Genesis 20:1-21:7 // Abraham's Failures; God's Faithfulness

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[0:00] Abimelech king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her.! 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. Now Abimelech had not gone near her, so he said, Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? Did he not say to me, she is my sister?
And didn't she also say, he is my brother? I have done this with a clear conscience and clear hands.
Then God said to him in the dream, Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me.
That is why I did not let you touch her. Now return the man's wife, for 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.
Early the next morning, Abimelech summoned all his officials, and when he told them all that had happened, they were very much afraid. Then Abimelech called Abraham in and said, What have you done to us?
[1:06] 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?

Abraham replied, I said to myself, There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father, though not of my mother, and she became my wife.
And when God caused me to wander from my father's household, I said to her, This is how you can show your love to me everywhere we go. Say of me, He is my brother. 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. To Sarah he said, I am giving your brother a thousand shekels of silver. This is to cover the offense against you before all who are with you.
You are completely vindicated. Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife and his female slaves, so they could have children again. For the Lord had kept all the women in Abimelech's household from conceiving because of Abraham's wife, Sarah.
[2:20] Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised. Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him.

Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him as God commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.
Sarah said, God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me.
And she added, who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have born him a son in his old age.
Good evening, everyone. It's great to be here with you all this evening. Let's begin by praying.
Heavenly Father, as we come before your word now, we pray that you would speak to us.
We pray that you would prepare our hearts by your spirit. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be used by you to shape us, to make us your people, that we may be a blessing to all the world.

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[3:48] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, if we've not met, my name's Az. As Jonathan said, I'm one of the ministry trainees here at St. Silas.

And if we've not met, one of the things you definitely won't know about me is that I grew up on a farm. And one of the great things about growing up on a farm in the middle of nowhere in Western Australia is that you don't really ever have to lock the door of your house.
There weren't that many people around where we lived. We knew most of the people that lived near us. And so we didn't need to lock the door. And that was great. That was great until I left home.
And I moved to the city for university. And suddenly, that pattern of behavior that I'd grown up with was really unhelpful. So it was quite common for me to leave the house in the morning to go to university and to accidentally leave the front door unlocked, open on at least one occasion.
Or the other side effect of this was that I also had a bad habit of locking myself out of the house. I wouldn't remember that I needed to take my keys with me and so I'd end up locked out.
[4:59] And there was one day where I did this, not once, not twice, but three times in a single day. I think for my housemates, it was kind of funny at the start and then quite annoying the second time.

And then by the third time, they were sort of laughing again, at least a little bit. Who we used to be stays with us. And it influences how we live now.
And in our passage today, we see the dark side of that. It's one that's tragic and it's destructive and it's sadly familiar.
Abraham has been called out of a pagan nation to become a channel through which all the peoples of the earth will be blessed. God has promised to bless him, to protect him, and to give him a son whose offspring will become a great nation.
And all of us here who are Christians have also been called from an old way of life to a new way of life, recognizing Jesus as our king. But for Abraham and for us, our sinfulness keeps pulling us back.
[6:14] It can cause us to doubt God's goodness or to doubt his faithfulness to his promises to us. And these are things that can do real damage to our ability to live for God and to love others in the ways that he calls us to.

So how does God respond when his chosen people fail time and time again to live faithfully before him?
Well, let's begin by looking at verses 1 to 8. Don't return to the same old sins. Last week, we heard about God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah with burning sulfur raining from the sky.
And Abraham was living fairly close to this area, so he probably saw the destruction. The text doesn't tell us exactly why, but he moves southwest from there and comes to a place called Gerar. Gerar was a Philistine city state right off to the edge of the land that God has promised Abraham. So he's moving from living right in the middle of Canaan to going away off to the edge, so far that he's almost back in Egypt.
[7:29] And in chapter 18, we saw that God had told Abraham that the long-awaited son would arrive within a year. much to Sarah's amusement.

And so we're expecting a happy announcement any day. And I think there's very few things Abraham could do to stop this promise from happening. In fact, I could only really think of two. Separate yourself from your wife and hand her over to a king to join his harem. What on earth is going on here?
What is Abraham thinking? Well, sadly, this isn't the first time this has happened. The last time Abraham was around Egypt was way back in Genesis chapter 12, right at the start of our series. And in that instance, he'd done the same thing. Here's a comparison between the two. But you might expect that in our passage tonight, 25 years later, he would approach the situation very differently.
[8:38] But no. And it's important to understand here, this isn't just Abraham thinking, well, Sarah is such a beautiful woman that the local ruler will kill me to get her.

It's also an opportunity for Abraham to make a name for himself. He's a wealthy man. He might be traveling around, but he's traveling around with flocks and herds and a household, which back in Genesis 14 includes about 300 fighting men.
So making an alliance with the local ruler by having his sister in the royal household moves him from being a potential enemy to a trusted friend.

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With all the privileges that entails. So we see here, not just that Abraham is afraid for himself, but actually Abraham is using his wife as a bargaining chip to buy some of what God has already promised him.
God promised him protection. God promised him a place in the land. And Abraham instead, as we've seen before, grasps these promises for himself.
[9:51] He thinks, yes, that looks good. I'd like that. Let me see how I can get that for myself. And as we've said, Genesis 12 comes right at the very beginning of Abraham's story.

This comes 25 years later. Abraham has seen God's faithfulness to him through the years. He's no longer what we might call a new believer. So we're seeing Abraham ignore all of God's goodness to him.
The covenants that God has made with him. And even the promise of a child within the year. This isn't just Abraham being faithless, falling back into old, sinful patterns of behavior.
This is Abraham actively putting the promises of God in jeopardy. And so God steps in. God acts to preserve his promises.
Verse 3. 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.
[11:00] Now Abimelech had not gone near her so he said, Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? Did he not say to me, she is my sister? And didn't she also say, he is my brother? I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands.

Notice what a reversal we have here. Abimelech is taking on the role that Abraham is meant to. He's asking just like Abraham did in chapter 18. Will not the judge of all the earth do what is right?
Then God said to him in the dream, yes I know you did this with a clear conscience and so I've kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her.
Now return the man's wife for 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.
So early the next morning Abimelech summoned all his officials and when he told them all that had happened, they were very much afraid. Interestingly, as we'll see in verse 11, as we had read to us, part of Abraham's excuse for this whole fiasco is that he looks at Gerar and says, these people have got no fear of the Lord.
[12:27] But we see in verses 4 to 8, this trial of Abimelech and his people. They do fear the Lord. When Abimelech summons them all together, when he tells them everything that's happened, they were very much afraid.

And so we're seeing here this reversal of what should be. God has made promises to Abraham and has called Abraham to be a blessing to the nations. Abraham fails to trust God's promises.
Abraham has fallen for the old lie. He thinks he can obtain what God has promised him through sin. And sin always promises us things that look like what God offers.
But they're only ever pale, distorted reflections. And so even in this great father of the faith, we see the power of sin at work to make him distrust the promises of God, to go outside God's will, to get the good things that God has promised him by his own effort.
Abraham sees and he responds with fear. So he fails to protect his wife, to trust in God's promises, and instead of being a blessing to the nations, Abraham has brought down a curse.
[13:49] Let's now look onwards. Verses 9 to 16. Don't resort to the same old excuses.

So Abimelech calls Abraham in to this gathered group of his people and he says, what have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You've done things to me that should never be done. And Abimelech asked Abraham, what was your reason for doing this? So Abraham's sin has been brought to light.
How will he respond? Well sadly we go from the same old sin to the same old excuses. The very oldest excuses for sin right back to Genesis 3.
Adam and Eve see that the fruit is good and so they take it and then Adam when challenged by God blames his wife and blames God. Verse 11.
[14:56] Abraham replied, I said to myself, there is surely no fear of God in this place. He looked, he sees these people that don't know God and he thinks, God can't protect me here.

They don't fear God. I need to protect myself and they'll kill me because of my wife. If Sarah wasn't so beautiful, desirable as the wife of a wealthy man, there would have been no reason for this.

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You know, she is my sister, kind of, half-sister. It wasn't really a lie. And then finally, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, actually, you know what, this is God's fault.
This never would have happened if I just got to stay at home. God dragged me all the way across the world out here and so I have to fend for myself. I have to defend my own. I'm away from my family, I'm away from my homeland.
Who else is going to look out for me? And really, the one person who doesn't seem to be at fault here in Abraham's mind is Abraham. And isn't that always the way?
[16:07] always the temptation for us when we return to the same old sins. We've got every excuse. We see something that looks good on the surface or something that looks like an easier option and so we go for it.

We blame the people around us, the world around us. Well, of course I'm angry. Look at what you've done. We blame God when we feel the things that we deserve haven't been given to us. God, I've prayed for a job and I'm still stuck on the same minimum wage doing something I can't stand. I've prayed for a partner and here I am alone.
You can't judge me. I've tried doing things your way and look where it got me. You can't judge me for getting these things for myself. You were meant to give them to me and you haven't.
And notice at the very start of this passage as we said, Abraham moves from the center of the promised land exactly where God has put him right off to the edge.
[17:27] This started with a drift. It started with a drift away. His first excuse is well, look at these people. They don't fear the Lord. They're scary and they're dangerous.

Well, if you think this place is dangerous why are you here? God didn't tell him to go to Gerar. God didn't tell him to head away from the promised land back towards Egypt.
There are no new excuses for sin and there are no good excuses for sin. Abraham's old patterns are still influencing him. Right at the very beginning of his journey 25 years before we see that he cooked up this plan for Sarah in verse 13.
Whenever we go to a new place until we've sort of got the lay of the land don't call yourself my wife. We'll just tell them you're my sister.
Never mind the horror of this for a woman in Sarah's situation. This isn't we'll pretend to be brother and sister and we'll just sort of stay as housemates until we know that the neighbors are okay.
[18:41] This is be added to Pharaoh's harem. Be added to Abimelech's harem. This is a horrific thing. And you know we could say well Abraham was a product of his time and his culture and that was a very normal thing for people to do and that might even be true but Abraham's not meant to be a product of his time and his culture.

Abraham is meant to be the conduit through which God steps into his time and his culture and says not like this and yet 25 years on he's still using the same playbook.
He hasn't let his growing understanding of God's faithfulness change how he responds to his fears and we're often not so different. We come every week to church.
We live our lives as recipients of God's grace and we grow in our knowledge of God's faithfulness and knowledge of how much has been done for us. But are we letting that growth in knowledge shape how we live our lives and how we make our decisions or are we falling back on the same old excuses?
And so Abimelech responds in obedience. Abimelech knows what he has to do. He returns Sarah he gives Abraham gifts to demonstrate peace between them.
[20:10] He says my land is before you live wherever you like. And we get this really weird thing verse 17 Abraham prays to God and God healed Abimelech his wife and his female slaves so they could have children again despite how Abraham has failed God has promised that through Abraham he will bring blessing to the nations and so through Abraham undeserving as he is God brings blessing to this nation.

Despite Abraham's repeated failure God still remains faithful to his promises. Notice here in this chapter we've seen foretastes of all the original promises that God gave Abraham right back in Genesis chapter 12.
But there's still one thing remaining. Let's look at the end of our passage today. Don't underestimate the same gracious God.
At the end of chapter 20 we see in this really stark way just how much power God has. Abimelech's entire household has been rendered unable to bear children just like Sarah.

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And it is Abraham who must pray to God to remove the curse so that they can conceive. We can only imagine that Abraham didn't just have Abimelech and his household in mind when he prayed this prayer.
[21:59] If God can enable an entire household to bear children once more surely even he and Sarah could be blessed in this way as well.

This is the final part of the Genesis 12 promises left without a foretaste despite Abraham's faithlessness and failure and despite he and Sarah's frailty would God still bless them with the son that he's promised.
Chapter 21 Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah as he had said and the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised.
Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age. At the very time God had promised him.
God is faithful to his promises. Just in these two verses we read as he said what he had promised and at the very time God had promised him.
[23:07] And finally we see Abraham's obedience in response. He names his son Isaac as the Lord commanded him. He circumcises him on the eighth day.

The covenant will be established just as God promised. And Sarah is finally laughing for joy. After years of waiting the promised son is finally here and everyone who hears of this will be celebrating with her.
And this is a good moment to take stock of Abraham's story of the covenants that God has made with him. Remember we have this story written down for us because it was written down for Abraham's descendants, the Israelites who were about to go back into Canaan after being rescued from Egypt.
But like Abraham they had been faithless. They had failed to trust in the promises of God. So the question they're asking is are we sure these promises still apply?
Will God still use us to bring about his purposes despite our failure? And this passage gives them a resounding yes.
[24:26] It gives them encouragement that they definitely are the people of the promise. In chapter 20 Isaac's paternity is guaranteed three times through God's intervention to protect Sarah.

As such these Israelites can be sure that the child of the promise their forefather really was the one through whom these promises would come. If the ultimate fulfillment of God's promises rested on human faithfulness none of them would ever come to pass.
And we see through the story of the whole Old Testament God makes promises to his people to bless them he promises to make them a nation he promises to protect them and especially over and over again he promises to bless all the nations of the world through them but through the whole Old Testament time and time again we see the faithlessness and the failure of God's people.
They reject his promises they reject him instead of being a blessing to the nations they become a curse worshipping the same idols adopting the same patterns of violence and selfishness giving in to the same sin.
So how can God keep his promises? God is just he can't bless sinful people forever how can God bring blessing to the world through his people if his people have the same problem as the world that they are trying to bless?
[26:07] And so at long last we have the coming of another promised son but unlike Abraham unlike Isaac unlike Israel this son is born without sin this son lives a life of perfect obedience and faithfulness and through this son through Jesus the promises made to Abraham are applied to us if you were at roots this week we saw this in Romans chapter 4 for if those who depend on the law are heirs faith means nothing and the promise is worthless if it's up to our performance it's never going to happen therefore the promise comes by faith so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring not only to those who are of the law but also to those who have the faith of Abraham he is the father of us all as it is written

I have made you a father to many nations he is our father in the sight of God in whom he believed! Jesus took on our sin and paid for it on the cross through Jesus this promised descendant of Abraham and Isaac blessing has come to all the nations our every sin and failure has been paid for not just the first time or the second time or the third time or the fourth time everyone and so now we like Abraham are called to be a blessing to share the hope that we have with those around us but

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we like Abraham can't do this if all we are are the products of our time and our culture we the church are meant to be the conduit through which God steps into this time and into every culture and says not like this so we can't underestimate the power of sin to impact our ability to carry out the calling that we have to be a blessing to the nations there are parts of me that
I can't blame on growing up on a farm there are parts of me that run deep that sickened me and that over the years have drawn me back to the same old sins making the same false promises giving me the same old excuses and I'm sure that's true for all of us we can't fail to take sin seriously we can't keep making excuses for it down playing it as Abraham did and we can't hope to fight it by ourselves we know the feeling whatever your particular temptation may be maybe it's anger maybe it's pride maybe it's coveting and envy maybe it's lust and pornography maybe it's any of a million things that belong to the life that we've been called out of
I've screwed up again God can't forgive me this time surely his promises to me have run out surely they can't apply to me anymore sin first tempts us with the things it can't give us and then afterwards it tempts us to stay at a distance from the only one who can rescue us from it come to Jesus bring your sin to him bring it while you're caught in it don't wait don't hold back only he can forgive you and restore you and he has promised that he will we do have this great comfort that ultimately God's promises don't depend on us we can trust them even in the midst of our failure we can come before
[31:14] God again and again and again and what a promise we have to look forward to that one day if our faith is in Jesus our sin will be gone forever I have never met Azariah without sin but I'm really looking forward to it and in the meantime if we are called to be a blessing then we need to live lives faithfully following Jesus for no matter how many promises God has made they are yes in Christ and so through him the amen is spoken by us to the glory of God let's pray our heavenly father we thank you for your incredible promises to us throughout history promises made to

Adam and Eve in the garden made to Abraham promises that we have been brought into we thank you that at the cross sin and death were defeated forever and we thank you for the great promise still to come that Jesus will return that sin will be destroyed that we will live with him spotless!
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