

25. When the World surprises and shames the Church (2007)

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 20, a chapter all about when the world surprises and shames the church. Now we've been seeing in these chapters about Abraham, the beginning of Christian mission, that is the calling of the people of the covenant to be those who bring blessing to the world.

God's promise from the start was that Abraham's line will bring blessing to all the families of the earth. And it's highly significant that the marking out of that family of faith, the household of faith, as the covenant people of circumcision, that that leads directly into a situation of mission.

God's friends, like Abraham, the friend of God, are his prophets and priests to the world, speaking to men for God and also speaking to God for men.

We saw that in chapter 19 as Abraham pled for Sodom. But of course, the church, alas, all too often fails the world. And the sorry story of Lot's legacy and all the consequences of that showed us that all too clearly just last week.

It was a very sobering word, wasn't it? Especially for those fathers among us. And here's another chapter about the church's interaction with the world. And this time it's all about when the church is surprised and, once again, shamed by the world.

[1 : 32] And it's another sobering chapter. Again, it's full of realism. But that's why it is also full of hope and encouragement for us as God's church today. That's why, you know, the Old Testament is preserved for us, isn't it?

Paul tells us in Romans 15, that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope.

And it gives us hope, we who are very aware of our own weaknesses and failures, because it doesn't hide the weaknesses and the failures of the great hearers of the faith from us, does it?

It doesn't pretend them away. It's the real Abraham that we see in Genesis, isn't it? Warts and all. The Abraham of whom the Bible says in Romans 4, listen, no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God.

And when we read a chapter like this, Genesis 20, and then read verses like that, it is a wonderful encouragement, isn't it? Because it reminds us, doesn't it, that the God of all grace doesn't evaluate things the way we do.

[2 : 47] And it reminds us that Jesus is building his church through his people, warts and all, and that the gates of hell can't stop him. And if that's so, then neither can your mistakes or my blundering stop him either.

Isn't that encouraging? So let's look at this chapter then to see what we're going to learn. First of all, we meet a relapsing prophet, and then we meet a righteous pagan, and in the end we witness a redeeming prayer.

First then, a relapsing prophet. Verses 1 and 2 immediately have a ring of déjà vu about them, don't they? We've seen it all before, back in chapter 12, verse 10 and following.

In Hebrew, the very same words are used. Abraham journeyed south and sojourned in Gera. Then, in chapter 12, it was all the way to Egypt, out of the land.

This time it's a bit further west, and not so far south, just to the very edge of the land, as I said, the area of the Gaza Strip. But why did Abraham up and off from Mamre?

[3 : 52] Well, maybe he was disillusioned after all that he'd witnessed in chapter 19, destruction of Sodom, despite his prayers. Perhaps, perhaps, he was disillusioned by Lot's failure to change, even after his escape.

We don't know. Maybe he just wanted to be far away from those burning, sulfurous cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, just to get away from that central reminder of what God had done.

But whatever the reason was for his move, it very quickly led to disaster. He loses his wife to a pagan king all over again. It's almost impossible, isn't it? To imagine that he could fall into that same catastrophic behavior all over again.

Don't you think? The old, she's really my sister routine. It had been a disaster before, nearly 30 years ago. Why on earth did he think it would work now?

In fact, some scholars, if you read their books about Genesis, they assume that this is a mistake, that actually it's just the same story that's been repeated and got stuck in there by completely without the author realizing that nobody would notice.

[4 : 57] And their reasoning, of course, is just this. Well, people just don't fall into those same sins twice, do they? Christian believers never do that. They always learn their lesson the first time, don't they?

Don't you? Don't you? Do you always learn your lesson the first time? Do you never lapse into the same sins the second time? Well, if you think that, come to me for some counseling because you've just relapsed again into your self-deception.

But Abraham, the friend of God, the father of the faithful, does precisely that, doesn't he? He relapses into exactly the same pattern of behavior that had nearly brought him to total disaster at least once before.

And maybe more than once because verse 13 tells us it was a frequent plan, wasn't it? Wherever we go, this is what we say. Maybe there was more. And friends, listen to this.

If Abraham, who grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, if Abraham battled with these things right into his 90s and beyond, then don't you believe it won't be so for you as well?

[6 : 07] Great preacher Alexander White once said to a young man who was full of nonsense about having got some blessing that would free him from sin and folly in the future. No, no, he said.

It's a serfecht right to the end. A sore fight right to the end. And that's the great lesson of this chapter, at least one of them. Don't think that the time will come when you've arrived in your Christian walk when at last these kind of struggles will be over and you'll know nothing but perfect peace.

Friends, it won't come. We have to endure to the end, says Jesus. And he also says that the way is hard that leads to life. Was for Abraham, got to be for you and me.

So, we find by the end of verse 2 Sarah in the same position as she was in chapter 12 taken by a pagan king into his harem. Then, we're told that it was because of her great beauty.

We're not told that here. She's well on in her 90s after all. It may be that it's got more to do with Abimelech wanting to have an alliance with Abraham who was a man of great substance.

[7 : 14] And in fact, when you get to chapter 21 you'll see that that's exactly what happens. But, maybe we're being unfair to Sarah. She was a very desirable woman at one time.

Perhaps she still was. After all, she was just about to have a baby quite soon, wasn't she? So, perhaps somehow she's been rejuvenated. We're not sure. John Calvin in his comments says this though.

It's possible that she was not so much worn with age but we often see some women in their 40th year more wrinkled than others in their 70th. So, there you are. Take encouragement from John Calvin all of you who are in your 70s.

Of course, if you just turned 40 this week it might not be such a cheery thought. I better be careful. I know somebody very well who just turned 40 this week.

But whatever the reason for what happened, the real reason is clear, isn't it? It was Abraham's lapse in faith and it was his lie again to a pagan king just like before.

[8 : 18] Verse 2, she's my sister. How can this great man of faith muck it up so badly? After all that he's been through, after all that he's seen of God's dealing with him, we can understand it of a new believer just going out in his walk in faith as he was in chapter 12.

But now, 30 years later, after God had promised to protect him, promised to bless him and had, promised to curse those who came against him and had every time, how could it happen?

Well, the answer is very plain according to the Bible, isn't it? It's because the flesh is weak and the world is strong and the devil is very cunning and vicious.

And the truth is that in these stories of God's saints, we're never free from the stain of sin and neither are we free from the shadow of the serpent. We have an enemy. Don't forget that just because he lurks in the shadows and doesn't make himself obvious, doesn't parade himself. Remember Peter's words in 1 Peter 5, be self-controlled and alert, your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.

[9 : 31] Now Peter the Apostle knew that, didn't he, by bitter experience. And so did Abraham. We have a persistent enemy in the life of faith and we must be alert, says Peter, and self-controlled.

First of all, we must be alert, alert to his timing. Just think of the building crescendo of these recent chapters in Genesis. We've had the promise, the covenant, God's amazingly close relationship with Abraham as his friend.

We've had Abraham's prayers and all of a sudden it's just thrown into confusion. Abraham's on the move, away from the place of God's altar.

He's lapsing into old habits. He's got a total loss of mooring. So all of a sudden everything seems to be clouded in his life. And that is such a characteristic hallmark of our enemy's tactics.

You see, God's spirit is the spirit of order, isn't he? It's the devil who is the spirit of disorder and dis-ease and turmoil. And so often these attacks come to God's people at absolutely crucial times, crucial moments in the unfolding of God's plan and his purposes.

[10 : 46] Here we are virtually on the eve of the birth of Isaac, the promised seed. The one thing central to the very purpose of Abraham's life and crucial to the whole salvation of the world.

Chapter 12, God promises Abraham through him he'll bless all nations. Chapter 15, it's going to be through his very own son. Chapter 17, we're made explicit that it's going to be Sarah's son.

And chapter 18, remember we're told it's going to be next year. We're absolutely almost there.

We're almost at the climax of the whole story. And yet at precisely that point, disaster almost overtakes everything.

Why? Well, because there's an enemy who loves to attack at crucial moments in the life of God's promise, in the life of God's people. If you read through the whole of the Old Testament history, you'll see exactly that kind of pattern emerging on almost every turn.

Back in Genesis 12, as we've seen, no sooner was Abraham into the promised land than he's out of it again, in Egypt, losing his wife. Think ahead to the people of Israel, Numbers chapter 14, when they're on the brink of the promised land and the spies come back, and what happens?

[12 : 04] Disaster, rebellion, and for 40 years they're wandering in the wilderness. Think of King Solomon, the very height of the monarchy, the kingship in Israel, and at last, Israel is a united nation, seen by the eyes of the world as the place that shines the glory of God.

And what happens? Well, you turn the page and immediately Solomon's going downhill. He's marrying pagan women, he's building shrines to pagan gods, and as a result, well, the kingdom is taken away and divided in two.

Think of the story surrounding the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ himself, the Messiah, when he finally came. Immediately, you've got the attention of Herod, seeking to destroy him, killing all the babies in Bethlehem.

You see, it's always the same pattern, especially at crucial moments in the history of salvation.

Ferocious attacks by the serpent, seeking to destroy the purpose of God.

If you read later on chapter 12 of John's vision, the book of Revelation, you'll see a graphic picture of what is in fact a recurring principle all through the history of the church.

[13 : 17] He sees a vision of the woman about to give birth to the man-child, and the dragon, the serpent, standing, waiting to devour. And that's a heavenly picture of what's going on in the church throughout all the ages from beginning to end.

And what it means is that wherever Jesus Christ is being born, as it were, wherever Christ's kingdom is advancing, wherever there is progress being made in great ways, the devil is at work seeking to devour and to destroy.

Wherever the seed is planted, the weeds and the tares will grow. Why? Well, an enemy has done this, says Jesus. And we need to be alert to that. And that's what explains the struggles and the opposition that so often we find in our Christian lives springing up exactly at crucial times in the work of God.

Whether it's in our own lives, or whether it's in our life together as a church, or even on a bigger scale in a whole area, in a whole mission field, for example. At crucial times in God's plan, the

enemy is there.

And also, very often, at times when God's people have precisely been successful and victorious in being faithful to Him. That's what we see in Abraham's story too, isn't it?

[14:36] after the high point of His going out in faith in chapter 12, that's when the debacle occurs in Egypt. After the high point of the rescue of Lot in Sodom in chapter 14, and of the covenant in chapter 15, that's when He falls into disaster with Hagar, isn't it, in chapter 16.

After the great intercession for Sodom in chapter 18, well now, this happens. And we see that pattern so often, don't we? Just think of Simon Peter, the one who warns us about the devil in his own letters.

It was after his great confession of the Christ that Caesarea Philippi, wasn't it, when immediately he turns tempted to Jesus and Jesus has to say to Peter, get behind me, Satan. After the Last Supper and Peter's great protestations of love for Jesus, what does he do?

He goes out and denies him three times. That's so often so with us too, isn't it? We're actually very vulnerable after times of great spiritual high, after times when we have won some victory in our Christian life, maybe over some sin or some temptation, or after we've had some real encouragement perhaps in our witness, in our evangelism.

We're very vulnerable because precisely at those times we begin to trust and rely on our experiences and our feelings and our sense of achievement about what we've done, rather than standing on faith in Christ.

[16:10] And the devil knows that and that's why he comes. Think of Jesus himself after the great spiritual high of his baptism and the heavens opening and the voice from on high and the spirit descending on him as a dove.

It was exactly then, wasn't it, after that, that he was driven into the wilderness and tempted for 40 days by the devil. And that's why Peter says, be alert.

Don't despair, just get to know the tactics of an enemy. Expect such attacks and resist the devil, he says, and he will flee from you. Just think of our own situation here as a congregation at the moment, here in St.

George's Tron. I think we need to be very alert. We're in a very critical stage of our life as a fellowship, aren't we? Next few months are going to see, we trust the completion of our building work, we're going to move down to Buchanan Street, where we'll be beginning a very new phase, an exciting phase of our ministry.

Now, if you were the devil, it wouldn't now be a very, very wonderful time to execute maximum damage, to wreck things, before we even begin, before we even begin to get into our stride, in our new setup.

[17:22] If I was the devil, I would be seeking right now to sow all kinds of seeds of discontent among people. I'd be trying to get folk to fall out with one another.

I'd be trying to stir up jealousy and dissension among people. I'd be trying to get the members of the building development team, for example, to get very cross with one another, fed up with one another, and fall out with a minister.

All these sorts of things. things. And for good measure, I would be depressing some in the congregation with illness, maybe with job losses, perhaps some others with all kinds of other things. So that at every turn, there was distraction into every other issue imaginable, other than focus on the real task in hand, being a people united in Christ, united for the gospel, and making the most of every opportunity God gives us.

I'm not joking. That's exactly what our enemy will be up to at this very moment. And we need to be alert and not fall into his hands.

[18:33] Peter also says, doesn't he, as well as being alert, that we've got to be self-controlled. We need to be wise, that is, to his methods. And you see, the devil is a very, very shrewd psychologist.

He's got a PhD in human behavioural psychology. And he knows your mind and your heart and he knows exactly how to trip you up and to trip me up. He knows our personalities better than we know ourselves and he can exploit our personal weaknesses.

That seems to be what happens with Abraham. He seems to have this rather irrational fear and phobia about losing his wife, doesn't he? Despite God's specific promise to protect him, despite God saying he'll curse anybody who comes against him, he just made a habit of this deception with Sarah.

Verse 13 says it was what he did wherever he went. And that means that it shouldn't be too great a surprise that even after 30 years walking with God, here in chapter 20 he reverts right back to his old ways.

See, if you give the devil a foothold, he will exploit it. That's why Paul says in Ephesians 4.27, don't give the devil even a foothold. And friends, that's still the same for you and me.

[19 : 50] Old habits die hard, don't they? Our weaknesses, our personality flaws, they go very deep and even the grace of God will not in this life completely remove those tendencies within us.

It will be struggle with them right to the end. That's what the Bible tells us. That's the truth. And that's why the fruit of the Spirit, says Paul, is self-control.

Now, you know what that means for you personally and I do for me. Because the devil won't waste time tempting you with somebody else's temptations.

He'll tell the things just for you. He'll go for your own particular weaknesses. That for you might be alcohol, it might be pornography, it might be anger or jealousy or whatever it is.

That's where you'll be targeted by him. Somebody else's problems might be a depressive spirit, a fearful personality. You're the sort of person who tends to have a sense of guilt and of failure and of self-loathing.

[20 : 55] Well, that is where the devil will attack you. Right there, pushing upon you, a feeling of inferiority, of despair. Some people are exactly the opposite.

Their problem is over enthusiasm, emotionally and spiritually. And with you, the devil won't try and make you depressed, he'll try and make you elated. He'll come as an angel of light. He'll distract you and divert you with all kinds of false experiences, feelings of pride and superiority spiritually because of it.

And the lesson is, for every one of us, from Abraham right down to us, is know yourself. Don't hide from reality. Face up to the truth about your own weaknesses and determine to be self-controlled. people. There are three R's of temptation. First, respect old tendencies and temptations.

Even things that you think were conquered long ago, even conquered sin, friends, will rear its head in the right circumstances. That's why Paul says, in my flesh dwells no good thing.

[22 : 01] Respect old tendencies. Second, recognize that when you begin to step aside from obedience to God's will and purpose for your life, you become very vulnerable.

That's when these tendencies spring to life. That's when you discover how weak your conscience really is. Third, be ruthless. Ruthlessly guard against these things in your life, whatever they are. Pluck out the eye that sees them, says Jesus. Cut off the hand that touches them. Don't give the devil a foothold. Well, Abraham needed those three R's because in just two verses, the poor relapsing prophet is up to his neck in disaster, losing again Sarah, his wife.

And notice, by the way, all the way through the passage, that's the key word, isn't it? His wife appears seven times, verse 2, and again verse 3, and verse 7, and verse 11, and 12, and 14, and 18, all the way through, we're being told again and again, Abraham's wife is being lost, the very one he needs, on the cusp of his life's fulfillment, but almost total disaster, the loss of the one without whom none of it can happen.

Well, let's read on. We find that along with our relapsing prophet, the bulk of the chapter, actually, verses 3 to 16, are all about this man, Abimelech. And he turns out to be an ironic contrast to Abraham, doesn't he?

[23 : 34] He's a very righteous pagan. And this reminds us of something else that's very important. We're not to forget that there's an enemy at work against us in the world, but neither are we ever to forget that regardless of that, and absolutely undeterred by that, God is at work in the world.

And God is determined to bless through his promised seed, no matter what happens to his saints. Don't miss the opening words of verse 3 there, but God. Those are two decisive words that change everything, aren't they?

It's an extraordinary story, isn't it? And yet actually not so foreign to our experience as God's people. Because we're the ones, aren't we, who tend to limit God, to shut him up in a box, to bring him down to our horizons.

But the truth is, God is much, much bigger than we think. And that's what he's showing Abraham here. First of all, this righteous pagan surprises God's people.

In verse 11, Abraham thinks to himself, there's no fear of God in this place. But in fact, he was quite wrong, wasn't he? There is fear of God. And God himself recognizes the integrity in Abimelech's

heart.

[24 : 45] Verse 6, he's a man of high morals. He wouldn't have dreamed of committing adultery. So in that respect, he protests his innocence. He's a good man. He's like Cornelius in Acts 10, the Roman who feared God and wanted to do right.

He's a man who's living true to his humanity in the light of God's general revelation. Paul tells us in Acts 17 that God made all people that they should seek God and feel their way toward him and find him.

And that's Abimelech. He doesn't know the Lord personally like Abraham does, not yet anyway, but he fears God and he's distressed by the fact that he's taken out of the man's wife. Even though, as we're told, he hasn't yet touched her in any intimate way.

And that was because, God says, I've protected you to prevent that. I kept you from sinning against me, says God, in a more terrible way. Possibly by inflicting some kind of disease on Abimelech.

Verse 17 tells us that Abraham's prayer heals him, as well as his wife and servants. May have been some kind of venereal infection or something that would stop fertility and also prevent normal relations, we don't know.

[25 : 54] But what a surprise to Abraham. Not all pagans are like the men of Sodom. Some of them are very, very fine people. And moreover, God is involving himself in their lives to restrain their sin and to bring them blessing.

Notice the very genuine response of this man to God in verses 3 to 7. He confronts Abraham, sorry, God confronts Abimelech. And notice Abimelech receives the same gospel warning as Lot did and the men of Sodom did.

Verse 3, Behold, you're a dead man. You're already ill, but you're going to die because of your sin. That's what the Sodom people were told, wasn't it?

But notice how differently he received the message. Despite his very reasonable protestation of ignorance, God tells him he's in real danger because he's taken another man's wife, even though he hasn't consummated it.

Notice, by the way, how seriously God takes adultery, verse 6. It's a sin, he says, against me. We shouldn't forget that. But Abimelech takes God seriously.

[27 : 06] Unlike the men of Sodom, they thought it was just a joke when God warned them. Even Lot lingered, didn't he? But verse 8 tells us that when first thing in the morning Lot had to be woken up by the angels, Abimelech is already up and telling his whole household the gospel.

And they all fear God. And then what we read in verses 9 to 16 shows us a real response of repentance and obedient faith, doesn't it?

In spite of all the appalling failure of God's church and his prophet Abraham, Abimelech, well, he responds in faith. He confronts Abraham with his sin.

He listens to Abraham's pathetic excuses, but the crucial thing is, don't miss this, he doesn't let that put him off. He responds to God's command. And verses 14 to 16 show that that response is genuine, don't they?

He gives Sarah back, he puts right what he's done, and he gives lavishly to Abraham. He gives him land and he gives him hard cash, a thousand shekels.

[28 : 12] That's a huge, huge sum. That's ten times more than the amount that Moses specifies in the law to be paid to a wronged woman. Deuteronomy 22 verse 19. Reminds us of Zacchaeus, doesn't it, in Luke 19.

He meets Jesus and he's changed and he gives back everything he's stolen four times. That's a real response to God, isn't it? You know somebody's really been touched in the heart when they've been touched in their wallet, don't you?

It's a very sure sign of spiritual reality. Not just words, but action. I wonder what Abraham thought about that. What do you think?

I reckon he was pretty surprised, just like the apostles were surprised in the book of Acts. They could hardly believe it, could they? They were amazed when they saw that God had granted even the Gentiles repentance and life, even the Gentiles receiving the Spirit, just like us.

I guess just like we're so often surprised when we see some of the most unlikely people truly converted, totally changed. So this righteous pagan surprises God's people, and it's true also that he shames God's people too, doesn't he?

[29 : 29] Abraham's guilty of total misjudgment of this man and his people, and he's shown up very badly, isn't he? In fact, Abimelech is more righteous than Abraham. He's the one who's shown to be caring and concerned for all his people, interceding to God for others.

Verse 4, Lord, he says, will you kill an innocent people? It's just like Abraham was back in chapter 18, isn't it? Interceding for others. Abraham here, though, is only thinking of himself.

So Abraham's shamed by his misjudgment of the world and also, also forgetting his own calling to be a source of blessing to people just like Abimelech.

It's shocking, isn't it? Abraham called to be a blessing and being quite the reverse. And yet, often that's what we're like in the church, isn't it?

Some Christians are so inward-looking, so horrified by the pagan world about, that we think it's all like Sodom. We think it's all utterly lost. We have no expectations anymore, really, of the gospel.

[30 : 36] We want to hunker down into holy huddles and bewail the evil going on outside, assuming that it's just utter godlessness all around. And it's easy for disillusion to lead us into despair, isn't it?

We get responses like Abraham experienced with Sodom and we begin to give up. But no! William still said this, it's not a false assumption, of course, that the world is very pagan.

And yet, even in the most pagan places, God is sovereign. In the most unexpected places, God has those that he's preparing to call to himself, like Abimelech, like Cornelius and many others, like the many that Paul was told by God himself, he already had in that city of Corinth.

Corinth was just a New Testament version of Old Testament Sodom, a dreadful place. And so, Paul was to go on proclaiming the Gospel, so that God would draw out those that he had in that city.

And that's very important, go on proclaiming the Gospel. Because although the world does often surprise the church and shame the church by its better behavior at times, by its higher integrity, we have to recognize that.

[31 : 56] Nevertheless, listen to this, the righteous pagan still needs the church. It's not enough, is it, that Abimelech is a good man, and honest and upright.

God recognizes that, but, all the same, he's sinned against God. Even if God has mercifully kept him from worse, nevertheless, he has committed personal sin against God.

And even a good man like Abimelech needs to be taught about sin and the dark consequences of it. And he is in verse 9. He's realized what great sin has been brought on him in his kingdom. And he needs God's command to repent.

That's what God gives in verse 7. But even that isn't something he can do by himself, is it? He needs something more. He needs God's chosen intercessor. Return the man's wife, God says. That's the mark of real repentance, obedience to God's call. But also, receive what only this man can give to you. Life through his prayers.

[33 : 08] See, what God is saying is that there's only one way of salvation from sin against God, even for fine men, for righteous men like Abimelech. That's very humbling, isn't it?

See, verses 9 to 13 here are there to remind us of that. He is a king. And he's showing his shock, isn't he, really, for Abraham's behavior. What have you done? Why did you do that?

And yet, God says to this man, who's been wronged, God says, you must bow the knee to this man, Abraham, who is my ambassador nonetheless, for the one way of salvation that I've appointed.

I reckon that must have been pretty hard for Abimelech, don't you? Very humbling. Reminds you of Naaman, doesn't it? Remember? He had to swallow his pride and go and wash in the dirty water of the river Jordan.

He who was a prince and a captain of Syria with far greater rivers. Because God says, as far as salvation is concerned, I only do things one way, my way.

[34 : 16] But good for Abimelech. He takes the gospel seriously. He takes God's commands seriously. And he obeys God. Not, alas, helped by Abraham's conduct, but rather despite it.

Not because of Abraham's witness, but because of God's command of truth. And you know, that might be a message for somebody here today.

It might be that you feel that the church is full of people who are far inferior to you, far less righteous than you. And it may be that that's the thing that's stopping you to become a Christian.

Well, that's not the issue, is it? It's God's command that's the issue. And you need the church. So the Supreme was right. Outside the church is no salvation.

Because for all our faults, and we can't deny that, and we don't deny it, and we should be ashamed of ourselves a great deal of the time, for all of that, God has chosen his church to be the ambassadors for Christ and his gospel to this world.

[35 : 16] Now, that is no excuse for our sin and failure in the church. None at all. We need to repent for our failures. Our failure to adorn the gospel, as Paul tells us we should.

We should be ashamed of ourselves. But it's no excuse for you either, if that's what's stopping you to become a Christian. You may plead your worthiness to God, as Abimelech did.

You may say, well, I'm far better than that crowd of Christians. Maybe so. Very possibly it is so. But God still says, you need to be saved by submission to my command.

Through the prayers of my intercessor, my prophet and priest who alone can save you. And that's what happened to Abimelech. Look at verses 17 and 18.

We witness here, don't we, a redeeming prayer. Abimelech is restored with all his household by the prayers of God's chosen prophet, his ambassador who represents God's blessing to all the nations of the world through the promised seed who is to come.

[36 : 21] And who did at last come in the fullness of time. In the person of our Lord Jesus Christ, the great prophet, the great priest, the one who promises to pray for the eternal salvation of all who come to him and seek his intercession without fail.

Abraham, you see, is an ambassador, isn't he, of the coming Savior. And the New Testament tells us that we are the ambassadors of the Christ who has come. God's making his appeal now through us, despite all our faults, as we proclaim the same gospel.

Be reconciled to God, his one way. And so Abimelech is restored by the redeeming prayer of God's prophet and priest. But so also, do you notice, Abraham is restored.

He's restored, isn't he, to his true calling from his relapse into disaster. Once again, he becomes the conduit of blessing to the nations. Once again, he becomes God's true friend, a priest and a prophet.

He gets his wife back and also he gets a powerful reminder, doesn't he, of God's promise, of a purpose that isn't yet forgotten. Great irony, isn't there, in his prayer.

[37 : 34] Look at verse 17. God healed all the women so that they bore children. for the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech. Gentle reminder to Abraham that God closes wombs and he opens them.

He opens them effortlessly. He opens them in his time. Even though Sarah and Abraham haven't yet seen everything that they longed for.

That was surely a gentle rebuke, wasn't it, for Abraham and Sarah? And yet also a wonderful encouragement. God hasn't forgotten. He will keep his promise. Well, as we come to the end of this chapter then, let me just flag up for you three things to remember from this story.

First, the devil is at work, always, to damage God's plan to exploit our weaknesses and sin. And we must be alert, we must be self-controlled. But God, don't forget that.

Don't despair. Remember, God also is at work and he's not hindered by Satan. He was working his purpose out for Abraham, bringing to pass everything he'd promised about the land and his seed and blessing the nations through Abraham.

[38 : 50] God is always, always working his purpose out. Sometimes it's true to us, it seems, that he does move in mysterious ways. And sometimes, friends, those ways are more mysterious to us than they need be because of our sin and our relapses.

Because our lives are far more complex than they ought to be. Sometimes, too, the apparent difficulties and seeming hardships we face are actually because God is blessing us for our own protection, like Abimelech being afflicted so he didn't sin worse, to prevent us from sinning worse against God.

But God is working his purposes out as year succeeds to year. Sometimes maybe he'll surprise us and shame us as he shows us everything that he is doing in the world for his glory.

God is bigger than we think. Don't forget it. Second, the world often shames us as God's people and we often let God down so badly, don't we?

Like Abraham, we do become cynical, perhaps. We despise the world. We write it off. We write people off. We relapse ourselves into our old ways and into old sins. We even blame God for it.

[40 : 01] That's what Abraham was doing in verse 13, isn't it? Just like Adam. It's God's fault. He caused me to come and wander all this place. He's got me into all this trouble. He can't blame me if

I do these things.

You recognize that symptom? I do. But listen, this chapter reminds us, doesn't it, that God doesn't give up even on his relapsing prophets, does he?

He persists with his friends, even when they let him down. He's the God of grace. He stands by his friends. Notice how he restores Abraham.

It's as he returns to his true calling, isn't it? To being God's prophet and priest, to having his heart open to the pagan world, to having his prayers filled with priestly intercession for the world.

And that's always the way God brings us back too, isn't it? As individuals or as church fellowships. As we turn back to our true calling as ambassadors for Christ, with the salvation of the peoples of the world, as the real burden of our hearts.

[41 : 09] That's how God restores us to real fellowship with himself, isn't it? To sharing his heart of mercy and of love. The Lord doesn't give up on his relapsing prophets.

He loves to restore and to renew. And he does it as we're turned back to our true calling with our hearts full of prayer for others. Third, God even uses our failures to magnify our grasp of his wonderful grace and mercy to us in Christ.

You see, when the next chapter shows us that Isaac is at last born, it's absolutely clear, isn't it? It's abundantly clear that it is in no way whatsoever due to the efforts of man.

Not only is it beyond doubt in a physical sense, it's impossible because they're so old. But it's more than that. It's morally impossible, isn't it? We just can't possibly say that Abraham somehow deserved from God these things because of his unrelapsing faith.

In this chapter alone, he should have forfeited everything. But God. And sometimes, friends, God has to show us things about ourselves, things that we would much rather hide away, much rather pretend weren't true, just so that we can begin to grasp the sheer wonder of his grace to us.

[42 : 38] Sometimes it's only when through our failures we begin to really understand what sin is and how ugly and awful and terrible it is in God's eyes. Sometimes it's only then that the brightness of God's grace and the depth of his love for us can come right home to our hearts.

Isn't that true? Because only then is there no danger that we could ever think, well, I did it myself. I deserved it. I helped God with this. It's only the Abraham who knew deeply in his heart and painfully, truly, the realities of chapter 12 and chapter 16 and this chapter, chapter 20.

It's only that Abraham who can read Romans 4 without danger of pride, isn't it? No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in faith as he gave glory to God.

Now, because of these things, he can hear that. He can hear God's verdict on him. He can hear God's justification on him and he can say with a full heart, hallelujah.

It's true, but it was only, only by the grace and mercy of God that it's true. Only by the amazing grace of God, my Savior. So, friends, when we ourselves are shamed and surprised by the world, as alas, too often we are in our frequent relapses from our calling in our many failures and mistakes.

[44 : 13] Remember God's amazing grace. And let that bring us both to repentance, but also to rejoicing in the grace, the amazing grace of our wonderful God and Savior.

And remember, even in our folly, God is at work. I will build my church, says our Lord Jesus Christ. And if the gates of hell can't stop him, then be sure of this, neither can your sin, or your relapses, or your muck-ups, or the mess that we so often make in our lives.

None of these things can stop him. Relapsing prophets? Yes, that's every one of us, isn't it? Alas. But we're his relapsing prophets.

And that's what makes all the difference. Let's pray. Gracious God, our Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are to us such a kind and good and gracious Savior and Shepherd and Friend.

[45 : 25] How many times you've sought us and drawn us back. your faithfulness, your grace, your mercy overwhelms us. Forgive us, Lord.

Strengthen us that we would relapse in the future less than in the past. But teach us, even through these difficult things, the wonders of your grace.

that we also might be people who radiate that grace and mercy to others for the glory of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.