

Prayers

Opening prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, may Your wisdom be my guide as I think about what I do today, may Your Light be my guide as I seek to discern the truth, and may Your love be my guide as I spend time with those I love. In this way, may I learn to value Your presence within the detail of every moment I live; all praise to You Lord Jesus Christ: AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

1. For yourself

Pray about what is on your mind today. Do not be shy to bring the things that are of concern to you before the throne of God's grace

2. For your friends and family

Pray for the needs of those you love. Put yourself in their position, insofar as you can, and pray that their needs are met by God's grace

3. For the church and its work

Pray for the current needs of your church, perhaps in finance or in vision, or in leadership ...

4. For your neighbourhood, your country and the world (News)

Pray for the needs of your community and nation. Pray that God's will be done

Meditation

Let us truly honour God, and respect each other:

Let us give thanks for the privilege of salvation;

Let us offer Him our whole lives, without question;

Let us take every opportunity to speak about Jesus;

Let us love everyone we meet, unquestionably;

Let us do all we can for the poor as Christ would do;

Let us put aside time, each day, to study God's Word;

Let us take every opportunity to pray to our Lord;

Let us support the church, in good times and ill;

Let us donate our time and wealth for God's work;

Let us show love for others, in every possible way;

Let us truly honour God, and respect each other; always.

Bible Study

Bible passage – Genesis 20: 1-18

¹ Abraham journeyed on from there in the direction of the Negev, and settled between Kadesh and Shur. While he was living as a foreigner in Gerar, ² Abraham described his wife Sarah as his sister; and King Abimelech of Gerar summoned Sarah.

³ Then God came to Abimelech one night in a dream, and said,

‘You are as good as dead because you have taken this woman. She has a husband!’

⁴ However, Abimelech had not gone near her, so he said,

'Lord, will you destroy people who are innocent?' ⁵ Did he not tell me himself, "She is my sister"? She herself added, "He is my brother." So I did this with integrity and a clear conscience.'

⁶ Still in the dream, God replied,

'Yes, I know you did this with integrity; which is why I kept you from sinning against me, and did not let you touch her. ⁷ Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet. He will pray and your life will be saved. If you do not restore her, you and all your people will surely die.'

⁸ Early next morning, Abimelech got up, summoned his servants and told them everything. They were horrified! ⁹ Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him,

'What have you done to us? How have I wronged you, that you have brought such great guilt on me and my people? You have treated me intolerably! ¹⁰ What was in your mind for you to do this thing?'

¹¹ Abraham answered,

'I did it because I thought there was no fear of God here and I would be killed because of my wife. ¹² Anyway, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother. That is why I was able to marry her. ¹³ Therefore, when God made me journey away from my father's house, I told to her, "You must show me this loyalty; wherever we go, tell people that I am your brother."'

¹⁴ Then Abimelech gave Sarah back to Abraham and also presented him with sheep and oxen, and male and female servants. ¹⁵ Abimelech said,

'Here is all my land; settle wherever you like.'

¹⁶ He said to Sarah,

'I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver on your behalf, to show everyone of your people that you are completely innocent.'

¹⁷ Then Abraham prayed to God; and Abimelech was healed together with his wife and female servants. ¹⁸ For because of Abraham's wife Sarah, the LORD had stopped anyone in Abimelech's household from bearing children, and now they became fertile again.

Review

At first, this chapter of Genesis reads like a repeat of what happened earlier when Abraham and Sarah first came into Canaan (12:10-20). Then, they travelled through Canaan as far as Egypt; but in this story Abraham journeyed south west of Canaan towards what would one day become Philistine territory, to the city-state of King Abimelech. In the earlier story, Abraham made a big mistake when he presented Sarah to Pharaoh as his sister (Gen 12:10-20) and when he does something similar in our passage today we wonder whether this is going to be another tale of Abraham's failings. Yet despite the similarities with the previous story, there are differences, and we must look at the details of the story carefully if we are to discover the true depth of what scripture has to say to us here.

Abraham and Sarah were reaching the climax of their Godly calling and had just accepted that they would indeed bear a son miraculously within a year (18:1-15). Abraham also enjoyed a close relationship with God, interceding for the city of Sodom and for his nephew Lot before the city was destroyed (18:22-33, 19). It seems strange therefore that the story of Abraham does not move on immediately to the birth of the expected son; yet it does not! Genesis 20 brings us back to Abraham's humanity and the cultural strangeness of his life; remember that this story would have been strange even to Israelite people who lived a thousand years later at the time of the great Israelite and Judean Kingdoms (900 to 700 BC). Despite his faith, Abraham was a man who had problems with fear and found it hard to trust God in every circumstance of life, and the excuses he gave to Abimelech once he discovered that he was dealing with a god-fearing man (20:11f.) showed up this weakness in him. The remarkable fact is that despite this, God remained faithful to the Covenant promises to Abraham and his descendants (17:1-8).

The ruse that Sarah was Abraham's sister was supposed to protect the two of them on their travels (20:13); the assumption being that Abraham's life would be spared through such bargaining and manipulation. All this sounds appalling to us, but such manipulation of relationships was common practice in those days. Wealthy men often exchanged women or wives as part of their territorial negotiations, and Abimelech, the local king, would have

assumed that he was entering into such bargaining with Abraham. However, their use of this with Abimelech was a complete failure because Abimelech was a godly man who took Sarah in innocence. By going along with this because he thought it was appropriate (20:1,2), Abraham compromised not just his wife, but the Covenant as well, because Sarah was about to bear the child of God's Covenant promise (17:15f.)! If Abimelech had taken Sarah from his harem and slept with her, then we would not know in a year's time whether the child born to her was Abraham's or not!

Throughout the whole sorry incident, God nevertheless worked powerfully. He came to Abimelech immediately in a dream to avert any suggestion that Sarah was compromised sexually, and He moved Abimelech to recognise Abraham as a prophet (20:7). As such, although Abimelech was somewhat taken aback by what had happened, he recompensed Abraham for the mistake with extraordinary generosity (20:14ff), and then received the blessing of Abraham's prayers (20:17).

Despite Abraham's failings, God was ultimately in control of all that happened because this was the only way He could fulfil His purposes. After the birth of Isaac, God would test Abraham just one more time, and on Mount Moriah the Lord posed him the ultimate test of faith, the quality that had let him down on this occasion, and by the grace of God, Abraham did not fail. This demonstrates a powerful truth about the nature of God which is found throughout the Bible and lies at the heart of the Gospel of Salvation; God will not fail us. 'If we are faithless, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny himself.' (2 Tim 2:13)

Going Deeper

- Comparing Genesis 12 to Genesis 20
- Other important features of the story

If we want to understand this passage properly, we will firstly have to compare it with the similar story in the second half of Genesis 12. Then, we will find that there are some important themes which emerge about the whole story, and this gives us valuable comment on the nature of Abraham's faith and its consequences.

Comparing Genesis 12 to Genesis 20

We can learn a great deal about this story by comparing it with Genesis 12:10-20. In both cases, no reason is given for Abraham to be 'on the move'. It is as if the nomadic tendency in Abraham expressed a certain nervousness and uncertainty within him at crucial points in his journey of faith, firstly when he entered the Promised Land, and secondly when the promises of God were about to be visibly fulfilled, as in this passage. Both these stories are therefore a test of Abraham's faith, and it is important for us to see within them the message that God does not have to find perfect people, or people of perfect faith in order to do his will. His will is accomplished not through people who are faultless, but through faulty people who are willing to sustain their relationship with God and accept their own faults. We would be advised to remember this if we have a tendency to look up to others in the church because of their apparently perfect or wonderful faith. When the people of Israel read the scriptures about their most revered forefather, they read of one who had on-going weak aspects to his character which were continually tested by the Lord; not least insecurity and fearfulness, and a certain unease when dealing with his wife, even within the culture of his day!

One other similarity between these two stories is that in both of them, Abraham and Sarah escaped from their predicaments by the mercy of God and came away with the added blessings of more wealth. In Genesis 12, Pharaoh gave Abraham sheep, cattle and servants because of Sarah, and before she was even returned to him (12:16); this proved to be important for them both at the time. In Genesis 20, Abimelech gave Abraham the same, but added an amount of money that was almost beyond imagining! From what we are able to gather, a thousand pieces of silver (20:16) was equivalent to around 160 years standard wages for a labourer! What an extraordinary gap there is between the failings of Abraham and the blessings God granted him! Not only did God persist with his servant in the midst of his failings, he rewarded him beyond his dreams or expectations. There is one interesting thing to note about this wealth, however, which is that although it was given to Abraham, the Hebrew (20:16) strongly suggests that it was given primarily to and for Sarah. This sustains a major theme of Genesis that Sarah was important as an individual; and as a woman, she was the bearer of the child who would fulfil the Covenant. Abraham had asked her to say she was his sister (20:13) and this was socially equivalent to granting her rights not normally associated with a wife; Abimelech rewarded her accordingly, and it seems that God approved!

Other important features of the story

Abimelech was warned about the deception of Abraham in a dream. God knew what was happening, and told Abimelech that he would die if he went anywhere near Sarah (20:3). This may seem strange to us, for Abimelech is described, quite lengthily, as an innocent man (20:6,7). But through the dream, Abimelech realised that he had taken a married woman into his harem, and it would have been unthinkable for a king of those times to take a woman who was married into a harem. This was regarded as an evil act and one that

God punished (see Lev 20:22; Deut 22:22); this explains the horror of the servants (20:8). Abimelech is one of those characters in the Old Testament who was outside of God's Covenant people and yet appeared to have been godly through natural revelation, as was Melchizedek (14:17ff). Abimelech was quite different from Pharaoh in Genesis 12 who is portrayed as a mere worldly monarch.

This may be why God was prepared to tell Abimelech that Abraham was a 'prophet'; something that as a godly man, Abimelech clearly understood (20:7). This is the very first occurrence of the term 'prophet' in the whole Bible, so for us, it is highly significant. The remarkable thing about this passage is that Abraham's work as a prophet is described as that of intercession 'He will pray and your life will be saved' (20:7). Abraham had previously spoken directly with God (18:23-33) when bargaining for the lives of the citizens of Sodom, including his nephew Lot, so here in the midst of this story of failure, the Lord affirmed his gift to Abraham of intercession and prophecy. At the end of the story, Abraham did indeed fulfil this prophetic duty by praying for Abimelech (20:17ff) to remove the curse God had placed upon Abimelech's household due to what had happened.

It is hard for us to come to terms with some of the details of the story that remain a puzzle to us. For example, how can a foreign king such as Abimelech become a 'god-fearer'? Or, why would Abimelech take a 99 year old woman into his harem in the first place? The Israelites believed that God had rejuvenated Sarah's beauty as well as her child bearing in her old age, and it is no more difficult to believe that a woman of her age could be beautiful than that she could bear a child. The truth is that scripture tells us only so much, and we have to take what it says, as it is reported. Most of our theories about what it says will always remain unproven, for they are part of the mystery of the whole story surrounding the origins of God's people. We accept these stories by faith simply because by so doing we are able to access the significant truths that scripture conveys and which speak to us even today; and amongst those we have come across today are important lessons about failure as well as faith.

Discipleship

Application

We have discovered that Abraham, the most important figure of faith in the Bible apart from Jesus, is a deeply flawed man. Despite this, God was nevertheless prepared to work consistently through him; He was also prepared to bless Abraham abundantly and far more than he could imagine; and God himself called him a prophet in the midst of one of the weakest moments of his life.

All this demonstrates that God was in control. He took overall management of all that was happening because His plan for the world was at stake and He had chosen Abraham to be the one who would begin the great plan of salvation. The nation of people that would be born through Abraham were to be a 'blessing to the families of all the earth' (12:3) and the means whereby God's relationship with people could be restored. There was a good reason for the Lord to be merciful and generous to Abraham, and He is merciful to us for the same reason, because we now inherit the same calling.

God was in control within today's story by correcting Abraham's mistakes and weaknesses, and that can be our experience as well if we are committed to God's call on our lives. Just as Abraham needed to keep trusting God and move on to the completion of everything God required of him, so should we do the same. There is no need for us to dwell on our faults, allow them to dominate us, or give them as a reason for not doing things; if we really trust Him, He will lead us according to His purpose for us, and we must not let our perceptions of what we are capable of get in the way. The Lord looks for the submissive heart that says 'I don't understand why or how you can use me, but I will do whatever you ask of me, Lord.'

Finally, we can see through Abimelech that God was in control of the world beyond that of his chosen servant Abraham. This, perhaps, is something we need to learn. In the Old Testament, God used the nations according to his will, sometimes even to judge his own people (as at the time of invasion and exile, in 2 Kings 24ff), and sometimes to bless his people, as here. The church today is right to claim its birthright as God's Kingdom here on earth, but this does not mean that God is either unconcerned about the affairs of the nations or is unable to use them. Our challenge must be to see what God is doing in our world today and follow what He is leading us to do, because His mission is to save the whole world.

Questions for groups

1. Discuss why it is that God uses other peoples and other nations when dealing with His people. Can you give examples of this today?

2. Does it seem 'fair' to you that Abimelech should have to recompense Abraham for what were his own faults? What does the Bible say through this?
3. In what ways does Abraham act as a prophet either here, or in any other story about him?

Discipleship challenges

- *Think about your own weaknesses, and recall times when you have felt that it is impossible for the Lord to use you. If we cannot remember, then your Christian friends may be able to do so! Pray about these things and see if you can hear again what the Lord was trying to say to you, and whether you can now respond!*
- *Spend a half hour in prayer asking the Lord to show you where you are weak in faith. All of us have some areas in which we are weak, and need some guidance from the Lord.*

Final Prayer

At the end of a day, Lord Jesus, when good things have happened and the worst has been overcome, may we rest in the knowledge that You have been our constant guide. Then, in full confidence of Your love and power, lead us into tomorrow with faith and without fear. AMEN
