

This text has a lot of characters and a lot of moving parts. But with every single character and with every single situation, God's faithfulness is on full display.

**Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar, and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister." Then Abimelek, king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her. Genesis 20:1-2**

The opening phrase of this chapter, "*Now Abraham moved on from there...*" reminds us that Abraham is living as a semi-nomadic tribesman. While he has encamped at certain places for some time, he is still on a journey of faith, living in exile, in search of the land that has been promised to him from God.

For the second of what will be three episodes, Abraham tells a foreign ruler that Sarah is his sister. We can only assume that Abraham is functioning out of fear. That is what we heard Abraham say the first time, some 20 years earlier, when he made the same mistake in Egypt.

I think it is challenging for us in such a connected world to imagine what it means for Abraham to leave on a journey as he has been on. We have our navigation and communication tools, food, money, and supplies. Trips for us in the modern world are rarely something that is cause for concern. Now for Abraham, to leave family behind, to leave his hometown was to leave behind all of the social security nets that existed. It was a far more treacherous and dangerous journey.

So when we see Abraham enter into a foreign land and do something as egregious and cowardly as pretending his wife is his sister, we have to at least be able to understand it isn't total flippancy.

Abraham understood that as you entered a foreign land, a beautiful woman would be viewed as property to be acquired. So the foreign rulers would often take women into their harem. If they were married, the practice would be to kill the husband and take the wife. But if the brother was around, they would do quite the opposite. They would actually treat the brother with high dignity and respect because they would want the brother's blessing to give the sister away. Abraham's fear wasn't unfounded.

Many of our own fears are not unfounded either. The journey of faith is always a tension between trust and untrust, belief and doubt. We are all a mixed bag of moments of strength and moments of weakness. We have moments where we seek God and moments where we run to other things to fill our needs that ultimately fail us.

Abraham is living in that tension. God had given him the promise, but he isn't fully trusting in God for it to come to pass, so he is trying to secure his survival through his own means. He doesn't trust exclusively in God's ability. But rather, it is a mixed bag of his own faith and God's power. The story of Abraham is one that demonstrates he lived in that tension for over 20 years. But what we will see is that God is faithful, even in our failures. He has been faithful to Abraham before and will remain faithful in his future failures.

**But God came to Abimelek 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 Abimelek 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." vv. 3-5**

What takes place here is a sort of trial. God comes to Abimelek to warn him about the impending doom if he takes Sarah as a wife. God gives to Abimelek what Abraham did not; that is the truth about Sarah's marital status. Abimelek's response is a fascinating one because he responds with a proper fear of the Lord, something Abraham assumed wasn't in the land of Gerar.

Abimelek responds in three ways. He questions the justice of God. "*Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation?*" Interesting how this question very much mirrors Abraham's prayer about the city of Sodom just a chapter or two before this. He points to the guilt of Abraham and Sarah. "*Did he not say to me, 'She is my sister,' and didn't she also say, 'He is my brother?'*" He points to his own innocence. "*I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands.*"

Abraham assumes his enemy king to be a morally bankrupt man with no reverence for God. But Abimelek, when confronted by God, demonstrates "*a clear conscience.*" Another translation for this word is integrity or piety. This word had been used before to speak about Abraham and to speak about Job, and now a non-Israelite is seen to be with integrity.

Both Abimelek and Abraham were presented with situations that generate fear. For Abraham, it was the concern that his life would be taken, so he reverts to self-protection and survival. For Abimelek, it was the concern that his life would be taken as a result of his unknowing sin. But it is only Abimelek (the foreigner) that moves toward and into dialogue with God.

The journey of faith will often present us with moments of great fear, moments where we are tested and challenged. The journey of faith will give us moments where the security and promise of God will seem

beyond the scope of reason. It is in these moments that we should learn from Abimelek and move toward God. What is your reaction to these circumstances? When faced with moments of fear and unknown, do you, like Abraham here, move more toward your own strength and control? Or do you, like Abimelek here, move toward dialogue with God?

It is in that tension between faith and fear, whether it is caused by our failure like here in the case of Abraham, or it is caused by circumstances that were presented to you like here in the case of Abimelek, that we are to lean into the faithfulness of God.

**Then God said to him in a 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.” vv. 6-7**

The faithfulness of God is demonstrated to both Abraham and Abimelek in their different situations. First, for Abimelek, God prevents him from sinning, recognizing that he is in a situation that wasn't his own making. Notice God's patience and faithfulness to Abimelek. For Abimelek, he found himself in a situation where he acted with a clear conscience, but the circumstances presented a perilous situation. But God does not deal with him harshly, God is faithful in the mess—*“and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her.”*

Second, for Abraham, God is subtly maintaining his promise of a child through Abraham and Sarah. By protecting Sarah from Abimelek, God is remaining faithful and protecting the manner in which he is bringing about the promised child! Even in Abraham's failure, God is faithful.

**Early the next morning Abimelek summoned all his officials, and when he told them all that had happened, they were very much afraid. Then Abimelek called Abraham in and said, “What have you done to us? 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 Abimelek 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 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, say of me, “He is my brother.”’

**Then Abimelek brought sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham, and he returned Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelek 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 Abimelek, his wife and his female slaves so they could have children again, for the Lord had kept all the women in Abimelek's household from conceiving because of Abraham's wife Sarah. vv. 8-18**

Abimelek goes to confront Abraham about why he would put him in such a situation. Abraham's excuses are not good ones. He claims Abimelek didn't fear God, but in fact, Abimelek is readily accepting the guilt they had incurred and demonstrated greater respect of God than Abraham did. Fear causes us to see things that are not there and to assume the worst in others. This is what happened to Abraham. Notice in verse 9, Abimelek is not denying his guilt but is, in fact, confessing his guilt. This is the fear of God that we can confess our sins.

I think what we take away from this is that fear and failure challenge and tests our faith, but it does not ultimately negate our faith. God remains faithful to Abraham, continues to utilize him even in his lack of faith to bring about his purposes.

Consider what we see in Abraham. He lies, deceives, cowers in the face of fear, and yet Abimelek gives him a blessing at the end of it all. Abraham is the chosen of God, not because of his perfection, not because of the strength of his faith, but solely by the grace of God. Unworthy as Abraham is, God is faithful to working through Abraham.

Our hope is not in our ability to obtain moral perfection; our hope is not in the ability to skirt challenging circumstances; all of that is too unstable and unpredictable. Our hope is in the certain faithfulness of God that is never changing. God's faithfulness through our failures and circumstances is not the only thing highlighted by this text. Let's look into chapter 21, and we'll see God's faithfulness to his promise of redemption.

In the next section, we will see the faithfulness of God through the keeping of two promises. One to Abraham and Sarah, and the other to Hagar and Ishmael.

**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. Genesis 21:1-5**

Here is the much anticipated moment, the birth of the promised Son. For much of the text, this has been where the hopeful anticipation has been building up toward. The narrative had begun in chapter 12, with the promise that from Abraham and Sarah, a great nation would come. Then in chapter 16, we find out about Sarah's barrenness and their attempt to solve the problem through their own means. And for many chapters, while so many others in the text were having children, the reader is left waiting for resolution for the awaited child.

Much has happened in the story leading to this particular moment, which is why the author makes an explicit shift, *“Now the Lord was gracious to Sarah...”* It re-focuses the reader, but it does so by way of being explicit about God’s faithfulness. Notice the double emphasis, *“...as he had said...”* and *“the Lord did for Sarah what he had promised.”*

What Abraham and Sarah have learned through the many twists in their journey is the faithfulness of God. Through much of their own failure, doubt, disbelief, questioning, laughing, all of it. God remained faithful to his promise. No matter the circumstance brought on them and no matter how many times they failed, God remained faithful.

Notice that the author mentions the name Isaac three times in these few verses; this is very much intentional. The name of Isaac in Hebrew is from the root word, *Yitschaq*, which literally means “he laughs.” The original listener would have immediately made the connection because the difference in the verb “to laugh” and the name Isaac is merely two small accent notes.

The theme of laughter had developed throughout the story. Way back in chapters 17 and 18, Abraham and Sarah were visited by God and brought the news that they would have a child and become the father of many nations. At different times, both of them burst out into laughter at the very idea of that. It was the laughter of scoffing and cynicism.

Each of these prior instances of laughter has a connotation of cynicism, skepticism, or unbelief. What had caused Sarah and Abraham to respond with the laughter of disbelief? They had grown skeptical of the transcendent power of God. In their minds, they could not accept the idea of the transcendent ability of God that functioned outside of reason. They had come to believe that God could only work within natural processes, but the idea of God using supernatural processes caused them to laugh in skepticism and disbelief.

Does this sound familiar to anyone? Skepticism and cynicism, in our age, is the air we breathe. Our modern world is saturated with skepticism. Why? Why is it that the default mental setting for our secular world is toward doubt and skepticism?

Certainly, that is a question that is beyond the scope of this sermon, but can I suggest that at least with Abraham and Sarah, and quite possibly with us, we are scared of what Tim Keller has called “the vulnerability of hope.” To hope in the possibility of God is to expose one’s need for change and one’s ability to change. It means that we are not in as much control as we would like to think we are. To hope is to release control, to recognize your own finitude, and lean into the strength and power of something beyond yourself. Therefore, to hope is to be vulnerable.

For Abraham and Sarah, their faith and trust in the promise that God had laid before them over 20 years earlier was a mixed bag of belief and unbelief, faith and doubt, hope and despair. But notice God’s faithfulness in what comes next.

**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 borne him a son in his old age.” vv. 6-7**

What a beautiful confession, *“God has brought me laughter...”* Sarah certainly was brought back to the scene outside the tent when she had first heard the promise of God and scoffed at God’s idea of what was possible. Where Sarah doubted and failed to see the possibility of God intervening in supernatural ways, God remains faithful.

You see, this laughter is the expression of our rationality being overwhelmed by God’s ability to overcome our feeble expectations. This is the intrusion of a living God, the shock of the unexpected new life. For Abraham and Sarah, the long-awaited arrival of Isaac was shocking and life-altering. It was the startling encounter with the radically new, even in the midst of their cynicism and unbelief.

God was faithful to Sarah in her unbelief. But this did pose some challenges to Sarah, as we will see in the next section.

**The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” vv. 8-10**

Her joy over Isaac ultimately turned obsessive and idolatrous. It grew into a fury as she witnessed Hagar’s son Ishmael mocking and laughing at Isaac. Interestingly enough, the word for mocking is the same root word that is for the name Isaac and for the verb “to laugh” that we talked about earlier. It could literally be translated, “The son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was Isaac’ing.”

So in her fury, she tells Abraham to send them away, and Abraham is deeply distressed by the situation. He is caught between the love he has for Isaac and Sarah and the love for Ishmael, who is also his son. But yet again, God’s faithfulness is on full display.

**The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. But God said to him, “Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring.” vv. 11-13**

Here you have Hagar and Ishmael being cast aside, placed in an incredibly vulnerable situation. But in the midst of that, God assures Abraham of Ishmael’s survival, *“I will make the son of the slave into a nation also...”* Even in the midst of injustice, God is faithful; he is faithful to those suffering the sting of injustice and pain.

**Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, “I cannot watch the boy die.” And as she sat there, she began to sob.**

God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."

**Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt. vv. 14-21**

So Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael off with some food and supplies. As the slave woman and Ishmael leave, they enter the unknown, wandering into the desert of Beersheba. Eventually, the water runs dry, and Hagar places Ishmael by a bush, assuming the worst, that Ishmael would die.

God's gracious concern and faithfulness shine through in verses 17-18. The angel of God called to Hagar. She then opens her eyes, and a well of water appeared for their survival. And the text goes on to say that God was with Ishmael every step of the way. It is a profoundly intimate view of God's faithfulness for the vulnerable. He had promised that Ishmael would be a great nation, and God patiently walked with them in their vulnerability.

This has all sorts of damage and pain when we understand family birthrights in ancient times. Ishmael was the firstborn, he was to be the one to receive the inheritance and favor of Abraham, but it wasn't to be. We can only imagine the pain that Ishmael and Hagar endured within the household. The tension between the two sons is palpable. One is the firstborn child of a slave, the other the child of promise. Both were born to the man of promise, Abraham, and both caught in the tension of a family drama.

**The story is an Isaac story. But the text is equally clear that God is well inclined toward Ishmael... It is, of course, evident that Ishmael's promise is short of the full promise given to Isaac. And yet, it is a considerable promise not to be denied. God is attentive to the outsider. God will remember all the children like a mother remembers all her children. Brueggemann**

God is faithful through failures and circumstances. God is faithful to his redemptive purpose. God is faithful to the vulnerable. God is faithful in his presence. Now we come to the final section of the text and the final demonstration of God's faithfulness.

**At that time Abimelek and Phicol the commander of his forces said to Abraham, "God is with you in everything you do. Now swear to me here before**

**God that you will not deal falsely with me or my children or my descendants. Show to me and the country where you now reside as a foreigner the same kindness that I have shown to you." vv. 22-23**

The scene suddenly shifts but does so back to the relationship between Abraham and Abimelek that we saw at the beginning of our time together. Abimelek is now aware of the impact of the presence of God in the life of Abraham.

Maybe this is the primary way that we experience the faithfulness of God, that is, through his presence. Maybe the most challenging aspect of how God is operative in the world is that he allows for the autonomy of people. This creates the opportunity for failure and brokenness.

Here is what we have seen throughout the narrative, the faithfulness of God does not remove challenging circumstances, but instead, it promises God's presence through them.

Put simply, our circumstances never remove us from the presence of God, and our failures, doubt, and cynicism do not disqualify us from the faithfulness of God. We can, at times, think of the faithfulness of God to mean that all will go well for us. But this is nothing more than the trapings of our world projected onto God. We assume that health, wealth, and success are all signs of God's faithfulness, but this is a projection onto the scriptures.

What we actually take from the scriptures is that the faithfulness of God is made manifest in the presence of God with us. While we fail, while we are vulnerable, while we are in need of a promise, God is present. No matter what we face, God is present.

Look at the way this text closes.

**After the treaty had been made at Beersheba, Abimelek and Phicol the commander of his forces returned to the land of the Philistines. Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba, and there he called on the name of the Lord, the Eternal God. And Abraham stayed in the land of the Philistines for a long time." vv. 32-34**

Notice that the author calls God "*the Eternal God.*" Meaning this is the way that God was, is, and always will be. And it is this steady faithfulness that allows Abraham to "*stay in the land of the Philistines for a long time.*"

Our hope is secure only by the faithfulness of God. God is faithful, God is present, and it is only through that secure hope that we are able to live freely and openly in God's love. It is that secure faithfulness that we can build our life on. This is a certain and sure faithfulness that forgives, comforts, believes, and heals. It provides the certitude our hearts are searching for; it fills the gaps of our uncertainty and meets us in our despair.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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