

Faith that Fears God not Man

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Date: 19 August 2018

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[0 : 00] I think Genesis chapter 20 is a little bit like the weather today. In fact, it's grey and raining. And Genesis chapter 20 is grey and raining.

Grey because it's a confusing chapter. And raining because it's a challenging chapter as well. Grey and raining, confusing and challenging.

And, or curious I should say. And it's curious because why is it even here in the first place? If you look over the page with your Bibles, chapter 21 is the birth of Isaac.

That's the chapter we really want to read about. That's the one we've been waiting for. Why do we have to have chapter 20? What is the author doing? Why does the author bother this late into the game by introducing a totally new character, this king Abimelech?

Why does he bother with a storyline that seems to go nowhere, that doesn't progress the story of Abraham on at all? Why do we need this chapter 20?

[1 : 05] And the answer I think is of where it fits in the Bible. So it arrives just before God's promised son, Isaac.

Just before the promised son arrives is chapter 20. I think God is teaching us something about waiting. We have to wait one more chapter for Isaac.

We've been waiting two months for him to arrive. We've got to wait one more chapter. Abraham, he's been waiting 25 years for his promised son to arrive. He has to wait one more week as well. Many times in the Bible, God's people have to wait on his promises. So Israel will have to wait over 400 years for their promised land.

Israel will have to wait centuries and centuries and centuries until God's promised Messiah arrives that first Christmas morning. And for us Christian people, we're in a different phase of salvation history.

[2 : 09] But we too are waiting for God's promised son to arrive, Jesus. Learning to wait is characteristic of being God's people.

Today is a curious passage, but it's also a challenging one because chapter 20 is a warning. It's a warning. It's a warning about who we align ourselves to.

And that's what Michelle said in our kids talk. Who we align ourselves to. That question is at the top of your handout. So she was talking about footy teams and kids at school. But who do you align yourself to?

Which school or university did you choose? Which workplace did you choose? Which business have you chosen to align yourself to? We are helped or hindered in life based on who we align ourselves to.

What about church tradition? I know people here are from many different church backgrounds. But to some degree, we are all aligning ourselves with the Anglican tradition by being here today.

[3 : 15] That means while we're at HCD, we will be directly affected by decisions that other Anglicans make on our behalf. Who are we aligning ourselves to?

And of course, this goes doubly for marriage and for friendships. Who are we aligning ourselves to? Here is a curious chapter. Here is a challenging chapter that warns us as we wait for the man of promise.

Who are we aligning ourselves to in the meantime? Our author shows us that Abimelech's life or death rests on whether he aligns himself to Abraham or not.

So let's read the story. Chapter 20, verse 1. Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev. And he lived between Kadesh and Shur.

For a while he stayed in Gerar. And there Abraham said of his wife, She is my sister. And then Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent for Sarah and took her. And as we begin this chapter, there's an

eerie deja vu going on.

[4 : 18] So Abraham is journeying through the Negev again. He's telling lies about Sarah again. Verse 2. And there he said of his wife, Sarah, She is my sister.

Back in chapter 12, when they're in Egypt, he also passed Sarah off as his sister to Pharaoh. Here he does it again with a different king, Abimelech.

Poor old Abimelech. He thinks Sarah is single and ready to mingle. Yeah, sorry. Is that a bit sacrilegious to say that about the matriarch?

Anyway, she and Abraham are brother and sister, he thinks. She's single, free to marry. Just as Pharaoh thought in chapter 12. You see, our author is inviting us to compare and contrast the two deceptions.

And I've put them both on your handout. She is my sister is the big lie, both times. And loads of similarities between them. You can see that on your handout. But actually, it's in the differences or the contrast that makes all the difference.

[5 : 27] So in chapter 12, we've got nothing about Pharaoh. Nothing about how God spoke to Pharaoh, because he didn't. Nothing about how to remedy the situation.

But in chapter 20, loads about Abimelech. He's there all the time. Abimelech and God. Abimelech and Abraham. Abimelech making restoration.

It's the Abimelech story, chapter 20. This passage, our author breaks into three scenes which revolve around Abimelech. And those three scenes are our three points today.

And so let me read verse 3. But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken.

She is a married woman. You're as good as dead. But do you love it when you realize that a Hollywood expression is actually from the Bible? There's loads of times.

[6 : 27] So did you know this? By the skin of your teeth. It's from the Bible. Job 19. A leopard changing his spots. That's from Jeremiah. A drop in a bucket.

That's from Isaiah. Check this one out. Do you know a fly in the ointment? That's from the Bible. Anyway, there you go. Ecclesiastes 10. There's about 50 of them from a regular vernacular in Hollywood, which are from the Bible.

Abimelech, you're as good as dead. In verse 3. Because of the woman you have taken. She's a married woman. So Abimelech pleads his case, his innocence.

In verse 4. Now Abimelech had not gone near her. So he said, Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? You see, probably they're not like Sodom and Gomorrah, who we saw the past two weeks. Abraham is the deceiver. See verse 5. Did he not say to me, she is my sister? And Sarah is complicit also. And didn't she also say, he is my brother?

[7 : 29] And Abimelech sums up his defense at the end of verse 5. I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands. God is the judge. He's sympathetic to his plight in verse 6.

And he says in verse 7. Now return the man's wife for or because he is a prophet. And he will pray for you. And you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all who belong to you will die.

There is a cause and effect going on between Abimelech and how he treats Abraham. God warns Abimelech that his life or his death hangs on whether he aligns himself to Abraham.

We're told that Abraham is a prophet, that he can intercede with prayer as a good prophet should. And he can be spared. If Abimelech doesn't do this, he will die.

And so in our next scene, Abimelech confronts Abraham. This is point number 2. Verse 9. Then Abimelech called Abraham in and said, What have you done to us?

[8 : 39] How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should never be done. And Abimelech asked Abraham, What was your reason for doing this?

I wonder, how good are you at making up excuses or reasons? I wonder what the difference between a reason and an excuse is. I think it depends on how guilty you are.

So, a dog ate my homework. The light was yellow, officer. I swear I wasn't on my phone. It was someone else's fault. Well, it turns out that Abraham is quite good at making up excuses.

And he offers up three excuses or reasons. And they get progressively worse. So, verse 11. I said to myself, Abraham that is, Surely there's no fear of God in this place.

And they will kill me because of my wife. And that's not too unreasonable. You see, Gerar is a pagan land. Maybe Abraham thinks they're like Sodom and Gomorrah.

[9 : 43] Or they may just kill him to get to Sarah. Not unreasonable. But then the reasons get more and more ridiculous. So, verse 12. Besides, she really is my sister.

The daughter of my father. Though not of my mother. And she became my wife. Technically, says Abraham, Technically, she's my sister. We have the same father, but different mothers. Technically, Abraham, you're an idiot.

Because even if that is true, They are still truly married. They're really married. They're still husband and wife. Ridiculous excuse. The third excuse, verse 13.

And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, This is how you can show your love to me. Everywhere we go, save me. He is my brother. It's God's fault.

He caused me to wander through this godless land. So, I had to protect myself with this lie. Very similar to Abraham's greatest grandfather, Adam, in the garden.

[10 : 44] It's your fault, God. The woman you put here, she gave me the fruit and I ate. It's your fault. And ever since we've met Abraham two months ago, He's been a total mixed bag.

One week, he's really good and faithful. The next week, total rubbish. Today, Abraham fears Abimelech. He thinks Abimelech's people will kill him to get to Sarah.

He forgets God's promises to bless him. And he leaves Sarah in harm's way, jeopardizing his chance to father her children as she's taken by another man.

Abraham forgets his experiences of God in his life. Remember chapter 13? God gave Abraham a tremendous victory. Chapter 15?

God covenants himself to Abraham. Chapter 17? The sign of circumcision. The sign of God's commitment to his promises. And chapters 18 and 19?

[11 : 45] Abraham sees God judging the worst nation of Sodom and Gomorrah. He need not fear Abimelech. And so actually, the two men stand in sharp contrast to one another.

And ironically, it's Abimelech, not Abraham, who seems to fear God more. So Abimelech is afraid of God's warning. He fears God will judge him.

In verse 8, Abimelech's officials hear that God is coming and are afraid as well. It's a curious chapter. And so it could be that chapter 20 is telling us to fear God and not man.

That is true in the Bible. It could be that chapter 20 is teaching us that God is still faithful to his promises, even though Abraham is terrible today.

That is true. It's in the Bible. Curious chapter. But I don't think that deals with the last scene of the story. And so that's our last point.

[12 : 54] Verse 14. Then Abimelech brought sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham. And he returned Sarah, his wife, to him. And Abimelech said, My land is before you.

Live wherever you like. Here in our final scene, Abimelech blesses Abraham with livestock and slaves, which is more than he deserves.

He returned Sarah to him. Rather than kick him out of the land, which he should have done, he says, verse 15, My land is before you. Live wherever you like. Choose the best part of my land. It's all yours. He wants Abraham to dwell with him. Abimelech provides an extravagant compensation in verse 16. To Sarah, he said, I'm giving your brother a thousand shekels of silver. In the Old Testament, if you don't know, in the Old Testament, if a man violated an unmarried woman, the compensation was to be 50 shekels of silver. It's in Deuteronomy 22.

[13 : 54] Abimelech didn't touch Sarah, but he gives her a thousand. Not just 50, but a thousand. And the commentators tell us that a shekel is about two months wages.

And when I heard that, the inner accountant in me came to the surface. And so I did a little bit of number crunching. So if a shekel is worth two months wages, let's say an annual wage is 72 to 75 grand, which is probably right.

Two months wages is 12 grand. A thousand shekels, \$12 million in today's money. And verse 16, this \$12 million is to cover the offense against you, Sarah, before all who are with you, Sarah.

You, Sarah, are completely vindicated. You see, Abimelech makes a public restitution for Sarah's honor. He cares more for her honor than her own husband, who left her out to dry.

And so Abimelech allows Abraham to settle wherever he chooses. He gives him livestock and slaves to help him get set up.

[15:04] And of course, this extravagant financial compensation. You see, Abimelech takes God at his warning that his fate rests on whether he aligns himself to Abraham or not.

That is our main idea today. And that matches the promises we've heard of Abraham since we first met him back in chapter 12.

So, both please, the first slide. This is one of the promises God gave Abraham when he first met him. I will bless those who bless you. And whoever curses you, I will curse.

And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. Can you see the cause and effect? God made promises to Abraham, but other people will be affected depending on how they treat or how they align their lives to Abraham.

And throughout this series, this has happened before. Thanks, Wolf. So, think of little Ishmael, the first son. He's not the son of promise, but God blesses him.

[16:08] And why? Because Abraham prays for him. So, the next slide, please. So, Abraham said to God, If only Ishmael might live under your blessing.

And God responds, As for Ishmael, I have heard you. That's the linchpin. I have heard you. I will surely bless him. I will make him fruitful and will greatly increase his numbers.

Ishmael's blessings are entirely dependent on his father praying for him. Thanks, Wolf. And the last two weeks, we saw Sodom and Gomorrah judged and destroyed by God.

But God spared Lot. And we don't know what. Lot was a total basket case. Andrew was up here last week making fun of him publicly. And we were told why?

Because over in 19, verse 29, over the page, When God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham. And he brought Lot out. He spared Lot because of Abraham.

[17:11] And the same is true of Abimelech today. He is as good as dead for taking Sarah. But in the end, he's blessed. Because Abraham prays for him.

Verse 7. Now return the man's wife for he is a prophet and he will pray for you. God has decided that Abimelech will be spared from death depending on Abraham.

And so in verse 17, Then Abraham prayed to God and God healed Abimelech. And not just Abimelech, but all of his women.

God healed his wife and his female slaves so they could have children again. You see, all of his women had the same barrenness that Sarah has been struck with.

But they're now healed because Abraham intercedes. And you can see this again in verse 18, this tight cause and effect link. Verse 18. For the Lord had kept all the women in Abimelech's household from conceiving because of Abraham's wife Sarah.

[18:16] Abimelech is a dead man. He's a saved man. He's sick. He's healed. His women are barren. They can conceive. I will bless those who bless you.

Whoever curses you, I will curse. And therefore for us in this room, as we wait for Jesus to return, we will stand or fall based on how we align ourselves with the man of promise.

Jesus. It's one of God's last promises in the Bible. Jesus will return. He will judge the world. He will make everything okay.

He says that himself in our second reading from Mark. Last slide, please. This is Jesus predicting the end of the world and what we're talking about.

If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.

[19:18] You see, just like Abimelech who appears in history before the promised son, chapter 20, we too appear in history right before the promised son, Jesus.

Jesus warns that our life or death hang or depend on whether we align ourselves to him as we wait for his return.

And so for those of you who wouldn't call yourselves Christians and in a room this size, there'll be a few of you. If you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, please hear the loving warning of this passage. Align yourself with Jesus, the better Abraham. Allow him to be your savior. So that when he returns with his Father's glory with the holy angels, he won't have to be ashamed of you and you will be spared.

As lots of you know, we run a Christianity Explored course on Sunday afternoons. And two weeks ago, one of the chaps who comes to the course is a young Muslim guy.

[20:31] And he comes all the way from Broadmeadows on the bus. And he loves to come and listen and talk. And two weeks ago, the subject for discussion was about sin and a similar warning

from Jesus to repent.

Well, that afternoon, this Muslim chap, two weeks ago, he gave his life to Christ. Here at HCA, it was fantastic. I was buzzing about it. It's extraordinary. He aligned his life to Christ. He allowed Jesus to be his savior. And so he will be spared when Jesus returns. For those of us who are already Christians, which is most of us, we can already say, yes, I've aligned my life with Jesus.

I did that years ago when I chose to follow him. And that is great. Well done. But here is the warning to us. Realign your lives with Jesus.

In that Mark passage, you can see the tight link. Can I have it please back on the screen? You can see the tight link between how we treat Jesus or how we align ourselves to Jesus and what our fate will be.

[21 : 37] When we first became Christians, we loved Jesus, didn't we? We loved Jesus' words. But now in the long wait until he returns, have we become a little bit embarrassed by him?

Maybe even ashamed by him and his words. Are we ashamed about what Jesus says about human relationships and hell and the fact that he's the ruling king?

That all the promises of Abraham come only through him? These are things he spoke very plainly about. It's easy to be ashamed of him in this sinful and adulterous generation.

Maybe we've become a little bit like Abraham from chapter 20. A little bit afraid of man and not of God. Afraid of what people will do to us if we stand up for Jesus.

The social death. The professional death. Or even the much worse, physical one. Aligning yourself to Jesus is to take up your cross and follow him.

[22 : 46] It's not being ashamed of him and his words. It is fearing God more than man in the meantime as we wait for him to return.

Right throughout the Bible, people can be blessed. People can be grafted in. People can call Abraham their father because they trust in Jesus.

And so for us, while we wait for him to return, here is the warning. Align yourself with Jesus for the first time. Or realign your lives with him as you once did.

Tell other people as well. Otherwise, they are as good as dead. So let's pray. Father God, we thank you that you tell the truth.

That you lovingly warn us. Father, please help us to align or realign our lives with Jesus. Help us to not be ashamed of him and his words.

[23 : 50] Even in a sinful and adulterous generation like this. Help us not to fear the social or the professional or the physical death. Trusting that we will gain our lives in the future.

Father, please help us to live a life that you can be proud of as we wait for you to return. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.