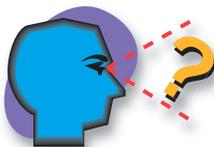




Genesis

Responses to the Questions



NOTE; BE SURE TO ANSWER ALL THE QUESTIONS YOURSELF BEFORE READING THE ANSWERS IN ORDER TO MAKE THE MOST OF THIS STUDY.

Abraham and Abimelech Read Genesis 20:1-18

1. Responses will vary. Abraham resorts to deception out of fear of losing his life. Protecting his life this way, in his nomadic existence, apparently has become habitual for him. Picture Abimelech's men arriving at Abraham's tent to take Sarah away. Was it her reputation as a great beauty that provoked the abduction? We don't know. [Note: The average age span of that day was about 120-130 years; at the age of 90, Sarah would have been at the stage of her life equivalent to a 40-50 year old woman today.] We do know that fear gripped Abraham, and he resorted to the most expedient way of preserving his life. What might have been going through his mind? "Surely God knows why I have to do this. Surely He will forgive me for it. He doesn't want me dead! I'm sure He'll understand." Any of us who have done what we know is wrong to do, even in a small thing, will be familiar with this line of thinking. It is the beginning of presumption, which, when it starts small this way, is always at its most lethal. Those in positions of authority, those with superior knowledge and experiences, and those who have been abundantly blessed by God are perhaps those most vulnerable to it. The problem with even small episodes of presumption lies in the devious and subtle nature of sin. We always believe we have control over it and can break out of it when we want to. "Just this one time" reflects that kind of gullibility. But St. Paul accurately describes the power of sin as that of a slave master. When we give into it, we lose our freedom from it. "What then? Are we to sin because we are...under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you yield yourselves to any one as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?" (Rom. 6:15-16) The power of sin to enslave is formidable.

This evidence of possible presumption in Abraham is something worth watching.

2. Responses will vary. There seems to be some urgency for the release of Sarah. God appears to the one who is able to make that happen. Although Abimelech suggests that his hands are entirely clean, God reminds him that it took a special intervention to prevent "a near occasion of sin" from turning into actual sin. And how did Abimelech position himself to this near occasion of sin? It was by his abduction of Sarah from Abraham. Why take even a "sister" from a "brother," if not for selfish purposes? Abimelech has no claim on Sarah. That was his offense.

3. God promised Abraham that within a year a son would be born to Sarah. Any sexual contact that Sarah has with anyone other than Abraham might cast doubt on the legitimacy of that birth. God does not let that happen. He preserves His plan to give Sarah a son from Abraham.

4. Abimelech has legitimate anger against Abraham for his deception, since it was the cause of his illness and the threat of death. It wouldn't have been unreasonable for him to think, "Can't God find better quality people to do His work?" Imagine having to ask for prayers that will save your life from the very one who got you into trouble in the first place. Yet God tells Abimelech that Abraham is a "prophet" (the simplest meaning of the word "prophet" is "one who speaks for God") and that healing will be mediated through the prayers of this prophet, flawed as he is.



Responses to the Questions (cont.)

Catholic Scripture Study

Abraham and Abimelech (cont.)

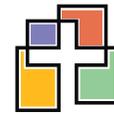
This episode is the first example in Scripture of how God continues to work His will through weak and even sinful humans if they have been chosen by Him to be in positions of authority, as Abraham clearly had. The work that He does through them is for the sake of others; it does not cancel out their responsibility for their own choices. Another example of this is when Moses was in the desert with the rebellious people of Israel. They needed water, so God told Moses to speak to a rock and water would flow from it (see Numbers 20:7-13). Instead, Moses hit the rock twice with his miraculous rod. In an earlier episode, when the people of Israel had first left Egypt for the Promised Land, God had told Moses to strike a rock with the rod for water (see Ex. 17:1-7). This time, however, the instructions were different. But Moses didn't obey them. The water did gush out for the thirsty people to drink, but Moses himself was punished by God for disobeying His word.

In the New Testament, we see the same principle at work. For example, in John 11:45-53, Caiaphas, who was high priest in the year of Jesus' Passion, prophesied that Jesus would die for the nation of Israel. John writes, "He did not say this of his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad." Caiaphas is a man who speaks the most profound truth of the gospel in his role as high priest, yet he heads up a party of conspirators to kill the Son of God!

In Matt. 23:1-3, Jesus tells the people what the simple rule is to be towards people who are in positions of God's authority but who do not live up to the truth: do what they tell you to do (because the truth they teach is God's gift to you through these individuals), but don't do what they do. A sinful pope or priest can still be a vessel of God's grace, just as Abraham and Moses and Caiaphas were. Our Catholic confidence in this truth is entirely biblical.

5. Sarah may well have had her reservations about the wisdom of the plan, not to mention concerns about her own safety. Yet she submitted to Abraham, regardless of all that she might have raised in objection to it. St. Peter looks back to her as an example of the beauty of wifely submission within marriage, a beauty that is greater than what jewelry and fine clothes can produce. We should be careful to understand his words in their context, so that submission does not become a servile reaction to a ruthless master. It is clear from vs. 7 that husbands are to treat their wives with respect, fully recognizing them as joint recipients of God's grace. Anything less than that kind of treatment will result in "hindered prayers."

It is in this context that St. Peter urges wives to be submissive to their husbands. Sometimes there are occasions when a wife has reservations about or objections to a plan her husband has made. If it does not involve breaking God's law, it behooves the wife to be submissive rather than cantankerous, critical, or stiff-necked. The reference to Sarah's submission is an apt one, since Abraham's plan was more dangerous than plans most modern husbands would come up with! Nevertheless, she submitted, and God protected her from danger, both from sexual advances and for a sullied reputation. The lesson is a good one: "...as Sarah obeyed Abraham...you are now her children if you do right and let nothing terrify you." (1 Pet. 3:6)



Responses to the Questions (cont.)

Catholic Scripture Study

Abraham and Abimelech (cont.)

6. Responses will vary. Some will find it perplexing that God doesn't scold Abraham for his lapse and that He uses him to pray for Abimelech's healing. Maybe it looks like God is winking at this kind of dishonesty. It makes us uncomfortable. What are the possibilities? One is that this lapse is minor in God's eyes, committed under the influence of fear and easily put aside. Another is that it is seemingly minor but represents something serious underneath it. In that case, we would expect some kind of reaction from God, either a rebuke or possibly a test to see if, after all, Abraham is really His friend. Time will tell.

The Birth of Isaac

Read Genesis 21:1-7

7. Responses will vary. Sometimes the deepest kind of joy in our lives comes over the things that at one time seemed the most impossible. When Sarah first laughed at the idea of having a child after so many years of being barren and Abraham being so old, there must have been a good bit of incredulity in it, or she would not have tried to deny it. When her son is born, he becomes the living proof that God keeps His promises, no matter how impossible they seem. Sarah's attitude towards God must have grown from reverent respect (she feared she would be in trouble if she acknowledged her laugh) to deep love for and confidence in Him as she held her son in her arms. The birth of this child, for Sarah, was not just a demonstration of God's power and trustworthiness. It was a profoundly personal expression of His love for her ("God has made laughter for me"). She seems to be liberated by this encounter with Him, for now she envisions others sharing her laughter of delight, with no need to deny it. The laughter will be a response to an unthinkable reversal - that which had seemed too good to be true has actually happened.

Sarah's prophetic word about the effect that the news of the birth of her son will have on "every one who hears" is a foreshadowing of Mary's prophetic word about the effect of the news of the birth of her Son: "All generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48). The mother of Israel foreshadows the Mother of the Church.

A Problem Over Ishmael

Read Genesis 21:8-21

8. Sarah probably could see the handwriting on the wall. Ishmael, as Abraham's firstborn son, would try to pull rank on Isaac. If this was allowed to fester, it would undoubtedly present problems for the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham to make a great nation of him through Sarah's son. What kind of rights as the firstborn would Ishmael have? Would he receive the patriarchal blessing instead of Isaac? Would Ishmael continue to harass Isaac, especially if Isaac's unique role as the child of promise in the family became clear with time? It is not hard to see why Sarah urged Abraham to take action.

9. Abraham loves Ishmael. His affections are deeply attached to the boy, which would be normal. It will cause him agony to lose him and his mother. That pain, of course, will be the consequence of a mistake made long ago. To do God's will by making Isaac his sole heir will require a kind of death for Abraham. It will mean facing up to the weakness that has developed in his heart for Ishmael. It is a moment of decision.

10. It appears that Abraham took this idea to God; vs. 12 seems to be God's end of a conversation Abraham was having with Him. This time, God has an opportunity to respond to Sarah's suggestion. Surprisingly, perhaps, to Abraham, this time Sarah is right.



Responses to the Questions (cont.)

Catholic Scripture Study

A Problem Over Ishmael (cont.)

11. Responses will vary. Sarah's concern over the future roles of Ishmael and Isaac seem to find some justification in the fact that God endorses the expulsion of Hagar and her son from the household. This severe action suggests that Abraham's weakness concerning Ishmael was significant. He has shown himself in the past to be very attached to him; perhaps this attachment would threaten Abraham's resolve to follow through with the terms of the covenant he had made with God to make Isaac his heir. Maybe there was some deep ambivalence in his heart about Ishmael. The harsh remedy was the most effective way of getting to the root of this kind of weakness. It was severe but necessary.

God promises to be merciful to Hagar and Ishmael, which must have eased Abraham's mind somewhat. One has to wonder, though, why Abraham gave only bread and a skin of water to them when they set out from the camp. Did he secretly hope they would have to quickly return when the food ran out? We don't know. We do know that God intervened to rescue them and that Ishmael grew up to fulfill God's promises about him.

In this, as in the case of Lot, God shows Himself to be very responsive to the ones that His chosen people hold dear. Even in the midst of a severe remedy for weakness, God is a Lover.

A Covenant with Abimelech

Read Genesis 21:22-34

12. Abimelech may have been very impressed with how God was so protective of Abraham and how effective his prayers were. He must have had a reputation of being highly favored by God. Perhaps it seemed wise to Abimelech and Philcor to secure for themselves an enduring relationship with Abraham. He would be an excellent ally. First, however, there is the need to establish honesty and loyalty between them. This may be a veiled reference to Abraham's earlier deception concerning Sarah. In any case, Abraham agrees to deal honorably with Abimelech and his family. The men make a formal agreement, a covenant. This is the first time in Scripture we see a covenant being made among men; before this they have been initiated by God. This is not to suggest that men did not make covenants until this time; rather, it suggests that what men do among themselves to secure peace and well-being is actually a reflection of God's own nature, Who continually extends to man the opportunity to live as a member of His family, in covenant with Him.

13. Responses will vary. We know from previous chapters that Abraham is a man of faith, a friend of God. We also know that he isn't perfect. He has both inspired and disappointed us. He has lived with God for more than twenty-five years by the time we reach these chapters. He has not turned back from following Him or trusting in His promises, but he has stumbled and stalled out a few times.

In Genesis 20-21, we have a chance to ponder some of the weaknesses we see in Abraham. The most disturbing one is the possible presumption he has in his relationship with God, a confidence that leads him to repeat an earlier misstep. What would prompt this kind of presumption? We don't know for sure, but usually it comes when one has lost the balance between confidence and humility, when one thinks everything is "in the bag."



Responses to the Questions (cont.)

Catholic Scripture Study

A Covenant with Abimelech (cont.)

In this particular case, has Abraham lived so long with God that he can't imagine that anything he could do would cause him to forfeit what God has promised? If so, the soil of his soul would be fertile for presumption. Indeed, if he believes that nothing can happen to revoke God's covenant with him, he would not have much incentive to strengthen himself where he knows he is weak. Did we signs of that in his reluctance to let Ishmael go?

To sum up, we have seen many wonderful elements in Abraham's life of faith and trust in God. Yet we also see some evidence that Abraham may believe that his life as God's chosen man is a sure thing, with nothing left to question.

Is he right? We shall see.