

Genesis 20-21

Sister Act 2

Introduction

Let me ask:

- Who is the goodie and who is the baddie in this story? (*invite responses*)
- Was Abraham's policy justified? (*invite responses*)

Securing Sarah

Has your life ever be threatened? Has you family ever been under threat? How did you try to protect yourself and your family?

Abraham had a security strategy: *"And when God made me wander from my father's household, I said to her. 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother"'"* (v13). In 1991 the Gulf War broke out. At that time my wife, four small children and I were living in a rented house in a Muslim neighbourhood in Pakistan. The Pakistani masses supported Saddam Hussein. Articles printed in Pakistani newspapers incited Pakistanis to kill all Americans. The local police told us to stay in our homes and not go out on the streets. A big demonstration at the American mission hospital was planned. The police said they would try to control the crowds but could give no guarantees. My wife and I were strangers in a foreign land. We had no way of defending ourselves. The only security I could provide was by arranging with neighbours for us to clamber over the wall in case of an attack and find refuge in their property. A Pakistani friend was prepared, if necessary, to hide us in his van and drive us to Lahore.

Genesis 19 emphasised how helpless Lot was in providing protection for his own family. Abraham is painfully conscious of his own limitations. The situation of threat to personal and family security was one that was very familiar to Abram. He was a very vulnerable stranger in the land. Genesis 20 stresses that Abraham was a nomad, a wanderer. In verse 1 we read *"Abraham moved on from there"*, that is, away from the area where Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. If you ever go to Rotorua in New Zealand you might feel like having a peg on your nose because there are so many hot springs in that town that you can never get away from the smell of sulphur. Abraham was interested in living with a peg on his nose. He had just lost his whole neighbourhood in the ancient equivalent of a nuclear attack. No wonder he felt like finding somewhere else to stay. He heads south but his options are limited because he has to avoid the deserts of Kadesh and Shur. So he finds himself in Gerar, near the southern border of the land of Canaan.

His wife was a cause of major anxiety to him because she was ravishingly beautiful. Abraham later tells the king of his first impressions when he came to Gerar, *"I said to myself 'There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife'"* (v11). When Genesis 20 opens Abraham is 99 years old and his wife is 89. People lived a lot longer at that time than they do now. Abraham died at the age of 175. So Abraham was like a modern 50 year old man and his wife was like a woman in her mid 40s. Even by the standards of her own time she was well past childbearing age. However, she was still a stunner to look at.

Abraham was well aware of how men looked at his wife. He had already had one bad experience in Egypt when the Pharaoh had decided to add Sarah to his collection of wives. But he felt so helpless, because he and his wife were strangers in a foreign land. Abraham felt particularly vulnerable when he moved to new cities. There was always the possibility that another powerful man or local ruler, like Pharaoh, would try to take his wife away from him.

There are people on drugs and professional thieves who want to take away our precious things from us. We have been burgled, our next door neighbours have been burgled and our neighbours across the road have been burgled. People living in some of Sydney's inner and western suburbs are at least 40 percent more likely to have their house burgled than those in the rest of the State, according to data from the Australian Institute of Criminology. The threat of burglary has forced us to have security locks placed on all our windows. I don't know what measures you take to protect your valuables. Most people can't afford sophisticated security systems. One common way of securing valuables is through trickery. For example, you might put a sign at the front of the house stating the house has an electronic alarm system installed when in fact you don't. Or, when you go out, you might leave lights on and the radio or TV on to give the impression there are still people at home.

Similarly, Abraham sought to protect himself and his family by means of a clever trick, what you might call his Sister Act. *"And when God made me wander from my father's household, I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: Everywhere we go, say of me, 'He is my brother''"* (v13). So Genesis 20 begins with Abraham, having arrived in Gerar and recognising that people had no fear of God. So he resorts to his usual trick, a trick that he had used everywhere he had traveled, a trick that usually worked: *"For a while he stayed in Gerar, and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, 'She is my sister'"* (vvlb-2a). Sister act!

To understand Abraham's policy realize that ancient culture was patriarchal. The local king, Abimelech illustrates a common ancient aversion to adultery (vv4-5). But a despot knows how to take a married woman as his wife and yet avoid adultery. It's easy, just kill the husband. Abraham's policy aimed at creating a security fence around Sarah and himself. According to standard ancient cultural mores, any person wanting to take Sarah as his wife would approach Abraham first, as her brother and, therefore, her guardian and protector. If a ruler or other powerful person should make such an approach to Abraham then Abraham has advance warning of danger and can take whatever preventative action he deems necessary, for example, fleeing the territory concerned. This is why Abraham and Sarah agree to the 'sister act'.

In Abraham's mind the need for such a policy is justified by what happens next: *"Then Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her"* (v2). Not a word is wasted here. It is as "king" that Abimelech does this. There is no "by your leave" here, no attempt to sit down with Abraham first and seek his permission. No! Abimelech is the king. As such he takes what he wants. He wants Sarah so he simply sends for her and takes her. Others may have observed the protocol of negotiating with the brother. But not Abimelech! He just takes what he wants. Abraham's policy has evidently worked on many other occasions (v13) but now for the second time it fails to provide him with the security fence he needs.

We learn from verse 3: *“But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, ‘You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman”* (v3). Abimelech is indignant, *“Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation!”* These words deliberately evoke Abraham’s prayer concerning Sodom and Gomorrah. There was nothing innocent about Sodom and Gomorrah and there has been nothing innocent about Abimelech’s behaviour. But he won’t acknowledge any blame. So he blusters, *“Did he not say to me, ‘She is my sister, and didn’t she also say, ‘He is my brother?’ I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands”* (v5). His protestations and posturing are highly amusing and hypocritical to the ancient Jewish reader. Are we really expected to believe that this man would have kept his mitts off Sarah had he known she was married to Abraham? No way! There is no fear of God in this place. Abimelech has just acted like a despot and has simply taken Sarah without bothering about standard cultural protocols. He would not have hesitated for a moment to kill Abraham in order to claim his wife.

God humours Abimelech: *“Then God said to him in the dream, ‘Yes, I know that you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her (v6). In other words, ‘I’ll accept this much, that you didn’t know she was a married woman and I want you to be perfectly clear about one thing. There is absolutely no way I’m going to let you lay your hands on her.”* So God adds, *“Now return the man’s wife, for he is a prophet”* (v7a). That is, *“Abraham is a man I confide in, a man who has a special relationship with me. Don’t you dare play games with him. You’ve treated the lives of Abraham and his wife as though they were in your hands. I’m turning this around. Your life and the lives of your family are now in his hands. Only if Abraham prays for you is there any possibility of life for you. If you refuse to return his wife to him then he will not pray for you and you will die.”* Remember, it was Abraham’s prayer for Lot that saved his life. Abraham is presented yet again as the man who stands between men and life and death.

Ancient despots like Abimelech had to learn to treat Abraham with enormous respect. In the same way, no matter how self-sufficient you may feel, don’t mistake the mistake of trivialising Jesus and feeling that you can do what you want with what belongs to him. Jesus holds your life or your death in his hands. He determines whether you will draw your next breath or not. He determines where you will spend eternity, whether in heaven or in hell.

As soon as everyone is up the next morning Abimelech tells his officials what has happened. When Abraham first arrived in Gerar there was no fear of God to be seen. Now these people know that the God of Abraham is someone to be feared. But Abimelech won’t accept any personal blame for this situation. He calls Abraham in and treats him as though all the wrong was on Abraham’s side: *“What have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should not be done”* (v9). What blindness, self-righteousness and hypocrisy! Abimelech had no right to take Sarah even if he had not known she was Abraham’s wife. Abimelech has lost face. The way to regain face and his standing is by making out that Abraham is fully responsible for this situation. Abraham, however, explains that he had very solid and legitimate reasons for acting in the way that he had. There was no fear of God in Gerar when he arrived and he was telling no lie when he said Sarah was his sister because she was indeed his half-sister.

Abraham had used a perfectly valid security trick. The problem does not lie in Abraham's strategy but in Abimelech's despotism.

Jim, a regular churchgoer, was in hospital fighting for his life. It was touch and go whether he would survive. As the pastor stood next to the bed, Jim's condition appeared to deteriorate rapidly. Jim motioned frantically for something to write on. The pastor lovingly handed him pen and paper. Jim used his last bit of energy to scribble a note. Then he died. The pastor thought it best not to look at the note at that time, so he placed it in his jacket pocket. At the funeral, as he was finishing his eulogy, he realized that he was wearing the same jacket that he was wearing when Jim died. He said, "You know, Jim handed me a note just before he died. I haven't looked at it yet, but knowing Jim, I'm sure there's a word of inspiration for us all." He opened the note and read, "Hey, you're standing on my oxygen tube."

Abimelech's life and household are in Abraham's hands. Abraham controls Abimelech's oxygen supply. The chapter begins with Abimelech trying to take away from Abraham his most precious possession. It ends with Abimelech enriching Abraham further with yet more sheep, cattle and slaves and returning his dear wife to him, plus giving a thousand shekels of silver. He is desperate to be on the right side of Abraham because he and his family will only live if Abraham prays for them and Abimelech is fearful that Abraham will not pray for him. The chapter begins with Abraham's vulnerability to the despotic Abimelech. But it ends with Abimelech being like putty in Abraham's hands.

Securing Isaac

Genesis 20 ends with a reminder to Abraham of the power of God. God clearly promised to give a son to Abraham and Sarah. God gives Abraham great grounds for confidence that he will fulfill his promise. He gets Abraham to pray for the opening of the wombs of Abimelech's wife and the wombs of his slave girls. Abraham prays and God answers. No Abraham knows there can be no doubt that God controls the wombs of all women. It is God who enables Bonnie to be pregnant. It is God who enables Sunny to be pregnant. So the very next thing we read is how God does for Sarah what he had promised. He enables her to conceive and give birth to Isaac. What a wonderful God our God is! As she holds "Laughter", that is, Isaac, in her hands she cries, "God has brought me laughter."

But 2 to 3 years later something happens that wipes the smile off Sarah's face. When Hagar became pregnant with Ishmael she despised Sarah. Her son has inherited his mother's contempt for Sarah and her son Isaac and he expresses his hatred for Isaac in the sight of Sarah. Sarah decides he has to go. Ishmael may not be Sarah's son but he is Abraham's and Abraham loves him. He knows how much Sarah hates Hagar and her son and the matter distresses him. However, God tells him that in this case it is necessary to send Hagar and Ishmael away because God's promise to Abraham will be worked out through Isaac alone, not Ishmael. So while Ishmael stays around he remains a threat to the promise. But, as verse 20 informs us, "God was with the boy as he grew up" and the first proof of this is the way God provided water for him in the desert.

The chapter ends with Abimelech and Abraham agreeing to enter into a peace treaty. Abimelech is scared of Abraham because of his prior experience. He knows a very frightening God is with Abraham. So he wants reassurance that Abraham will not later turn on him or his descendants and his actions imply that he knows full well he has

wronged Abraham. But note verse 23: "Show to me and the country where you are living as an alien" - talk about rubbing it in! "This is my land, not yours!" Abimelech says. Abimelech claims he has treated Abraham with kindness because he returned his wife to him. Abraham promises to treat him with kindness.

A problem soon arises because Abimelech's servants act like their king had done. Understand the imagery here. Abraham speaks of having dug the well which Abimelech's servants now seize. The imagery of digging a well is associated with sexual relationships in the ancient world. This passage cleverly reminds us of what happened when Abimelech seized Abraham's wife. When a complaint was brought before him by God he protested his innocence. He said, "I didn't know" and he blamed Abraham. But now a complaint is brought to Abimelech by Abraham. Abimelech, true to character, protests his innocence. He says, "I didn't know" and again he blames Abraham: "You did not tell me, and I heard about it only today." And yet again, it is action by Abraham which enables a peaceful, stable relationship to exist between these two men. It is because Abraham gives sheep, cattle and seven ewe lambs to Abimelech that Abimelech agrees to let Abraham live in the land. In this way God provides a place in which the restless wanderer, Abraham, can live for a while.

You and I live in a world of threat. There is a limit to what we can do to protect ourselves. When you feel threatened hang on to the promises of God. Don't trust in your own ability to make your life secure. In your prayers make it a practice to express your reliance on God.