

If We Are Faithless, He Remains Faithful

Genesis 20:1-18

Today's passage is both encouraging and frustrating. It is encouraging because we see the incredible faithfulness of God to fulfill His covenant promises "in spite of" man's unfaithfulness. But it is frustrating because we want to see Abraham do better. And we don't want him to do better just for the sake of having a hero. We also want him to do better because we want hope that we can, and will, do better.

The truth is that Abraham will do better. His story is not yet over. But we cannot skip this chapter in the story, not if we are going to understand salvation rightly – Abraham's or ours.

Read Genesis 20:1-18.

When we last saw Abraham, he was interceding for Sodom. He was concerned for his nephew Lot. He was also concerned that the God of all the earth would not punish the righteous with the wicked. God hears the prayers of Abraham, and Lot is saved along with his daughters. I wonder if Abraham and Lot ever meet again. We do not have any record of them doing so. But Abraham's reaction to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is very different than Lot's. Lot flees to a cave. Abraham moves to a place called Gerar. Gerar is near present day Gaza. He probably moves there because there is room for his flocks to graze. It is easy to miss the difficulty of Abraham and Sarah's situation. Abraham is nearly 100 years old. He and Sarah have been living as nomads for 25 years. At some point, they must wonder, when is life going to get easier.

Chapter 20 gives us the feeling of "de ja vu". We are to think to ourselves, "Haven't we been here before?" In Genesis 12, Abraham's faith faltered in Egypt. And God was faithful to bring him back on track. But why does Abraham have to commit the same sin again? Why must Abraham still have these seasons of unfaithfulness?

It is likely that stories like this one inspired a proverbial saying that was well known during Paul's day.

2 Timothy 2:11-13 ¹¹ The saying is trustworthy, for:

- If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
- ¹² if we endure, we will also reign with him;
- if we deny him, he also will deny us;
- ¹³ if we are faithless, he remains faithful-

for he cannot deny himself.

The first three statements of this saying make perfect sense.

1. If we have died with him, we will also live with him, speaks of our union with Jesus Christ by faith alone. It is a promise of new obedience in this life and perfect obedience in eternity.
2. If we endure, we will also reign with him, speaks to the importance of perseverance through suffering and persecution.
3. If we deny him, he will also deny us, makes plain that to utterly reject Jesus as our Savior means that He will reject us on the Day of Judgment.

But the fourth statement does not fit the pattern of the previous statements.

4. If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself.

What exactly does this statement even mean? This is the lesson of Genesis 20. God had staked His reputation on being faithful to fulfill His promises to Abraham. If those promises were only good if Abraham remained faithful, then Genesis 20 ought to have nullified them. Sarah would have lived out her days in the harem of Abimelech. Abraham would then have been forgotten. And the gospel would be forever changed. In fact, what sort of Gospel would it be if only those who were always faithful could be saved? Could you be saved? Consider the implications if God would only be faithful to you if you always remained faithful to Him. Would any of us have any hope of ever being saved?

At the same time, a gospel that leaves us in unfaithfulness is no gospel at all. We need a gospel that will make us faithful. But how do the unfaithful become faithful.

John Currid, in his commentary on this text, writes.

“Each of us has deeply worn channels of a corrupt nature – besetting sins that refuse to let us go. And these sins come in cycles. They revisit us time and time again. Similar situations lead us to act in a similar vein. But, as in the case of Abraham, God continues to bring the situations upon us so that we should see our sin, and that we should turn to him, that we should trust him and realize he will protect us. Such repetitive cycles highlight our besetting sins, but they also point to a solution, which is complete trust and faith in God.” Currid 370-1.

Currid’s statement is extremely helpful. When a Christian struggles with a repeated sin, there is a need to remember God’s sovereign faithfulness. We are fully responsible for our sin. And we are also responsible to turn from our sin back to God.

But we also need to realize that God's faithfulness to us is bigger than our failures to Him. This is easier said than done.

Often our failures bring us to doubt God's good work in our lives. We struggle to know why God has not provided the strength for perfect victory. This is why stories like Genesis 20 are so vital. We can see clearly that God's faithfulness to Abraham is larger than Abraham's faithfulness to God.

Throughout this frustrating chapter, we can see God continuing to hold Abraham, and Sarah, in the palm of his hand.

² And
 Abraham said of Sarah his wife,
 "She is my sister."
 And
 Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

Abimelech is taking Sarah into his harem. The purpose is to have her for himself. God had promised that Abraham would have a child with Sarah. If left to themselves, all of this could come crumbling down. But God does not leave Abraham and Sarah to their own devices. He intercedes at just the right time.

³ 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."

I have said before, two of the best words in Scripture are "but God". It is certainly true here. If God does not intercede, all is lost. But God does intercede. He intercedes because He cannot deny Himself. God comes to Abimelech in a dream. And He gives Abimelech a very stern warning. "You are a dead man." The woman you have taken is another man's wife.

Although Abimelech was fine with having multiple wives, which goes against God's moral law, he still agreed that taking another man's wife was sinful. In this way, Abimelech still retains some of the moral law that was written on the heart of Adam at

the beginning. But this whole encounter is not simply about adultery. It is about God protecting his children. The Psalmist recognizes this in Psalm 105.

Psalm 105:12-15 ¹² When they were few in number, of little account, and sojourners in it, ¹³ wandering from nation to nation, from one kingdom to another people, ¹⁴ he allowed no one to oppress them; he rebuked kings on their account, ¹⁵ saying, "Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm!"

But God's concern for Abraham and Sarah does not mean that He has no concern for Abimelech. In fact, God even uses Abraham's faithlessness to lead Abimelech to the truth. God accuses Abimelech of sin and warns him of precarious situation. Then Abimelech defends himself against God's accusation.

⁴ Now Abimelech had not approached her.

This is important for two reasons. It is important because we need to know that Sarah has been preserved. But it is also important for Abimelech to establish his innocence.

So he said,

⁵ "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."

Abimelech pleads ignorance. He did not know that Sarah was the wife of Abraham. It was the deception of Abraham that led him into this wrong. And Abimelech is not lying. God judges what he says to be true, making Abraham the one at fault.

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.
Therefore I did not let you touch her."

It is possible that if Abimelech had not acted in ignorance, God may have simply killed him on the spot. In this exchange, God tells Abimelech that taking Sarah was still sin, but it was not the sin of purposely taking another man's wife.

God tells Abimelech that this is the reason why God comes to him in the dream before he had even touched Sarah. One way or another, God was not going to let anyone touch Sarah. But He chooses this method, knowing that Abimelech will heed God's warning.

Now God reveals to Abimelech that Abraham is more than just a man. He is a prophet.

7 Now then, return the man's wife,
 for he is a prophet,
 so that he will pray for you,
 and you shall live.

By establishing Abraham as a prophet, God is revealing to Abimelech Himself. Abraham must be a prophet of the God who is now speaking. If Abimelech wants to know the God who is speaking to him, he might do so by going to Abraham. God leads Abimelech in this direction, by telling him that if he wants to live, he will return Sarah to Abraham, and he will seek blessing from Abraham's prayers.

This is profound. Abraham, through his faithlessness, has almost caused Abimelech's death. In spite of this, Abimelech must still seek life from Abraham's prayers.

Then God gives another warning.

But
if you do not return her,
know that you shall surely die,
you,
and
all who are yours."

God's warning fits well with God's original promise to Abraham. "Those who bless you will be blessed, but those who curse you will themselves be cursed." God is talking to Abimelech, but He is speaking to Abraham, and to us.

Abraham gets into this situation because He does not believe God will take care of him. But through God's intervention in the situation, God is teaching Abraham that His faithfulness is larger than Abraham's faithlessness.

Abimelech heeds God's warning.

8 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.

We are not yet told why the servants of Abimelech are so afraid. That will come in vv. 17-18. For now, it is enough that everyone agrees to return Sarah to Abraham.

This might not seem too important to us, but it would have mattered a great deal in their day. For a king to take someone into his harem and then immediately send her back would have been very confusing, if not shameful. His servants would have believed something to be wrong.

Through this, not only the king, but all his household has an opportunity to know the true God through his servant Abraham. Everyone is being told that Abraham is a prophet of the true God.

But before Abimelech seeks to receive blessing from Abraham, he has a bone of contention to pick with him. His accusation is very important to the story.

9 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."

10 And Abimelech said to Abraham,
 "What did you see,
 that you did this thing?"

This rebuke lets Abraham know that he was in the wrong. Abraham must learn his lesson and come to repentance for his deception, and his lack of faith.

11 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.

12 Besides,
she is indeed my sister,
 the daughter of my father
 though
 not the daughter of my mother,
 and
she became my wife.

13 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.'"

We have heard Abraham's excuse before. Abraham had lived in many places. And it was typical for kings to want to take Sarah from him. He was assuming that Abimelech was no different. And, technically speaking, Sarah was his half-sister. What is more, it seems that Abraham's deception was something of a set plan. This was the default story whenever they would go into a new place.

All this is fine, but what Abraham could have said, and should have said, is that he did not trust that his God would be faithful to take care of him. This is the real issue. And it is the issue with which we all struggle.

In one way or another, we who have the same God as Abraham as our heavenly Father, through Jesus Christ, struggle to believe that God will be faithful to fulfill his promises to us. Every form of disobedience flows from our failure to believe God's sovereign care of our lives.

I am thankful for this story. God does not ignore Abraham's faithlessness. He exposes it. And he calls Abraham to greater trust. Through Abraham's faithlessness, God reveals more of His faithfulness. And so, rather than casting Abraham aside, God continues to use him and to bless him.

Abimelech showers Abraham and Sarah with gifts. These gifts are not ones that they have earned. And they are not simply the fruit of Abimelech's kindness. They are the products of God's amazing grace.

14 Then Abimelech took
sheep and oxen,
and
male servants and female servants,
and
gave them to Abraham,
and
returned Sarah his wife to him.

15 And
Abimelech said,
"Behold, my land is before you;
dwell where it pleases you."

Abraham is given sheep and oxen. He is given more male and female servants. Sarah is returned to him. And he tells Abraham that he is free to dwell in his realm, wherever Abraham might choose. God is teaching Abraham of His covenant love towards him. God is also faithful to Sarah.

16 To Sarah he (Abimelech) 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."

Abimelech wants it to be clear to everyone that he has not violated Sarah. The thousand pieces of silver are more than a laborer could make in 150 years. It is a huge sum. Sarah is not only honored. It is clear that God has preserved her innocence in

this matter. Abimelech has gone above and beyond God's command. He has sought to bless Abraham and Sarah. Therefore, Abraham will pray for him.

17 Then Abraham prayed to God,
and
God healed Abimelech,
and
also healed his wife and female slaves
so that they bore children.

18 For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech
because of Sarah,
Abraham's wife.

We are told some important information that we had not yet known. Abimelech's wife and all the female slaves in his house experienced some condition that closed their wombs. We do not know what this condition was, but it was obvious that everyone knew of it. There may also have been some ailment that Abimelech was experiencing. For we are told that God healed Abimelech too. This healing. This removal of the curse happened after Abraham prays for Abimelech. Abraham has been in the wrong, but he is still the one to whom the promises are given.

"Although Abraham is in the wrong, Abimelech must ask Abraham, God's elect instrument of salvation, to intercede for him. God's human covenant partner, who nearly brought death to Abimelech by his scheming, is still the means by which God gives life and blessing." Waltke

"Once again, though the human partner is unfaithful, God is faithful. He does not cast aside his flawed saint but restores him in order to work his elective purposes through him." Waltke 282.

Some may twist this teaching into an excuse to remain unfaithful. Or that it does not matter if we turn from our sin. But you would only think this way if you did not know the end of Abraham's story. Before the end, Abraham will love and trust God in almost unthinkable ways.

"By revealing Abraham's weaknesses in the midst of these significant events, the narrator captures the magnitude of Abraham's obedience and also inspires the readers' own faith struggles." Waltke 284

“Each of us has deeply worn channels of a corrupt nature – besetting sins that refuse to let us go. And these sins come in cycles. They revisit us time and time again. Similar situations lead us to act in a similar vein. But, as in the case of Abraham, God continues to bring the situations upon us so that we should see our sin, and that we should turn to him, that we should trust him and realize he will protect us. Such repetitive cycles highlight our besetting sins, but they also point to a solution, which is complete trust and faith in God.” Currid 370-1.

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Have you fled to Jesus? Are you casting all your hopes of blessing upon Him, and not yourself? When you believe in Jesus, He unites you to Himself. There is a spiritual bond between you.

All of the promises of blessing that belong to Jesus, also now belong to you. You will spend your whole life struggling to believe this. As you endure pain and suffering in this world, your deeply ingrained channels of fear and unbelief will raise their ugly head. But in the midst of your faithlessness, God will prove himself faithful. Not so that you can continue being faithless. But so that you can learn that God’s faithfulness is larger than you.

God’s faithfulness to you rests in your being united to Jesus Christ. He can no sooner be unfaithful to you than He could deny Himself.

if we are faithless, he remains faithful-
 for he cannot deny himself.

O for grace to trust to trust Him more...