

Messy Lives; Secure Promises

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[0 : 00] Good morning everyone and welcome to any who are visiting, who are new here or visiting.

! I noticed Laura, that sister, Laura and Zach up the back corner. So welcome. I look forward! to chatting to you afterwards. And yeah, hopefully anyone else who's new here will get to meet today. Well, we are going to be, we're continuing our series through Genesis and we're actually looking at Genesis chapter 20 today and it would be great if you could have your Bibles open at Genesis chapter 20 because we will, over the course of this sermon, be reading through the whole chapter bit by bit and following it closely. I want to start there by asking you, I wonder if you were to do an audit of your life, in how many areas would you find your life and things about your life not quite as they should be? Maybe think about your relationships.

relationships. How many of your relationships are not quite as they should be? You might have relationships that are strained or distant or maybe where someone is just absent who should be in your life. What about your house, your living arrangements? Is your house, is everything about your house as it should be? I know when I asked that question I probably just set several people in this room, started stressing immediately and this list of things, incomplete tasks about your house have just started cycling through your mind, your endless to-do list of the things that are breaking and falling apart that you can't quite get to. What about your finances?

Do your finances feel also cured? What about your health? Are there things about your health that are not just as they should be? Maybe your work. Do you have not enough work or too much work?

[2 : 11] Is your workplace toxic or does the work itself seem pointless? I wonder if you did an audit of your life. I suspect that for many of us if we did that audit there would be many, many areas of our lives where we just find things are a bit out of shape, a bit messy.

Now not many people become monks these days and especially not Protestants but I've been thinking about it and I think that part of the appeal of becoming a monk and then like going and living in a monastery, part of the appeal is that you can sort of closet yourself away from much of the world.

Like think about it, like let me try and sell this to you, actually I don't want you to become monks but I'll try and sell it to you for a moment. If you were to become a monk and live in a monastery or you would be reducing your life to like a very limited and clearly defined range of spaces and possessions and relationships and routines. Doesn't that have at least some appeal, the simplicity of that life, an escape from the chaos that much of our lives is, much of the time? I think the less drastic secular equivalent of becoming a monk is downsizing, you know the sea change, the tree change, going offline, going off grid, trying to kind of shrink life down to something that is more contained and therefore less stressful, less ridden with anxieties and uncertainties. But real life is messy and confusing. The more you engage with the world, the more messy it will be. It's full of ambiguities and compromises and half-finished projects. And the account we're about to read in Genesis chapter 20,

I think it captures something of the messiness of life. We read through this chapter, it's an episode in the life of Abraham and Sarah and it's a story in which very little is as it should be.

There's little we find, little in this chapter that is as we might expect it to be. It's full of deception, confusion, ambiguity, unanswered questions and not a little irony.

[4 : 45] Even God's actions here seem simultaneously explicable and yet strangely mysterious. And for all that, this chapter will give us something solid and unshifting we can cling to.

So let's get into it. You can see on your outlines, if you have one, that I've given you a four-part structure of sorts for the chapter. Verses 1 and 2 set the scene. Verses 3 to 7 give us a

confrontation at night. Verses 4 to 16 a confrontation in the morning. And verses 17 and 18 the aftermath.

But let's allow the narrative to unfold as we read through it together. So firstly, verses 1 and 2 set the scene as Abraham is again on the move. So we read in verse 1, from there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur and he's sojourned in Gerah. Now there are three places that are mentioned there. First there's the from there, right, from there. Where's he, he's traveling from somewhere. Where's he traveling from? Now presumably the there in verse 1 is Hebron. And since Abraham and his nephew Lot chapters ago and years ago had parted ways in Genesis chapter 13, Lot had been living in Sodom and Abraham had settled, we're told in chapter 13 of Genesis, at Hebron by the oaks of Mamre. And they're mentioned a couple of times, chapter 13, chapter 14, chapter 18, verse 1. And he'd been living there for probably around 20 years or so. Maybe a little bit more. And while living at Hebron, Abraham had formed an alliance with his neighbors, three Amorite brothers by the names of Mamre, Eschol and Anah. You can read that in chapter 14, verse 13. So he'd been in a settled place for a couple of decades, maybe a little bit more. With neighbors that he got on well with, had formed an alliance with. And you know, life had been proceeding as well as it might. But now Lot had been forced to flee Sodom and Abraham had left

Hebron. Now why did he leave? Well it doesn't tell us why. Maybe there was some environmental pressures. Maybe there was some social or political instability in the aftermath of Sodom's destruction.

We're not really told why he left. But whatever the case, he's leaving behind this place which had become familiar and neighbors with whom he enjoyed friendly relations. And from Hebron, Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negev. Now that's the southernmost territory of the land of Canaan, the southernmost region, the Negev, the south. And it's further specified he lived between Kadesh and Shur, which are like south and southwest boundaries of the Negev. So he's traveled something like 80 to 100 kilometers southwest from Hebron and settles in this region on the very southernmost part of the promised land, or the land of Canaan. If he goes any further, he's on his way to Egypt.

[8 : 03] And then verse 1 also tells us he's sojourned in Gerar. Now Gerar is a bit further north. Northwest, it's on the edge of what we would call sort of Philistine territory in the Bible. It's towards the Mediterranean Sea. And this might represent another move. So first he goes south and then he stays there for a while. Then he moves north and stays there. But note there's different verbs used in verse 1. He lived in the Negev. He sojourned in Gerar. So I think probably more likely while he's living down south, he still moves around grazing his flocks here and there. And in the course of that moving around, he spent some time near Gerar. Now whichever of those two it is, whether, you know, whichever, have a way to understand his movements in verse 1, clearly some time has passed.

It takes time to do all that travelling and moving around. So when he came to Gerar, in the course of these wanderings, Abraham resorted, verse 2 tells us, to a ruse. Verse 2, and Abraham said of Sarah his wife, she is my sister. He passed off Sarah as his sister. Now why did he do this? Well we know Abraham had done this on at least one other occasion in Genesis chapter 12 when he'd recently arrived in Canaan. There was a famine, so he went down to Egypt and sojourned there. And while he was in Egypt, he said Sarah was his sister. And now there are some similarities. It's that time in Egypt in chapter 12, like this time in chapter 20, Abraham might have felt particularly vulnerable compared to those years he'd spent in Hebron where there was at least some stability. Now he is once again a stranger entirely at the mercy of others. In that earlier time, 25 years earlier in Egypt, Abraham resorted to this ruse particularly because of Sarah's beauty. He reasoned if he were her husband, then the Egyptians might kill him so that they could take Sarah and marry her. On the other hand, if Abraham were Sarah's brother, then her beauty is actually an asset to him because rather than kill Abraham to get Sarah, they'll try to butter Abraham up so they can get Sarah, which is exactly what happened. Like Pharaoh gave Abraham lots of sheep and oxen and donkeys and servants and so on. So Abraham profited quite nicely from his deception when he was in Egypt. One suspects it was a less pleasant experience for Sarah, whom Pharaoh took. Well now Abraham resorts to the same ruse. And lo and behold, there's the same outcome. Verse 2 again, Abraham said of Sarah, his wife, she is my sister, and Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent and took Sarah. Once again, the king of the land where Abraham is sojourning takes Abraham's wife

into his harem or takes her to be his own wife. Now what was Abimelech's motive? The text doesn't tell us.

Perhaps Sarah was still desirable. I mean, she was a great beauty 25 years ago when she was 65. Does she still turn heads at 90? I guess it's possible, but the text doesn't say that.

But there might have been other motives. I mean, maybe Abimelech was seeking a marriage alliance. Abraham didn't have a daughter. Maybe he's seeking a marriage alliance. Abraham's a wealthy man and Abimelech might want to sort of marry into that wealth. Maybe this is sort of an airbrushed hostage situation. So Abraham wouldn't cause him any trouble. I don't know. The motive, we're not told the motive. Whatever the case, in the scheme of Genesis, let me suggest this is a catastrophic development. Now, of course, what Abraham did was morally reprehensible. You know, it's actually not all that different to Lot in chapter 19, offering his two daughters to a depraved mob of men. Well, here, you know, again, we have Abraham, a man, treating a woman as an object to be given away, exchanged, used for his own sake. But there's another reason, too, why another man taking Sarah at this time is a calamity? Because you remember those things that God had said to Abraham and Sarah very, very recently. We've seen these in the last few chapters. Chapter 17, verse 21, God said to Abraham, 18, verse 10, I will surely return to you about this time next year and Sarah, your wife, will have a son.

[13:30] 18, verse 14, at the appointed time, I'll return to you about this time next year and Sarah shall have a son. Can you see the problem? Sarah's supposed to have a son in what? Well, when God was making those promises, in 12 months. 12 months minus whatever time it's taken Abraham to travel to Hebron and from Hebron to the Negev and then to Gerar and then Abimelech. I mean, what's left?

What does that leave us? 11 months? 10 months? Nine months? This wasn't the time for Sarah to be passing her evenings in the company of another man. I mean, think of the potential ramifications for Abraham's line. Think of the potential ramifications for the covenant. The entire divine arrangement placed in jeopardy because of Abraham's ruse. And Abraham just lets it happen.

No worse, he doesn't just allow it to happen. He sets things up so that it could happen. He perhaps even expects it to happen. I mean, after all, if he didn't anticipate other men's interest in Sarah, why would he even bother with the ruse?

Where's the Abraham of Genesis 18 who showed extravagant hospitality to angels? Where's the Abraham of Genesis 18 who boldly pleaded with the Lord on behalf of Sodom?

Who is this man we see here whose lack of faith not only compromises his own marriage covenant, but even more seriously, it places in jeopardy the covenant of God.

[15:25] But God had no intention of letting everything unravel so easily. Which brings us to the second part of the chapter, a confrontation at night. Look at verse 3. Verse 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.

God speaks. But not to Abraham, mind you. God speaks to Abimelech, this pagan idolatrous king. And he gives Abimelech a stark and unapologetic warning. Notice that God holds Abimelech to the biblical standard of the inviolability of marriage.

And you must not take another man's wife, as would later be articulated in the Ten Commandments, you shall not commit adultery. God holds Abimelech to that.

And the penalty hovering over Abimelech is the same that hung over disobedience in the Garden of Eden. You are a dead man because of what you've done.

[16:43] Now, throughout history, there have been countless men who have taken another man's wife. And the vast majority of those have not received a dream from God warning them of the consequences.

But Abimelech did. And as is always the case, God's word of warning, his threat of judgment, when he says to Abimelech, you're a dead man, that creates a pause.

God's word of warning is a temporary reprieve. It creates space and time in which the one who receives the warning may respond before the threatened punishment falls.

It was the same with Nineveh. When we looked at Jonah earlier in the year, when Jonah preached 40 days and Nineveh shall be overthrown, well, that gave space for Nineveh to repent, even though Jonah didn't want them to.

That's what God's word does today. When any today hear of the reality of hell and the wrath of God, it creates space in which they may repent. That's what it did for Abimelech at this very moment.

[17:47] Every warning from God comes draped in the patience of God. And we hear Abimelech's response in verses 4 to 5. But first, the narrator drops in an important detail, the start of verse 4, now Abimelech had not approached her.

See, Abimelech had taken Sarah to be his wife, but he'd not yet consummated the marriage. That's an important detail if we're keeping track of the promise of God.

It's also important if we're trying to gauge the precise level of Abimelech's culpability at this moment. So verse 4, Abimelech mounts a defence before God.

So he said, Abimelech said, I just accepted what they told me.

But it's Abimelech's question in verse 4 that really captures our attention. Did you notice that? Verse 4, Lord, will you kill an innocent people? Does it remind you of anything?

[19:15] I heard a yes. What's it remind you of? Abraham's pleading for Sodom. That's right. It's almost, it's uncanny. It's almost the same, right?

Back in chapter 18, verse 23. 18, verse 23. Then Abraham drew near and said, this is to the Lord, will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?

Verse 25, far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked. Abimelech's asking God the same question that Abraham asked God.

In fact, the words are the same too. It's translated as innocent in chapter 20, verse 4, but it's the same Hebrew word, the word righteous, the word tzaddik. There's another parallel with the intercession, with Abraham's intercession for Sodom, which it can be easy to overlook.

But listen to Abimelech's words again in verse 4. Lord, will you kill an innocent people? The word is nation. Abimelech is pleading not only on his own behalf, but on behalf of his people.

[20:24] He recognises that his actions as king of Gerar would have consequence for the entire Philistine nation. But Abimelech says, Lord, we're innocent, we're righteous.

I acted in ignorance, I acted in integrity of heart. Lord, will you kill a righteous people? And God replies in verse 6. Verse 6. Then God said to him in the dream, Yes, I know that you've done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me.

Therefore, I did not let you touch her. So I don't think we need to imagine any kind of saintly or heroic self-control on Abimelech's part. The true agent restraining Abimelech's sin was the sovereign hand of God.

It was I who kept you from sinning against me. I mean, to the extent that any of us have any progress in godliness or victory over sin, we can say the same thing, can't we?

It's always God's restraining hand. Well, by his restraining hand, God had kept Abimelech from sinning further and had protected his covenant at this precarious time.

[21:38] At the same time, God acknowledges the essential truth of Abimelech's defense. Yes, you did act in the integrity of your heart. You didn't know what you were doing. But now Abimelech was no longer ignorant.

A change, of course, was required. Verse 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.

Now, I want you to think about this verse. Really think about verse 7 here. What's going on here? What's expected in this verse and what's surprising in God's answer? I think what's expected is the beginning and the end of the verse.

Now then, return the man's wife and you shall live. But if you do not return her, then you shall know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.

I mean, that fits. That makes sense. That follows naturally out of verses 2 to 6. You took Sarah in the integrity of your heart. You didn't know she was Abraham's wife. But now you do know that if you keep her, you're sinning.

[22:49] So there's no excuse. So take her back. Send her back. And if you don't, the penalty of sin remains on you. You shall surely die. There are echoes of Genesis 2.17 there. You and all who are yours.

Again, we see the sin of the king of Gerar would be borne by his people. But that kind of all makes sense. But what about the bit in the middle? Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you and you shall live.

What's that doing there? I mean, what's going on here? I mean, isn't it enough that Abimelech's sin was unintentional and that he repented and that he gave Sarah back?

Well, apparently that's not enough. Abimelech and his people need Abraham's prayer. We're going to return to that thought later. But for now, I want you to notice some of the irony in these words. God says, notice he, two things about Abraham. He's a prophet and he'll pray. Now, what's a prophet? Well, incidentally, this is the first and only time the word prophet appears in the book of Genesis.

[23 : 58] What's a prophet? A prophet is someone who receives God's word and declares it to others, right? That's a prophet. We know Abraham had heard God speak multiple times in the past, so I guess he kind of qualifies.

But in chapter 20, it's not Abraham that hears God's word, it's Abimelech. And in chapter 20, it's not Abraham who declares God's word. We're going to see in verse 7, it's Abimelech.

He goes and tells all his servants what God had said. So if anyone's performing the function of a prophet in chapter 20, it's Abimelech, not Abraham, and yet God says that Abraham's a prophet. There's this jarring disconnect, right? God also says of Abraham and he'll pray. Well, again, so far in chapter 20, who's praying? It's Abimelech that's talking to God, that's praying, and praying the same kind of prayer that Abraham prayed about Sodom.

Lord, will you kill a righteous people? But again, God says to Abimelech, your prayers, Abimelech, will not do. You need the prayers of Abraham.

[25 : 06] Now just hold that thought. We're going to come back to it. Let's see how Abimelech reacts to this startling dream when he wakes up the next morning. Verse 8. Verse 8.

So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants and told them all these things, or literally all these words. It's the words of God. And the men were very much afraid.

You know, Abimelech did what we might expect Abraham to do, right? He declared the words of God to his people. In doing, in this disclosure, this immediate and full disclosure, you've got to say Abimelechs are quite different to most kings and princes and presidents and politicians alive today. I mean, just think about it. Whenever any kind of prince or president or someone or a politician does something shady or crooked or downright despicable, how often do they come out immediately with a full and frank disclosure of their crimes to all and sundry?

Right? Oh, look, this is what I did. You know, you won't hear a word about it until they're publicly exposed and then they'll probably deny it. Anyway.

[26 : 25] But Abimelech urgently summons his servants to tell them what he did, what God had said, and the grave danger they were all in. And what's the outcome? They heard God's words and immediately the men were very much afraid.

They feared God. They feared God. This is the one to whom I'll look, God would say later in the Bible.

He who is humble and contrite and trembles at my word. Well, they tremble at the word of God. There was nothing they could do but for Abimelech to try to set things right with Abraham.

But while they feared God, Abimelech also understandably feels aggrieved by Abraham and so he confronts, as he calls Abraham to him, he confronts Abraham about what he's done.

Verse 9. Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, what have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin?

[27 : 31] You have done to me things that ought not to be done. And Abimelech said to Abraham, what did you see that you did this thing? Now, Abimelech, you notice he doesn't deny his own wrongdoing.

He admits that he and his kingdom are guilty of a great sin in taking Abraham's wife. But he also lays the blame for that, or at least some of the blame for that, at Abraham's feet. He says it was Abraham who brought this sin upon them.

When he asked in verse 10, what did you see that you did this? He might just be saying to Abraham, can you help me understand your perspective here? I mean, how did you see things? What was your perception of the situation that led you to do this?

Or maybe he's picking up on God's description of Abraham as a prophet and saying, look, Abraham, if you received some revelation from God that led to you treating me this way, like, what? Why did you do it?

Well, in verses 11 to 13, Abraham offers his defence. Look at Abraham's defence with me, verse 11. Abraham said, I did it because I thought there is no fear of God at all in this place and they will kill me because of my wife.

[28 : 40] Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, this is the kindness you must do to me, you must do me at every place to which we come, say of me, he is my brother.

Now, what do you make of Abraham's defence? I think these must be some of the most slippery, unedifying, weasel words in all of Scripture.

I mean, it seems to start okay. I did it, he says. Actually, that's not even there in the Hebrew. He doesn't say I did it. He can't quite bring himself to say I did it. He just starts because, right?

Okay, he just launches into excuses. Excuse one, because I thought, literally because I said, notice what follow Abraham's words, he's not God's words, not some vision he's seen, this is just what Abraham's come up with.

Because I said, there's no fear of God at all in this place and they'll kill me because of my wife. I mean, Abraham's words, they're dripping with unintended irony, aren't they? Because we know, having just read verse 8, that as soon as Abimelech's men heard God's words, the men were very much afraid.

[30 : 00] Not just afraid, but very much afraid. Perhaps if Abraham the prophet had tried to speak God's words to Abimelech and the Philistines, he would have discovered that for himself.

As it turns out, the land of Gerah was full of the fear of God. In fact, the only one who doesn't seem to fear God in chapter 20 is Abraham himself. You know, having received all God's promises, yet Abraham acts not in fear of God, but out of fear of men, afraid that they will kill him to take his wife. And so he gives up his wife to save his own skin. That's excuse one. Excuse two. Excuse two.

Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my...

I mean, literally, indeed is truly. She is truly my sister, the daughter of my father, though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. Now, this is just legal casuistry, isn't it? It's just looking for the loophole to evade responsibility.

I mean, these are weasel words that kind of remind me of Bill Clinton's infamous denial, which I won't repeat here, right? I mean, technically it wasn't a lie, but it was absolutely intended to deceive.

[31 : 23] She really is my sister, my half-sister. I mean, as if that were relevant in this situation. Actually, we have here another instance of the masterful storytelling in Genesis, because there's a deliberate ambiguity here.

This account has been told in such a way as to leave us reading it in the same position as Abimelech, where all we can do is kind of take Abraham's word for it. Because back in chapter 11, when Abraham and Abraham's family, or Abram's family, were first introduced, nothing is said about who Sarah's parents were.

We're told Abraham's father had three sons, Abram, Nahor, and Haran. There's no mention of him having a daughter. There's no mention of him having two wives. We're told that Abraham's first brother, Nahor, married Milcah, the daughter of his second brother, Haran.

So that is, Abraham's first brother married his niece. So it's happy, Genesis 11 is happy to explain a family connection in a marriage, but again, no mention of Sarah.

In fact, of Sarah, in Genesis chapter 11, verse 31, it explicitly says, calls Sarah Terah's daughter-in-law, the wife of Abram, not his daughter.

[32 : 36] So the narrator of Genesis has had ample opportunity to kind of tell us this earlier, if it's true that Sarah is Abraham's half-sister.

And when Abraham says it in verse 12, we're left wondering, like, I mean, is she? I mean, maybe. Maybe Abraham's kind of telling the truth now, or maybe he's still lying.

I don't know. Is she his half-sister? Possibly. Not that it matters, because even if it's technically true at some level, it's still a deception because she's his wife.

And I don't actually know which one's better. Like, is it better that he's, like, lying now still and she's not actually his half-sister, or that he's telling the truth now and that he married his half-sister?

I don't know which is better. I mean, he doesn't come out looking so good either way, right? Right? That's excuse two. Excuse three, and when God caused me to wander from my father's house, so maybe it's God's fault, I said to her, this is the kindness you must do to me at every place to which

we come.

[33 : 41] Save me, he is my brother. That word kindness is the Hebrew word hesed, which is, some of you will be aware, is a weighty word in the Old Testament. It's often used of God's kindness, of his covenant love, of his steadfast love.

It first appears in the Bible in the previous chapter where Lot is speaking about the Lord's kindness in saving him, in saving his life. And here's Abraham saying, when Sarah lied, it was actually kindness to her husband.

In verse 12, he tried to pass off his deception as true, truly she's my sister. In verse 13, he tried to pass it off as kindness, as steadfast love, truth and love, together, you know, two core attributes of God himself.

And these are the sum total of the prophet Abraham's words in this chapter. I mean, what a dismal performance it is. Abraham could hardly have done any worse in Gerar than if he had set out intentionally to sully the name of God, which only accentuates how remarkable is Abimelech's response, which is clearly prompted by what God had said and not by what Abraham had said. Look at verse 14. Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen and male servants and female servants and gave them to Abraham and returned Sarah, his wife, to him. And Abimelech said, behold, my land is before you, dwell, or live in it, where it pleases you.

[35 : 18] To Sarah he said, behold, I've given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. It's a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you and before everyone you are vindicated.

He showers Abraham with gifts. You know, similar to the gifts that Pharaoh gave Abraham in chapter 12 was a bride price, but these are just gifts, right? He returns Sarah, he invites Sarah to dwell wherever he likes in Abimelech's land, that is not to sojourn, but to live.

To settle down there if he wants to. He gives a specific gift of a thousand pieces of silver, a very large sum, as a sign that nothing untoward had happened between Abimelech and Sarah.

You may notice the, I've given your brother a thousand, maybe a little pointed jab at the pair for their deception. But in all of this, you've got to say, Abimelech displays remarkable magnanimity to someone who's just deceived him and brought great sin on his people and brought the entire people into danger.

Of the two, Abimelech's conduct is by far the more commendable and Abraham's in this chapter is by far the more blameworthy. Which just makes it all the more noteworthy when we remember God's words in verse 7.

[36 : 43] which is not that Abraham needed the prayers of Abimelech, but Abimelech needed the prayers of Abraham. And so we come to the aftermath in verse 17.

Then Abraham prayed to God and God healed Abimelech and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children.

for the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife. We see Abraham's intercession for Abimelech which is immediately effective.

God heals Abimelech and his entire household. God had brought on his whole household an inability to conceive because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

it's kind of part punishment for Abimelech's inadvertent sin. It's also part protection of Sarah and God's promise.

[37 : 46] God decreed that none in Abimelech's house could conceive so long as Sarah was among them but now he lifts that, he heals them, he restores life to Abimelech, his household, his people.

There's a final irony here though, isn't there? If we've been following Abraham's life and story. If Abraham's prayer could so quickly heal Abimelech's wife and servants and open all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, what of Sarah herself whose womb had been closed these many decades past?

Let's leave that question in closing I want to draw together some threads from chapter 20 as a whole. I mean what is this chapter doing here in the book of Genesis?

Why do we have it, this funny little chapter? For one thing it shows us the persistence of sin. We've seen this kind of thing before. Here Abraham makes the same mistake in chapter 20 that he'd made way back in chapter 12.

The same mistake at age 100 that he made at age 75. 25 years had passed. 25 years of God's steady work in Abraham's life.

[39 : 04] Is he a changed man? Well, perhaps, somewhat. But it didn't take much for the old fears to resurface.

It didn't take much for the old sins to reappear. isn't it the same for each of us? God changes us, but old habits die hard.

I was speaking with someone recently who was well aware of the sins of his youth and how quickly he would just fall into any temptation. He said whatever temptation came he would just run after it. And he said to me, he feels like a new man now, but he prays every day that the old man will not reassert itself.

Let anyone who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. But I don't think that's the main function of Genesis 20, as helpful it might be to see the persistence of sin, potential persistence of sin in our lives.

[40 : 18] The main function of this chapter and of this episode in the life of Abraham is to demonstrate God's absolute commitment to the promise of Genesis 12 verse 3.

So have a look at Genesis 12 verse 3 with me. Genesis 12 verse 3. Genesis 12 verse 3. Part of those initial promises God made to Abraham when he sent him out toward the promised land, toward the land of Canaan.

Genesis 12 verse 3. God promised, I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonours you I will curse and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

In part that promise of Genesis 12 verse 3 is a promise of protection. And we see God's protection of Abraham and God's protection of Sarah in Genesis 20.

We see God protect them from Abimelech's power, protect them from their own folly. We see God judge Abimelech for his mistreatment of them.

[41 : 25] Him who dishonours you I will curse as God had promised in chapter 12 verse 3. God is safeguarding his own promise that at the proper time Sarah would bear Abraham a son.

God remains just as committed to his people to the present day. God is God I will not fear.

What can man do to me? What can anyone do to us who have the promises of God? God? But actually the promise of Genesis 12 verse 3 which is so aptly illustrated in chapter 20 isn't just a promise of protection.

It's also a declaration of God's plan of salvation. I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonours you I will curse and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

Why did Abimelech need the prayers of Abraham? Abraham because there is no blessing for the families of the earth except through Abraham and God has determined to bring the nations that blessing.

[42 : 55] Abimelech needed the prayers of Abraham because he needed the blessings of God and there was no other way. So in Genesis chapter 20 in this kind of convoluted roundabout way God brings about through Abraham's sin and failure exactly the same outcome he would have brought about if Abraham the prophet had been faithful.

That is Abimelech hears the word of God, he fears God, he blesses Abraham and he's healed of his great sin.

I will bless those who bless you, God had promised. Of course the promise to Abraham that in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed isn't really about Abraham at all.

It's about the promised son of Abraham, the seed of Abraham, a better prophet and a better mediator. Abraham tried to pass off his deception as kindness, grace and truth.

But the son came from the father full of grace and truth. Abraham feared men rather than trusting God. The son entrusted himself to God even as men did their worst.

[44 : 24] Abraham gave up his wife to save himself. The son gave up himself to save you and me. If Abimelech needed Abraham's intercession and if despite Abraham's shortcomings His intercession sufficed, how much more is Jesus Christ a full and sufficient mediator for us?

The Holy One, the righteous one, who died, who was raised, who always lives to intercede for us. Our experience of life is often as Genesis 20.

It's full of ambiguities and slippery words, shabby behaviour and lurking fears. things even the best of men in our experience have feet of clay.

In our lives things rarely add up and the equation never balances. But the messiness of our lives does not nullify the promise of God.

Rather the messiness of our lives is the backdrop for the promise of God. God and especially this promise. God gave us eternal life and this life is in his son.

[45 : 57] Whoever has the son has life. Whoever does not have the son of God does not have life. Kiss the son lest he be angry and you perish in your way for his wrath is quickly kindled.

But blessed are all who take refuge in him. Will you pray with me? Heavenly Father we thank you for our better prophet and our better mediator Jesus Christ who gave himself for us and who always lives to intercede for us.

Thank you that through his redeeming work all our great sins are forgiven and taken away and we are healed. Thank you that in him we are blessed and we are protected by your sovereign hand and your spirit.

And in the midst of our messy lives where so little often makes sense, we thank you for the firm and secure promise that you've given us in your son, in whose name we pray.

Amen. Thank you.