

Gen 20; 21:22-34

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[0:00] time or another, maybe more when we're young. The problem is that our heroes so often disappoint us. So eventually we learn that our parents are just human, or the athlete we idolize as kids gets arrested. The politician we put our hopes in probably should get arrested, but somehow always seems to skate. Eventually everybody disappoints us. Now I'm an historian, and so the problem is particularly bad for me. The more you learn about someone, the more you realize how disappointingly human everybody was in the past, not unlike today. So the champion of justice that you so admired, well it turns out that he actually treated his family really poorly. Or maybe the wise leader was also capable of shocking violence against his enemies. How do you make sense of the failings of your heroes? And does great moral failure discredit a person's work?

Well it's no different for us Christians. Of course we can look to Jesus, a sinless Savior who willingly, freely gave his own life for others. The more we learn about him, the more we learn to love and admire him. But the other people in the history of the church, the great pastors and missionaries and martyrs and theologians, it's not so simple. Even the great people of the Bible are seriously flawed.

And this evening we're continuing a study on one of those heroes, Abraham. And in the New Testament, in the book of Hebrews, Abraham is presented as a hero, one of the great heroes of the faith.

A man who by faith left his home, left everything he knew, and went to live in the place that God had called him to go. And why? Well, Hebrews tells us, Abraham was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. In other words, he was willing to give up his home, everything he knew, in order to gain what he knew God was building for him. So Hebrews presents Abraham as a model of faith, an example for us to emulate. And he was that. But as we'll see this evening, there was more to Abraham's story than heroic faith. This evening we're looking at Genesis chapter 20, a chapter which gives us a very different picture of Abraham. You can go and turn there in your Bibles now. If you're using one of the Pew Bibles, you'll find that on page 14.

And I'm going to read the whole of chapter 20 aloud. So listen as I read Genesis chapter 20. From there, Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur, and he sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, she is my sister. And Abimelech, king of Gerar, 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.

[3:16] 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, in 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. 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 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 this thing? 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. Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife.

[4:31] And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, this is the kindness you must do 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.

Dwell where it pleases you. 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 healed.

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.

Now this is not a very flattering picture of Abraham, the great hero of the faith.

In fact, in a strange irony, it's Abimelech, the presumably pagan king of this small city of Gerar, who acts honorably. He doesn't know God. In fact, Abraham comes to Gerar and he says, there is no fear of God in this place. And yet it's Abimelech who's eager to do the right thing.

[5:49] This is a puzzling text. And I want to ask three questions to help us understand it. And the first is, why does Abraham pull this trick in the first place? The second is, what's so bad about this after all? And the third is, what does God do about it?

So why does Abraham pull this trick? Well, it seems like this was actually standard procedure for Abraham. If you look at Genesis 20, 13, Abraham tells Abimelech, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, Sarah, this is the kindness you must do me.

At every place to which we come, save me. He is my brother. So they had a plan all worked out, Abraham and Sarah, both together. And this was at least the second time that they tried this. If you turn back in your Bibles to Genesis 12, you'll see that they did this earlier in Egypt with almost the same results. Abraham was entering Egypt. He was worried that the Egyptians would see that his wife was beautiful, that they would kill him in order to take her.

And so he said that she was only his sister. Pharaoh took Sarah as part of his harem. And Abraham, he was just Abram then, this was before the name change. Abram even profited on the deal.

Pharaoh treated him well and he got wealthy. Now Pharaoh was a mighty king, a king of a large kingdom in Egypt. But even when Abraham goes to a small city in the desert, ruled by a small-time king like Abimelech, he does this same thing. So why did Abraham do this? Well, it seems pretty clear that he was afraid. He was afraid that he'd be harmed or killed because of his wife. He was a stranger in a strange land. He had no family around him. And he was willing to give his wife away to another man in order to protect himself. Now if we think back to the description of Abraham as a great man of faith, it's hard to recognize that Abraham in this text. But they were the same man.

[7:55] Genesis 20 was thankfully not the end of Abraham's story. God was still teaching Abraham. He was disciplining him and testing him despite all his failings. And years later, you can read about this in Genesis 22, Abraham would trust God enough to offer him even his own son, Isaac. He became the man of faith, but he's still very much a work in progress at this point. Now if you like science fiction, maybe you've read the Dune novels. Or if you've not read the novels, maybe you've seen the Dune movie with David Bowie. It's very 80s, so big hair and lots of electronic music.

There's a line in the books that gets repeated again and again. Fear is the mind killer. Fear is the mind killer. I think we all know what that means. When we're afraid, it's difficult to think clearly. It's difficult to use our reason. But fear is not just the enemy of the mind.

It's the enemy of the soul. It wars against our faith. Will God really give us what he's promised? Is Jesus really the good shepherd that shepherds me through danger? You want to say yes, but you're just so afraid. Fear wars against love. We want to love God and love the people around us, but what if they disappoint us again? What if they hurt us like so many people have hurt us before?

We want to share and be generous with the possessions that God has given us, but what if we don't have enough someday? What if we run out? We're not so different from Abraham. No, we might never find ourselves tempted to hand over our spouse to the king of some desert city, but fear leads all of us into sin. I suspect that some of us here are even now in the midst of the grip of fear. Fear attacks the things that are the best in our lives. Now, the good news the Bible tells us is that the opposite is true as well. 1 John 4-7 tells us that there's no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear.

John's not talking about positive thinking. He's not talking about sending good thoughts over Facebook to a friend. Those things will not help you overcome fear. No, it's only perfect love that casts out fear. It's the love that we receive that sends our fears running. John is saying that it's only when we know God's true love for us that we can defeat fear. If God is for us, if he is good, and powerful, and powerful, if he is the king of the future, just as he is of the present, and if he loves us, well, then we have nothing to fear. On his better days, Abraham knew this too.

[10:53] So if you're afraid, what should you do? Sometimes you act. So if you see a spider, you smash the spider. But not all fears can be smashed. For the greater fears, the ones that really have a hold on us, you can only do this one thing. Meditate on God's great love for you in Christ.

If he's already given us his son, he loves us, and he will give us everything we need. It's knowledge of this love that protects us from making these sort of foolish, terrible, self-protective decisions that end up being self-destructive. It's knowledge of God's love and faithfulness and power that keeps us from making the kind of mistake that Abraham makes here in Genesis 20. Well, this brings us to the second question. What's so bad about what Abraham does after all? He is a vulnerable person. And the answer to this one might seem pretty obvious.

He gives his wife to another man in order to protect himself. Now, if you're married, you probably said vows, and your vows probably didn't explicitly say that you would not give your spouse to a Middle Eastern despot if you felt threatened. But it was at least implied in the vows.

Abraham certainly failed spectacularly in his duty to love and cherish and care for his wife. Husbands are called to lay down their lives for their wives, to treat their wives the way Christ has treated the church. And Abraham does exactly the opposite. He gives his wife away to protect himself. So that's obviously wrong. It's a moral failing. We can understand that. But there's something even worse in this text, something that's maybe not quite as obvious. And it's this.

In giving his wife to another man, Abraham is putting God's entire plan of salvation at risk. Keep a finger in Genesis 20 and turn back just a few chapters to Genesis 17.

[12:55] Look at verse 3. Genesis 17.3. It says, Then Abraham fell on his face, and God said to him, Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you, throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant to be God to you, and your offspring after you. So God here made a covenant with Abraham. He promised to give Abraham countless descendants, and to be his God. And if we look down at verse 19, we learn how that covenant is going to happen. God said, No, but Sarah, your wife, shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, that's Abraham's other son with another woman. I have heard you. Behold, I have blessed him, and will make him fruitful, and multiply him greatly. He shall father 12 princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year. So God had just made this covenant with Abraham. He had promised to give Sarah a son, Isaac, through whom this covenant would proceed.

And later on, we learn more about this son. We learn that God had intended to bless all the nations of the earth through this son of Abraham's. It's through this family line that Jesus would eventually come to us. This is God's plan of salvation, not just as a blessing for Abraham, but for the entire human race.

And at most, a few months later, Abraham gives his wife to another man. So you can see the problem. What happens if she gets pregnant? What if Sarah's son is Abimelech's son? What if it's not actually clear who the father is? It's a disaster, not just for Abraham and Sarah, but for all humanity.

And it's once you understand this, that the details of Genesis 20 start to make sense. This is why God comes to Abimelech in a dream and warns him not to go near Sarah. This is why there's this public business about the animals and the thousand pieces of silver. Everyone needs to know that Abimelech was not the father. And if you compare this with the first episode, with Pharaoh in Genesis 12, there, there's no promise of innocence, no public pledge. This was before the promise of a son through Sarah. But now God wants to make it very clear that his promise of salvation is still at work.

And this brings us to our third question. What does God do about this dysfunctional, sinful situation? Because as you've probably figured out, this is not actually a story about Abraham after all.

[16:06] This is really the story of God's actions to bring redemption to the world. Now, if you've read the Bible much, you may have noticed how much it seems to emphasize the flaws of its people. It starts with Adam and Eve. Then we come to Abraham. Abraham led a very long and very eventful life, and we only get bits and pieces of that life. But Genesis decides that we need to hear about him giving his wife to another man twice. Of all the things we could learn about Abraham, that's what we learn. Things don't get much better when you jump to his son Isaac and grandson Jacob.

Jumping forward, we come to Moses, a man who murders an Egyptian and then isn't allowed into the promised land because he's impatient with God's people and God's commandment. Or King David, the great king of the Israelite people. He's sort of a reverse Abraham. He doesn't give his wife away to keep himself safe. He actually takes another man's wife and then kills her husband in order to cover it up. David's son Solomon has 600 wives. We can go on in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, things aren't much better. Paul, who writes much in the New Testament, is a persecutor of the church.

He has blood on his hands. He has to eventually rebuke Peter, the chief of the apostles, because Peter doesn't want to associate with non-Jews at one point. On and on and on, again and again, the Bible emphasizes the flaws of its heroes. Now, other religions don't do this in the same way. This is unique to the religion of the Bible. Why does Christianity do it? Now, part of it is just honesty.

It's an honest depiction of what human life really is like. Oliver Cromwell was, in the 17th century, the Lord Protector of England. The story goes that one day he was having his portrait painted by a famous portrait painter, and he saw what the painter was doing, and he demanded that he be painted warts and all. And that's actually where the phrase, warts and all, comes from. Now, this is one of those historical anecdotes, which may not actually be true. There's no way to really prove it, but if it's not true, it should be. And certainly, if you look at Cromwell's portrait, it's very warty. It's not a flattering portrait. Portraits back then were just like portraits today. The artist generally cleaned up the image a little bit, tried to present the subject in as attractive and noble and heroic way as possible. But Cromwell was a Christian, a very serious Christian, who knew that he was flawed, not just physically, but morally. And he didn't want to cover that up. So why does the Bible show the warts of its heroes? Because it's honest about human nature and the reality of sin, even for the best of men and women. It's a warts and all picture of humanity. There's a deeper reason that the Bible highlights the sin of its heroes. The biblical authors want to make one point very clear, that the great work of salvation is God's work, and it's not ours.

Human beings have a part to play. God told Abraham to leave his hometown and go to a strange land. Abraham had to go. God calls us to preach the good news and to believe the good news about Jesus.

[19:40] God does. We're to preach the good news and we're to respond to it in faith. But ultimately, it's God who does the work. Just look at Genesis 20 with me. See how God redeems this terrible situation and not only brings it back from the brink of catastrophe, but actually uses it to further his own plan. In verse 3, God sends a dream to Abimelech, warning him not to go near Sarah because she's another man's wife. He also prevents the conception of other children at this time, so there could be no confusion. In verse 14, he uses this terrible mistake to actually bless Abraham.

Abraham comes out of this situation wealthier than before. In verse 15, God provides through Abimelech the opportunity to dwell in the promised land. If we look ahead to chapter 21, verse 22, we see another brief encounter between Abimelech and Abraham, and Abimelech allows Abraham to put down roots. It's kind of a long story. Abraham digs a well for his animals to use. His men and Abimelech's men fight over who gets to use the well, but it ends with him making a treaty with Abimelech, a permanent treaty that recognized his legal right to use this well. Now, that seems like a bit of strange property law until you realize that this was the promised land, the land that God had promised to give to Abraham, and this is the very first moment where Abraham has a permanent legal foothold in that land. God is already bringing about his promise, not just for a son, but for a home for his people. Now, friends, if you pay attention, you'll find this same pattern over and over and over again in the

Bible. God creates a people for himself. Those people are faithless, but God remains faithful, even in the face of their sin. This was true in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve turned their backs on God and went their own way. It was true with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It was true when God's people came out of Egypt and grumbled in the desert. It's always been true. Most of all, of course, it's true in the work of Jesus Christ. God sends his eternal son into the world.

He is sinless. He does acts of power and mercy, but he's greeted with hostility, hatred. They mock him, they kill him. And yet, even through this great sin, God's purpose of salvation goes forward.

Anyone who believes in Jesus can have eternal life. It is simple faith in Jesus that allows us to share in God's promises, those promises made to Abraham so many thousands of years ago. A family forever. We're adopted into God's family. We're called his children. A home to live in. Well, we are promised a promised land far more glorious than anything Abraham ever anticipated. Most of all, God promises himself. When God made his covenant with Abraham, he promises to be faithful, not just to Abraham, but to future generations. He says, I will be their God. He promises to be a father to us, to provide for us, to lead us, to protect us, to love us. So if you're a Christian, Abraham's story is part of your story. That's why we still read it so many years later. We can recognize ourselves in Abraham, afraid, prone to doubting

[23 : 34] God's promises and protection, wanting to take matters into our own hands. But it's more than that. So we also share in these great promises. In fact, we know these promises. We share in these promises more fully than Abraham ever did. Because all of these promises have been fulfilled in Christ.

He is the one who provides us with an eternal home and a family that does not fail us. He is the one who said, not only I will be your God, but I will be Emmanuel, God with you.

So what do you have to be afraid of? God is for you. If God is for you, even when you're stumbling into the same sins again and again, against all reason, you can still trust him. His goodness and wisdom does not depend on your performance. Now, to be sure, you should put away sin. If you're in the habit of handing your wife over to strange men, you should stop doing that. It doesn't help you. It doesn't honor him. But don't despair in your sin. Confess it and look to God for mercy. You will find it. Now, if you're not a Christian, if you're just curious about the Christian faith, then the case is a little different.

Maybe you're hesitating, wondering whether these promises really can be believed and trusted. Or maybe you've been disappointed by Christians you know, Christians that remind you more of Abraham than they do of Jesus. Well, all I can do is point you to God himself. He is the one who works for salvation. He is the one who brings redemption. He is creating a family for himself. And all who believe in his son will be cleansed of sin and adopted into that family. Abraham was a remarkable man of faith.

If you come back on next Sunday night and hear about Genesis 22, you'll hear all about that. But he was just a man. An Irish friend of mine used to tell me that the best of men are men at best.

[25 : 48] He said it in an Irish accent, so it sounded better when he said it. But I've never forgotten it. It's true of Abraham. He was one of the best of men, but just a man. So we can learn from Abraham, from his triumphs, as well as his failures, but we're not going to put our faith in him.

We shouldn't put our faith in ourselves either. It's the story of Abraham which is meant to point us to the one trustworthy being in all of the universe, God himself. And we do not need to be afraid.

We can put our trust in that God, the one who is at work for the salvation of his people in the days of Abraham and who is at work today. Let's pray. Father, we do thank you for the great promises we have throughout the Bible, the promise we have in the gospel, what we call the good news of Jesus.

Lord, we thank you that through Christ we can be delivered from our own stupidity, our own sinfulness, our own selfishness. We can be brought to the place that you would have us by your grace and mercy.

Lord, I pray that you would help us to cast away all fear of this world, help us to cast away all self-trust, and put our trust in you. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.