

27. The Persecuted Seed who brings Division (2007)

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 10 August 2008

Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] Well, if you would turn with me to Genesis chapter 21 and the passage we read there, page 15 in our visitor's Bibles, that would be a great help. And our title this morning is, The Persecuted Seed Who Brings Division.

Now, in reading the story of Abraham, we've already noted that we must take the New Testament very seriously. That is, the words of Jesus and his apostles who remind us that Abraham's faith truly is our faith.

He saw my day and was glad, said Jesus of Abraham. And he saw very clearly also the future hope for all of God's people in the new heavens and the new earth. Some people find that very hard to believe of Abraham.

But let me tell you, the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews leaves us in no doubt whatsoever about that. Yes, he says, in earthly terms, Abraham was called to go with God.

And he says, and he went not knowing where he was going. But in an ultimate sense, he was absolutely clear. He was looking, says the apostle, not to an earthly city, an earthly homeland, but a heavenly one.

[1 : 18] Looking forward, he says, to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God. That was Abraham's true hope. For himself and also for the offspring that God promised him.

A multitude that outnumbered even the stars in the sky. And the wonder of the gospel, according to the New Testament, is that we also, though I guess we're probably nearly all Gentiles here this morning, that we also are Abraham's heirs, according to the promise.

And therefore, we have the same promise and the same hope. Paul says to the Galatians, we're all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring's heirs, according to promise.

That's the gospel of Jesus Christ, the New Testament gospel. We're Abraham's heirs. And so when we remember that, it shouldn't surprise us that, when we read about Abraham's life and God's dealings with him, it shouldn't surprise us that we recognize patterns that we find, in fact, are very familiar to us, in our own experience, in God's dealing with our lives.

That's because we're people of the same God. We're people of the same Redeemer. And therefore, the patterns of our Redeemer, and the pattern of his redeeming ways, they touch the lives and the experiences of all his true people, whether then or now.

[2 : 48] Can't be otherwise, can it, when you think about it, just for a moment, because to be a believer, to be one of God's people, is to be united to him by faith. And that means, doesn't it, that the lives of all true believers will be shaped by the pattern of the life of the true Redeemer, the one that we're united to, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah himself.

Now that's something that's very, very basic to Paul's teaching about the Christian life, about what it means to belong to Jesus Christ. We're united to him, he says, in the pattern of his death and resurrection.

Remember he says to the Philippians, it's been granted to us, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake, and to be engaged in conflict for his sake.

That's the privilege of God's gospel grace. And that pattern is one that permeates the lives of all the true people of the Redeemer.

Whether, like us, they live many years following the coming of Christ, or, like Abraham, they lived many years before, longing for and looking forward to that coming.

[4 : 02] And it's because of that, of course, that the Old Testament is a truly Christian book. It's because of that, that the Old Testament has so much to teach us today. And it's why we shouldn't be surprised in the least to see the same unchanging patterns of God's redeeming ways on every page of the Old Testament.

And these chapters about the birth of Isaac and its aftermath are full of those kind of patterns. Last time in verses 1 to 7 we saw, when we read about the promised seed's birth, we saw the pattern of the promised seed who brings delight by his birth.

And today we're seeing a very different pattern, another distinctive pattern about the persecuted seed, who brings division by his life. Well, let's look then at verses 8 to 21.

I wanted you to note its parallel structure. It's very similarly structured, these two halves. And the parallelism shows us the central focus is on God's decisive word.

It's God's word of response to confirm his promise of the future to both of Abraham's sons. That's what's the focus of this passage. In verses 8 to 14, the threat is to Isaac's destiny.

[5 : 15] And God's word gives reassurance about his spiritual future. No question. In verses 15 to 21, the threat is to Ishmael's life. And again, God gives a word of great reassurance about his earthly future.

And noting the structure just helps us, I think, to see what the writer wants us to focus on. God's words and God's response to the situation. Whether it's the tension that arises through the birth of Isaac, the promised seed, or the problem that arises because of Ishmael being sent out.

Well, I want to focus on this passage then under three headings. Here they are. First of all, the conflict of the covenant seed. Then, the commitment to the covenant plan.

And thirdly, not to forget the compassion of the covenant God. The conflict then for the covenant seed.

The first thing you see this story reminds us is this. There have been enemies of the covenant gospel of God right from the beginning. And so it will be right to the end of history.

[6 : 24] For all the true offspring of God's promise in Christ. That's the message. Look at verse 8. The child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned.

But, Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had bore to Abraham, mocking or laughing in mockery.

Now, on one level, what we've got here is just another story of human tragedy, isn't it? Family breakdown. The entail of sin and muck-ups in this family's history. It's just coming home to roost, isn't it?

We've read about it. It's tragic. We've got the jealousy among parents and siblings from different parentage. It's very common. And no doubt, Sarah's attitude, well, seems to us rather unfair and wrong.

Seems very jealous and vindictive. Especially when we know, in a sense, that it's all her own fault, isn't it? It was her idea back in chapter 16, wasn't it? For Abraham to go to his slave woman and to have a surrogate child.

[7 : 29] Well, I guess it's the kind of thing that we're not so unfamiliar with today. And sometimes, alas, it is just realism, isn't it?

That splits, that breakups in some family relationships. They just seem to be unavoidable. And that's even so among Christian believers, isn't it? We need to admit that.

Because we're all fallen people, aren't we? We're all sinful. We all make muck-ups and mistakes.

And it's very painful at times, isn't it? But, of course, what's going on here has a much, much deeper significance even than that.

Much deeper. See, when verse 2 of the chapter tells us that... Sorry, verse 9 tells us that... Ishmael was laughing in mockery.

It's telling us that this is something far more than just normal sibling rivalry, isn't it? It's not just that this is a rather jealous older child getting annoyed that the new one, the younger one, is getting all the attention.

[8 : 35] That often happens. In fact, it always happens, doesn't it? No, this is something much, much more sinister than that. And that's why Sarah is so disturbed. We don't know exactly what she saw. But what we do know is that it was a manifestation of deep disdain, of rejection, even of hatred of Isaac by his half-brother.

We know that because in Galatians 4, verse 29, Paul calls it persecution. He calls it spiritual persecution from the one who was born merely according to the flesh, of the one who was born according to the spirit.

Or to put it in terms of the book of Genesis, it's evidence of the outright hostility, the enmity of the seed of the serpent for the promised seed of the woman.

Ishmael's mocking laughter was simply the manifestation of a pattern that had marked the story of redemption right from the very beginning. And as I said, we'll mark it right to the very end.

Remember back in Genesis 3, verse 15? Gets its first airing, doesn't it, from God himself. What did he say? I will put enmity between you, that's the serpent, and the woman, Eve, and between your offspring and her offspring.

[9 : 56] And the very next chapter of Genesis, chapter 4, plainly shows us that played out in real life with the hatred of Cain, the man of the world, for Abel. The man of faith, the man of promise.

And he murdered him. And that's the way it's been ever since. That's what Paul says to the Galatian church. All of those born according to the spirit of God will be opposed and persecuted by those who are born of the flesh.

I said it's a pattern that runs right through history. Later on you might like to read Revelation, chapter 12, the very last book of the Bible. And it pictures it graphically.

It's a dramatic vision. You know the story of a woman who's giving birth to a man-child. And the dragon, the serpent, is standing over her trying to overcome him at his birth. It's the birth of Jesus Christ, the Messiah himself.

And of course he fails and cannot overcome him. But when he can't, he goes off to make war forever on the offspring of the woman. Who are the offspring? All of those who follow the Lord Jesus Christ, says Revelation, chapter 12.

[11 : 07] And that is the pattern of redemption's history. That's the pattern that's written on every page of the Bible. It's the story of the persecuted seed who brings division by his life.

Always, you see, there are two kinds of laughter, aren't there? Two kinds of laughter that surround every forward march of the plan of God's salvation. There's a laughter of joy and delight.

We saw that last week, verses 6 and 7. The people of faith rejoice with great joy at the promised birth, the promised fruition of God's covenant working.

But at the same time, there's verses 8 and 9. There's jealousy and hatred, that kind of laughter. Think about it in the birth of the Lord Jesus himself, the climax of God's plan.

Read the gospel accounts. What do you find? On the one hand, you find the laughter of joy and delight, don't you? The shepherds, the wise men, Simeon and Anna. Those who welcome the promised one coming at last.

[12 : 11] But on the other hand, there's quite the opposite, isn't there? There's the jealousy, the hatred, the mocking laughter. There's Herod. There's a religious leader. There's all of those who are opposed in heart to the coming Redeemer.

And it's always the same. It's just the beginning of a redeeming pattern that we're seeing here. A pattern of conflict for the covenant seed of God in this world.

And you see, friends, this is in the Bible because you and I need to recognize that pattern. And we need to take it seriously. We need to know that wherever and whenever the covenant seed is being born, wherever the life of Jesus the Messiah is being established and rooted and secured for the future, for his purposes of grace, wherever that is happening in the world and in our lives, there will be conflict and there will be division.

There'll be joy, yes there will, but there'll also be jealousy. There'll be rejoicing, but there'll also be rejection and revulsion. It's an abiding pattern of God's redeeming plan.

That's what you see all through the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ. Read Matthew chapter 9 for an example. Later on, it's a chapter full of Jesus' marvelous words and works. And some at the end of the chapter we read are full of joy.

[13 : 31] Nothing has ever been seen like this in Israel, they say. They're rejoicing. But the very next verse shows others are equally full of scorn. He casts out demons by the prince of demons, they said.

And you'll see that, friends, wherever the true gospel of the real Jesus is preached today. You'll see it just the same. Jesus warned us of that explicitly many times, didn't he?

Just take the parable of the sower, for example. The seed, wherever it is sown, will bring conflict and division. So did Paul. Do you remember he talked often about how real gospel ministry is revelatory.

It reveals God to men and women. Yes, it does. But also, it reveals the hearts of men and women to God, doesn't it? Remember what he says in 2 Corinthians chapter 2?

To the one, the gospel of Christ is an aroma of life, a sweet savor. But to the other, well, it's the stench of death itself.

[14:36] Wherever there is true spiritual birth taking place, there is and always will be conflict and division. And that's because the gospel of the promised seed, the gospel of God, is a two-edged sword.

Divides between faith and unbelief. And so it was in Isaac's birth, with all that it signified for God's promise of salvation, Ishmael just is shown up by his birth.

He's shown up to be what he really is at heart, an enemy of the true faith. Even though, remember, and this is very important, even though Ishmael was circumcised, even though Ishmael was outwardly associated with a household of faith, with God's professing church, he was an enemy. And that goes to show, doesn't it, that heresy and unbelief in the visible church is hardly a new phenomenon. It's been there right from the beginning. It's been a pattern from the start. And therefore, conflict and division will always result, always, when God's saving covenant gospel comes into contact with sinful humanity.

Even within the visible household of faith, the professing church. There will be conflict between the natural and the spiritual.

[16:03] There will be persecution from those who in their hearts, however much outwardly they may profess to serve Christ and his kingdom, inwardly, they are truly mockers of the gospel of grace.

The unique and exclusive way of God's salvation. Salvation that is by sheer grace, by sheer electing grace and mercy of God alone.

And salvation, which is by the proclamation of the unique gospel of the lordship of Jesus Christ, alone and no other way. That gospel and that message will always bring division.

It's always been so. I was telling you last week about how I'd been reading on holiday Jonathan Aitken's excellent biography of John Newton. And it was extraordinary to read of the outright hostility and opposition back in those days, in the 18th century, of established Anglican hierarchies to John Newton and other evangelicals of his day.

John Newton couldn't get a bishop anywhere in the whole of the Church of England who was willing to ordain him. Why? Because he was tarnished with the stigma of what they called enthusiasm or Methodism.

[17:13] That was the ecclesiastical swear word of those days. Today it's fundamentalist or evangelical. And in the end, you know, it was only through the patronage of Lord Dartmouth, a peer of the realm, who was able to play on the fawning bishop's willingness to ingratiate themselves with the lord of the realm.

It was only through that that John Newton never got a parish. Listen to what the historian, Lord Trevelyan, said. Lord Dartmouth, he said, made interest in high episcopal quarters to obtain the ordination of John Newton who, listen, was too much in earnest about religion to be readily entrusted with a commission to teach it.

Except as a matter of favor to a great man. Pathetic, isn't it? But that is the conflict. That is the abiding pattern for the covenant seed, for those who are bound to one who really will always be a rejected Messiah.

And Paul says in 2 Timothy 2, verse 2 Timothy 3, verse 12, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, mocked, laughed at, scorned in the world and even worse, even from among those in the professing household of faith, the visible church.

And the Bible wants us just to be realistic about that, to be understanding of that in our own Christian walk, not to be naive about it. Otherwise we'll be deeply discouraged, won't we?

[18:52] But you know, there's a deeper conflict too for the covenant seed. Paul makes that clear as well. There's a conflict within, isn't there? He tells the Galatians in the very next chapter that it's not just persecution from those of the flesh outside that are going to be a struggle for us.

He says as long as we remain in these earthly bodies, there's going to be the same conflict with the flesh and the spirit deep within our own lives. And isn't that true? For the desires of the flesh, he says, are against the spirit and the desires of the spirit against the flesh.

We've got an enemy within us too. Peter says the same, doesn't he? In 1 Peter 2 he calls it the passions of the flesh, the sinful desires, he says, that wage war against our souls.

The Bible wants us to be realistic about that as well. wherever the new birth of the spirit is taking place in somebody's life to make them a child of God, to make them a true seed of Abraham in Christ.

Wherever that happens, it's going to be a birth into conflict. That gospel tells us that we're born for battle. We're born as the seed of true faith. That means God puts enmity in our hearts that wasn't there before.

[20 : 08] Enmity against the world and the flesh and the devil. To be born of God means God puts you into conflict. That's what becoming a Christian means and that's what staying a faithful Christian means right to the end.

It's the beginning of a lifelong battle against unbelief and disobedience. The beginning of a lifelong battle for obedience and faith and faithfulness to the end. That's what explains your Christian life, you know.

That's what explains the things that you've struggled with and prayed to God about this very week. very important for you to realize that. Struggle and conflict that you've experienced this week in your Christian life it's not evidence of failure.

It's not a mark of apostasy of falling away from Christ. It's quite the opposite. It's evidence of the life of the Spirit of God in your heart and in your life.

Evidence that you're a true seed of God born by the Spirit. That ought to be a great comfort for us often in our struggles. We should recognize that our struggles are the fight of faith rather than the ease and the acquiescence of apostasy.

[21 : 25] It's a comfort but it's also a challenge too isn't it? Because it means that there are times aren't there when we have to make painful hard decisions in that battle.

Decisions to send away forever things that are a mortal danger to our future. Things which are a real and present threat to our spiritual lives.

It might be activities that hinder us behaviors habits pastimes. It might be a relationship that hinders God's purpose for our future.

A relationship that mocks the purpose of God in Christ for your life. maybe any number of these things but nothing can be allowed to hinder the purpose for which God has called you heavenward in Jesus Christ.

And that's very hard to come to terms with sometimes. But it's essential. It's critical. And that brings us to the second point the commitment to God's covenant plan.

[22 : 32] You see the very heart of this story makes it absolutely plain that God will not allow enemies of the gospel to hinder and to endanger the purpose of his grace and salvation for the world.

He is absolutely committed to the purpose of his covenant grace in the world and in the lives of his people. And so however harsh it seemed and however much maybe Sarah's motives herself were rather mixed and tainted God says to Abraham you'll see in verse 12 you're wrong to be angry about this Abraham.

You're naive if you think that you can just all live happily ever after. The way of the flesh and the way of the spirit they can't be friends they're intractable enemies Abraham. Listen to your wife this time.

She's right in the action that's needed. If my covenant purpose for blessing in this world is to finish and come to its fruition then Ishmael well Ishmael's got to go.

Actually it may be that Sarah's attitude wasn't as harsh as it looks to us. The scholars tell us that in fact Ishmael even though he was a son of a slave woman would have had a legitimate claim on Abraham's heritage as a co-heir but that that right could be traded for full freedom so Sarah's concern certainly is that Ishmael should not be along with Isaac as the sole heir of God's promise but nevertheless there was the bonus that he would gain full status as a free man.

[24 : 08] But in any case Sarah's attitude isn't the focus. Verse 12 is very clear isn't it? God himself affirms his total commitment total commitment to the one chosen seed and the one chosen way total commitment to the uniqueness of his covenant plan of salvation.

Do as she tells you for through Isaac through Isaac alone shall your offspring be named. Through Isaac alone will all my promises to you come to pass Abraham.

You see all of this illustrates another great pattern doesn't it? Great pattern that's always there in God's workings. Sometimes radical action is needed in the work of God.

when his work exposes unbelief and opposition that must be dealt with. That must be sorted out otherwise the saving work of his grace will be hindered and spoiled and destroyed.

Sometimes division and parting of the ways is the only way in the work of God. That's been a hallmark hasn't it of the history of the gospel? Let me put it another way.

[25 : 20] Although certainly the visible unity of the professing church of Jesus Christ is important and is to be cherished it's not to be cherished at all costs according to God.

The truth of the gospel and fidelity to God's one unique revealed way of salvation for all people is more important to God than the outward unity of those who bear the marks of his professing family as part of his visible church.

And where there's refusal of the true promised seed where there's rejection of his sovereignly declared authority well then division is sometimes inevitable it's necessary.

That's why in New Testament times the fledgling Christian church had to separate from the unbelieving mass of Jews who refused Jesus who refused the promised seed the Messiah.

That's why we have the astonishing accusation in the New Testament from the apostles of Christ that they liken unbelieving Jews to Ishmael to the offspring of Hagar.

[26 : 30] They're like Ishmael they're rejecting God's promised one they're refusing to submit to him as their only hope for salvation. It's the message of Galatians. In the same way Paul insists doesn't he that people who are true believers separate from those who want to keep the things of the flesh and the things of the spirit together by adding works of the law and circumcision and things to the faith in Jesus Christ alone.

No he shouts to the Galatians you can't do that. To add to the gospel of God is simply to take away from the one unique gospel of sovereign grace through his seed. It's to subtract so much from the gospel that you destroy it.

So you must resist that. You must resist it totally. You must have nothing to do with those who teach such aberrations. Paul even says let them be cursed.

Very painful isn't it when Christians have to resist or even break fellowship with other Christians within the outward family of the church. Whether it's in Galatians in 60 AD or whether it's in 2008 AD but sometimes the Bible teaches us it's essential because God is utterly committed to the future of his unique covenant plan of salvation for all the nations.

A unique plan through the promised seed Jesus Christ alone and through the proclamation of that gospel of Jesus Christ alone. And if God is committed to that so also must his people be utterly committed to the unique gospel of his sovereign grace.

[28 : 15] And that's so whatever painful divisions that it might entail. And it meant many many painful divisions from Genesis 21 all the way through Scripture.

Think about how Paul for example had to separate himself from Peter because Peter was undermining the gospel. Thankfully of course Peter learned his sense and learned lessons. Think of the painful command that Paul had to give to the church in Corinth to expel a brother from the church.

Why? Because his conduct was destroying the very truth of the gospel and that cannot happen.

Think of the pain it must have been for Martin Luther the many martyrs of the Reformation who could do no other but stand on the truth of God against the weight of a professing church.

Look at what many of our friends in the Anglican communion are having to do today to maintain the truth of Christ and his gospel to the derision and the criticism of a worldly church that just calls them divisive and schismatic and bullshit and against unity.

You see the gospel brings conflict and division and it goes on dividing between the flesh and the spirit and it always will. And believers and churches that are committed as God is to his gospel, to his one covenant plan of grace for all peoples, they will always have to face painful divisions just like that.

[29 : 45] And that's why friends it's impossible to build a true gospel church and it's impossible to keep a church to that true gospel and focus on the gospel and focus on the priorities of the gospel.

It's impossible to do that without there always being some division. Because the flesh wars against the spirit, always.

And because some who profess faith at heart are simply really of the flesh and they will oppose the things of the spirit the more the things of the spirit show themselves. You speak to any pastor who's gone to a church that has never had the gospel before and starts to preach the true gospel of Christ and ask him what happens.

But you know alas, because all of us inhabit bodies of flesh as Paul reminds us, all of us are constantly tending, aren't we, to drift back to our nature, to drift away from the kingdom focus in our lives, to drift away from the spirit and back to the flesh.

And therefore there's always a challenge because the gospel is always making demands of us in a gospel church. And there'll always be those of us and there'll always be a part of every one of us that doesn't want our lives challenged with the constant commitment that the gospel demands of us.

[31 : 08] We don't like the call of God on our time, on our thinking, on our wallets. And therefore a gulf sometimes opens up between those and others in a church who are captivated by the gospel's advance.

And in the end perhaps they drift away or perhaps they find something they get angry about and they march away in a huff of self righteousness. And that's something that every gospel church has to come to terms with and be very realistic about as Christians.

Otherwise we'll get terribly, terribly discouraged. Especially true of folk in ministry. Especially true I think for a church like us in a time of change and challenge, facing many challenges to keep the gospel as the real priority in our midst.

It's true of course in a church of our side that for example if you take our building project, there are many different views about aspects of our building project, certain reservations and so on.

But of course after great deliberations it was an overwhelmingly united decision of our eldership to press ahead and the vast majority of those who had uncertainties in all kinds of ways said well we're going to get behind this.

[32 : 23] And they have and that shows that despite everything they want to serve the gospel above all. They want the gospel to be at the heart and the priority. But we also need to remember that Jesus does make plain to us that wherever his church is cherishing the gospel, wherever his church is rising to the mission of the gospel there will always inevitably be conflict.

there will be some painful separations. That's what he tells us in the parable of the sower isn't it? When hardship or persecution arises on account of the word some will fall away says Jesus. When the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word some will prove unfruitful says Jesus. Jesus teaches his followers that so that we'll know that radical commitment to his covenant plan will not be painless.

Not for your Christian life, not for our corporate life as a fellowship. There will be painful divisions at times. There will be losses, there will be discouragements.

Wherever a church and wherever a Christian is seeking to be radically true to the gospel and to the mission of the kingdom. I think this episode in Genesis 21 must have been surely one of the most painful ones ever in Abraham's household of faith.

[33 : 45] Don't you think? But God said it was essential to the fulfillment of his wonderful plan for the whole family's future. Indeed, for the future of the whole church of Jesus Christ through all the ages.

And it's often true that it is the painful separations, partings, divisions in the work of the gospel that are the birth pangs of some of the greatest fruitfulness for the work of Christ and his kingdom.

And as Christians today we've got to learn that that's part of the cost of radical commitment to the covenant plan of God. But although we must learn that, we must also learn this.

Don't fall asleep here. We must never be glad about these painful things. We must never be harsh or careless, far less superior or smug or self-righteous.

Unless we're tempted ever to be like that, do not miss verses 15 to 21 of our passage. And that's our final point. They're put here to ensure that we cannot miss the compassion of our covenant God.

[34 : 58] Do you see, God, our God cares even for the enemies of his covenant despite their opposition to his way of salvation? Isn't the mercy and the compassion of God in this passage extraordinary?

If you look back to verse 13 you'll see that he assured Abraham that because Ishmael was still his son, he would still bless him with an earthly future. And in verse 18 we see that God meant what he said.

He hears Ishmael's cry of distress. Remember Ishmael's name means God hears. And he reassures Hagar of the promise that he'd made to her before all those years ago in chapter 16 about Ishmael's future.

He will become a great nation. He's not going to die out here in the desert. Ishmael, you see, had been rejected because he refused to submit to God's revealed truth about salvation.

He wouldn't submit to God's seed. He wouldn't accept Isaac as the only source of blessing and hope. for everybody, including him. He wouldn't bow the knee, as it were, to God's anointed one, to God's way.

[36 : 08] No, he thought he was worthy of himself and he mocked him. And yet, although he rejected God's appointed way, God did not cast him off utterly, did he?

He was not beyond God's goodness and mercy. God still showed him earthly care and compassion. And he does that even to those outside his covenant family, even to those who mock his ways, who are at odds with his purposes, who separate themselves from him.

It's extraordinary, isn't it? But it's true, we can't deny it. Jesus tells us that our God is the God who makes the sun shine on the just and the unjust.

And so, if on the one hand, we as God's people must take seriously God's unswerving commitment to his unique seed, to his one way of salvation, to the one gospel of Jesus Christ alone, and if we must be willing to reflect that commitment in our lives, however painful it is, however misunderstood we must be at times when we must be separated from those who would undermine it or hinder the true gospel.

If that is true on the one hand, then this also is absolutely true on the other. We must surely also reflect God's compassion and care for those outside his church who are enemies of the gospel of Christ.

[37 : 33] Because the God of verse 12 of Genesis 21 is the same God of verses 17 and 18, isn't he? Now that would have been a very important message, wouldn't it, for Moses' first hearers?

The people of Israel about to enter the promised land. They were to be committed to his covenant. Moses kept saying, be holy, be separate, don't be like the pagans all around about you.

Reject all of their false ways and their false religion. And yet at the same time, the law of Moses also endlessly reflects the compassion of God also to pagans.

The law of Moses was full of instructions to care for the stranger, for the sojourner, for the alien, for the foreigner. Just read Deuteronomy when you go home. It's full of God's compassion for those who are not even inside his covenant nation.

And don't you think that's important too for God's people today? That we too are to reflect the unswerving compassion of God as well as the unswerving commitment to his gospel of truth.

[38 : 42] Listen to Jesus' words. You've heard it was said, you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.

For he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others?

Do not even the Gentiles, the pagans do the same. You therefore must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. It makes a difference, doesn't it?

To the way that we think about those who are enemies of the gospel. Whether it's those who oppose us right from outside in all kinds of ways or very painfully those who mock us from within the professing church of Jesus Christ.

Makes a difference too, doesn't it? In some very specific situations today. If you go to the land today where Abraham lived then, you'll find two groups of people very much enemies of the promised seed of Abraham, Jesus Christ.

[39 : 53] Jews and Muslims. Both of these groups persecute Christians in Palestine and indeed in many other parts of the world today. One group traces their ancestry back to Isaac.

The other to Ishmael. And yet, you know, the New Testament puts them both in the same category, doesn't it? We've said that. Opposed to the true seed of salvation, Jesus Christ.

In Galatians, Paul is clear. Unbelieving Jews are of the flesh. They're opposed to the Spirit. They're like Ishmael. They're children of the slave woman. In Romans 11, verse 28, he says, unbelieving Jews are enemies of God as regards the Gospel.

And yet he goes right on in that same verse to say that they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers. And what is Paul's heart's desire for them? To seek to bring them to Christ through the Gospel.

That's why the Westminster Larger Catechism and the answer to question number 191 says that part of praying the Lord's Prayer, part of praying thy kingdom come, means that we should be praying for the salvation of Jews as well as for the fullness of Gentiles to come in.

[41 : 06] And think about Muslims today. Aren't they perhaps the fiercest enemies of the Gospel in the world today? In many places, certainly. Proudly tracing their ancestry back to Ishmael as they claim.

And yet, verse 13 of Genesis chapter 21 reminds us that Ishmael too is a son of Abraham. Even though he's an enemy, God shows him earthly care and compassion and mercy. Shouldn't that then also be our attitude as Christians to Muslims today? Not to seek to destroy them and persecute them as enemies of the Gospel even though they are.

Not to do what it seems many Muslims at least are determined to do to Christians today. No, but rather to reflect even to our enemies the love of our Father in Heaven as true sons of our Father in Heaven.

In fact, isn't that our calling from God? For all people in this dark world, for all who live as enemies of the cross of Christ. To love our enemies.

[42 : 15] To pray for those who persecute us that we might be indeed true sons of our Father in Heaven. The one who makes his son shine on the just and the unjust. Is Genesis chapter 21 just ancient history?

Well, it is ancient history, isn't it? But it's also God's living word. And it shows us the beginning of a pattern. The pattern of the persecuted seed of God that brings conflict, that brings division always by his life.

It's a pattern all through history. It's a pattern that will be true right to the very end of history. And it's here in our Bibles to teach us today in our time for our lives.

So let's learn what God wants us to learn about conflict. To be realistic about the conflict that all God's true offspring will face. We are people of a crucified Messiah.

about commitment. To be committed to his unique gospel covenant of truth. Whatever painful claims it might make on our lives.

[43 : 23] Whatever heartbreaks. And about compassion. To be equally determined to display the compassion of our covenant God. Who shows such love and such mercy.

Even to those who are his sworn enemies on earth. Let me end with the words of the Lord Jesus. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you.

And utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad. For great is your reward in heaven. For so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others. So that they may see your good works. And give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

This is the gospel of Christ. Amen. Let's pray. Heavenly Father we thank you that you are the God who was so committed to your covenant purposes of grace and mercy for a world undone in sin.

[44 : 31] that nothing even the pain and cost to your own heart of your own beloved son nothing would stand in the way of your great salvation.

Help us we pray to be utterly committed to that great message of grace. Whatever the cost however harsh and fiery the conflict but in the midst of it all may our hearts radiate the love and the compassion and the mercy of your own heart that our light may be true light and draw others to the Savior's light.

For we ask it in his name. Amen.