

Genesis 20:1-18

by John Calvin

The sermon explores Abraham's journey and his moral failings, emphasizing God's protective grace and the importance of integrity and prayer in human relationships.

Scripture: Genesis 20:1-3, Genesis 20:6-9, Genesis 20:11, Genesis 20:16-17

Topics: "Faith And Doubt", "Gods Providence"

Description

John Calvin preaches about the journey of Abraham and his encounter with Abimelech, highlighting Abraham's faith and struggles, as well as the grace and protection of God amidst human frailty and mistakes. The narrative shows how even the righteous can falter due to fear and unbelief, yet God's mercy prevails to correct and guide them back to righteousness. Abimelech's repentance and restoration of Sarah demonstrate the importance of acknowledging wrongdoing and seeking reconciliation with God and others. The story emphasizes the significance of integrity, honesty, and trust in God's providence, even in the midst of challenging circumstances.

Transcript

1. And Abraham journeyed from thence toward the south country, and dwelled between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar.

1. Postea profectus est inde Abraham ad terram Meridianam, et habitavit inter Cades et Sur, peregrinatusque est in Gerar.

2. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent, and took Sarah.

2. Et dixit Abraham de Sarah uxore sua, Soror mea est. Et misit Abimelech rex Gerar, et accepit Sarah.

3. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, thou art but a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife.

3. Et venit Jehova ad Abimelech in somnio noctis, et dixit et, Ecce es mortuus, propter uxorem quam accepisti: quum ipsa maritata sit marito.

4. But Abimelech had not come near her: and he said, Lord, wilt thou slay also a righteous nation?

4. Abimelech autem non appropinquaverat ad eam: itaque dixit, Jehova, num gentem etiam justam occides?

5. Said he not unto me, She is my sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother: in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this.

5. Numquid non ipse dixit mihi, Soror mea est: et ipsa etiam dixit, Frater meus est? in integritate cordis mei, et in munditia manuum mearum feci hoc.

6. And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her.

6. Et dixit ad eum Deus in somnio, Etiam ego novi quod in integritate cordis tui fecisti hoc, et prohibui etiam ego to, ne peccares mihi: idcirco non permisi tibi, ut tangeres eam.

7. Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine.

7. Et nunc redde uxorem viro, quia propheta est, et orabit pro to, et vives: quodsi tu non reddideris, scito quod moriendo morieris tu et omne quod est tibi.

8. Therefore Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ears: and the men were sore afraid.

8. Et surrexit Abimelech mane, et vocavit omnes servos suos, et loquutus est omnia verba ista in auribus eorum, et timuerunt viri valde.

9. Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said unto him, What hast thou done unto us? and what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done.

9. Et vocavit Abimelech Abraham, et dixit ei, Quid fecisti nobis? et quid peccavi tibi, quia induxisti super me et super regnum meum peccatum grande? opera quae non debent fieri, fecisti mecum.

10. And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing?

10. Et dixit Abimelech ad Abraham, Quid vidisti quia fecisti rem hanc?

11. And Abraham said, Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake.

11. Et dixit Abraham, Quia dixi, Vere non est timor Dei in loco isto: et occident me propter uxorem meam.

12. And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.

12. Et etiam vere soror mea filia patris mei est, veruntamea non filia matris meae: et fuit mihi in uxorem meam.

13. And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her, This is thy kindness which thou shalt shew unto me; at every place whither we shall come, say of me, He is my

brother.

13. Et fuit, quando circumduxerunt me Angeli de domo patris mei, dixi ei, Haec est misericordia tua quam facies mecum, in omni loco ad quem veniemus, dic de me, Frater meus est.

14. And Abimelech took sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and womenservants, and gave them unto Abraham, and restored him Sarah his wife.

14. Et cepit Abimelech pecudes, et boves, et servos, et ancillas, et dedit Abraham: et restituit ei Sarah, uxorem ejus.

15. And Abimelech said, Behold, my land is before thee: dwell where it pleaseth thee.

15. Et dixit Abimelech, Ecce, terra mea coram to, in loco bono coram oculis tuis habita.

16. And unto Sarah he said, Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver: behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that are with thee, and with all other : thus she was reprovèd.

16. Et ad Sarah dixit, Ecce, dedi mille argenteos fratri tuo: ecce, est tibi operimentum oculorum, omnibus qui sunt tecum: et in omnibus correcta fuit.

17. So Abraham prayed unto God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bare children

17. Et oravit Abraham ad Deum, et sanavit Deus Abimelech et uxorem ejus, et ancillas ejus, et pepererunt:

18. For the LORD had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife.

18. Quia claudendo clauserat Jehova super omnum vulvam domus Abimelech propter Sarah uxorem Abraham.

1. And Abraham journeyed from thence . What Moses related respecting the destruction of Sodom, was a digression. He now returns to the continuation of his history, and proceeds to show what happened to Abraham; how he conducted himself, and how the Lord protected him; till the promised seed, the future source of the Church, should be born unto him. He also says, that Abraham came into the South country; not that he traveled beyond the limits of the inheritance given to him, but left his former abode, and went towards the South. Moreover; the region which he points out fell chiefly, afterwards, to the lot of the tribe of Judah. It is, however, unknown what was his intention in removing, or what necessity impelled him to change his place: we ought, however, to be persuaded, that he had not transferred his abode to another place for any insufficient cause; especially since a son, whom he had not even dared to wish for, had been lately promised him, through Sarah. Some imagine that he fled from the sad spectacle which was continually presented before his eyes; for he saw the plain, which had lately appeared so pleasant to the view, and so replenished with varied abundance of fruits, transformed into a misshapen chaos. And certainly, it was possible that the whole neighborhood might be affected with the smell of sulphur, as well as tainted with other corruptions, in order that men might the more clearly perceive this memorable judgment of God. Therefore, there is nothing discordant with facts, in the supposition, that Abraham, seeing the place was under the curse of the Lord, was, by his detestation of it, drawn elsewhere. It is also

credible, that (as it happened to him in another place) he was driven away by the malice and injuries of those among whom he dwelt. For the more abundantly the Lord had manifested his grace towards him, the more necessary was it, in return, for his patience to be exercised, in order that he might reflect upon his conditions as a pilgrim upon earth. Moses also expressly declares, that he dwelt as a stranger in the land of Gerar. Thus we see, that this holy family was driven hither and thither as refuse, while a fixed abode was granted to the wicked. But it is profitable to the pious to be thus unsettled on earth; lest, by setting their minds on a commodious and quiet habitation, they should lose the inheritance of heaven.

2. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife . In this history, the Holy Spirit presents to us a remarkable instance, both of the infirmity of man, and of the grace of God. It is a common proverb, that even fools become wise by suffering evil. But Abraham, forgetful of the great danger which had befallen him in Egypt, once more strikes his foot against the same stone; although the Lord had purposely chastised him, in order that the warning might be useful to him, throughout his whole life. Therefore we perceive, in the example of the holy patriarch, how easily the oblivion, both of the chastisements and the favors of God, steals over us. For it is impossible to excuse his gross negligence, in not calling to mind, that he had once tempted God; and that he would have had himself alone to blame, if his wife had become the property of another man. But if we thoroughly examine ourselves scarcely any one will be found who will not acknowledge, that he has often offended in the same way. It may be added, that Abraham was not free from the charge of ingratitude; because, if he had rejected that his wife had been wonderfully preserved to him by the Lord, he would never again, knowingly and willingly, have cast himself into similar danger. For he makes the former favor divinely offered unto him, so far as he is able, of none effect. We must, however, notice the nature of the sin, on which we have touched before. For Abraham did not, for the sake of providing for his own safety prostitute his wife, (as impious men cavil.) But, as he had before been anxious to preserve his life, till he should receive the seed divinely promised to him; so now, seeing his wife with child, in the hope of enjoying so great a blessing, he thought nothing of his wife's danger. 428 Therefore if we thoroughly weigh all things, he sinned through unbelief, by attributing less than he ought to the providence of God. Whence also, we are admonished, how dangerous a thing it is, to trust our own counsels. For Abraham's disposition is right, while fixing his attention on the promise of God; but inasmuch as he does not patiently wait for God's helps but turns aside to the use of unlawful means, he is, in this respect, worthy of censure.

And Abimelech sent . There is no doubt that the Lord purposed to punish his servant, for the counsel he had so rashly taken. And such fruits of distrust do all receive, who rely not, as they ought, on the providence of God. Some perverse men quarrel with this passage; because nothing seems to them more improbable than that a decrepit old woman should be desired by the king, and taken from the bosom of her husband. But we answer, first, that it is not known what her appearance was, except that Moses before declared her to be a person of singular beauty. And it is possible that she was not much worn with age. For we often see some women in their fortieth year more wrinkled than others in their seventieth. But here another thing is to be considered, that, by the unwonted favor of God, her comeliness was preeminent among her other endowments. It might also be, that king Abimelech was less attracted by the elegance of her form, than by the rare virtues with which he saw her, as a matron, to be endued. Lastly, we must remember, that this whole affair was directed by the hand of God, in order that Abraham might receive the due reward of his folly. And as we find that they who are exceedingly acute in discerning the natural causes of things, are yet most blind in reference to the divine judgments; let this single fact suffice us, that Abimelech, being a minister to execute the divine chastisement, acted under a secret impulse.

3. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night . Here Moses shows that the Lord acted with such gentleness, that in punishing his servant, he yet, as a father, forgave him: just as he deals with us, so that, while chastising us with his rod, his mercy and his goodness far exceed his severity. Hence also we infer, that he takes greater care of the pious than carnal sense can understand; since he watches over them while they sleep. This also is to be carefully noticed; that however we may be despised by the worlds we are yet precious to him, since for our sake he reproveth even kings, as it is written in Ps 105:14. But as this subject was more fully discussed in the twelfth chapter, (Ge 12:1) let the readers there seek what I now purposely omit. Whereas, God is said to have come, this is to be applied to the perception of the king, to whom undoubtedly the majesty of God was manifested; so that he might clearly perceive himself to be divinely reprov'd and not deluded with a vain spectre.

Behold, thou art but a dead man . Although God reprov'd king Abimelech, for the sake of Abraham, whom he covered with his special protection; he yet intends to show, generally, his high displeasure against adultery. And, in truth, here is no express mention of Abraham; but rather a general announcement is made, for the purpose of maintaining conjugal fidelity. 'Thou shalt die, because thou hast seized upon a woman who was joined to a husband.' Let us therefore learn, that a precept was given in these words, to mankind, which forbids any one to touch his neighbor's wife. And, truly, since nothing in the life of man is more sacred than marriage, it is not to be wondered at, that the Lord should require mutual fidelity to be cherished between husbands and wives and should declare that he will be the Avenger of it, as often as it is violated. He now addresses himself, indeed, only to one man; but the warning ought to sound in the ears of all, that adulterers -- although they may exult with impunity for a time -- shall yet feel that God, who presides over marriage, will take vengeance on them. (Heb 13:4.)

4. But Abimelech had not come near her . Though Abraham had deprived himself of his wife, the Lord interposed in time to preserve her uninjured. When Moses previously relates, that she was taken away by Pharaoh, he does not say whether her chastity was assailed or not; but since the Lord then also declared himself the vindicator of her whom he now saved from dishonor, we ought not to doubt that her integrity was preserved both times. For why did he now forbid the king of Gerar to touch her, if he had previously suffered her to be corrupted in Egypt? We see, however, that when the Lord so defers his aid as not to stretch out his hand to the faithful, till they are in extreme peril, he shows the more clearly how admirable is his Providence.

Wilt thou slay also a righteous nation? The explanation given by some, that Abimelech here compares himself with the men of Sodom, is perhaps too refined. The following meaning appears to me more simple; namely 'O Lord, although thou dost severely punish adultery, shall thy wrath pour itself out on unoffending men, who have rather fallen into error, than sinned knowingly and willingly?' Moreover, Abimelech seems so to clear himself, as if he were entirely free from blame: and yet the Lord both admits and approves his excuse. We must, however, mark in what way, and to what extent he boasts that his heart and hands are guiltless. For he does not arrogate to himself a purity which is altogether spotless; but only denies that he was led by lust, either tyrannically or purposely, to abuse another man's wife. We know how great is the difference between a crime and a fault ; 429 thus Abimelech does not exempt himself from every kind of charge, but only shows that he had been conscious of no such wickedness as required this severe punishment. The 'simplicity of heart,' of which he speaks, is nothing else than that ignorance which stands opposed to consciousness of guilt; and 'the righteousness of his hands,' is nothing but that selfgovernment, by which men abstain from force and acts of injustice. Besides, the interrogation which Abimelech used proceeded from a common feeling of religion. For nature itself dictates, that God

preserves a just discrimination in inflicting punishments.

6. Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart . We infer from this answer of God, (as I have lately remarked,) that Abimelech did not testify falsely concerning his own integrity. Yet, while God allows that his excuse is true, He nevertheless chastises him. Let us hence learn, that even they who are pure, according to human judgment, are not entirely free from blame. For no error may be deemed so excusable, as to be without some deteriorating admixture. Wherefores it is not for any one to absolve himself by his own judgment; rather let us learn to bring all our conduct to the standard of God. For Solomon does not say in vain, that

'the ways of men seem right to themselves,

but the Lord pondereth the hearts,' (Pr 21:2.)

But if even they who are unconscious to themselves of any evil, do not escape censure; what will be our condition, if we are held inwardly bound by our own conscience?

I also withheld thee . This declaration implies that God had respect, not only to Abraham, but also to the king. For because he had no intention of defiling another man's wife, God had compassion on him. And it frequently happens, that the Spirit restrains, by his bridle, those who are gliding into error; just as, on the other hand, he drives those headlong, by infatuations and a spirit of stupor, who, with depraved affections and lusts, knowingly transgress. And as God brought to the heathen king, who had not been guilty of deliberate wickedness, a timely remedy, in order that his guilt should not be increased; so He proves himself daily to be the faithful guardian of his own people, to prevent them from rushing forward, from lighter faults to desperate crimes.

7. Now therefore, restore the man his wife . God does not now speak of Abraham as of a common man, but as of one who is so peculiarly dear unto himself, that He undertakes the defense of his conjugal bed, by a kind of privilege. He calls Abraham a prophet, for the sake of honor; as if he were charging Abimelech with having injured a man of great and singular excellence; that he might not wonder at the greatness of the punishment inflicted upon him. And although the word prophet is properly the name of an office; yet I think it has here a more comprehensive import, and that it is put for a chosen man, and one who is familiar with God. For since at that time, no Scripture was in existence, God not only made himself known by dreams and visions but chose also to himself rare and excellent men, to scatter abroad the seed of piety, by which the world would become more inexcusable. But since Abraham is a prophet, he is constituted, as it were, a mediator between God and Abimelech. Christ, even then, was the only Mediator; but this was no reason why some men should not pray for others; especially they who excelled in holiness, and were accepted by God; as the Apostle teaches, that

'the fervent prayers of a righteous man avail much.'

(Jas 5:16.)

And we ought not, at this day, to neglect such intercession, provided it does not obscure the grace of Christ, nor lead us away from Him. But that, under this pretext, the Papists resort to the patronage of the dead, is absurd. For as the Lord does not here send the king of Gerar to Noah, or to any one of the dead fathers, but into the presence of the living Abraham; so the only precept we have on this subject is, that, by mutually praying for each other, we should cultivate charity among ourselves.

And if thou restore her not . Hence we are to learn, the intention of those threats and denunciations with which God terrifies men; namely, forcibly to impel those to repentance, who are too backward. In the beginning of this discourse, it had been absolutely declared, 'Thou art a dead man;' now the condition is added, 'Unless thou restore her.' Yet the meaning of both expressions is the same; though at first God speaks more sharply, that he may inspire the offender with the greater terror. But now, when he is subdued, God expresses his intention more clearly, and leaves him the hope of pardon and salvation. Thus is the knot untied, with which many entangle themselves, when they perceive that God does not always, or instantly, execute the punishments which he has denounced; because they deem it a sign, either that God has changed his purpose, or that he pretends a different thing by his word, from that which he has secretly decreed. He threatens destruction to the Ninevites, by Jonah, and afterwards spared them. (Jon 3:4.) The unskilful do not perceive how they can escape from one of two absurdities; namely, that God has retracted his sentence; or that he had feigned himself to be about to do what he really did not intend. But if we hold fast this principle, that the inculcation of repentance is included in all threats, the difficulty will be solved. For although God, in the first instance, addresses men as lost; and, therefore, penetrates them with the present fear of death, still the end is to be regarded. For if he invites them to repentance, it follows, that the hope of pardon is left them, provided they repent.

8. Therefore Abimelech rose early in the morning . Moses teaches how efficacious the oracle had been. For Abimelech, alarmed at the voice of God, arose in the morning, not only that he himself might quickly obey the command enjoined upon him but that he might also exhort his own people to do the same. An example of such ready obedience is shown us in a heathen king, that we may no more make excuses for our torpor, when we are so little profited by the Divine remonstrances. God appeared to him in a dream; but since he daily cries aloud in our ears, by Moses, by the prophets and by the apostles, and finally, by his only-begotten Son, it were absurd to suppose that so many testimonies should avail less than the vision of a single dream.

9. Then Abimelech called Abraham . There are those who suppose that the king of Gerar did not make a complaint against Abraham; but rather declared his own repentance. If, however we fairly weigh his words we find confession mixed with expostulation. Although he complains that Abraham had acted unjustly, he yet does not so transfer the blame to him, as to free himself from all fault. And he may, with justice, impute part of the blame to Abraham, as he does; provided he also acknowledges his own sin. Let we therefore know, that this king did not act as hypocrites are in the habit of doing. For, as soon as ever a pretext is furnished for inculpating others, they confidently absolve themselves: they even esteem it a lawful purgation for themselves, if they can draw others into a participation of their crime. But Abimelech, while he complains that he had been deceived, and had fallen through impudence, yet does not, meanwhile, scruple to condemn himself as guilty of a great sin, 'It is not,' he says, 'through thee, that I and my whole kingdom have been prevented from falling into the greatest wickedness.' No one therefore may exonerate himself from blame, under the pretense that he had been induced by others to sin. It is, however to be noted, that adultery is here called a great sin; because it binds not one man only, but a whole people, as in a common crime. The king of Gerar could not indeed have spoken thus, had he not acknowledged the sacred right of marriage. But, at the present time, Christians -- at least they who boast of the name -- are not ashamed jocularly to extenuate so great a crime, from which even a heathen shrinks with the greatest horror. Let us however know, that Abimelech was a true herald of that divine judgment, which miserable men in vain endeavor to elude by their cavils. And let that expression of Paul ever recur to our memory, 'Be not deceived; because of those things cometh the wrath of God upon the disobedient.' (1Co 5:9; Eph 5:6.) It is not without reason, that he makes this sin common to the whole nation; for when crimes are

committed with impunity, a whole region is, in a certain sense, polluted. And it is especially notorious, that the anger of God is provoked against the whole body of the people, in the person of the king. Hence, with so much the greater earnestness and care, must we beseech God to govern, by his Spirit, those whom he has placed in authority over us; and then, to preserve the country, in which he has granted us a dwelling-place, exempt and pure from all iniquity.

10. What sawest thou that thou hast done this thing ? By this question the king provides against the future. He thinks that Abraham had not practiced this dissimulation inconsiderately; and, since God was grievously offended, he fears to fall again into the same danger. He therefore testifies, by an inquiry so earnest, that he wishes to remedy the evil. Now, it is no common sign of a just and meek disposition in Abimelech, that he allows Abraham a free defense. We know how sharply, and fiercely, they expostulate, who think themselves aggrieved: so much the greater praise, then, was due to the moderation of this king, towards an unknown foreigner. Meanwhile, let us learn, by his example, whenever we expostulate with our brethren, who may have done us any wrong, to permit them freely to answer us.

11. And Abraham said . There are two points contained in this answer. For, first, he confesses that he had been induced by fear to conceal his marriage. He then denies that he had lied for the purpose of excusing himself. Now, although Abraham declares with truth, that he had not concealed his marriage with any fraudulent intention, nor for the purpose of injuring any one; yet he was worthy of censure, because, through fear, he had submitted, so far as he was concerned, to the prostitution of his wife. Wherefore, much cannot be said in his excuse: since he ought to have been more courageous and resolute in fulfilling the duty of a husband, by vindicating, the honor of his wife whatever danger might threaten him. Besides, it was a sign of distrust, to resort to an unlawful subtlety. With regard to his suspicion; although he had everywhere perceived that a monstrous licentiousness prevailed; it was, nevertheless, unjust to form a judgment so unfavourable of a people whom he had not yet known; for he supposes them all to be homicides. But as I have treated, at some length, on these subjects, in the tenth chapter (Ge 10:1); it may now suffice to have alluded to them, by the way. Meanwhile, we come to the conclusion, that Abraham does not contend for the justice of his cause before God; but only shows his earnestness to appease Abimelech. His particular form of expression is, however, to be noticed; for wherever the fear of God does not reign, men easily rush onwards to every kind of wickedness; so that they neither spare human blood, nor restrain themselves from rapine, violence, and contumelies. And doubtless it is the fear of God alone, which unites us together in the bonds of our common humanity which keeps us within the bounds of moderation, and represses cruelty; otherwise we should devour each other like wild beasts. It will, indeed, sometimes happen, that they who are destitute of the fear of God, may cultivate the appearance of equity. For God, in order that he may preserve mankind from destruction, holds in check, with his secret rein, the lusts of the ungodly. It must, however, be always taken into the account, that the door is opened to all kinds of wickedness, when piety and the fear of God have vanished. Of this, at the present day, too clear a proof is manifest, in the horrible deluge of crime, which almost covers the whole earth. For, from what other cause than this arise such a variety of deceptions and frauds, such perfidy and cruelty, that all sense of justice is extinguished by the contempt of God? Now, whenever we have a difficult contest with the corruptions of our own age, let us reflect on the times of Abraham, which, although they were filled with impiety and other crimes yet did not divert the holy man from the course of duty.

12. And yet indeed she is my sister . Some suppose Sarah to have been Abraham's own sister, yet not by the same mothers but born from a second wife. As, however, the name sister has a wider signification among the Hebrews, I willingly adopt a different conjecture; namely, that she was his sister in the second

degree; thus it will be true that they had a common father, that is, a grandfather, from whom they had descended by brothers. Moreover, Abraham extenuates his offense, and draws a distinction between his silence and a direct falsehood; and certainly he professed with truth, that he was the brother of Sarah. Indeed it appears that he feigned nothing in words which differed from the facts themselves; yet when all things have been sifted, his defense proves to be either frivolous, or, at least, too feeble. For since he had purposely used the name of sister as a pretext, lest men should have some suspicion of his marriage; he sophistically afforded them an occasion of falling into error. Wherefore, although he did not lie in words, yet with respect to the matter of fact, his dissimulation was a lie, by implication. He had, however, no other intention than to declare that he had not dealt fraudulently with Abimelech; but that, in an affair of great anxiety, he had caught at an indirect method of escape from death, by the pretext of his previous relationship to his wife.

13. When God caused me to wander 430 Because the verb is here put in the plural number, I freely expound the passage as referring to the angels, who led Abraham through his various wanderings. Some, with too much subtlety, infer from it a Trinity of Persons: as if it had been written: The gods caused me to wander . I grant, indeed, that the noun ■■■■■ (Elohim ,) is frequently taken for God in the Scripture: but then the verb with which it is connected is always singular. Wherever a plural verb is added then it signifies angels or princes. 431 There are those who think that Abraham, because he was speaking with one who was not rightly instructed, spoke thus in conformity with the common custom of the heathen; but, in my opinion, most erroneously. For to what purpose did he, by erecting altars, make it manifest that he was devoted to the service of the only true God, if it were lawful for him afterwards to deny, in words, the very God whom he had worshipped? On which subject we have before spoken, as the case required. Abraham, however, does not complain respecting, the angels, that he had been led astray by their fallacious guidance: but he points out what his own condition formerly was; namely, that having left his own country, he had not only migrated into a distant land, but had been constantly compelled to change his abode. Wherefore there is no wonder, that necessity drove him into new designs. Should any one inquire, why he makes angels the guides of his pilgrimage? the answer is ready; Although Abraham knew that he was wandering by the will and providence of God alone, he yet refers to angels, who, as he elsewhere acknowledges, were given him to be the guides of his journey. The sum of the address is of this tendency; to teach Abimelech, that Abraham was alike free from malicious cunning, and from falsehood: and then, that because he was passing a wandering and unquiet life; Sarah, by agreement, had always said the same thing which she had done in Gerar. This wretched anxiety of the holy man might so move Abimelech to compassion as to cause his anger to cease.

14. And Abimelech took sheep . Abraham had before received possessions and gifts in Egypt; but with this difference, that whereas Pharaoh had commanded him to depart elsewhere; Abimelech offers him a home in his kingdom. It therefore appears that both kings were stricken with no common degree of fear. For when they perceived that they were reproved by the Lord, because they had been troublesome to Abraham; they found no method of appeasing God, except that of compensating, by acts of kindness, for the injury they had brought on the holy man. The latter difference alluded to flowed hence; that Pharaohs being more severely censured, was so terrified, that he could scarcely bear the sight of Abraham: whereas Abimelech, although alarmed, was yet soon composed by an added word of consolation, when the Lord said to him, He is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee. For there is no other remedy for the removal of fear, than the Lord's declaration that he will be propitious. It is indeed of little advantage for the sinner to present to God only what fear extorts. But it is a true sign of penitence, when, with a composed mind and quiet conscience, he yields himself, as obedient and docile, to God. And seeing that Abimelech allowed

Abraham a habitation in his realm, a blessing of no trivial kind followed this act of humanity; because Isaac was born there, as we shall see in the next chapter (Ge 20:1.)

16. He is to thee a covering of the eyes . Because there is, in these words, some obscurity, the passage is variously explained. The beginning of the verse is free from difficulty. For when Abimelech had given a thousand pieces of silver; in order that his liberality might not be suspected, he declare⁶ that he had given them to Abraham; and that since Abraham had been honorably received, his wife was not to be regarded as a harlot. But what follows is more obscure, 'He shall be a veil to thee.' Many interpreters refer this to the gift; in which they seem to me to be wrong. The Hebrews, having no neuter gender, use the feminine instead of it. But Moses, in this place, rather points to the husband; and this best suits the sense. For Sarah is taught that the husband to whom she is joined was as a veil, with which she ought to be covered lest she should be exposed to others. Paul says, that the veil which the woman carries on her head, is the symbol of subjection. (1Co 11:10.) This also belongs to unmarried persons, as referring to the end for which the sex is ordained; but it applies more aptly to married women; because they are veiled, as by the very ordinance of marriage. I therefore thus explain the words, 'Thou, if thou hadst no husband, wouldst be exposed to many dangers; but now, since God has appointed for thee a guardian of thy modesty, it behoves thee to conceal thyself under that veil. Why then hast thou of thine own accords thrown off this covering?' This was a just censure; because Sarah, pretending that she was in the power of her husband, had deprived herself of the divine protection.

Thus she was reprov^{ed} . Interpreters distort this clause also. The natural exposition seems to me to be, that the Lord had suffered Sarah to be reprov^{ed} by a heathen king, that he might the more deeply affect her with a sense of shame. For Moses draws especial attention to the person of the speaker; because it seemed a disgrace that the mother of the faithful should be reprehended by such a master. Others suppose that Moses speaks of the profit which she had received; seeing that she, instructed by such a lesson, would henceforth learn to act differently. But Moses seems rather to point out that kind of correction of which I have spoken; namely, that Sarah was humbled, by being delivered over to the discipline of a heathen man.

17. So Abraham prayed . In two respects the wonderful favor of God towards Abraham was apparent; firsts that, with outstretched hand, He avenged the injury done to him; and, secondly, that, through Abraham's prayer, He became pacified towards the house of Abimelech. It was necessary to declare, that the house of Abimelech had been healed in answer to Abraham's prayers; in order that, by such a benefit, the inhabitants might be the more closely bound to him. A question, however, may be agitated respecting the kind of punishment described in the expression, the whole house was barren. For if Abraham had gone into the land of Gerar, after Sarah had conceived, and if the whole of what Moses has here related was fulfilled before Isaac was born, how was it possible that, in so short a time, this sterility should be manifest? If we should say, that the judgment of God was then made plain, in a manner to us unknown, the answer would not be inappropriate. Yet I am not certain, that the series of the history has not been inverted. The more probable supposition may seem to be, that Abraham had already been resident in Gerar, when Isaac was promised to him; but that the part, which had before been omitted, is now inserted by Moses. Should any one object, that Abraham dwelt in Mamre till the destruction of Sodom, there would be nothing absurd in the belief, that what Moses here relates had taken place previously. Yet, since the correct notation of time does little for the confirmation of our faith, I leave both opinions undecided.

Footnotes

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There seems too much of special pleading in the reasoning of Calvin, both on this occasion, and on that referred to, of a similar kind, in the twelfth chapter. -- Ed.

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"Inter scelus et delictum." -- "Between an act of abandoned wickedness and a mere fault." -- Ed

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"Quando circumduxerunt me angeli." -- "When the angels led me about."

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The reasoning of Calvin is not conclusive. There are cases, though but few, in which Elohim, as here, when joined to a verb plural, signifies, not angels nor princes, but the true God. See Ge 35:7. Calvin, however, in this passage also, translates the word, "angels." Still there seems no sufficient reason for departing from our own received version. Dathe agrees with it. "Deinde cum Deus me ex patria mea migrare juberet." It is also confirmed by the Septuagint version. -- See the Commentary of Professor Bush, in loco. -- Ed.

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