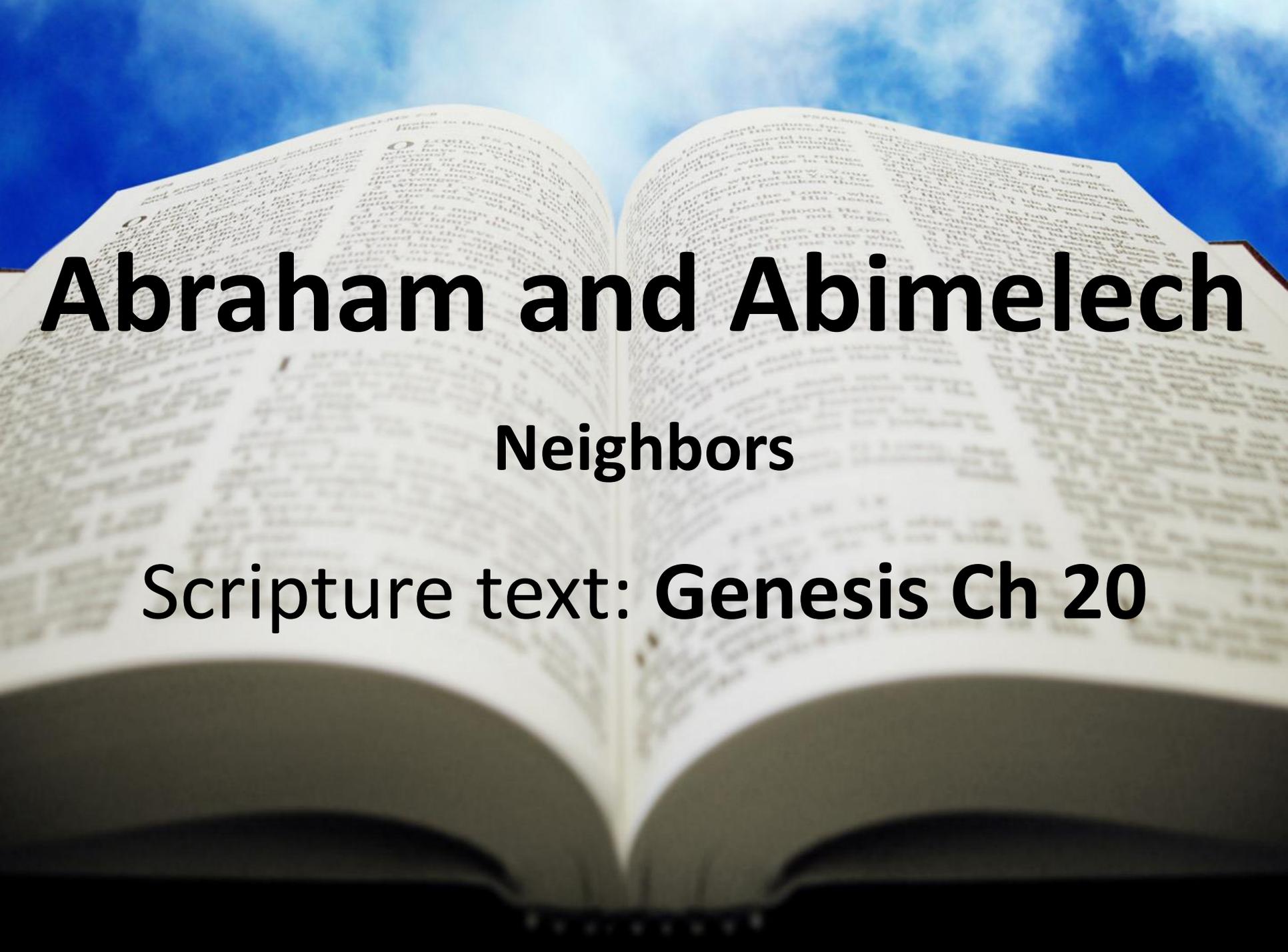


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Abraham and Abimelech

Neighbors

Scripture text: **Genesis Ch 20**

We make our friends and our enemies,” wrote G.K. Chesterton, “but God appoints our next-door neighbor.” Someone has defined a neighbor as “**a person who can get into your house in a minute, but it takes two hours to get him out.**” Neighbors can be a great source of blessing and even grow closer to us than some of our relatives. “Better is a neighbor that is near than a brother far off,” counseled Solomon (Prov. 27:10). However, neighbors can be a problem at times, whether believers or unbelievers. In fact, **we can be a problem to our neighbors!**

We usually think of Abraham as a man who was always performing great exploits of faith, and we forget that his daily life was somewhat routine.

He had to take care of a pregnant wife and a young son, and he needed to manage great flocks and herds and handle the business affairs of the camp. Abraham and his chief steward were responsible for settling the daily disputes and making important decisions.

In addition, there were neighbors to deal with—like Abimelech, the king of Gerar.

In Abraham's dealings with his neighbors, the patriarch is seen first as a troublemaker (Gen. 20) and then as a peacemaker (21:22–34).

As we look at these two experiences, we can learn how to relate positively to those who are outside the faith and be better witnesses to them (Col. 4:5; 1 Thes. 4:12; 1 Tim. 3:7).

Colossians 4:5-6 Walk in wisdom toward outsiders, making the best use of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person.

1 Timothy 3:7 Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12 Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, **to do this more and more, and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.**

If you did not know who Abraham was, and you read this chapter for the first time, which of the two men would you say was the believer?

Surely not Abraham, **the liar!** It was not Abraham who showed integrity, and it was not Abraham whom God kept from sinning. **What Abraham did was selfish,** but Abimelech responded with generosity. If anybody reveals excellent character, it is Abimelech and not Abraham, **“the friend of God.”**

But before you draw some unwarranted conclusions, **take time to consider the facts revealed in this event.** Abraham's failures were tragic, but from them **we learn some valuable lessons to help us in our walk of faith.**

Believers do sin. This chapter would be an embarrassment to us except for one thing: **The Bible tells the truth about all people, and that includes God's people.**

It does not hide the fact that **Noah got drunk** and exposed himself (Gen. 9:20–23),
or that **Moses lost his temper** (Num. 20:1–13),
or that **David committed adultery and plotted the death of a valiant soldier** (2 Sam. 11).
Peter denied the Lord three times (Matt. 26:69–75),
and **Barnabas lapsed into false doctrine** (Gal. 2:13).

These things are recorded, not to encourage us to sin, but **to warn us to beware of sin**. After all, if these great men of faith disobeyed the Lord, then we “ordinary saints” had better be very careful!

1 Corinthians 10:11-12 Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. **Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.**

Why did Abraham sin? For one thing, though Abraham **had a sinful nature**, he had been justified by faith (Gen. 15:6). God gave him **a new name** (from “Abram” to “Abraham”), but that did not change his old nature. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8). Because of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16ff) and the work of Christ on the cross (Rom. 6), believers can have victory over the old nature; but **this is not automatic. We must walk in the Spirit if we hope to overcome temptation.**

That leads to a second consideration:

Abraham moved into “enemy territory.” After living at Hebron (“fellowship”) for perhaps twenty years, he then decided to go to the land of the Philistines. Gerar is just within Philistine country, but it was still a dangerous place to be. Perhaps it was the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah that caused Abraham to want to move; but whatever his motive was, the decision was not a wise one.

True, Abraham did not go down to Egypt as he had done before (Gen. 12). He was still within the boundaries of the land God promised to give him, but his move put him in a dangerous position.

Matthew 26:41 **Watch and pray** that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

Genesis 19:27-29 And Abraham went early in the morning to the place where he had stood before the LORD. And **he looked down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and toward all the land of the valley,** and he looked and, **behold, the smoke of the land went up like the smoke of a furnace.** So it was that, when **God destroyed the cities of the valley,** God remembered Abraham and sent Lot out of the midst of the overthrow when he overthrew the cities in which Lot had lived.

Genesis 20:1 From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb and lived between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar.

After the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, **Abraham moved**. Perhaps he did not want to live in the hills overlooking the destroyed region any longer, and **be reminded of those people and the judgment visited upon them**.

Genesis 20:2-3 And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "**She is my sister.**" And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "**Behold, you are a dead man** because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife."

Ephesians 2:1-3 And **you were dead in the trespasses and sins** in which you once walked, following the course of this world, **following the prince of the power of the air**, the spirit that is now at work in the **sons of disobedience--**

After arriving in Gerar, Abraham began to walk by sight and not by faith; for he began to be afraid.

**Fear of man and faith in God cannot dwell together in the same heart. “*Proverb 29:25*
The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the LORD is safe.”**

Abraham forgot that his God was “the Almighty God” (Gen. 17:1) who could do anything (18:14) and who had covenanted to bless Abraham and Sarah.

But the basic cause of Abraham's failure was the sad fact that he and Sarah had failed to judge this sin when they had dealt with it in Egypt. (See 12:10–20.) They had admitted their sin to Pharaoh and confessed it to God, but the fact that it surfaced again indicates that they did not judge the sin and forsake it (Prov. 28:13). In fact, the sin had grown worse; **for now Sarah shared in telling the lie (Gen. 20:5). A home kept together by a lie is in bad shape indeed.**

She is my sister: This is the same lie Abraham told back in Gen_12:10-13. He shows that **it is all too easy to slip back into sinful habits.** Abraham stumbles in a place he stumbled before. **Instead of trusting God to keep his family together,** he devised his own plan to do it. His plan will fail completely.

Age does not automatically sanctify us. **Unless yielded to the Spirit of God,** we will repeat in our old age the sinful patterns of our youth.

Genesis 12:11-13 When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, **"I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance, and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake."**

Is this the attitude of a person who is trusting Almighty God?

A lighthearted admission of sin is not the same as a brokenhearted confession of sin (Ps. 51:17). If our attitude is right, we will hate our sins, loathe ourselves for having sinned (Ezek. 6:9; 36:31), and despise the very memory of our sins. People who remember their sins with pleasure and “enjoy them again” in their minds have never judged their sins or seen how sinful their sins really are. The father of American psychology, William James, wrote, “For him who confesses, shams are over and realities have begun.”

Psalm 51:17 The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

Ezekiel 36:31-32 Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations. It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel.

Abraham and Sarah had convinced themselves that they were not telling a lie at all. It was only a “half-truth” (Gen. 20:12), and half-truths are not supposed to be as wicked as outright lies. **They are worse!** “A lie consists in the motive quite as much as in the actual words,” wrote F.B. Meyer.

A half-truth has just enough fact in it to make it plausible and just enough deception to make it dangerous.

So, believers do sin; but that does not disannul their faith or destroy their salvation, **though it may discredit their testimony.**

Abraham was still a child of God even though his witness for the Lord had been greatly weakened. However, Abimelech was in a more dangerous position than Abraham; for **Abimelech was under a sentence of death.**

Genesis 20:3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "**Behold, you are a dead man** because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife."

Genesis 20:7 Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that **he will pray for you, and you shall live**. But if you do not return her, know that **you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.**"

Abimelech was a man of integrity; and **when God spoke to him, he obeyed**. He had many fine qualities; but he was not a believer, and therefore he was a dead man (Eph. 2:1–3).

This is not to minimize the enormity of Abraham's sin, for a believer should not do what Abraham did. But Abraham and Abimelech had two different standings before God: **One was saved, and the other was lost.**

So, any unsaved person who wants to use Genesis 20 as “ammunition” against believers (“You’re all hypocrites!”) had **better consider his or her spiritual condition before God**. If unsaved people accept what the Bible says about Abraham, that he lied, then they must also accept what the Bible says about them: **They are dead in trespasses and sins**. In spite of his disobedience, Abraham was accepted before God; but Abimelech was rejected and under divine condemnation (John 3:18–21). **God chastened Abraham, but He condemned Abimelech.**

John 3:18-21 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever **does not believe is condemned already**, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. **And this is the judgment:** the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light **because their works were evil**. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, **lest his works should be exposed**. But whoever **does what is true comes to the light**, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

When believers sin, they suffer. Charles Spurgeon said, **“God does not allow His children to sin successfully.”** When we deliberately disobey God, we suffer both from the consequences of our sins and from the chastening hand of God, unless we repent and submit (Heb. 12:5–11). God in His grace will forgive our sins (1 John 1:5–10), but God in His sovereignty must allow sin to produce a sad harvest (Gal. 6:7). Read Psalms 32 and 51 to see what happened to David physically and spiritually because he would not repent and confess his sins to the Lord.

Hebrews 12:5-8 And have you forgotten the exhortation that **addresses you as sons?** "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. **For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives.**" It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.

1 John 1:6-9 If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. **But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.** If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. **If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.**

Galatians 6:7-9 Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but **the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life**. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up.

It took only a few seconds for Abraham to tell a lie, but that lie was more than sounds and puffs of breath in the air. **That lie became a seed that was planted and grew and brought forth bitter fruit.** God hates lies (Prov. 6:17; 12:22). He is a God of truth (Deut. 32:4), the Spirit is the Spirit of Truth (John 14:17), and the Word is the Word of Truth (James 1:18).

“A lying tongue is but for a moment,” wrote Matthew Henry. **“Truth is the daughter of time; and in time, truth will come out.”**

What did this one lie cost Abraham? To begin with, **it cost him character.** Phillips Brooks said, **“The purpose of life is the building of character through truth.”** God is not just “saving souls” and taking people to heaven. Through the trials and testing of life, **He is making saved people more like Jesus Christ and thereby glorifying Himself.** Abraham stopped asking “What is right?” and began asking “What is safe?” and this led to his downfall. Once the salt has lost its taste, how do you restore it?

Matthew 5:13-16 "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, **how shall its saltiness be restored?** It is no longer good for anything **except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.** "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. **In the same way, let your light shine before others,** so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

He also lost his testimony. How could Abraham talk to his pagan neighbors about the **God of truth when he himself had told a lie?** Lot lost his witness in Sodom, and Abraham lost his witness in Gerar.

“A bad man’s example has little influence over good men,” wrote James Strahan in Hebrew Ideals (Kregel, 1982, p. 141). **“But the bad example of a good man, eminent in station and established in reputation, has an enormous power for evil.”**

Imagine how humiliated Abraham was when Abimelech called him out, confronted him, and rebuked him. It is hard enough to submit to the rebuke of a Christian brother or sister, but to accept rebuke from an unsaved person demands a great deal of honesty and humility. “You have done things to me that should not be done” (**Gen. 20:9**). **Those words cut deep!** **Christians must be careful how they relate to those who are “outside”** (Col. 4:5; 1 Thes. 4:12).

He lost his ministry; for instead of being a source of blessing (Gen. 12:1–3), he was the cause of judgment. No babies were born during Abraham’s sojourn in Gerar (12:17–18).

When a child of God gets out of the will of God, the discipline of God usually follows.

Jonah caused a storm that nearly wrecked the ship (Jonah 1); Achan brought defeat to the army (Josh. 7); and David brought sorrow to his family (2 Sam. 12:10).

Abraham almost lost Sarah and Isaac. In that day, a king had the right to take into his harem any single woman who pleased him. Abimelech thought Sarah was a single woman, so he took her; and were it not for the intervention of God, the king would have had normal relations with her. **What the king did threatened God's great plan of salvation, so the Lord had to act to protect Sarah and Isaac.** Whenever we do something that forces God to intervene miraculously, **we are tempting God; and tempting God is sin.**

Deuteronomy 6:16 "You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah.

Matthew 4:5-7 Then the devil took him to the holy city and set him on the pinnacle of the temple and said to him, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, "'He will command his angels concerning you,' and "'On their hands they will bear you up, lest you strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus said to him, "Again it is written, '**You shall not put the Lord your God to the test.**'"

Perhaps one of the saddest consequences of Abraham's sin was Isaac's repetition of it years later (Gen. 26:7–11). It is sad when our sins affect outsiders, but **it is sadder still when our sins are duplicated in our own families.** In fact, **Isaac's lie was worse than his father's** because Sarah really was Abraham's half sister, while Rebekah was only Isaac's cousin.

When believers sin, they are disciplined by God until they come to a place of repentance and confession. This discipline is not enjoyable, **but it is profitable;** and in the end, it produces happiness and holiness to the glory of God.

Sinning believers can be forgiven and restored. While God did not defend Abraham's sin, He did defend Abraham and so control circumstances that His servant was not completely defeated. In fact, God called Abraham a prophet and made it clear that Abraham's intercession was the only thing that stood between Abimelech and death (Gen. 20:7). **The fact that God answered Abraham's prayer for Abimelech is evidence that Abraham had confessed his sins and the Lord had forgiven him (Ps. 66:18–20).**

Psalm 66:16-20 Come and hear, all you who fear God, and I will tell what he has done for my soul. I cried to him with my mouth, and high praise was on my tongue. **If I had cherished iniquity in my heart, the Lord would not have listened.** But truly God has listened; he has attended to the voice of my prayer. **Blessed be God, because he has not rejected my prayer or removed his steadfast love from me!**

God does not reject His children when they sin any more than a parent rejects a disobedient son or daughter (Isa. 49:13–16). Abraham was justified by faith and had a righteous standing before God (Rom. 4:1–5). Justification does not change; we are accepted in Jesus Christ no matter what we are in ourselves (2 Cor. 5:17, 21; Eph. 1:6). Of course, the fact that we are justified before God means there will be a change in our lives; for “faith without works is dead” (James 2:20). But our position in Christ (justification) is not altered by our practice on earth (sanctification).

Isaiah 49:13-16 Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! **For the LORD has comforted his people and will have compassion on his afflicted.** But Zion said, "The LORD has forsaken me; my Lord has forgotten me." "Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, **yet I will not forget you.** Behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands; your walls are continually before me.

Romans 4:1-5 What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? **"Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."** Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, **his faith is counted as righteousness,**

2 Corinthians 5:17-21 Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, **he is a new creation**. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. **For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.**

Ephesians 1:3-6 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, **who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places**, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, **that we should be holy and blameless before him**. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, **to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved**.

The important thing is that we deal with our sins humbly and honestly, confess them to God, judge them and forsake them, and claim His promises of forgiveness (1 John 1:9; Micah 7:18–19; Isa. 55:6–13). Abraham and Sarah made a new beginning, and so can you.

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Micah 7:18-19 Who is a God like you, **pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance?** He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in steadfast love. **He will again have compassion on us; he will tread our iniquities underfoot. You will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea.**

1 John 2:1 My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

Isaiah 55:6-7 "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; **let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.**