certain. God promised Abraham and Sarah their own son and on God's chosen day they loved and held Isaac. The blessings that came through Abraham continue today. While God's promises remain true and many are fulfilled, we must trust God for what has not yet been delivered. Sometimes what is true does not feel true. Faith in God is more than a general sense that everything will turn out well. God leads us to trust specific truth in specific ways. The Bible is full of promises that offer help and hope, even when we feel hopeless. We must trust that God knows best and has purposes that exceed our limited understanding. Truth about God stabilizes daily life. What specific truth and promise will you trust today? God keeps His promises and grows His people even while they wait.

Go Deeper

Check out these footnoted references for further study of God's Word in this week's lesson.

- 1: **Sin:** Romans 14:23b
- 2: **God blessed Ishmael:** Genesis 16:10; 17:18, 20-21
- 3: **Prophecy of Ishmael:** Genesis 16
- 4: **God's love:** Psalm 103:10-11
- 5: **Temptation:** Matthew 6:13; Mark 14:38; 1 Corinthians 10:13
- 6: **Groaning:** Romans 8:22-24