

Fear of the Faithless

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[0 : 00] Friends, let's pray. Almighty God and Heavenly Father, as we look at your word tonight, we pray that you might give us our ears to hear, our eyes to see, hearts to understand and receive your word written for us.

And we pray these things in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. Well, it was this time last year that I got my first speeding ticket, the blemish on my hitherto unstained driving record. I still remember it very clearly. I was driving to preach at a church in the city, actually. It was at the corner of La Trobe and Exhibition Streets. I was pinged for going 48 kilometers in a 40k zone. I repented. In my defense, it was previously a 60k an hour zone, but they had just reduced the speed limit. It took me a year before I chose to go back to that church and preach, which I did this morning.

And I can tell you when I got to that same junction, I slammed on the brakes and went to about 30k an hour through. Because that first memory was so seared in my, that first memory was really seared in my mind.

[1 : 07] I wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. Well, I wonder when was the last time that you got a second chance? The opportunity to right a wrong, to correct a mistake of your past.

Have you ever faced a situation identical to the first? You're in the same position, confronted with the same decision, but now you have the chance to make the right call.

Tonight, Abraham is given a second chance. He's confronted with his past, the exact same position, the exact same decision. And our question is, has he learned his lesson?

Will he this time choose wisely? Last week, we read of how God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. And here in chapter 20, Abraham and Sarah continue their journey towards the land promised to them.

As they enter Gerah, Abraham says of Sarah, his wife, she is my sister. And Abimelech, king of Gerah, sent and took Sarah.

[2 : 10] Well, we've been here before, haven't we? We get a sense of deja vu. Let me take you back to Genesis chapter 12. Do you recall what happens? A famine strikes the land.

Abraham and Sarah journey towards Egypt. Abraham fears being killed for Sarah's beauty. And so they concoct the lie of all lies. 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.

You see, Abraham may have protected his life, but he was playing poker with the promises of God. Because just as expected, yes, Sarah's beauty catches Pharaoh's eye.

And Pharaoh brings her into his house. Do you remember God's promises made to Abraham? A great people living in a great land under the rule of a great God.

And now suddenly, in one act, in one lie, these promises are under threat. What people will there be if Sarah is taken by Pharaoh?

[3 : 16] What land will they occupy if they remain in Egypt? And which God will they serve?

Yahweh or the gods of Egypt? Abraham, as the guardian of the Holy Grail might say, chose poorly.

And yet, nevertheless, God delivered Abraham and Sarah from Pharaoh. God still preserved his covenant promises back then in chapter 12.

But let's be clear, it wasn't because of Abraham's faithfulness. It was in spite of his faithlessness. Well, that was then, but surely now Abraham will choose wisely.

Surely now he's learned his lesson. After all, just think back to everything that's happened since round one. God has promised to make Abraham's offspring as dust of the earth.

He has promised that Abraham's very own son shall be his heir. And just three chapters ago, he promised that that son will be born by this time next year.

[4 : 20] And his name will be Isaac. So, you'd think that with a promise reiterated, with a name and even a birth date, Abraham has every reason to trust in God's faithfulness.

He has every reason to choose wisely. Every reason to not fear for his life. Indeed, just in our last chapter, we saw Abraham's faithfulness in interceding for Sodom.

So, if you're like me, I'm coming to this chapter with my expectations set pretty high. Abraham will trust in God's promises. He will get this right.

And then we read verse 2. And Abraham said, O Sarah, his wife, she is my sister. Abraham repeats his past sin.

He lies. Despite all the promises of God, despite his own recent faithfulness last week, Abraham is still wracked by fear. And so, once again, here we are.

[5 : 28] History repeats itself. Abraham's fear imperils God's promises. Once again, God must act. Once again, God must protect his promises.

Well, I don't know about you, but I don't know if I should feel this way, but I feel a little bit sorry for Abimelech. He didn't really intend to do anything wrong, did he? I'm guessing if he had known Sarah was married, it seems that he wouldn't have taken her away from Abraham into his own house.

If anyone is a victim in this biblical bold and the beautiful, I think it's Abimelech. And yet, and yet, in verse 3, God confronts him in a dream. And this is what he says.

Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife. You see, friends, in the eyes of God, Abimelech is on death row.

It's just a bit harsh. I mean, God could just simply say, Abimelech, you're a guilty man. But no, he chooses these words, you are a dead man. Death just seems a bit of overkill for what is an innocent mistake.

[6 : 39] I mean, after all, Abraham deceived Abimelech. Why is he not found guilty? So, for better or for worse, rightly or wrongly, I'm sort of on Abimelech's side right now.

He was deceived and in verse 4 is innocent. In verse 5, he acted in the integrity of his heart and the innocence of his hands. God acknowledges as much.

Yes, I know that you've done this in the integrity of your heart. And yet, Abimelech still stands guilty. He may not have slept with Sarah, but he had taken another man's wife.

His sin, in one sense, was to steal the wife of another man. This tells us something about sin, doesn't it? There is, in one sense, absolute liability.

It doesn't matter whether we sin intentionally, recklessly or negligently. Look at 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.

[7 : 42] But if you do not return her, here's the consequence. You know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours. Sin deserves death.

Sin deserves death. What an unpopular thing to say. What an almost immoral thing to say. That everyone who sins deserves to die.

And yet, that is God's clear message. A message we can't shy away from. For if we diminish the guilt of the sinner, we will diminish the goodness of God.

Did you see it? Hidden away, in the midst of guilt, is God's goodness. Verse 6. God says to Abimelech, It was I who kept you from sinning against me.

Therefore, I do not let you touch her. So even in our guilt, God's goodness reigns. He is good to Abimelech by showing him mercy, by not letting him sin further against Sarah.

[8 : 50] He is good to Gerar by not allowing his judgment to fall on them all. But more than anything else, he is good to Abraham. He is good to him by preserving his covenant of promises against all odds.

He promised to make of Abraham a great nation in its own land under God's rule. And just think, if Abimelech had slept with Sarah and borne a child through her, those very promises would have been undone.

But God did not let Abimelech even touch her. God protected his promises. Not the sin of a king, nor the fear of a man, can thwart the faithfulness of God.

God's goodness covers our guilt. Well, why don't we look at this second dynamic at play? It's the fear of the faithless.

In verses 8 to 10, Abimelech confronts Abraham. 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?

[9 : 57] You have done to me things that ought not to be done. And later he asks, what did you see that you did this thing? I don't know about you, but once again, I'm squarely in Abimelech's corner on this one.

Spit it out, Abraham. Fess up. Come clean. Tell us why you did this. After all, if my friend had told me his wife was his sister, and I sought to pursue her, only to find out that she was actually married to my friend, I would probably want to know why.

Look at Abraham's answer. There is no fear of God at all in this place. And they will kill me because of my wife.

Now just think about the two parts of that sentence. There is no fear of God. We're talking about fear. And then in the very next breath, they're going to kill me. Oh no, I think there is fear.

I think there is fear. Though it's not fear of God. It's fear of man. And it's not fear from Abimelech, but it's actually fear from Abraham.

[11 : 05] The sheer irony of this is breathtaking. Abraham's answer should have been, yes, there is fear of man everywhere in this wretched, wretched man.

Notice Abraham floundering in verses 12 and 13. First, he puts up the excuse that Sarah is technically speaking my half-sister.

So in that sense, I wasn't really lying. And secondly, he blames God who caused me to wander from my father's house. Don't ask me, ask him.

But most notably, look closely at verse 13. I want you to see how deeply entrenched Abraham's fear really is.

And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, and that was all the way back in chapter 12 from him, right at the beginning. I said to Sarah, this is the kindness you must do me.

[11 : 59] At every place to which we come, say of me, he is my brother. I wish I could pass chapter 20 off as a spirit of the moment.

I panicked. I choked. I wasn't quite sure what to do on the spot. But friends, Abraham's fear is not spontaneous. It's premeditated.

It's calculated. It's considered. So deep is his fear that right from the get-go, he had planned a way out. I mean, we came to this chapter hoping that Abraham had really changed eight chapters later.

And despite his faithfulness of last week, we see here that he is actually exactly the same as he was. Fearful and faithless. His fear reveals his faithlessness in the covenant promises of God.

Well, it's been said that signing a prenup is like getting a divorce before a marriage. That's pretty close to what Abraham has done here. As soon as he had heard God's unbreakable, loving commitment to him back in chapter 12, what did he do?

[13 : 13] He fixes a side deal to protect his assets. Abraham meets God's promise of faithfulness with an act of infidelity. It can be so easy to let fear grip us, paralyze us, and prevent us from trusting God and his promises.

And the truth is we are too much like Abraham, aren't we? We doubt our salvation. We question God's promise to forgive our sins. We disbelieve his assurance that nothing can separate us from his love.

And we lose hope that he will one day wipe away our every tear. And the truth is in this city, over the coming years, we will have even more reason to be afraid.

If you're a Christian and clear about it publicly, it wouldn't be surprising. We're being already branded as bigots and intolerant. Our public schools teach a view of sexuality that is totally inconsistent with God's moral order.

We're being silenced and told that the gospel of repentance is hate speech. Oh, there are many reasons to fear. And it will take a lot of courage for us to stand up.

[14 : 30] And the greatest temptation we will face is to fear. We will be tempted to fear man more than God. We will be tempted to lose faith in God's promises.

We will be tempted to take our safety into our own hands. But in a world set against God, the great promise of this chapter is God is faithful.

He will not be defeated. His covenant promises will not be undone. And against a hostile world, and yes, even in spite of us so often as a faithless people, God remains faithful.

We can have confidence that God's faithfulness covers our fear. His goodness covers our guilt.

Well, friends, let me ask after all of that, what do you think Abraham deserves?

After what he's done now, not just once but twice, what do you think, how do you think God ought to treat him? Well, if I'm honest, and if I were God, that's a good way to start any sentence, really.

[15 : 35] Not much. If anything, punishment. It was, after all, his fear that got us back into this mess, wasn't it? Maybe if I were a harsher parent, I would say, look, if Abraham didn't learn from Egypt, why not now teach him a lesson he'll never forget?

But, friends, God is merciful and gracious, isn't he? So, maybe, maybe Abraham can get Sarah back. Walk away unpunished.

Call it quits. That would, at least in one sense, be a win-win. Both Abraham and Abimelech walk free. But look at what Abraham actually received. 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. Just a bit more than what he probably deserved. But it doesn't stop there. Behold, my land is before you. Dwell where it pleases you. So, let's do a stock take. Sheep and oxen. Male and female servants.

[16 : 43] Free access to land. And in verse 16, the kicker, a thousand pieces of silver. What about Sarah? In verse 16, Abimelech counts her innocent.

A victim trafficked between Abraham and Abimelech's sin. But she, too, also lied that Abraham was her brother. You know, we get to this part, and we might think that, it's just a bit unfair, isn't it?

A bit unjust. That Abraham and Sarah don't deserve all that. Well, of course they don't. Friend, when it comes to your sin, do you want raw justice, or sweet mercy?

Are we asking for what we deserve, or what we clearly don't? Mercy, forgiveness, grace, and salvation.

You know, we might object to God blessing and undeserving Abraham. But if I'm honest with myself, God blessing and undeserving Adam is my only hope. And my guess is, that God blessing and undeserving you, is your only hope as well.

[17 : 55] Praise God that he does not treat us out of merit, but out of his mercy. Psalm 103, he does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

Well, if we thought that there was enough irony in this chapter, we're not done yet. Because God is yet to deliver on his promise to Abimelech. Abraham is yet to pray for him, so that in God's words, he might live.

And that prayer comes 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 has closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah, Abraham's wife. Friends, just think about this for a moment. God promises to give Abraham a child, through an old and infertile Sarah.

The promise of future descendants, is one third of God's great covenant. And what does God then do, to the people of Gerar, when that very promise is placed under threat?

[19 : 04] He works in reverse. He prevents any of their children being born. And to hear the echoes of God's promise yet again. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you, I will curse.

God's curse protects his people. And even in the curse, God remains faithful. But think about this from Abraham's perspective for a moment.

Year after year, you've been longing to see God's promise realized. Month after month, you have been presumably praying for that child. Day after day, you have been waiting.

And then, in an instant, your prayer brings about birth. But it's not of your own son. It's the birth of the children of your enemy.

Not just one enemy, but a whole nation. And you've got to think of your Abraham, that's got to be a bit bittersweet. But it demonstrates beyond a shadow of doubt, that the God whom we worship, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, is sovereign.

[20 : 15] He is sovereign over the destinies of, not just his people, but all people. Those living, and those yet to be born. He is powerful to open wombs, and close wombs, to give children to the young, and to the old.

And friends, he will exercise his power, to deliver on his promises, against all odds. Nothing, will thwart the faithfulness of God.

Not our fear, nor our faithlessness. God's faithfulness covers our fear. His goodness covers our guilt.

Well, if Abraham had reason for confidence, we have even more. We have that for which Abraham longed to receive, but never obtained. We have the promises of God in Christ. These aren't material promises of health, wealth, and prosperity. These are far greater promises. Adoption, redemption, forgiveness, hope, and the inheritance of eternal life, which awaits us all in heaven.

[21 : 27] In Romans chapter 8, which was read for us before, Paul wants to get into our heads, but also into our hearts, the confidence we ought to have.

The confidence we ought to have, as those who conquer in Christ Jesus. Just listen to his heartbeat here. For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, it's pretty all-encompassing, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. We read earlier, what were Paul's reasons for fear? Tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger, the sword.

My guess is, if anyone has a reason to fear, it's Paul. Paul's got it. And yet, against all odds, and in staring fear in the face, what does Paul say?

If God is for us, who can be against us? And friends, that is the confidence of the conqueror. That is the confidence of us who conquer in Christ Jesus.

[22 : 48] And as this world turns against the gospel, and our reasons for fear multiply, the question is, will we respond in fear and faithlessness like Abraham? Or will we have the confidence of those who conquer through Christ Jesus?

If you do just a broad sweep of history over the last few decades, we're now entering the period where there's very little cultural incentive to be a Christian. Maybe there was a time where it paid to stand with Jesus, but definitely not anymore.

What was once good became traditional. What was traditional then became old-fashioned, and what was old-fashioned became regressive, and what was regressive became bigoted, and today what was bigoted is fast becoming immoral.

Well, we will be called all of those things, and for all those reasons, we will have reasons to fear, and then some. So when the heat is on, and the ridicule is amped up, and Christians are pushed to the margins and silenced, we have a choice, don't we?

We can remain faithful to God, at least right now in our understanding of marriage, the difference between men and women, and the demands of repentance. Or we can choose fear.

[24 : 10] We might not publicly deny God, but isn't it so much easier to just remain silent, to keep our heads down, to go along with the world that is set against the Christ we claim to love.

But friends, Genesis 20 tells us this great truth, that God's faithfulness covers our fear. His goodness covers our guilt. He will keep His promises against all odds.

He will keep His promises where even we appear to put them at risk. Not even our greatest act of faithlessness can thwart God's greatest act of faithfulness.

We mustn't mistake this. It's not an excuse to fear. It's not an excuse to faithlessness. It's a reason to not fear. For nothing in this world can separate you and me from God's greatest promise, His love for us in Christ Jesus our Lord.

So friends, do not be afraid. Trust in the faithfulness of God. Let's pray. Mighty God and faithful King, thank you for your word to us.

[25 : 26] Thank you for the example of Abraham. Though he feared and did not have faith in your promises, we are so much like him. So thank you for meeting us in our weakness.

We praise you that you are faithful to your promises even when we fail to trust them. So take away our fear. Give us a greater faith.

Strengthen in us the confidence we have as conquerors through him who loved us. And we pray these things in Jesus' strong name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.