

God disciplines us so that He can bless us.

We find this lesson a lesson that the people of Israel under Moses in the wilderness needed to learn over and over.

God promised and commanded, they failed, God had to scold them and teach them again so that He could bless them.

Hebrews 12:7-11

We are going to walk through this chapter in four steps and learn God's lesson to His people along the way.

Actually, the lesson comes to us in 10 pieces,

10 lessons that add up to one big lesson to Abraham and through him to the people of Israel, and through them to us.

Abraham is learning that God sometimes scolds those whom He loves. And, we need the scolding.

I. God protects His promise. vss. 1-7

Abraham has travelled south after witnessing the destruction of the whole valley in which Sodom and Gomorrah had been.

We don't know why... presumably to find pasture for his flocks.

He finds himself near the lands of the Philistines in an area ruled by a sort of regional king, Abimelech.

And, Abimelech takes Sarah, Abraham's wife, to be his own wife.

But, he doesn't know it is Abraham's wife because Abraham has told him that she is his sister. Why?

Well, the text doesn't tell us why Abimelech would do this.

Maybe he finds her attractive... though she is 90. No doubt Sarah is a very pretty woman.

More likely, Abimelech is interested in a political alliance with a very wealthy man.

In any case, Abraham agrees with the transaction... wrongly. He shouldn't have done it.

Why does Abraham do this? He tells us in vs. 11. He is fearful. Abimelech might kill him.

Lesson 1: Temptation often follows great moments of communion with God.

Who would have thought after the amazing promises of God in chs. 17 and 18...

When God gives Abraham and Sarah their new names.

Abraham obeys God in the covenant sign of circumcision.

God visits again and speaks to Abraham as a friend... a baby within the year! The promised son of the covenant.

Then God shares His plans with Abraham and Abraham pleads with God for Lot and God hears his prayer!

Abraham, the friend of God who's words move the hand of God...

will, within the year, have in his arms the promised son of the covenant.

But, Abraham is prepared to put the whole thing at risk, trying to secure his personal safety and security in his own way.

Can't God protect Abraham? Sure He can. why can Abraham not trust God?

Why, after all Abraham has seen God do, can he not trust Him now? You might ask this too of Israel in the wilderness.

After all that they had seen God do, how could they become fearful and fail to trust Him?

But, this is often the case for the people of God.

Consider Elijah after that awesome moment on Mt. Carmel in 1 Kings 18.

Elijah had prayed and there had been drought for 3 years because the land was filled with Baal worship.

King Ahab and queen Jezebel were looking to kill him as they killed the other prophets.

So, Elijah challenged them to a duel of prophets on Mt. Carmel... and he wins!

The people slaughter all 950 of the prophets of Baal, the queen's friends.

Jezebel threatens Elijah. **1 Kings 19:2-3** Elijah ran for his life and hid in a cave.

Why was he so afraid? Where was his faith?

Or, consider Peter, after spending three years as Jesus' best friend, and all the teaching and miracles he had seen.

And, there he was in the courtyards as Jesus was standing trial... "No, I do not know the man." Three times!

What colossal failure of faith!

And, now Abraham, after talking to God as His friend and witnessing the awesome power of God. He's scared.

So, now Sarah is in another man's house.

"But God" = totally changed the situation... (vs. 3)

Why? Well, the context of this chapter in the story of Abraham answers the question.

God has made a promise to Abraham. God is personally invested in keeping His promises.

And, so, God has a nonnegotiable interest in protecting Abraham's marriage.

So, God came to Abimelech in a dream... this, in itself, is surprising. We'll get back to it.

What does God say in the dream?

Lesson 2: God cares about marriage and keeping promises.

God appears to Abimelech and threatens him with death because he has taken a married woman... even though he didn't know it.

vs. 3 "You are a dead man... because she is married."

Even this early in the Bible, God is protecting marriage as an inviolable institution. Adultery = sin

God made a promise to Abraham. God is going to keep His promise.

We are supposed to reflect the character, image, of God. When you get married, you make a promise to each other under God.

If you break that promise the penalty is death! This is not simply an arbitrary law. This is what God thinks about it.

In American culture today, we don't have much patience for this kind of teaching... half of our marriages end in divorce.

There is an entire subculture in our nation devoted to enticing people to cheat on their spouses.

People say that they are not happy in their marriage. It's not what they want. They want someone else.

And, often that someone else is married, or has been, or will be...

But your happiness is quite beside the point.

What about your promise? What about your children? What about obeying God? What about avoiding judgment?

And, as it has always been, if you keep your hands off of other people's wives and husbands, everything in life goes better.

Furthermore, we can see that God is angry at Abimelech for violating Abraham's marriage even though Abimelech didn't know that he did!

Apparently, sin is still sin... even when the sinner does not know he is sinning.

Ignorance is no excuse. It doesn't work with God to say, "I didn't know!"

And, Abimelech didn't. Why? Because Abraham deceived him.

Lesson 3: Our sin can cause others to stumble.

It was Abraham's deception that got Abimelech in trouble with God.

It was Abraham's deception that put Sarah in a compromising situation.

We discover in this story that Abraham appears to be thinking about no one but himself. It is sad. We expect better of him.

And, God does of us too...

We are to live in such a way that helps others and leads them away from sin, not into it.

But, something else is going on, something beyond Abraham's control.

Lesson 4: God protects people from sin, often in ways we are unaware of.

We discover here the power of God in protecting Abimelech from further sin. (vs. 6)

This is remarkable... how did God do it? We do not know.

vs 17 tells us that Abimelech and his people needed healing. Maybe it was some sort of sickness... a potentially deadly disease.

This would explain Abimelech's attention to God and the reaction of his servants.

In any case, God, entirely without Abimelech knowing, or knowing much about God, was protecting him.

This happens with us too. I think back at my life and marvel at the ways that God has guarded me from sin and temptation.

The Bible tells us that God only allows temptation that we are able to bear. **1 Cor. 10:11-13**

Maybe you struggle in school or as an athlete... God might be protecting you from the sin of pride.

At the end of 2 Cor. we discover that God gave Paul a "thorn in the flesh" (some sickness) to keep him from exalting himself.

You might wonder why you do not have a girlfriend or boyfriend... God could be protecting you from sexual sin.

You might ask God, "Why don't you give me more money?" God might be protecting you from greed.

I know that God used my parents to protect me from many sins while I was growing up.

II. God teaches His children. vss. 8-13

Romans 15:4 Well, then, what are we to learn?

vss. 8-10

So, now Abimelech pulls his people together and discusses the situation, and what God has said to him.

They are rightfully scared... so they meet with Abraham and have some questions for him.

Abimelech wants to know why.

"Have I wronged you?" (vs. 9)

"This is not the sort of thing people ought to do to one another." (vs. 9) And, Abimelech is entirely correct.

(vs. 10) "What have you seen that you have done this?" = Did you see something in Me? Was I offensive?

Then Abraham gives his explanation... and it is terrible. **vss. 11-13**

The next lesson comes from the first thing that Abraham says to Abimelech in the explanation.

Lesson 5: When we assess other people we are often wrong.

And, Abraham has to learn this lesson from the mouth of the person he has misjudged.

Have you ever been in such a situation?

If, not, it is surely not because you have never misjudged anyone... but that they have not told you about it.

They may still be hurting.

Well, Abraham has explained to Abimelech that he thought he was a violent Godless lustful heathen. Was he ever wrong!

But, we can understand why Abraham might have thought this.

He had just witnessed the obliteration of Sodom and Gomorrah and the corruption of his friend Lot.

Possibly, the world seemed full of violent Godless lustful heathen just now.

Often our own experiences color the way we see people around us...

Church people are hypocrites. Men are monsters. Women are gossips. Liberals are jerks. Conservatives are selfish.

But, then, we too are wrong. Be careful... you don't know much about most people.

We learn some things in this story about Abimelech. In fact, he turns out to be a fairly amazing guy.

OK, he's a polygamist. Abraham is as well... that's not good, but God is going to deal with that later in the Bible.

vs. 4 We learn that Abimelech, whatever his faith is... and he is probably a pagan, not worshipping the God of Abraham...
Abimelech knows enough about God to expect Him to be just and love righteousness.

vs. 5 Abimelech points out that Abraham has lied to him... Abraham who is supposed to be an eventual blessing to others...
Here Abraham is a terrible witness to a man he ought to be representing God to.

vs. 5 Abimelech protests to God that he has integrity in his heart and that his hands are innocent.
And, in vs. 6 God agrees with him! God says that He has kept him from sinning against Him, God.

vs. 8 So concerned is he that Abimelech gets up early to talk to his servants about the dream. All are frightened.
Abimelech most certainly fears God. And, then he protests his innocence to Abraham.

By any measure, whatever he believes about God, Abimelech is a man who fears God and wants to be righteous.
He's a good man, and as we shall discover, obedient to God and generous to Abraham.

Abraham was flat wrong in his assessment of Abimelech, embarrassingly wrong.
Abraham owes the man an apology... but there is none recorded here. We can hope that he did apologize.
But, in any case we learn that the best of men with the deepest faith can be horribly wrong about other people...
And, frankly we see this in the Church all the time today.
Good Christian people thinking others are out to get them because of an odd comment or plain misjudgment.
Principle: Believe the best in others unless you know otherwise.

Lesson 6: More on temptation... Old habits die hard.

Abraham gives a second answer to Abimelech's questions... **vss. 12-13**

The text here, in contrast to Gen. 12, says nothing about Sarah's beauty...

no, apparently by now this practice had become family policy.

It isn't that Abraham has relapsed. The fact is that he never learned the lesson the first time.

Have you ever noticed that the same sins keep popping up?

You have to make decisions to combat sinful habits. Pray. Get wise counsel. Make commitments. Be accountable.

Lesson 7: Sin often leads to lame excuses.

Here he has given three... and they are all lame:

First, (vs. 11) Abraham explains to Abimelech that he was fearful of Abimelech... and after all he has seen God do.

Second, (vs. 12) well... "she actually is my sister," says Abraham.

Third, (vs. 13) it is all God's fault. Listen to what Abraham says.

"God caused me to wander" = actually God did nothing of the sort. God sent him out with a promise to a promised land.

When have we heard this kind of thing before?

In the garden... Adam, "the woman whom You gave me."

But Abraham felt the danger and the insecurity of it all. "Sarah, here's how you will help protect us."

It was a bad idea. God did not need the help. It went badly right away. But, Abraham never gave it up.

You can make excuses for your sin. You might even convince yourself. But you will not fool God.

III. God expects obedience. vss. 14-16

So, we see a marvelous example of obedience from Abimelech.

In fact, Abimelech literally puts everything he has into obeying God.

Lesson 8: Wholehearted obedience goes beyond God's command.

The command (vs. 7) was to "restore the man's wife." But, Abimelech goes way beyond that. Why? Because he fears God.

Often when I meet with people about various issues in life I am asked, "What do I have to do?"

Too often, what that means is, "What is the least I can do?" we want the minimum that qualifies for obedience.

We don't want to get carried away... none of this "sell all you have, give it to the poor, and come follow Me" sort of thing.

Do you know what this attitude is? It is essentially a closet legalism. "I want to do just enough to please God."

But you cannot earn God's favor in this way. Righteousness is by faith or not at all.

Furthermore, this is the wrong policy in general

Who wants a husband who says, "What is the least I can do to be considered a good husband?"

Who wants a father... an employee... a pastor...

No, there must be a better way than this sort of legalistic attempt to measure up.

And it is just here that Abimelech's behavior is instructive.

He is not acting the man who says, "What do I have to do?"

It is as if he comes to Abraham in obedience to God and says, "What all can I do for you?"

Do you see the difference?

This is the person who wants to obey, to go over and above.

How can I be your best friend? Your most faithful servant? How can I obey the best?

It is a very different way of thinking. It is the Christian way of thinking.

Lesson 9: When God restores us and the messes we make, He goes beyond what we think.

Through Abimelech, look what God does for Abraham!

Again, just as God did after Abraham's mess in Egypt, he comes out looking like gold... with more gold (silver).

The lesson is not, "Look how lying can get you ahead."

It is a look into the grace of our God.

IV. God uses His people. vss. 17-18

In this case "his people" is Abraham... whom God tells Abimelech in the dream, "he is a prophet."

But, you would have to say that as far as Abimelech is concerned, Abraham has not been a very good prophet.

Lesson 10: Even when we mess up and make a mess, God still uses us in His plans. God does not give up on His people.

Now at the end, God still uses Abraham. Abraham prays and God answers his prayer and restores Abimelech.

Even though Abraham has made such a mess, and had to be taught a lesson. God is not done with him.

You might wonder, how is Abraham a prophet? We do not read much in the way of prophecies from his mouth.

That's true, but in the Bible prophets do two things.

Prophets speak to people about God. They tell the people of their day just what God wants them to hear.

Prophets speak to God about people. Moses does this. Ezekiel does this... many more prophets. Abraham does this.

Here Abraham is going before God on behalf of Abimelech... as he did for Lot.

And, this is our calling today as God's witnesses.

We are to talk to people about God... and talk to God about people.

Even if we are bad witnesses and our lives are not perfect. Even when we demonstrate that we are still sinners.

Even then, God is not done using us as His witnesses.

So, Abraham hasn't been kicked out of the promise. He is still God's and God is still his.