

Faithfulness and Unfaithfulness

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[0 : 00] The scripture reading this morning is taken from Genesis chapter 20 verses 1 through 18. From there, Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur.

! And he sojourned in Gerah. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister. And Abimelech, king of Gerah, sent and took Sarah.

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

Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, Lord, will you kill an innocent people? Did he not himself say to me, She is my sister? And she herself said, He is my brother.

In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands, I have done this. Then God said to him in the dream, Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart.

[1 : 20] And it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore, I did not let you touch her. 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. So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants and told them all these things.

And the men were very much afraid. 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 to my kingdom a great sin?

You have done to me things that ought not to be done. And Abimelech said to Abraham, What did you see that you did these things?

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.

[2 : 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 at every place to which we come.

Say of me, he is my brother. 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. Twell here where it pleases you. So to Sarah he said, Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver.

It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you. And before everyone you are vindicated. Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they brought children.

For the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife. Thank you, Michelle.

[4 : 00] Well, some of you are probably thinking, We heard this before. We did this before. We covered this before. And the answer is no, we didn't cover it before. But we certainly did cover something very similar.

Back in chapter 12, as we worked our way through the book of Genesis up to this particular point. And what we see is that this is approximately 25 years later, that Abraham is still battling sins of trusting the Lord and loving his wife as he loves himself.

This is quite surprising because Abraham is the father of faith. Abraham is the one whom God chose and said, Through you, I'm going to bless all the nations of the earth with salvation.

But this passage is not just surprising because we see the father of faith struggling in these ways. Indeed, this passage is more surprising because what we see is how patiently and how graciously God deals with Abraham, who's struggling with this besetting sin.

25 years later, you would think that what he experienced the first time, the humiliation of that, the danger of that that he placed Sarah in, that he would not find himself in this place this morning. [5 : 37] But again, I pray for us. My prayer for us this morning is that we would be more surprised by the grace and the mercy of God that is shown to this struggling, faltering saint and servant of God.

And one of the ways I think we should consider this this morning is to remember that we really are no different from Abraham. In different ways and to different degrees, we are all faltering saints. And many times we live and act out of character. And it is good news to know that we have a faithful, gracious, heavenly father who does not abandon us in our sin. And so we want to consider this this morning. But first, let's pause and pray. Father, we thank you for your word this morning. We thank you that you have watched over it and preserved it through the ages and all that is written in it is for our encouragement so that through the scriptures we might have hope.

I pray you would speak to all of our hearts this morning. Lord, you know where each one of us is and what each one of us needs. And Lord, we pray that you cause us to hear your voice and more than that to respond to your voice.

[7 : 05] Lord, I pray in public as I've done in private that you would anoint me by your spirit and that you would use me to bring your word to your people and you would use it to build this local church for the glory of your great name.

In Christ's name we pray. Amen. As we consider this passage this morning, I pray that we would see and all marvel and rejoice that even when God's people are unfaithful to him and forget his promises, God remains faithful to them and keeps his promises.

Now, it would not surprise me if that lands on some of our errors in a kind of off way. Because for many of us, sadly, when we think of our relationship with the Lord, the accent of our relationship with the Lord is on us and what we do or don't do rather than on God and what he does and does not do.

We tend to think more that it is our faithfulness that's going to make the difference at the end of the day of what our Christian life is, indeed, what our salvation will end up being.

We tend to think that that really is going to be determined at the end of the day by what I do or what I do not do. And I believe that this passage this morning is part of the witness of Scripture that that is not true.

[8 : 46] This passage this morning reminds us that we will finish the race and we will not be lost, as we sang this morning, because of a faithful God.

Because of a God who remains faithful to us even when we are unfaithful. So this passage, what comes into clear focus is an unfaithful servant and a faithful God.

And now remaining time, I want us to consider both of these, starting with an unfaithful servant. Abraham clearly is the unfaithful servant in this passage.

And the passage opens with him moving from place to place and he ends up in this place called Gerar. And he tells the inhabitants of Gerar that Sarah is his sister.

And so King Abimelech, who was the man in charge, the buck stopped with him, he decided that he would take Sarah as his wife because Abraham and Sarah said that she was Abraham's sister.

[10 : 09] So he added her to at least one wife that he already had. And again, this harkens back to Genesis chapter 12 when Abraham went to Egypt and was fearful that because Sarah was a beautiful woman that she might be taken and he might be killed.

And so he said to her, I want you to say that you are my sister. And again, this is 25 years earlier, not too long after the Lord had called him and promised him a son.

But here in this account, we get to see a bit more that shines some light on what happened back in Genesis 12. That Abraham didn't just, in that moment, when he was in Egypt, ask Sarah to lie for him and cover for him and go along with this scheme.

Abraham said, before we set out, he was afraid, he was concerned that just the norm of the day in his mind was nobody feared God and I'm a weak man and those who are more powerful will kill me and will take my wife.

And so he says to Sarah, here's the kindness, here's the kindness that I want you to show to me. Wherever we go, I want you to say that you are my sister.

[11 : 34] And Sarah does this, not just once, but she does this twice. But the truth is that Abraham was not being, he was not having Sarah to be kind to him.

He was being unkind to Sarah because he was exposing her to sexual abuse. He was exposing her to dangers that really could not have been known.

And what is clear is that Abraham was not trusting the Lord. And here's the man who God accredited faith to him.

God accredited righteousness to him, sorry, because of his faith. But we see him struggling in this one particular way in an ongoing way. He wasn't trusting God with the ability to protect him and to care for him along this journey that God was sending him on.

So he could believe that God is going to take him somewhere, but he didn't have faith to believe that God was going to protect him. And so he decides he's going to protect himself by scheming this lie with his wife.

[12 : 44] What makes this account especially perplexing and even troubling is that this took place shortly after the Lord had come to Abraham. You remember this back in Genesis 17.

The Lord came to Abraham and told him, you're going to have a son in a year's time, right around this time, Sarah's going to have a son. You're to name him Isaac. And if you follow, as we have been doing, we saw the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

This is pretty close to that. As a matter of fact, you would notice how it opens. It says, from there.

This is when Abraham was standing at that place where he'd interceded for Sodom and Gomorrah.

From there, he journeyed onwards. And so this is a short time later. And at this particular point, if Sarah was pregnant, now remember, this baby's going to come in just a couple of months.

So if Sarah was pregnant, it would not have been obvious. Because you can imagine, Sarah, they have the big stomach, and Abraham says, this is my sister.

[13 : 53] And then they say, your sister. So who is she pregnant for? So clearly, at this particular point, Sarah, at least, she may not have been pregnant, or if she was pregnant, her stomach was not showing.

And so here we have Abraham. God has given him this promise. God who keeps his word has said to him, you're going to have a son. Here is his name. And fear has so overcome Abraham that that promise clearly is not in his mind.

Because he is putting Sarah at risk of really getting pregnant, and he wouldn't know whether that's his child or not in that particular season.

But clearly, at this point, we don't know whether she was or not. But we can see that Abraham was, at this point, ignoring the promise of God, not taking it very seriously, because he was exposing Sarah again to be impregnated by Abimelech or some other man.

Sometimes when you're studying scripture or reading scripture, you want to ask, boy, I wonder what was going through Abraham's mind. And I really wonder, what was Abraham thinking?

[15 : 08] What was he thinking to do this right in that season when God says, you're going to have a son by your wife, Sarah? I think what is clear, though, is that none of that mattered to Abraham.

He was driven by fear. He was driven by selfishness! He was driven by selfishness and not faith in God and not love and concern for Sarah, his wife.

So Abraham was being unfaithful. First, he was being unfaithful to the Lord. He was being unfaithful to the Lord by not trusting the Lord to protect him on this journey that the Lord was taking him on, where the Lord had promised him that he was going to give him both offspring and a land.

He was not being faithful to God because he was putting at risk this promise that God had given to him that he was going to give him a son by his wife, Sarah.

And then clearly he was not being faithful to Sarah. He was putting his welfare above her welfare.

He was putting her at risk of sexual abuse all because he was consumed with fear and self-preservation and that caused him to say to Sarah, do this kindness to me, not realize that he was doing a gross unkindness to her.

[16 : 41] Abraham was also unfaithful to Abimelech. We look at this passage and we see Abimelech was a noble man. He was a man of some character even though from what we can tell he's not a believer.

He's not one who believed in the Lord. But Abraham was unfaithful to Abimelech and was putting him in a position where he could have unknowingly committed adultery with Abraham's wife because Abraham said that Sarah was his sister.

But Abimelech was a God-fearing man and otherwise he would not have taken Sarah to be his wife. This is a pretty remarkable account.

When you think about it, if there were no names attached to these and you didn't know anything about them and you were asked, who do you think was the one who was God's servant? You wouldn't pick Abraham.

I mean, it would not be intuitive to pick Abraham. You would pick Abimelech because he's the one who's saying to God, in the integrity of my heart, the cleanness of my hands I've done this.

[17 : 50] Abraham was not faithful to Abimelech. He wasn't faithful to God. He wasn't faithful to Sarah. He was not faithful to Abimelech.

But again, the marvel of this account that we have before us is not how unfaithful Abraham was. Instead, the marvel is how faithful God is.

And this is my second and final point where we'll spend the bulk of our time. when we look at this passage, we see, first of all, God being a faithful God to Sarah.

Look again at verses 3 and 4. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman you have taken, for she is a man's wife.

Now, Abimelech had not approached her so he said, Lord, will you kill an innocent people? The Lord protected Sarah from sexual abuse by warning Abimelech in a dream that she was a married woman and threatened him with death if he followed through to do anything to her.

[19 : 13] And Abimelech had not even approached her. Again, I would love to know what was Sarah thinking going through this again some 25 years later finding herself in this particular situation.

It's quite amazing that she was not fearful. It's quite amazing that she showed more character and obvious trust in the Lord than her husband Abraham did.

And I believe the reason she was able to do this, the Apostle Peter gives us a window into how Sarah was able to do this in 1 Peter 3 where he's instructing wives about how they should conduct themselves towards their husbands.

And this is what he says to them in 1 Peter 3 verses 5 and 6. For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves by submitting to their husbands.

As Sarah obeyed Abraham calling him Lord and you are her children if you do good and do not fear that which is frightening.

[20 : 32] Notice what it says in verse 5. It says that Sarah and the holy women of old who hoped in the Lord. That's where our hope was.

She couldn't put a hope in Abraham. She hoped and she trusted in the Lord and the Lord showed himself faithful to her and the Lord protected her in that situation.

Just as he did in the first situation. You remember we talked about that as well and God protected her even with Pharaoh.

She hoped in the Lord she trusted in the Lord and therefore she was able to submit to Abraham and not be fearful of a very frightening situation of being taken into a king's harem and being at his mercy.

But the Lord was also faithful to Abimelech. He was faithful to Abimelech by not allowing Abimelech to touch Sarah. Look again at verse 6. Then God said to him in the dream yes I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart and it was I who kept you from sinning against me.

[21 : 48] Therefore I did not let you touch her. God was faithful to Abimelech even though Abraham was unfaithful to him the Lord was faithful to Abimelech.

And then certainly the Lord was faithful to Abraham. Look at verse 7. Verse 7 I believe is one of the most surprising and most gracious verses not just in this chapter but I believe in the entire book of Genesis.

Look at what the Lord says to Abimelech in verse 7. Now then return the man's wife for he's 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 and all who are yours.

It is both surprising and gracious that the Lord refers to Abraham as a prophet. I mean Abimelech was saying who are you talking to?

Not this man who just lied to me and told me that this is his sister and had me to almost commit adultery you're calling him a prophet? I know today the popular prophet is I.T.

[23 : 17] not E.T. And you probably wonder with all the stuff that Abraham gets after this brother. He was I.T. but no that's not something we should think about. But imagine Abimelech must have been really really confused.

You could have fooled me that this guy was a prophet and now you want him to pray for me. The innocent one you want this man who lied almost caused me to commit adultery you want him to come and pray for me.

It's the kindness of the Lord to call Abraham a prophet under those circumstances and also to say that he's the one who would be praying for Abimelech. One of the striking things about this passage as in Genesis 12 is that there's no open rebuke of Abraham.

There's no open rebuke of him. in the previous passage Pharaoh was rebuked in this passage in a sense we can say Abimelech was rebuked because his wife and his slaves they were not able to conceive children and yet this faltering servant of the Lord this stumbling servant of the Lord gets no rebuke.

And we don't know why with any certainty God does not rebuke him because scripture is silent on that. But no doubt I believe that Abraham was crushed and discouraged by his repeated sin.

[25 : 00] I mean everything you see about Abraham we think back about his intercession for Sodom and Gomorrah. He was a godly man a righteous man and yet he finds himself in this besetting sin he finds himself moving to another place overcome by fear again and resorting to something that he did in his past that ought not to have been done in the first place and certainly not another time.

And I believe it's fair to say that Abraham was already crushed by his sin and that the Lord does not openly rebuke him but instead openly affirms him is an expression I believe of God's tenderness and God's care for a servant who had failed and a servant who was already discouraged by his own sin.

Again the Lord calls him my prophet he is one who stands before me he is one who represents me hears my voice and he proclaims that to others.

What we see is that God is remaining faithful to Abraham even though Abraham has been unfaithful to him and the only reason that we could attribute to this is God's steadfast love and mercy and grace to this faltering flawed servant but he's God's servant nonetheless.

it's quite interesting that we see in verses 14 to 16 these lavish gifts that Abimelech bestows on Abraham and it's easy to think that this is Abimelech who's doing that but behind Abimelech there's God who's blessing Abraham there's God who is still performing his word to Abraham that he promised when he called them I'm going to bless you and what we see is that God's blessings upon his servants are based on his promises and not based on some works basis if you do this you behave well I'll bless you if you don't I'll withdraw it and we see the Lord being kind to Abraham and blessing him ultimately with the gifts that he gets we're not told the quantity of sheep and the quantity of oxen and slaves that he got but no doubt it's extravagant we're told by theologians smarter than

[27 : 43] I am who would have studied the culture of that time that the thousand pieces of silver or the thousand shekels that Abraham got was the equivalent of 167 years worth of wages for a laborer in that day 167 years worth of labor now you think about it if you're a bimelech and this guy has just almost caused you to commit adultery and you're doing this of your own free will you think you'd be that generous with him the generosity of a bimelech really was the generosity of God to Abraham even in the midst of his sin and I know all kinds of thoughts go through our minds with these kinds of things and the only thing I could say it's kind of like what Paul responds in Romans chapter 9 when he says who are you to question God and what he does but perhaps the greatest expression of God's grace and faithfulness to Abraham is this affirming him even in the midst of his failure and his flaws and what we see in verse 18 is that the Lord has Abraham to pray for a bimelech look at verse verses 17 and 18 sorry look at verse 17 that Abraham prayed to

God and God healed a bimelech 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 a bimelech because of Sarah a bimelech's wife now think about it the Lord could have simply said okay a bimelech I heal your wife I heal your slaves and they will now be able to be our children he doesn't do that the God of the universe who does not need human hands goes to his faltering failing servant Abraham and he says I want you to pray I want you to pray the one who just lied the one who was unmindful of God's promises the one who exposed his wife to sexual abuse God goes to him and says I want you to

pray for a bimelech and notice the verse very very carefully verse 17

Abraham prayed God healed Abraham prayed God healed God didn't have to do that but God did that for his unfaithful servant in that particular circumstance because I can tell you one thing I doubt the last thing on Abraham's mind was to pray not to pray maybe pray a prayer of repentance but not a prayer for this man and for his household that they would be healed but a gracious and patient and kind God calls this faltering servant of his and says I want you to pray for them he prayed for them and God healed them brothers and sisters I believe that this should be very very instructive for us when we fail one of the instinctive things that we want to do is withdraw when we know we have disappointed the Lord when we know that we've not even lived up to our own expectations and standards we want to withdraw we feel a sense of unworthiness and that's what happened with Peter when Peter denied the

Lord three times he went back fishing and what we see is when Jesus had risen from the dead and the angel was at the tomb and the two Marys and Salome came to the tomb the angel said to them you go and tell his disciples and Peter that he is going to go before you into Galilee this was the Lord's way of encouraging and affirming this disciple who had failed to say to him you're still one of my disciples you're still one who belongs to me and here in this matter with Abimelech the Lord goes to great lengths to affirm Abraham as his servant and as his prophet despite his repeated failures despite his inability to trust the

Lord to protect him and to care for Sarah above himself the Lord graciously and mercifully affirms this faltering servant I wonder how this lands on your ears this morning and just trusting the providence of the Lord that he has brought us here to hear what we're hearing this morning I wonder there are some of us this morning who are discouraged and more aware of our unfaithfulness than we are of God's faithfulness one of there are some of us this morning who are so aware of our faithlessness that we are drawing back we're discouraged we don't feel worthy and we're drawing back the brothers and sisters the Lord would have us to draw near remembering his unchanging faithfulness remembering that he is not surprised by our sin he is not surprised by our unfaithfulness he is the all knowing

[34 : 13] God he knew this before the foundation of the world he knew this when he called us he calls us to draw near to continue to serve him and he calls us to remember that even on our best day we are unworthy servants even in our best day brothers and sisters there's nothing that we in and of ourselves can bring to the Lord that makes us worthy in his sight and he calls us to continue to press on even in our unfaithfulness because he is a faithful God God was not only faithful to Abraham and to Sarah and to Abimelech God was faithful to his promises and that's what's going on in this passage God made these promises to

Abraham that he was going to give him offspring and that he was going to give him a land and what God does is God is faithful to his promises to ensure that his promise comes to pass and he protects Sarah from being sinned against he protects Sarah from even the cloud of any possibility that this child that she was bearing was not the child of this hundred year old man God was being faithful to his promises he was watching over his word he was keeping his word and what this reminds us of is that the burden of fulfillment of all of God's promises are on him not on us we have the privilege of participating in what God does but we are not essential God's promises that he made to Abraham were not dependent on Abraham remember when God made the covenant with Abraham he put him to sleep back in

Genesis 15 we looked at that God put him to sleep Abraham was asleep and God himself walked through the pieces essentially saying may the fate of these dead animals be my fate if I do not keep my word unilaterally and though Abraham forgot the promise and though Abraham in his fear didn't really care about what happened to Sarah and this baby that was supposed to come in one year there was a faithful God watching over his promises and ensured that Sarah in a year's time would bear a son and there would be no doubt that that son was Abraham's son and this is why God fulfills his word in ways that are undeniable this is why he ensured that the Messiah came through a virgin so that it would be clear that God alone kept his promise in sending the Messiah and again brothers and sisters as we journey in this life like

Abraham regrettably we will falter and sometimes we will falter in particular sins that might even shock us I believe Abraham probably was shocked that 25 years later he's walked with the Lord this thing has already happened and here he finds himself in the very same situation again and I believe that the Lord would have us to hear this morning is that we are to be trusting the faithful Lord who

even when we fail he's faithful he remains faithful he is merciful he is kind he is gracious and so we must press on remembering that he's faithful one of the most precious verses in scripture to me is Ephesians 1 verse 6 this is what Paul says and I'm sure of this that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ this is this is God's unilateral commitment speaking through the apostle Paul he's anointed by the Holy Spirit he says I'm sure of this that the good work that God began in you he will bring it to completion to the day of Jesus Christ yes it is God who works in us and wills to do his good pleasure in and through our lives God works in us and I'm not minimizing that we must!

[39 : 24] we must press on and pursue the things of God not minimizing that at all what I'm saying to us brothers and sisters is the accent is not on us the accent is on a God who cannot fail who cannot lie who watches over his promises and even when his servants fail he's not ashamed to still call them his own he's not ashamed to affirm them and call them not to and I wish I could tell you that we wouldn't face situations like we see Abraham facing I wish I could tell you that and I pray that that is not the case for at least the vast majority of us but like Abraham we find ourselves with besetting sins in our lives and sins that just seem to dog us seem to be at our tails and the good news is in spite of all of that there is a faithful

God there is a God who has promised that we will finish the race if we truly belong to him we will finish the race if he begins the work if it's a true work of his he will complete it brothers and sisters to the very end and so I pray that when we think back on Abraham and this account and the previous account I pray that we are not fixated on how could he do that I pray that instead we are marveling at the grace of God to this man who humanly speaking we would say can't believe he did it let's marvel at the grace of God the grace of God not just to Abraham but the grace of God to all those who belong to him that once we ever belong to him we will always belong to him because he is faithful let's pray

Lord we bow our hearts this morning to you the faithful God we thank you Lord that the good work that you have begun and those of us who belong to you you will complete it to the day of the Lord Jesus Christ I pray that you cause us this morning to marvel at the grace of God and as we marvel at the grace of God I pray that you would help us to be debtors to your mercy I pray that you would help us to live lives that are submitted to you because we are living them in view of your unbounded mercy to undeserving sinners like us but I pray this morning that if there would be any present or watching or listening online who belong to you and who have failed and who are feeling unworthy and wanting to withdraw

Lord I pray that they would sense your affirming mercy and grace to call them back to serving you not because they are faithful but because you are faithful father would you work in all of our hearts this morning in ways that only you can we ask this in Jesus name Amen!

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