

Faith that Fears God not Man

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- [0 : 0 0] All week I've been thinking this is quite a curious and a challenging chapter of the Bible. Curious because as lots of people have said to me this week, why is it even here in the Bible?
- Chapter 21 over the page, that's the real story. If you look over the page, chapter 21, the birth of Isaac. It finally happens. Why can't we just get there now?
- Why does the author bother with chapter 20? Why does the author bother to introduce us to a totally new character, Abimelech, and a storyline that goes nowhere?
- Chapter 20 doesn't add to the Abraham narrative at all. Why do we need it? And it seems actually that until the arrival of the promised son in chapter 21, today God is going to teach us something about waiting.
- Until the arrival of the promised son, God is going to teach us something about waiting. We in this room, we've been waiting two months for Isaac to arrive since we first met his father in chapter 12, which was in June.
- [1 : 1 2] For Abraham, he's been waiting 25 years for his promised son to arrive. It's clear he's going to have to wait one more week. Many times in the Bible, particularly in the Old Testament, God's people have to wait.
- They will have to wait over 400 years still to get their promised land. They will have to wait centuries and centuries and centuries until God's promised Messiah arrives that first Christmas morning.
- And Christian people, we are in a different period of salvation history. But we too are waiting for God's promised son, Jesus.
- Learning to wait on God's promises is characteristic of being his people. Today is a curious passage. But today is a challenging passage.
- Because actually chapter 20 is a warning. It's a warning about how we align ourselves. Who do we align ourselves to?
- [2 : 2 2] And I put that question at the top of your handout there. It's an important question because aligning yourself to someone ties your fate to theirs. So if they are successful, you will be successful.
- If they fail, you will fail. And so on. Who do you align yourself to? Which workplace or school or company or business did you align yourself to nine to five?
- That can hinder your success in life. What about church tradition? To some degree, even though I know some of us here are Baptists and the like, to some degree we are all aligning ourselves with the Anglican tradition in this room.
- That means while we're here at HTD, we will be directly affected by decisions that other Anglicans make on our behalf, for better or for worse.
- And I guess all of this goes doubly for marriage and friendships. Who do we align ourselves to? Here is a curious and a challenging chapter that warns us, as we wait for God's promised son, who are we aligning ourselves to?

[3 : 38] And our author shows us that Abimelech's life or death hangs on how he aligns himself to God's man, Abraham.

And so let's read the story. Start at verse one. 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, She is my sister. Then Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent for Sarah and took her. As we begin this chapter, there's an eerie déjà vu going on.

Abraham is journeying through the Negev again. He's telling lies about his wife again. Verse two. And there Abraham said of his wife, Sarah, she is my sister.

Back in chapter 12, when they were in Egypt, he also passed Sarah off as his sister to Pharaoh. Some of you will remember that. This time he does it again with a different king, Abimelech.

[4 : 40] Poor old Abimelech. He thinks Sarah is single. She's free to marry. Just as Pharaoh did in chapter 12. Our author is inviting us to compare these two deceptions.

And I put them sort of in a table on your handout. Lots of similarities, but lots of contrasts or differences. And it's in the differences that makes all the difference, I should say.

So in chapter 12, we barely get anything about Pharaoh. He doesn't speak to God at all. He's not told how to really remedy his situation. But here, lots and lots on Abimelech.

Abimelech and God. Abimelech and Abraham. Abimelech making restoration. It's the Abimelech story. Our author breaks the passage down into three scenes with Abimelech.

And those three scenes will be our three points today. So please keep that hand out there. That'll really help us as we go through. Point one. I'll read from verse three.

[5 : 44] 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's a married woman.

You're as good as dead. Don't you just love it when you realize that an everyday expression is actually from the Bible? You're as good as dead. What about this? The skin of your teeth. That's from the Bible.

From Job. A leopard changing its spots. That's from Jeremiah. Drop in a bucket. That's from Isaiah. Even this one. Did you know a fly in the ointment is actually from the Bible?

It's from Ecclesiastes 10. Look it up. There is about 50 of these. So I only gave you four. There you go. Abimelech, you're as good as dead. Verse three.

Abimelech, you're as good as dead. Because. Because of the woman you have taken. She's a married woman. So Abimelech pleads his case. Verse four.

[6 : 39] Now Abimelech had not gone near her. So he said, Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation? Our nation is innocent. He protests. Probably not like Sodom and Gomorrah.

Wicked nation we saw last week. Verse five. Abraham is the deceiver. He says, did he not say to me, she is my sister? Sarah, she's not innocent either.

He says, didn't she also say he is my brother? He summarizes his defense at the end of verse five. I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands.

God, the judge, is sympathetic to his plight in verse six. And he says in verse seven, now return the man's wife for or because he's a prophet and he will pray for you and you will live.

But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all who belong to you will die. There's a strong cause and effect going on. God warns Abimelech that his life or death hangs on whether he aligns himself with Abraham and his family.

[7 : 52] We're told that Abraham is a prophet, that he can pray or intercede for Abimelech and he will be spared. And so in our next scene, Abimelech confronts Abraham.

Point two. Verse nine. Then Abimelech 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 that should never be done. And Abimelech asked Abraham, what was your reason for doing this? I wonder how good are you at making up excuses and reasons?

Are you pretty good? The dog ate my homework. The light was yellow, officer. It's not my fault, I swear. Well, it turns out that Abraham was quite good at making up excuses and he offers up three of them.

And they get more and more flimsy as he gets on. So verse 11. Abraham's excuse. I said to myself, there is surely no fear of God in this place and they will kill me because of my wife.

[9 : 00] And that's not unreasonable. Gerar is a pagan country. They may be like Sodom and Gomorrah in Abraham's eyes. They may kill him just to get to Sarah.

Not unreasonable. But then the reasons start to get ridiculous. Verse 12. Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father, though not of my mother. And she became my wife.

Technically, says Abraham, technically, technically she's my sister. Well, technically, Abraham's an idiot. Because even if that is true, really, they are still married.

Terrible excuse. The third excuse, verse 13. And when God had me wander from my father's household, I said to her, this is how you can show your love to me.

Everywhere we go, say of me, he is my brother. You see, it's God's fault. He had me wander through these godless lands. I had to protect myself. And it's very similar to Abraham's greatest grandfather, Adam, in the garden.

[10 : 02] It's your fault, God. The woman you put here, she gave me the fruit and I ate it. It's your fault, God. Ever since we met Abraham, he's been a total mixed bag.

One week he's really good and faithful. The next week, totally rubbish, like today. Today, Abraham fears Abimelech. He thinks people will kill him just to get to his wife.

He forgets God's promises to bless him. He leaves Sarah in harm's way. He jeopardizes his chance of fathering her children as she's taken in by another man.

Abraham forgets God's experiences or his experiences of God in his life. Remember chapter 13? There was a tremendous victory he was given.

Chapter 15, the covenant relationship. Chapter 17, the sign of circumcision and God's commitment to his word. And in chapters 18 and 19 last week, Abraham sees God judging the much worse nations of Sodom and Gomorrah.

[11 : 12] He need not fear old Abimelech. And actually, the two men stand in sharp contrast with one another. But it's Abimelech who seems to fear God more.

He fears God's warning. He fears God has the power to judge his nation. Even his officials in verse 8, when they learn that God is coming for them, they are afraid.

And so, it could be that chapter 20 is teaching us to fear God and not man. Definitely a true statement in the Bible.

True here as well. It could be that chapter 20 is showing us that even when Abraham is rubbish again, God is still going to be faithful to his promises.

It's a curious chapter. These are all true. And so, let's look at the final scene. And this is our final point. Verse 14.

[12 : 15] Then Abimelech brought sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave them to Abraham. And he returned Sarah, his wife, to him. And Abimelech said, My land is before you. Live wherever you like.

Here in our final scene, Abimelech blesses Abraham, which is much more than he deserves. He gives him livestock and slaves. He returned Sarah, his wife, to him.

Rather than kick him out of the land, which he should have done. Verse 15. My land is before you. Live wherever you like. Choose the best part of my land.

It's all yours. He wants Abraham to dwell with him. Or for him to dwell with Abraham. Abimelech provides an extravagant compensation in verse 16.

To Sarah, he said, I'm giving your brother a thousand shekels of silver. In the Old Testament, if a man violates an unmarried woman, he has to compensate the family 50 shekels of silver.

[13 : 17] That's in Deuteronomy 22. Abimelech didn't even touch Sarah. But he offers a thousand shekels instead. The commentators tell us that a shekel is worth about two months wages.

And as soon as I heard that, the accountant in me came out and I made this little equation. So, two months wages at around about 72 grand a year, which I think is an average wage.

Two months wages is \$12,000. Times a thousand shekels is \$12 million. He says, Here is \$12 million, verse 16, to cover the offense against you, Sarah, before all who are with you.

You, Sarah, are completely vindicated. He makes a public restitution for Sarah's honor. Clearly, Abimelech cares more for Sarah's honor than her own husband, who left her just to be taken.

And so, Abimelech allows him to settle wherever he wants, gives him livestock and slaves to help him get started. And, of course, the multi-million dollar compensation as well.

[14 : 28] You see, Abimelech takes God at his warning that his fate rests on whether he aligns himself with Abraham or not.

That's our main idea today. That matches the promises we heard about when we first met Abraham back in chapter 12. It's a slide, please, Gwyneth, on the screen.

When we first met Abraham, this is one of the promises. I will bless those who bless you. Cause and effect. Whoever curses you, I will curse. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.

God made promises to Abraham, but other people will be affected, depending on how they align themselves to him. And thank you, Gwyneth.

And throughout our series, this has happened before. Think of little Ishmael. Ishmael is not the son of promise. We meet him next week. Ishmael is not the son of promise, but God blesses him.

[15 : 32] And why? Because Abraham prayed for him. So please, Gwyneth, the next slide. So Abraham said to God, if only Ishmael might live under your blessing.

And God responds in verse 20 after. And as for Ishmael, I have heard you. I have heard you. I will surely bless him. His blessing is entirely dependent on his father interceding for him.

Thanks, Gwyneth. The last two weeks, Andrew showed us Sodom and Gomorrah. They were judged away. But Lot was spared. One man and his family. Why? Lot was really bad.

Andrew was making fun of him from here. But we're told that Lot was spared. Just back over the page. 19 verse 29. So when God destroyed the cities of the plain, he remembered Abraham.

And he brought out Lot. The same is true of Abimelech today. He is as good as dead for taking Sarah.

[16 : 37] But in the end, he is blessed. Because Abraham prays for him. Verse 7. Now return the man's wife for he is a prophet. And he will pray for you and you will live.

It's the fact that he prays for him that makes all the difference. God has decided that Abimelech will be spared from death depending on Abraham. And so in verse 17.

Then Abraham prayed to God. And he healed Abimelech. There's the cause and effect. Not just Abimelech too. But all his women. His wife and his female slaves.

Were prayed for. So they could have children again. They all had the same barrenness that Sarah had. But are now healed. Because Abraham intercedes.

And again in verse 18. You can see this tight cause and effect. Verse 18. For the Lord had kept all the women in Abimelech's household from conceiving. Because of Abraham's wife Sarah.

[17 : 37] Abimelech is a dead man. He is a saved man. He is sick. He is healed. His women are barren. They can conceive. I will bless those who bless you.

Whoever curses you I will curse. And all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. Abraham. God's man. And therefore for us. As we wait for God's man to arrive.

God's man of promise to arrive. We will stand or fall. Based on how we align ourselves with Jesus. The better Abraham.

Abraham. It's one of God's last promises. That Jesus will return. And judge the world. And make everything right. He himself says in our second reading.

That Graham gave us. The second reading. Which is. Please Gwyneth a slide. He says. If anyone is ashamed of me and my words. In this adulterous and sinful generation. The son of man will be ashamed of them.

[18 : 40] When he comes. In his father's glory. With the holy angels. You see. Just like. Abimelech appears. In history. Right before the promised son. So we too.

Appear in history. Right before. The promised son. Jesus. And he warns us. In that Mark passage. That our life and death hangs. On how we align ourselves.

To him. As we. Wait his. Return. And so for those of you here. Who wouldn't call yourselves. Christians. And in a room this size. There'll be a few. If you wouldn't call yourself.

A Christian. Please hear. The warning. Of this passage today. Align yourselves. With Jesus. Allow him. To be your. Saviour. When he comes.

In his father's glory. With the holy angels. You will be spared. We're running. A Christianity. Explored course. As some of you know. On a Sunday afternoon. At three o'clock.

[19 : 37] And two weeks ago. Well. Actually. There's a young Muslim guy. Who comes along. He comes from Broad Meadows. All the way on the bus. Every week. And two weeks ago. The discussion around the tables.

Was about sin. And Jesus gave a warning. Similar to here in Mark. In the passages we looked at. And. Later that day. That young Muslim guy. Gave his life to Christ.

Two weeks ago. Here at HTD. He. Repented. He took God. At his warning. And he aligned himself. With Christ. And allowed Christ.

To be his saviour. Extraordinary. For those of us here. Who are Christians already. Which is most of us. We could say. Well.

I've already aligned myself. With Jesus. I did that years ago. When I chose to follow him. And that's great. Brilliant. And so here is the warning. For our. For us today.

[20 : 32] To realign ourselves. With him. That Mark passage. There's that. Tight link. Between our faith. And how aligned. Or. Unashamed we are of Jesus.

And his words. When we first became Christians. We loved Jesus. We loved what he says. But now. In the slow wait. Until he comes.

Are we. A bit. Ashamed. Or embarrassed. By him. Are we ashamed. Of what Jesus says. About human relationships. About hell.

About him. Being the ruling king. That all the promises. Of Abraham. Come just through Jesus. These are things. He spoke. Very plainly about. It's easy.

To be ashamed of him. In a sinful. And adulterous. Generation. Like this one. Maybe we've become. A bit like Abraham. From chapter 20. Fearing man.

[21 : 29] Instead of God. Fearing what people. Will do to us. Because we. Follow Jesus. It is a sinful. And adulterous. Generation. There's the.

Fear of. The social death. Or the. Professional death. Or maybe even. The much more serious. Physical death. Aligning yourself.

To Jesus. Is taking up. Your cross. It is. Following him. It is not. Being ashamed. Of his words. It is. Fearing God. More than man. In the meantime.

Until he returns. Right throughout the Bible. People are. Blessed. People are. Grafted in. People can even. Call Abraham.

Their own father. Because they. Trust in Jesus. And so. For us. While we wait. For Jesus. To return. Here is the warning. Align yourself.

[22 : 24] With Jesus. For the first time. Realign. Realign. Realign your lives. With him. As you once did. Tell others. To align their lives. With Jesus.

Or else. They're as good as dead. So let me pray. Our father God. We thank you. That you tell us. The truth. That you lovingly.

Warn us. To align our lives. And realign our lives. With Jesus. Father. As we. Wait for him. To return. Please help us. To be unashamed.

Of him. And his words. This is a sinful. And adulterous. Generation. We. Are easily. Afraid. Please. Help us. Father. Please help us.

To be ready. When. The promised son. Comes back. In Jesus name. Amen.