

Faithlessness meets the faithful God

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Date: 05 September 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Well, as always, there should be a sermon outline available, and you can use that to help you to track along. Even more importantly, make sure that the Bible is open in front of you to Genesis 20-21.

We're going to go through the details fairly quickly, and it's good to have it open so that you can see what I'm saying is coming from the text of Scripture itself. Let's ask God again to illuminate our hearts and our minds.

Heavenly Father, we need you. We need desperately to hear your word. We are blind. We are deaf. And so, Father, please, Lord, open our eyes again. Open our ears. Shape us. Mow us. Challenge us. Correct us.

Bring us into a living relationship with you once again. So, Father, this is what we plead with you today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

[1 : 0 1] Have you ever laid awake at night replaying moments in your life that you've tried to forget? Have you ever wished that you could go back in time and stop yourself from making that painful choice?

Most of us probably have. We've been guilty, perhaps, of the sins of commission, where perhaps we've told that white lie or that half-truth. Just so that we could gain something.

Or where we've been harsh in an over-the-top way to someone, undoing years of friendship in a few seconds. Or perhaps sometimes we've committed sins of omission, where it's not so much about the wrong thing that we do, but the right thing that we didn't do.

We should have stepped in to defend that colleague from unfair treatment or demeaning jokes. Or tried a little harder to help that person in need. But we didn't. We messed up.

And messed up enough times, and we begin to realise that the problem isn't just that we messed up, but that we ourselves are so messed up. And we wonder, how does God feel about that? How does He relate to messed up people?

[2 : 0 6] Well, after all, it can't be fun, can it, to always be cleaning up people's mess? And when we mess up, does that mean that we've ruined God's plan for our lives?

Just how does God relate to messed up people like you and me? Our passage this morning, Genesis 20-21, will give us some insight into those kind of questions.

As Christians, whenever we come to the Bible, especially when we come to Old Testament narrative, we come to it not for self-help advice, but for theology. We come to learn what God is like. That's what theology means. The word logos about God, theos. So theology, the word about God. We do gain ethical instruction from it. That is, we do learn from watching the people in these stories what we should and should not do.

But we come to the Bible chiefly because our aim is to know God. And today, we'll get to know how God relates to people who keep messing up.

[3 : 0 9] And here are two distinctives that we discover about God today. Firstly, despite our slowness and fearfulness, God is faithful to protect his purposes.

Despite our slowness and fearfulness, God is faithful to protect his purposes. As we join the story in Genesis 20, the setting shifts from the ruins of Sodom to the desert region of the Negev.

Abraham is on the move again, and he eventually ends up in Gerah, which is somewhere on the west side of the Negev. We also learn that Abimelech, who is going to be a central character in these chapters, is the king of Gerah.

And straight away, verse 2, *deja vu* strikes again. Abraham says, Sarah is my sister. What? Doesn't this sound familiar?

Cast your minds back to Genesis 12, and you might remember that Abraham was also in the Negev area, and he eventually headed for Egypt. And while there, he deceived Pharaoh into thinking Sarah was his sister.

[4 : 17] And that didn't go well. It ended with Sarah being taken into a harem, Pharaoh being cursed with plagues, and God's people not being a blessing to anyone. And you think, well, let's not repeat that mistake again.

But here we are, back in the Negev, back in a foreign place, and Abraham decides once again to try the same trick. Face-pump moment, right?

Especially when he comes, ends up with the same result. The king of Gerah takes Sarah. Why? Why does Abraham do something that looks manifestly so stupid?

Well, let's try to sympathize a little bit with Abraham here. Let's try to get into his head. Down in verses 11 to 13, Abraham himself tells us why he has resorted to such actions.

He is absolutely fearful. Verse 11, There is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.

[5 : 21] He is worried that just like back in Egypt, he will be made a target if the king takes a fancy to his wife, and decides to order a hit job on him in order to acquire Sarah.

You see, perhaps we need to appreciate just how vulnerable Abraham felt. In verse 13, he mentions how God caused him to wander from his father's household.

Remember Genesis 12? God told him, Go! Leave everything you've ever known, your country, your society, your family, to go to where I'll show you.

And so that means, ever since then, Abraham has been sojourning with no obvious safety net. When perceived enemies are nearby, he has no one to call on for help.

Sure, he has his own resources, he's not without his own man, but he can't help but still feel anxious when faced with the unknown, a foreign king, with foreign customs.

[6 : 28] Fear of the unknown, that's relatable, isn't it? But notice what fear of the unknown leads him to. He plays a little loosely with the truth.

In verse 12, we discover that Sarah is actually his half-sister. And so seizing on that fact, he takes that as justification to present Sarah now as his sister, not as his wife.

But of course, in doing so, he's once again putting his own wife in danger. He's protecting himself, and not her. Decades on, from that first deception, back in Egypt, Abraham still appears as self-absorbed, as ever.

Look at verse 13, and notice what he says to Sarah. This is how you can show your love to me. If you really love me, Sarah, you'll go along with my deception.

How manipulative. How shady. And so Abraham's fears leads him to fall back on bad habits, and to play a little loosely with the truth.

[7 : 36] And we discover that he's actually become quite used to living out such untruths. That's what verse 13 tells us. Abraham says, Everywhere we go, say of me, he is my brother.

In other words, this is not just something that Abraham tries twice in two decades. No, it's been something that Abraham's been saying over and over again, wherever he has gone.

With no kids around, it's probably not too difficult for that to be convincing. And so as he keeps repeating that little lie and getting away with it, he's probably becoming a little more confident that this was the way to go.

It seems to work. And so we realize what's happening here in Gera is not just an impulsive decision. It's planned unrighteousness.

So the picture we're getting of Abraham here is of someone who is very slow to learn. For decades now, he's carried around the promises of God.

[8 : 46] He's seen God's hand in action. After all, does this chapter not come straight after chapter 19, where he's just seen dense smoke rising from the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as a result of God's action there?

Has he not seen God bring plagues upon Pharaoh? Has he not seen God give him the victory against four powerful kings and been visited by Melchizedek and angels?

And yet after that, he still does something like this. How can the Abraham of Genesis 15 and Genesis 18, the one who believed God when God showed him the stars, the one who pleaded before God for Sodom be the lying, scary cat Abraham of Genesis chapter 20?

But before we dismiss Abraham, perhaps we need to consider too how we too are so often messed up contradictions like him.

We can be people who praise God and do good to others on Monday, and then be people who ran from his word and fall into unrighteousness on Tuesday. Even after decades of being a Christian, as I can testify from personal experience.

[10:07] And it's not because we've suddenly forgotten the facts of the gospel. As Christians, we carry around the truths of God in our head. And it's quite unlikely that you decided to do your own thing simply because you suddenly doubt that Jesus rose again, or because you woke up one morning and concluded that the Trinity was illogical.

No, that's not the problem. Rather, the problem, as the writer Del Ralph Davis so aptly puts it, is that doctrinal faith has not become daily faith.

We believe God is absolutely sovereign and good in the abstract. until we see the number of COVID-19 cases in Sarawak getting higher and higher. Or we hear from the boss that a big pay card is on the way.

Then all of a sudden, the sovereign and the good God is forgotten, isn't he? Instead, we scramble to figure out something on our own. We develop our own salvation plans to save ourselves without so much as a word to God in prayer.

Or we think, yes, yes, in theory, God's good purposes will be accomplished. But let's just have an insurance plan apart from God just in case. You see, we're not that different to Abraham.

[11:27] We're walking contradictions. We're slow to learn. We're fearful often. And when fear overtakes us, we're tempted to walk down the path of Satan.

Look again at verse 11 and notice what Abraham says. There is no fear of God in this place. He's right, but not in the way he means it.

There is indeed no fear of God in that place. But it's not because the inhabitants of Gerah don't fear God, as verse 8 later will show us. It's because the temporary resident of Gerah, Abraham himself, doesn't fear God.

Notice what Abraham fears. He fears his current circumstances. He fears what those circumstances will lead to. Death. But notice, he doesn't seem to fear sinning against God at all. He's become comfortable with his deception. He doesn't fear God. But what should he fear more? His circumstances or sinning against God?

[12:41] And my brothers and sisters, what should you fear more? Your circumstances or sinning against God? Here's some interesting questions to ask yourself.

Do you fear getting cancer more or gossiping more? Do you fear losing your job more or being very comfortable with your impatience more?

If you lose your job, you'll face suffering. If you get cancer, you might die. But in Christ, suffering, though difficult, is momentary.

Death, though something to be grieved, is no longer the end. But, if you willfully sin without ever repenting, you will be eternally separated from God.

But what do you fear more? I hate to say it, but sometimes I fear my own circumstances more than offending God.

[13:49] I'm slow to learn and I suspect I'm not alone. And notice what Abraham's actions actually do.

Don't forget back in Genesis 18, God has promised Abraham that within a year, a son will be born to them. But Abraham's actions now jeopardize all that.

After all, if Sarah is with Abimelech, that means Sarah isn't with Abraham. So how can they produce any descendants? And should Sarah get impregnated at this time?

Well, even if Abraham claimed otherwise there's an element of doubt as to whose son this is? Is it Abraham's son or Abimelech's? And so Abraham's faithlessness appears to put God's purposes at risk.

And maybe God is justified in saying, you know what? Let's just forget all about it. You know, Abraham, you haven't learned anything from Egypt. Let's just forget you. But despite Abraham's slowness and fearfulness, God is faithful to protect his purposes.

[15:03] In verse 3, he appears to Abimelech in a dream and brings a charge against him. You're guilty of a capital offense, he says. You've taken a married woman. In ancient Near Eastern culture, adultery was taken very seriously in many societies and was even punishable by death.

And so God is simply holding Abimelech to account by the standard of his own laws. But Abimelech now mounts his defense case. In verse 5, he makes clear that he is a victim of fraud.

He had no idea that Sarah was married. He has acted with a clear conscience. He's blameless of heart, as the Hebrew literally puts it. And so, verse 4, Abimelech, like Abraham back in Genesis 18, appeals to the justice of God.

Have I done anything wrong? Am I like Sodom? Will you destroy an innocent nation, God? The answer of course is no.

And God knows that perfectly well as he makes clear in verse 6. Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, Abimelech, and so I have kept you from sinning against me.

[16:23] That is why I did not let you touch her. In other words, God is saying, I've intervened. I made sure that you didn't commit the sin of adultery by ensuring you had no sexual relations with Sarah.

We're not sure exactly how, but there are hints that God did so by striking Abimelech with some disease, since later on in verse 17, we're told that God healed him.

So God clears Abimelech of this charge. But now verse 7, God asks Abimelech to make restitution. He still needs to correct the situation to bring it to what it was like before.

Return Sarah or face the consequences, he says. Why? Well, for one, because Abraham is a prophet who will help you, pray for you because of your disease.

Now, that's ironic, isn't it? After all, wasn't the cause of Abimelech's troubles, Abraham himself? And furthermore, what are prophets?

[17:33] They are truth tellers, and that's precisely what Abraham isn't. And so you probably won't blame Abimelech for feeling indignant. But you see, what God is doing here is protecting his purposes.

Isaac must be born. The child of promise must be conceived. And so Sarah must be reunited with Abraham. And to his credit, Abimelech obeys without any question.

In fact, verse 8, he even summons all his officials and tells them what happened. Imagine that. That would be like our prime minister making a televised speech on RTM and making public the mess that he's in.

And then in verses 14 to 16, Abimelech makes amends. He doesn't point fingers, but he just does what needs to be done. He returns Sarah. He gives Abraham free reign of the land.

He even vindicates him. He acts righteously throughout. And then verses 17 and 18, Abraham prays for Abimelech and his household.

[18:46] It appears that God had closed their wombs, but now he opens them again. What can we say? Despite Abraham's fearfulness, despite Abraham's slowness, faithlessness, God doesn't allow that to derail his purposes.

He is determined to bless the world through the line of Abraham and he goes far beyond what we deserve. He still uses a flawed instrument like Abraham.

Without a doubt, we shouldn't follow in Abraham's footsteps here. But the larger lesson is that God isn't put off by our messiness. God isn't worried that our mess means that his will is never done.

You know, back in Matthew chapter 16, Jesus tells Peter that he will be the rock upon which the church will be built. What a privilege!

But Peter acts anything but like a rock. You know, three times when Jesus was heading to the cross, Peter, who boasted about never abandoning Jesus, denied him.

[20:12] And so when the resurrected Jesus met Peter on the shore later on, what do we expect Jesus to say? Forget it. Go home.

I had enough of you. But Jesus says instead to Peter, come and have breakfast. He feeds him. And then he sends Peter off to feed others.

Despite Peter's own fearfulness overcoming him, Jesus' purpose for Peter will not be undone. And Jesus offers to feed you too.

Come, eat, nourish yourself with my grace, of which there is a never ending supply. It's all offered at the cross.

And then come, follow me. For my purposes for you still stand, for you to be my disciple and to enjoy sweet fellowship with me.

[21:18] See, that's the first distinctive we discover about God today, that despite our fearfulness and slowness, God is faithful to protect his purposes.

Here's the second distinctive. Secondly, despite our past sin or mistakes, God is faithful to honor his oath. Despite our past sin or mistakes, God is faithful to honor his oath.

God has promised. In chapter 21, the long-awaited moment finally arrives. Sarah becomes pregnant and bears a son. God keeps his promises, the one that he's just protected.

He's gracious, verse 1, to Sarah, as he has said. He did for Sarah what he had promised. And then, end of verse 2, is at the very time God had promised Abraham.

You can't miss it. God did it. And only God can do it. Three times in verses 1 to 7, we're told that this happened when Abraham was in his old age, when he was 100 years old.

[22 : 31] The impossibility of this promise being fulfilled is highlighted. But is anything too hard for the Lord? The answer, of course, is no.

We know God specializes in impossible births. He can bring life out of dead wombs, and even a child can be born of a virgin, if that is what is necessary for God to honor his oath.

And so, there is laughter. You might remember back in Genesis 17, verse 17, how Abraham fell face down and laughed in disbelief when he first heard God promising a son to him.

You might remember Genesis 18, verse 12, Sarah laughing incredulously at the thought that she would have a child. But now, they laugh with joy.

You see, my friends, the Lord is faithful. He honors his oath. He keeps his promises. He cannot and does not lie. It is impossible that he will not keep his word.

[23 : 38] With the passing of time, we might sometimes doubt his faithfulness. But look at all that Abraham has gone through. And here we are. God does what he says.

Now, God has not promised such specific circumstances to us in the same way he did to Abraham. When it comes to salvation history, he is unique. There is no equivalent word of promise to us that at such a time, we will definitely have a child, spouse, or job.

But God does make promises to us. Yes, even beyond just eternal life. For instance, Romans 8 verse 28 is one of the most precious words of promises that God has made to us.

We know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. That is a word for us, to us.

God promises that whatever it is we're facing today, he's using it for his good purposes in our best interest. And he will honor that oath.

[24 : 54] He does not lie. It is impossible for him not to keep that promise either. At the end of 2009, I was forced to leave the UK due to changes visa regulations, meaning that I could not keep working as a ministry apprentice at the church I was at.

I was doing ministry with international students, I was learning lots from experienced mentors, and then all of that suddenly came to a halt. All of a sudden, I didn't even have a job.

But God knew what he was doing. And out of nowhere, he led the pastor of a church in KL to call me out of the blue. And then God led me to a place that I could never imagine, where God grew my faith in ways that it could never have grown in the UK.

And then he stretched me in good ways beyond my comfort zone. God works for the good of those who love him. That is a word he will keep.

So, happy ending, right? not quite. You see, do you remember who else lives in Abraham's household?

[26 : 07] His servant, Hagar, and her son, Ishmael. The same son who came about, you might remember from Genesis 16, because Sarah wanted to do things her own way.

They're a constant reminder of the past mistakes Abraham and Sarah have made. And by the time Isaac is born, Ishmael is probably a teenager. And they can't help but be tensions.

In verse 8, there's a party going on. Isaac is probably about three, since that was when children were weaned during that time. And it's not exactly clear what Ishmael did, but in some sense, he mocks Isaac.

He laughs at him. One commentator suggests that perhaps Ishmael was taunting Isaac by suggesting he was really Abimelech's son, not Abraham's. Now, that would be serious because it would mean that Isaac wasn't really the legitimate heir.

It sounds plausible, although we cannot be sure. Now, whatever the case might be, Sarah gets very mad. In verse 10, she basically says to Abraham, tell them to get lost.

[27 : 18] And now Abraham is in a dilemma. He's greatly distressed, verse 11, because don't forget, Ishmael is his son too. He loves him too.

He cannot imagine sending him away. But it becomes clear that he must. For Sarah, although she is wrong in her lack of concern for Hagar and Ishmael's well-being, she's right about one thing.

Verse 10 again, that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac. That's an accurate statement.

Isaac is the chosen child of promise. And Sarah, by requesting the banishment of Ishmael, is in effect actually asking Abraham to make clear that he recognizes Isaac as his legal heir.

You see, when the head of the household grants a slave woman and her children freedom, they give up their rights to any inheritance they're entitled to. And that's what Sarah is demanding.

[28 : 31] And that's also why God permits Sarah's demand in verse 12. For it is Isaac, not Ishmael, who is the chosen one. That must never be in doubt.

But what a messy situation. If only Abraham and Sarah had trusted God in Genesis 16, all this would not have to come about. But now, their past sin and mistakes come back to haunt them. It causes pain for everyone. For Sarah, for Abraham, for Hagar and Ishmael. Do you see how our past sins often have a way of messing things up, even in the present?

We sin against someone, we beg their forgiveness, but now the relationship isn't the same and we have to live with it. Sometimes it's not so much sin, but a real mistake that completely messes us up.

Just this week, I read about a situation where someone took out a mortgage, but the loan was accidentally paid into her son's account instead. She had made a mistake filling in the account details.

[29 : 47] Her son then proceeded to spend most of the money before the error was discovered. And as a result, this person's life has completely fallen apart. The bank doesn't think they're liable.

She is in great depth. She and her sons are alienated from one another. A mistake made in the past can have great present and ongoing consequences.

And this also raises another question. Back in Genesis 16, God promised Hagar and Ishmael as well that they too would have a great many descendants.

And that God will look after both of them. But now Sarah wants to evict them. How will they survive out in the world? Does this mean that God is a bit of a double-faced God?

Does he honour his word to one person, Sarah, but not another, Hagar? Don't forget, Hagar only came back to Sarah's household because God asked her to.

[30 : 48] Is this a cruel joke? Well, let's come back to the passage. In verse 14, Abraham doesn't speak a word when he sends Hagar and Ishmael on their way, but you can almost feel the pain coming from him.

And in verses 15 and 16, Hagar and Ishmael are in such a bad way that Hagar expects Ishmael to die. Their pain is definitely real.

And one thing is clear, God doesn't promise to take away any pain that comes about as a result of our mistakes, we have to face them. But do all the past misdeeds of Abraham or Sarah or even Ishmael also cause God to have second thoughts when it comes to keeping his word?

Well, look at verse 13. What does God do there? He repeats the promise he made to Hagar. And then in verse 17, what does God do? He hears.

Remember what we learned about God back in Genesis 16? God is the God who hears. And that hasn't changed. He hears. He sees. And then he provides what is needed.

[32 : 07] He looks after them. And before we know it, verse 21, Ishmael eventually gets a wife. He was looked after and now he is on his way to also becoming the father of a nation.

You see, despite our past sins and mistakes, God will honour his oath. And that includes even the people regarded as the nobodies of the world, like Hagar.

When God says that in Christ, he will forgive you, that he will look after you, even after that massive sin or that massive mistake, he's serious about that.

perhaps you've made mistakes in your parenting that you deeply regret. Perhaps you've done stuff in your past life you wish will all go away now.

And you think that somehow that means God has relegated you to lower priority status. Sure, he promises to be with me, but he probably will pick that other Christian rather than me to look after first, right?

[33 : 12] The one whose life is straighter than mine? That's not true. There is pain, sometimes profound pain.

God allows that. But in Christ, a promise like Romans 8:28 still applies to you, whatever your past. We see this even in the concluding episode of 21 verse 22 to 34. We won't have time to go through this in any sort of detail, but notice another person from Abraham's past pops back.

Abimelech returns, this time with his powerful commander in tow. And you think, uh-oh, is another one of Abraham's mistakes now coming back to haunt him? Well, not quite.

Abimelech comes in peace. He tells Abraham verse 22 that he recognizes God is on his side. And as a result, they enter into an agreement and Abimelech wants assurances from Abraham that he will no longer play games of deception.

[34 : 19] That's in verse 23, and that is agreed to by Abraham. And Abraham shows that he's telling the truth by what follows. In verses 25 to 31, they settle a particular grievance over a well.

But this time, Abraham doesn't try to manipulate, but instead he brings sheep and cattle to the king as a gesture of goodwill. In return, he becomes the undisputed owner of a well in the land of Canaan.

And this is what is going on. You see, God has honored his word of giving Abraham a son. And now, he is beginning to honor his promise of a land.

To get a foothold here as a foreigner is no small task indeed. And yet, God has been working even through Abraham's mistake in Genesis 20.

He gets Abraham and Abimelech to cross paths with one another, to get used to dealing with one another, so that ultimately, Abraham will get to this point where he can begin to claim a stake in this land.

[35 : 41] Despite our past sins and mistakes, God is faithful to honor his word. And so today, from Genesis 20 and 21, how does God deal with slow, fearful, messed up people like you and me?

He's patient with us. He doesn't give up on us. He does discipline us using things like pagan kings to show the depth of our unrighteousness and permitting the pain of past mistakes to ripple through our lives.

But he doesn't go back on his promises. Now, you must understand, gospel promises only apply if you trust in Jesus if you don't call Jesus your savior and lord, then God hasn't actually made any promises to you.

But if you do, then take heart. Every promise God has made is yes in Christ, even when we've messed up.

As the writer Dane Otloon puts it, if you are part of Christ's own body, your sins evoke his deepest heart, his compassion and pity.

[37 : 09] He's on your side. He sides with you against your sin, not against you because of your sin. He hates sin, but he loves you.

So if today you find yourself being faithless like Abraham, put your trust in this faithful God.

Call on his name, confess you've messed up, turn to him, repent and believe in his grace, and take hold of his promises.

Let's pray. Father, as we come to you, we pray that we will be brutally honest with ourselves, that we know that so often we are a mystery even to ourselves because we have such contradictions. One day, we love you and we really mean it. Another day, we can't wait to get away from you. But Father, Father, thank you that you are God who pursues us and that you are God who wants to make sure that your purposes will be carried out, that you want your children to come to you.

[38 : 45] So Father, for those of us who need to repent today, please help us to repent, help us to turn to you and to place our faith in you once again.

And for those whose lives are affected by past mistakes, whose pain is still being felt even today, we pray that you will draw near to them, remind them again of who you are, a faithful God who never lets go of his people, who holds us in his hands and who is always working for our good according to your purposes.

All this we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.