

When the World Surprises and Shames the Church

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Preacher: William Philip

[0 : 00] So we're going to turn to our Bible reading. Willie Philip, our senior minister, is continuing to preach to us from the book of Genesis. And this evening we get to chapter 20.

Do grab a Bible, there are red visitor's Bibles at the side, the front, and the back. Do grab one of those and follow along as we read together the whole of Genesis chapter 20.

Genesis 20, beginning in verse 1. From there, Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negev and lived between Kaddish and Shur.

And he sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, she is my sister. And Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent and took Sarah.

But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, Behold, you're a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife.

[1 : 15] Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, Lord, would you kill an innocent people? Did he not himself say to me, she is my sister?

And she herself said, he is my brother. In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands, I have done this. Then God said to him in the dream, Yes, I knew that you have done this in the integrity of your hearts.

And it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore, I did not let you touch her. Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you and you shall live.

But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours. So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants and told them all these things.

And the men were very much afraid. Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you that you have brought on me in my kingdom a great sin?

[2 : 32] You have done to me things that ought not to be done. And Abimelech said to Abraham, What did you see that you did this thing? Abraham said, I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.

Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, This is the kindness you must do to me.

At every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother. Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen and male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned Sarah, his wife, to him.

And Abimelech said, Behold, my land is before you. Dwell where it pleases you. To Sarah he said, Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver.

It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone you are vindicated. Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves, so that they bore children.

[3 : 55] For the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife. Well, amen. This is God's word, and we'll return to it again shortly.

I'll do turn, if you would, to Genesis and chapter 20. We've seen, I think, very clearly that from Genesis 18 onwards, we're reading about the beginning of real Christian mission.

God's friends, like Abraham, are his prophets and his priests in the world. They're speaking to God for men, and speaking to men for God.

But the truth is that from the very start, God's church has often failed the world. The sorry story last time of Lot's family legacy was a very sobering one.

And Genesis 20 here is another story of God's people interacting with pagan humanity outside, and this time showing that the household of faith is both surprised and often shamed by the world. [5 : 15] And yet it's a chapter full of encouragement, full of hope for the church today, precisely because the Bible doesn't hide or pretend away the weakness and the failures of even the great heroes of the faith, like Abraham.

It's the real Abraham, warts and all, as we see him here, of whom the Apostle Paul can say no distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God.

Now, when we read a chapter like this, and then a verse like that, it's a wonderful reminder, isn't it, that God's grace does not evaluate things as we tend to.

What a mercy that is. And it reminds us that Jesus is building his church, his people's warts and his people's wanderings, notwithstanding.

If the gates of hell cannot prevail against it, then neither are our shortcomings going to derail it either. And so these verses are written for our instruction, Paul says, so that through the encouragement, the encouragement that they provide, we may have hope.

[6 : 29] So let's look at the story. And we're met here, first with a relapsing prophet, then with a righteous pagan, and then finally we witness an extraordinary redeeming prayer.

Verses 1 and 2 reveals a relapsing prophet. There's an extraordinary ring of déjà vu about it. It's almost a direct repeat of Genesis 12, verse 10. In fact, in the Hebrew, the same words are used. Abraham journeyed to the south, and he sojourned there. Now back then, it was all the way to Egypt. This time it wasn't so far south, but it was further west, not right out of the land, but right to its very edge, down near the present-day Gaza Strip.

Why did he up and off from Mamre, from the altar of the Lord? Was he disillusioned after the events of chapter 19?

Sodom's destruction despite his prayers? Lot's failure to change perhaps despite his rescue?

Maybe Abraham wanted to be far away from the continual reminders of all of that.

[7 : 38] We don't know, but what we do know is that it led very quickly to disaster. His wife, all over again, is lost to a pagan king.

It's hard to believe, isn't it, that Abraham could fall into that same catastrophic behavior all over again. Well, at least it's hard to believe until we think for just a few moments about the reality of our own human hearts.

Do you always learn your lesson the first time? Never relapse into the same sinful habits a second time or a third? If you think that does describe you, we better have a chat afterwards, hadn't we? Because I think you've just relapsed into that recurring habit of self-deception that you have. Here, Abraham, the friend of God, the father of the faithful, relapses into exactly the same pattern of behavior that brought near total disaster at least once before.

There may be other times. Verse 13 says that it was a frequent plan. He says, at every place we pretended Sarah was his sister. It does seem to be a recurring pattern. And friends, if Abraham, who grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, if he had to battle his same sinful tendencies into his 90s, don't think that you and I are somehow going to overcome these struggles and get beyond ever that daily battle for godliness.

[9 : 11] Scottish preacher Alexander White once said in response to a young man who was very puffed up and full of all kinds of nonsense about having received some blessing that meant from now on he was going to be free of all sins and follies in his life.

He just said, no, no. It's a sehr fest right to the end. Right to the end. That's one great lesson, actually, in this chapter.

Don't think that the time will ever come when you've arrived in your Christian walk and the struggles are going to be over when you live in perfect peace. It won't in this life.

We have to endure to the end, says Jesus. The way is hard. That leads to life. So here we find Sarah in the same position again as chapter 12, having been taken into the harem of a pagan king. Notice then, if you remember, we were told it was because of her great beauty. Here we're not told that. She's well into her 90s, after all. May have had more to do with Abimelech wanting an alliance with Abraham.

[10 : 18] Abraham was now a man of great substance. And in fact, we'll see that alliance in chapter 21. Mind you, who's to say that Sarah wasn't still a desirable woman? After all, she was

about to have a baby.

So maybe she had been somehow rejuvenated. John Calvin makes an interesting comment, by the way, in his commentary on this. Here's what he says. It's possible she was not so much worn with age.

For we often see some women in their 40th year more wrinkled than others in their 70th. So there you are. If you're in your early 70s, take encouragement from John Calvin. Although if you just had your 40th birthday, it might not be quite so cheery.

This is one of those points where I've got to be very careful where I look. But whatever the reason for what happened here, the real reason, the real reason was Abraham's disastrous lapse and his lie, again, to the pagan king.

She's my sister. How can this great man of faith muck it up so badly after everything he's been through? You can understand, can't you, the folly of a younger man, a new convert all those years ago, but now he's seen all that God has done to protect him, to bless him.

[11 : 36] How could he collapse so badly now? Well, friends, the answer is very plain. It's all through the Bible. It's because the flesh is weak. It's because the world is strong.

And it's because the devil is cunning and vicious. And the truth is that God's saints are never free from the stain of sin and we're never free from the shadow of the serpent.

We have an enemy. Don't forget that just because he's lurking in the shadows, just because he doesn't parade his presence. Remember Peter's words. Be self-controlled and alert.

Your enemy, the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Well, Peter knew that, didn't he, by bitter experience.

So did Abraham. We have a persistent enemy in the life of faith and we have to be alert, self-controlled. First of all, we have to be alert to his timing.

[12 : 36] Just think of the building crescendo that we've seen in these chapters. There's the promise, there's the covenant, there's Abraham's relationship with God, there's all his progress, and yet all of a sudden it's thrown into confusion.

Abraham is on the move away from God's altar, he's lapsing into old habits, there's a total loss of his moorings, his judgment seems to be clouded.

That is just a hallmark of the enemy's tactics. God's spirit, remember Paul tells us, is the spirit of order. The devil is the spirit of disorder and dis-ease and turmoil.

And so often these attacks happen at crucial times, crucial moments in the unfolding of God's plan of salvation. Here we are, virtually on the eve of the birth of Isaac, the promised seed, the one who was utterly crucial to the whole purpose of Abraham's life and crucial for the story of the salvation of the world.

Back in Genesis 12, the promise to bless all nations comes from God and it's going to be through you, Abraham. In chapter 15, it's going to be through your own son. In chapter 17, it's definitely going to be Sarah's son.

[13 : 58] And in chapter 18, it's going to be next year. And we're almost at the climax of that whole story and yet now, disaster, almost completely overtakes it because there is an enemy.

And he attacks at crucial moments in the life of God's promise and in the life of God's people. Read the whole Old Testament history and you find this pattern again and again.

Think back to Genesis 12 when Abraham had just been called into the land. No sooner was he into the land than he's almost out again in Egypt, nearly losing his wife and his threat to the land and to the promised seed.

Think forward to Numbers chapter 14, the whole people of Israel and the climax of entering the land and yet there's a great rebellion and they won't enter and they go back to the desert for 40 years.

Or think of Solomon and the very climax of the kingship in Israel and at last, Israel is a nation being a light to the whole world. And within a chapter we see Solomon ensnared by foreign marriages and pagan women and utterly destroys the kingdom in the end.

[15 : 08] It's divided. Think right ahead to the story of the birth at last of the Savior, the promised Messiah, the Lord Jesus. Immediately we see Herod, the king, trying to destroy him by killing all the babies in the whole area.

It's always the same pattern and often at crucial moments of salvation history. Ferocious attacks of the evil one to destroy the purpose of God.

If you read Revelation chapter 12 you see a graphic picture of that recurring principle right through history. The woman is giving birth to the man-child and the dragon, the devil, standing, waiting to devour as soon as he's born.

That's just a heavenly view of the church throughout all the ages. And what it means is that wherever Christ is being born as it were, wherever Christ's kingdom is advancing, the devil is at work seeking to devour.

And we need to be alert about that. That's what explains the struggles and the oppositions that we find coming so often at times of crucial advance in the work of the kingdom.

[16:21] And that's still true today in our own lives, in our life together as a church or on a bigger scale in terms of whole mission fields, whole nations. At crucial times in God's plan.

And very often just when God's people have been enjoying success and real fruitfulness for him. And that's what we see in Abraham's story. It's after the high point, isn't it, of that great response of faith in chapter 12.

And he follows God's call that the debacle with Egypt occurs. It's after the high point of the great rescue of Lot in chapter 14 and the giving of the covenant in chapter 15. It's then that that disaster with Hagar occurs in chapter 16.

It's after his great intervention and prayer for Sodom in chapter 18 that we see this happening. And that's such a common pattern. Think of Peter who warns about the devil in that letter.

It was just after his great confession of Christ, wasn't it, in Matthew chapter 16 that the tempter suddenly grabs hold of Peter and Jesus has to say to him, get behind me, Satan.

[17:33] After the Last Supper, all Peter's protestations of love to Jesus and going to death with him, that he denies him three times. And we often, I think, find that with ourselves, don't we?

We're actually very, very vulnerable after a time of spiritual high. After a time when perhaps we have had some great victory in the spiritual life over sin or over temptation or perhaps when we've had just some real encouragement in our witness, in our evangelism.

And often it's because, you see, after good things happening, we begin to rely on our experience of that and our feeling of achievement. Instead of our faith.

And the devil knows, you see, he knows we're vulnerable and that's when he comes. Think of Jesus after the great high point at the opening of his ministry and his baptism and heavens opened and the Spirit descends upon him.

It was exactly then that the devil came and brought fierce temptation in the wilderness. And the answer, you see, as Peter says, is to be alert.

[18:50] Not to despair, but to get to know the tactics of our enemy. Expect such attacks and resist them. Resist the devil, says James, and he will flee from you.

Think of our church just now. There's been a lot of encouragement. We have a new believer that's come to faith. We have a new ministry that's beginning. We're looking forward to a very significant thing in partnership with beginning a new school.

If I were the devil, I'd be sowing all kinds of seeds of discontent among people here in this fellowship. I'd be trying to get people to fall out with one another. I'd be stirring up jealousy and dissension into the bargain.

I might be inflicting some of them with illnesses or with job losses or with all kinds of other things that just sow mayhem and discord so that there's distraction at every turn, so there's a loss of focus on the real task in hand of being the people of God in Christ united for his gospel here.

That's exactly what the enemy is up to always. And we need to be alert, says Peter, not falling prey to his ways. And secondly, remember Peter says we have to be self-controlled.

[20:09] That means we need to be wise not just to his timing but to his methods. And the devil is a perfect psychologist. The devil has a PhD in human psychology and behavioral science.

He knows exactly how to trip us up and how to trap us. He knows our personalities far better than we even know ourselves. And he will exploit our personal weaknesses.

Abraham, you see, seems to have an irrational fear and a phobia about these foreign chiefs and his wife. Despite God's specific promise to protect him, to curse anyone who came against him.

But he made a habit, didn't he, of this deception with Sarah. Verse 13 says it's what he did wherever they went. So it shouldn't be a surprise, should it, that even after 30 years and more of walking with God, he reverts to his old ways.

See, if you give the devil a foothold, he will exploit it. Which is why Paul says in Ephesians 4, verse 27, do not give the devil a foothold.

[21 : 18] And that's just as true today still for us, friends, because here's the truth, old habits really die hard. Our weaknesses, our personality flaws, they go very deep.

And even the grace of God in this life will not completely remove these tendencies within us. It will be a struggle right to the end.

That's why Paul says the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. And you know what that means for you.

The devil won't bother tempting you with somebody else's temptations.

He'll tailor things exactly for you, just for your personal weaknesses. For some, that might be things like drugs, or alcohol, or pornography, or anger, or jealousy, or whatever it is.

Well, that's where you will be attacked. Or maybe your problem is that you've got a very fearful, anxious, depressive personality.

[22 : 22] You've got a real tendency to a sense of guilt and failure. Well, that is where he will attack you. He'll strike you with self-loathing, with a sense of inferiority, with a sense of despair.

Maybe it's the opposite for you, that you're the sort of person who tends to over-enthusiasm emotionally and spiritually. Well, he'll masquerade with you like an angel of light.

He'll be directing you into all kinds of false experiences to buff your pride, to make you feel very superior. In a hundred different ways, he knows us, you see.

And the lesson is, we need to know ourselves, not hiding from reality. We need to face up, don't we, to the truth about our own weaknesses and determine to be self-controlled.

We need to learn the three R's, as I call them, of temptation. First, respect. Respect for old tendencies and temptations. Even things that you think you've conquered long, long ago.

[23 : 23] even conquered sin will rear its head in your life given the right circumstances. In my flesh, says Paul, dwells no good thing.

Respect these tendencies and temptations. Second, recognize that when you begin to step aside from obedience to God's will and purpose, you make yourself very vulnerable and those tendencies will spring to life.

and you'll discover how weak your conscience really is. So be realistic. Recognize your weaknesses.

And thirdly, be ruthless, guarding against these things in your life, whatever they are. Pluck out the eye that sees them, says Jesus. Cut off the hand that takes them.

Don't give the devil a foothold. Well, Abraham, you see, needed these words because in just two verses, this poor relapsing prophet is up to his neck in disaster, losing again Sarah, his wife, who was to bear the promised seed.

[24 : 32] Notice, his wife is the key word all the way through his chapter, seven times repeated in verse 2 and verse 3 and 7 and 11 and 12 and 14 and verse 18. Sarah, his wife, his wife, his wife, his wife and he's lost her on the cusp at last of his life's fulfillment but total disaster, the loss of the one without whom none of it could happen.

Well, let's read on. What we find in the bulk of the chapter from verses 3 to 16 is that it's all about this man Abimelech. And we discover that in ironic contrast to Abraham, the relaxing prophet, here we find a righteous pagan.

If we're not to forget that there is an enemy at work against us in the world, neither are we ever to forget that regardless of that, in fact, undeterred by that, God is at work in the world always, determined to bless through his promised seed.

Don't miss the opening words there in verse 3, but God, but God. And those two words are the decisive factor that changes everything.

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

[26 : 08] But the truth is, God is always much bigger than we think. And that's what he's showing Abraham. That's what he's showing all of us here. First, this righteous pagan surprises God's people.

Abraham thought, verse 11, there's no fear of God in this place. But it seems he was quite wrong. There is fear of God. And God himself recognizes integrity in Abimelech's heart in verse 6 there.

He is a man of high morals. He wouldn't have dreamed of committing adultery. So in that respect, he protests his innocence. And he is a good man.

He's like Cornelius that we discover in Acts chapter 10, the Roman who feared God, who wanted to do right. He's a man who's living true to his humanity.

He's living by the light of God's general revelation in the world. And Paul says, doesn't he, in Athens, in Acts chapter 17, that God made all people that they should seek God and feel their way towards him and find him.

[27 : 14] And that's Abimelech. He doesn't know the Lord personally in the way Abraham does, at least not yet. But he fears God and he's distressed by the fact that he's taken a man's wife, even though he hasn't yet touched her in any intimate way.

And that, we're told, is because God himself had prevented it. I kept you from sinning against me, says God in verse 6, in a more terrible way.

Probably, we don't know, but probably it was by inflicting some kind of disease on Abimelech because verse 17 tells us that later Abraham's prayer heals him as well as his wife and his slaves. It may have been some kind of venereal disease that caused infertility and perhaps prevented normal relations. But what a surprise to Abraham to find that not all pagans are like the men of Sodom.

Some of them are very fine people. And moreover, that God himself is already involved in their lives to restrain their sin and to bring them blessing.

[28 : 28] And notice a very genuine response this man makes to God. In verses 3-7 we read of this confrontation that God has with Abimelech. Notice that Abimelech gets the same gospel warning as did Lot and the men of Sodom.

Verse 3, Behold, you're a dead man. In other words, you're already ill, but you're going to die for your sin. But notice how differently he received this message.

Despite his quite reasonable protestation of innocence, God tells him he's in real danger because he's taken another man's wife, even though he hadn't actually consummated that relationship.

By the way, just notice how seriously God takes adultery. It's a sin against me, he says, in verse 6. And Abimelech certainly takes God seriously, unlike the men of Sodom who treated God's warning just as a joke, and unlike even Lot himself, do you remember, who lingered even in the midst of the destruction.

Look at verse 8. Abimelech is up at daybreak sharing the message with his whole house, and we're told they all fear God. And then in verses 9 to 16, we see a real and a true response of repentance and obedient faith, in spite of all the appalling failure of God's church and God's prophet.

[29 : 50] And here Abimelech confronts Abraham with his sin and listens to the pathetic excuses for his behavior. But here's the crucial thing.

Notice this. He doesn't let that put him off. He responds to God's command. And verses 14 to 16 show us that that response is genuine.

He gives Sarah back, puts right what he's done, and he gives lavishly to Abraham. Verse 15, land. And verse 16, hard cash, a thousand shekels.

That's a huge sum of silver. Ten times, by the way, the amount that Moses specified in the law as the amount that was to be paid for a wronged woman in those circumstances.

You can read that in Deuteronomy 22, verse 19. It's rather like Zacchaeus in Luke chapter 19, isn't it, who met Jesus. And then he paid back four times over all the things that he'd done wrong.

[30 : 57] That's a real response to God, isn't it? You know somebody's heart has been changed when their wallet's been unlocked. That's reality, not just words. I wonder what Abraham thought.

I think Abraham was probably pretty surprised. Just like the apostles were. Do you remember in Acts? You could hardly believe it. They were amazed that these Gentiles, these pagans, pagans, received the word of God and received repentance to life, received the gift of the Holy Spirit.

And we're often surprised at that, aren't we, when we see the most unlikely person come to faith in Jesus Christ. Their life totally turned around, totally changed.

and inside the church sometimes we can hardly believe it. So this righteous pagan really surprises God's people, but he also shames God's people.

Abraham is guilty, isn't he, of total misjudgment of this man and his people. And he's shown up very badly for it. In fact, Abimelech is more righteous than he.

[32 : 07] He's the one who is shown to be caring for all his people, interceding to God for them. Verse 4, Lord, will you kill an innocent people? He's interceding just like Abraham was back in chapter 18 for the people of the city, for Sodom.

Well, here, Abraham just seems to be thinking only of himself. So he was shamed by his misjudgment of the world and also by forgetting his own calling, which was to be a blessing to people just like this all around him.

And yet sometimes we are like that in the church, aren't we? Some Christians can become so inward-looking, so horrified at the pagan world round about.

We think it's all like Sodom, but it's all irreversibly lost. And they just don't really have any expectation of the gospel to produce change. They want to hunker down in holy huddles and just bewail the evil outside, assuming that there is only utter godlessness all around.

And it's so easy if you think that way to just become disillusioned, despairing. We get responses quite often, don't we? Like Abraham saw in Sodom.

[33 : 29] For all his pleading with the Lord, nothing seemed to happen. And it's so easy in those circumstances to just give up and think, no, God can't do anything or won't do anything. William still said this, it's not a false assumption of course that the world is very pagan, yet even in the most pagan places, God is sovereign.

In the most unexpected places, God has people he is preparing to call to himself, like Abimelech, like Cornelius, like all the many. Do you remember that Paul was told by God, God had in that city of Corinth, which was just like a New Testament version of a place like Sodom.

And so he says, go on preaching the gospel because I've got people here I'm calling out to myself. That's so important, isn't it? Go on proclaiming the gospel.

Because although the world does often shame the church and surprise the church by its behavior, which is often better, higher integrity, nevertheless, here is the thing, the righteous pagan still needs the church.

It's not enough, is it, here, that Abimelech is a good man, that he's honest, that he's upright. God recognizes that. But he has sinned against God all the same.

[34 : 55] Even though God had mercifully kept him from worse sin, he's taken a man's wife, that isn't just a moral, God says it's a personal sin against me. So even a good man like Abimelech needs to be taught about sin, needs to learn about its dark consequences.

And verse 9 shows that he's grasped the seriousness of sin. It's a great sin that has been brought upon me and my people, he says. And he needs God's command to repent, which God gives him there in verse 7.

But even that, you see, isn't something he can do by himself. What does he need? Do you see? He needs God's chosen intercessor. Verse 7, return the man's wife, that's a mark of real repentance and obedience to God's call, and receive what only this man can do for you.

Receive life through his prayer. You see, there's only one way of salvation from sin against God, even for a fine man, even for a righteous man like Abimelech.

Only one way, and it's a very humbling way. Verses 9 to 13 are there to remind us that. Here's a king, here's a king who's showing his shock, really, at Abraham's behavior.

[36 : 23] What have you done? Why did you do that? And yet God says to him, you must bow down to this man, who is my ambassador nonetheless. And only in that way lies your salvation.

I think that was very hard for Abimelech, don't you? I think that was very, very humbling. Rather like the story of Naaman, remember? He had to swallow his pride and bathe in the dirty water of the Jordan River, even though he was a prince of Syria.

But God says, I am the Lord and I only do things one way, my way. And Abimelech takes the gospel seriously.

He takes God's command seriously. He obeys God. Not a last help by Abraham and his conduct, but despite it. Not because of Abraham's witness, but because of God's command of truth.

And you know, that might well be a message for somebody here today, because you may feel that the church is full of all sorts of people far worse than you, and that you are far better behaved, far more upright than they are.

[37 : 38] It may well be that that's the very thing that stops you from becoming a Christian. But you see, that's not the issue. The issue is God's command.

You need the church. The old St. Cyprian was absolutely right. Outside the church, there is no salvation. Because for all the church's faults, and we can't deny that we are often, as the church of Jesus Christ, utterly shamed by the world.

But for all of that, God has chosen his church to be the ambassadors of Christ and his gospel to the world. That's no excuse for the church, none at all.

We need to constantly repent when we fail the world, when we fail to adorn the gospel of God as we should, and as we're called to. We should be ashamed of ourselves very often. There's no excuse for the church, but there's no excuse for the outsider either.

You might plead your worthiness to God, as Abimelech did. You might well say, well, I'm far better than that rotten crowd of Christians. Well, maybe so. But God still says, you need to be saved.

[38 : 51] And the only way, the only way, is my way, through submission to my command, through the prayers of my intercessor, my prophet, and my priest, who alone can rescue you.

And that's what happens to Abimelech. Look at verses 17 and 18. What we see here is an extraordinary redeeming prayer. Abimelech's 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 his promised seed who was yet to come.

And who did at last come in the fullness of the 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, all who come to seek his intercession.

And there's nothing in him that would keep you away. Abraham, you see, was an ambassador of the coming Savior. We are ambassadors now of the Christ who has come, Paul says.

God's now making his appeal through us as we proclaim the same gospel. Be reconciled to God one way, the only way, God's way. So Abimelech is restored by the redeeming prayer of God's prophet and his priest.

[40 : 17] But so also in that is Abraham restored, you see. He's restored, isn't he, to his true calling from this relapse into near disaster. To be again God's conduit of blessing to the nations, God's true friend and prophet and priest.

And he gets his wife back and he gets a powerful reminder also that God's promise and God's true purpose for him hasn't not been forgotten. This great irony, isn't there, in this prayer.

Look at verse 17. God healed all the women so they bore children. For the Lord God had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech. God closes wombs and God opens them effortlessly in his time.

Even if Sarah hadn't yet seen all that she'd longed for. God's God's God's love. That was a gentle rebuke, wasn't it, for Abraham and Sarah?

And yet also, what a wonderful comfort to them. God can and will keep his promise. As we come to a close, let's just crystallize three things that this story reminds us very clearly.

[41 : 32] First, the devil is at work always to do damage to God's plan by exploiting the weaknesses and the sins of his people.

So we must be alert, self-controlled. The devil is at work, but God is at work always.

Don't despair. He's not hindered by Satan. He was working his purpose out for Abraham. He was bringing to pass his promise of the land and the seed and to bless the nations through Abraham and seed.

God is always working his purpose out. And sometimes, yes, he does seem to move in very mysterious ways. And sometimes they're mysterious to us just because our sin and our relapses make things far more complex than they ever need to be.

But sometimes also the apparent difficulties and the seeming hardships we face are actually God's hand of blessing on us for our own protection. That was true of Abimelech's affliction, wasn't it?

[42 : 39] It was to prevent even worse sin against God. But God is working his purpose out as year succeeds to year, as the hymn says.

And sometimes he'll surprise us and sometimes shame us as he shows us what he's doing in the world for his glory. God is bigger than we think. Never forget that. Second, the world often shames us as God's people and we often let down God very badly indeed.

Like Abraham, we can become cynical about life. We can despise the world. We can write it off. We can write people off. And we can relapse, can't we, into old ways and sins and even blame God.

That's what Abraham was doing here. It's just what Phil was speaking about this morning. Blame someone else. Verse 13. It was God's fault. He set me off on this wretched course. If I had to sort out all sorts of troubles wherever we went, well, it's God's fault.

It's not mine really. Very common symptoms. We recognize them, don't they, in ourselves. But listen, God doesn't give up on his relapsing prophets.

[43 : 51] God persists with his friends even when they let him down. He's the God of grace. He's the God who stands by his friends. Isn't that wonderful? But notice how he restores Abraham.

You see, it's as he returns to his true calling, to be God's prophet and his priest, to have his heart open again to the pagan world, to have his prayers filled with priestly intercession for this outsider. And that's the way back, isn't it? Always for us, for individuals, for churches. It's as we turn back to our true calling to be the ambassadors of grace that God has called us to be, to have the salvation of the peoples of the world as the burden of our hearts and in our prayers.

That's how we're restored to true fellowship with God because that's how we begin again to share the heart of God himself and be at one with him. The Lord doesn't give up on his relapsing prophets.

He loves to restore. He loves to renew. But he does it as we are turned back to our true calling with hearts that are set on redeeming prayer for the world.

[45 : 04] And thirdly, we need to remember that God uses even our failures to magnify our grasp of his wonderful grace and his love to us.

See, when in the next chapter Isaac is finally born, it is absolutely and abundantly clear now that this thing owes absolutely nothing at all to the efforts of man.

Not only is it beyond doubt that it's physically impossible through Sarah's age and her lifelong barrenness, but much more than that, it's morally unjustifiable.

We cannot say, can we, that Abraham deserved it from God because of his unrelapsing faithfulness. This chapter alone tells us that there was enough there to make him forfeit everything but God.

God. You see, sometimes God has to show us all sorts of things about ourselves, things that we'd rather hide away and pretend aren't there, just so that we can begin to grasp the sheer wonder of his grace.

[46 : 12] Sometimes it's only when our failures begin to help us understand how dreadful our sin really is, how ugly, how terrible, how awful it is in God's eyes.

Only then that the real brightness of God's grace, the depth of his love, comes home to us. Isn't that right? Because it's only then that there's no danger that we could say of ourselves, I did it.

I helped God with that. I deserved that because of what I did or my faithfulness. No. See, it's only the Abraham who knew deeply and painfully these shameful realities.

The shame of chapter 12, the shame of chapter 16, the shame of this chapter here. It's only that Abraham who can read God's verdict on him in Romans chapter 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. You see, because of these things, Abraham can hear that.

[47 : 21] He can hear God's verdict on him, God's justification of him. And he can say, hallelujah, it's true. But it's only by grace.

It's only by the amazing grace of God my Savior that that verdict can be spoken of me. So, friends, when we ourselves are shamed and surprised by the world, as alas, too often we are and will be in our many relapses from our calling and our many failures and mistakes, when we find ourselves in those places, remember God's amazing grace and let that bring you to repentance.

But also to rejoicing. Rejoicing in that grace of a wonderful God and Savior, even in our folly, God is at work.

I will build my church, says the Lord Jesus. And if the gates of hell can't stop him, then neither can your sins, neither can your relapses, neither can my muck-ups and my mess.

Relapsing prophets? Well, we're all that far too often, aren't we, alas? But we're his relapsing prophets.

[48 : 54] And that changes everything. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you that we are yours. We thank you that our shepherd, our creator and ruler and judge and king, that he is the king of love.

His goodness never fails. Even though ours so often is so, so lacking. Forgive us, Lord, our repeated failures.

And restore us, we ask, to serve you as we ought. And we ask it for thy great namesake. Amen.