

20. The God who Restores the Faithful's Failures (2007)

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[0 : 00] Well, do turn with me, if you would, to Genesis chapter 16 and to the passage that we read together. And it's good to have you boys and girls of the Sunday school with us today.

Lovely to have you in here with us with all the grown-ups today. And I hope that you'll try your best to listen and see what you can get out of our message this morning. It's all about the God who restores the faithful's failures.

William Still always used to say that the biggest hindrances to God's work in the world is not the ferocity of his enemies, but it's the sins of the saints, the disastrous failures of God's own people, God's own church.

And I think if you read biblical history, if you read church history, it's hard to refute that. So often it is the failure of the church to live up to a true calling that has led to disaster for the cause of Christ in this world.

And yet, despite the manifold failures of God's people and his church, the cause of Christ has not died. The gospel has not been silenced.

[1 : 12] And God's blessing still abounds in grace. And that's because our God is a God who restores, even from disastrous failures of faith.

Because he's the covenant God. He won't abandon his promises. We saw last time in chapter 15 that he's the God who assures the fearful faithful.

And here today in chapter 16, he is the God who restores the faithful's failures. And that's why it's a great chapter if you know that you are or you have been a failure in your life of following the Lord Jesus.

Paul says in the New Testament that a chapter like this is just for you. Romans 15 verse 4, he says, These things are written for our instruction, that through endurance and the encouragement of the scriptures, we might have hope.

So that if you know that you've let God down in your life, then this chapter is here to encourage you. It's here to give you hope. He's the God who restores failures.

[2 : 20] Of course, if you're not a failure in your faith, then you don't need this. And you can just pop off to sleep for the next half hour or so. Or maybe you can take notes so that you'll be able to help one of those failures that you do know in the fellowship. I'm sure there'll be plenty.

And you'll be able to help them. But just before you nod off to sleep, consider this. Remember this is the story of Abraham, the great man of faith.

The Bible's great example of faith and obedience. And yet despite his giant faith, just like what we saw back in chapter 12, where he was overtaken by temptation, so here again he fell into a disastrous failure of faith once again.

That's why Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 10, Therefore, let anyone who thinks he stands firm, take heed lest he fall. These things were written as warnings for us, for New Testament Christians.

And it seems to me that if Abraham can fail and fall like this, then very probably so can you, and so can I. So maybe we ought to all stay awake and listen.

[3 : 31] Listen and recognize our need for a God who restores failures. And rejoice that indeed he is the same God, yesterday, today, and forever.

So let's look at how this passage unfolds that message for us. First of all, if you look at verse 1 to the first half of verse 4, you'll see why it is that we fail as believers.

I'm going to call it the perennial root of our failures as believers. Because the reason that we blunder into sin and into failure is always the same. We fail to trust God's promises.

We fail to trust that his promises, his gospel to us, is enough and really will bring us to everything that God has for us. All the blessings, all the promises, all the satisfaction, all the joy that we could ever need or want.

We fail to trust what God has said. And that's because, of course, what we see so often doesn't seem to match up to that expectation, does it?

[4 : 38] And so the pain of waiting and the power of wanting leads us to doubt God's promises. And we seek to take the situation into our own hands in disobedience to his commands.

You see, disobedience to God's commands always springs from the same root. Disbelief in God's promises. Disbelief in the true gospel of Jesus Christ.

And what we're seeing in this chapter is an example of exactly that. Look at verse 1 because it lays out the problem very clearly, doesn't it? Sarai had born Abraham no children. Now that, of course, echoes what we were first told about Sarai way back in chapter 11.

Sarai was barren. She had no child. And if you look at verse 3 in our chapter here, you'll see that now it's more than 10 years later. And she's still a childless woman.

Don't minimize the real human pain in those few words. Especially if you're a man. Especially if you're somebody who has children.

[5 : 44] That's a very, very sore thing for any woman who desperately wants a family. Something that can take years of agonizing and wrestling with the Lord to come to terms with and come to accept.

Even if you are a great and godly woman whose hope truly is in the Lord. As the New Testament tells us, Sarah certainly was. But, of course, in Sarah's case, there's much, much more even than that, isn't there?

Because, of course, this couple, Abraham and Sarah, had a promise from God that the rest of us don't have. And we get married and we desire a family. We hope we can have a family.

But we know that children are a gift from God. We know that we can't presume that as a right. But, you see, Abraham and Sarah were different. They had a certain promise from God that they would have a son and an heir.

It's a repeated promise. We saw it last time in chapter 15. It was a sworn oath on the very life of the Lord himself. Let's look back to chapter 15, verse 4.

[6 : 51] This man, says God to Abraham, is his servant. This man shall not be your heir. Your very own son shall be your heir. God made a covenant, an oath, sealed in blood, to confirm the promise that he'd made long ago when he first called Abraham out of Ur and into the promised land.

And yet here we are, ten years on, all that waiting, and no sign of what God had promised.

Faith says, yes, God has promised. But sight says, oh God doesn't seem to see my problem. Doesn't seem to see how time is robbing me of any hope for a child.

God doesn't seem to hear my prayers or answer them. Is God really interested in me still? Is God able to deliver on what he's promised? Is God really alive?

Is God really real? Have you ever felt like that? You know, you still believe in your head, in your doctrine, of course, that God is alive and real and in control.

[7 : 59] He's still coming to church. And yet somehow, because of your circumstances, in your heart, it just doesn't feel real. It doesn't feel as if God is really there, as if he's really interested, or as if he's listening.

God doesn't see. God doesn't hear. He's not really alive to act, to change things. Well, that seems to be how Sarah felt here in these verses.

She still knows God is sovereign. Look at verse 2. It's the Lord, she says, who's prevented me from having children. And yet somehow, there's a kind of irrational disconnection, isn't there, between her head knowledge and the thing that really controls her affections, her emotions, her will, her actions.

And so she stops trusting in God's promise. She stops really trusting in God himself. And she stops living by that trust.

And you see, when you do that, you know, don't you, that a kind of extraordinary irrationality takes over. Look at verse 2. She says, I'll make happen what God has prevented from happening.

[9 : 17] Now that's absurd, isn't it? How can she think that she can do what God has prevented, or what God can't do? See, that's the kind of irrationality that we fall into so easily, isn't it, when we stop trusting God and his true promises.

Because what we're really doing when we do that is, we're substituting for the true God, a God of our own imagining. See, the only way we can really know the true God is by what God reveals of himself to us.

And God reveals himself to us in his word, in his promises, in his gospel. And if we stop trusting wholly in that revelation, then inevitably we'll get false ideas about God, won't we?

And our whole approach to how we think we should live with God is going to change, and we'll get totally skewed, we'll get off beam. We might think that we're still living as believers ought to live.

We might think that we're still heading for what God wants for our life, for the same goals, the same destinations, what we call the kingdom of God. But the reality is very different.

[10 : 26] In fact, we've lost the plot. We still want the things that God has promised, but actually we've really lost interest in the relationship with the God of promise.

That's the essence of sin, isn't it, when you think about it? Instead of us serving God for his sake, God in our minds just becomes a servant to serve us, to give us the things that we desire, the things that we want, and to do it our way.

That's the perennial root of all of our failures in our spiritual life. When we stop trusting God's true revelation to us, we lose sight of the reality of God, and inevitably we lose sight of the reality about how we're to live for God.

And that's just what happens here. Look at verse 2. Sarah turns to her own very human solution. We'll do, she says, what's perfectly reasonable in the circumstances.

It's entirely acceptable in the culture of their day, but we'll have a surrogate child. I guess there's a time, probably, when many of us would be quite shocked even to read that, but of course it's becoming much more acceptable in our own culture today, isn't it, in all kinds of different ways in one form or another.

[11 : 48] Now, it's clear, you see, that Abraham and Sarah both knew that God's promise involved both of them. They knew that God had ordained monogamy, a one-flesh relationship union.

Certainly, Moses' first readers of this knew that. They had God's law. It was absolutely plain to them. And so when they read this, they understood immediately that this was all wrong. And already we've seen how God has gone to great, great trouble to restore Sarah to Abraham when he nearly lost her in chapter 12.

Sarah is vital to this whole thing. But you see, that's what happens when human reason trumps divine revelation. It's very subtle, you see. You talk yourself into thinking, well, I'm not rejecting God.

I'm just helping to achieve what I know that God wants. He wants my happiness. He's promised that. And we convince ourselves that the end justifies the means.

I know what God wants, says Sarah, and so do you, Abraham. So come on, I'll get children this way, she says in verse 2. Interestingly, she says, I'll get children this way. She knows she's to be the mother.

[12 : 58] She doesn't just say, forget me, go off with another wife, I'll get out of the picture. No, I'll get children this way. And notice carefully the pattern of what follows.

Verse 2. Abraham listened, and defers to Sarah. And then Sarah takes all the initiative in action. Verse 3.

She gives Hagar to Abraham. And then we have the consequences. Hagar conceived. What a great result. The vindication, isn't it?

Surely it shows that they were right all along. Very easy to think that, isn't it? When we've allowed our reason to trump God's revelation.

When God says, you know, for example, sex is for one man and one woman, in marriage, for life. But actually, we've recognized in our mind that what God really is interested in is loving relationships.

[13 : 56] And we find one with somebody of the opposite sex. Or maybe with somebody of the same sex. And we find great fulfillment and great joy. And we say to ourselves, I've got what God really wanted, what God's really interested in.

I was right, wasn't I, to ignore the words that God literally said. I've got a result. Oh, and God says, don't yoke yourself with an unbeliever because you know that you can never truly be one in spirit with that person.

But you've thought to yourself, yes, but God's so good. Surely, surely in my situation, he'll use me to bring my partner to faith.

So you've got into that relationship. Maybe even a marriage. It seems so blissful. Easy to think, isn't it? That it's a good thing that we took a mature view of what God wanted.

We stopped being so fundamentalist, so legalistic, so literal about just some of these words that God says. Very easy to deceive ourselves, to blind ourselves to the truth when we've stopped trusting God.

[15 : 16] And the truth is that disbelief, stopping trusting God, has actually just led to disobedience, disobeying God. But in the end, that always leads to disaster.

You can't miss, can you, in this passage, the clear hints that Moses drops in the narrative. Look at verse 2. The husband listened to the voice of his wife.

Verse 3, she took and gave to her husband. Where have you read that before? That's straight out of Genesis 3, isn't it? Almost word for word.

And just like Adam, the son of God, here Abraham, the man of God, the friend of God, is as culpable as his wife in abdicating the responsibility that God's given to him to be the spiritual leader in the home.

And he joins her in sin. It's a perennial pattern. It's the same sin all over again. And just by the way, there is, I think there isn't there, a warning to us as married men, those of us who are.

[16 : 20] We are responsible to God in our families. We mustn't abdicate that. If we do, it will begin to lead into all kinds of problems. Nor must we abdicate our responsibility for our sexual behavior as men, as husbands.

We're all very vulnerable there. The friend of God, if the great man of faith, can fall, then so can we, you and me. So let's not pretend. But it's a perennial pattern, isn't it?

Whether it's Genesis 3, or Genesis 11, or Genesis 16, or wherever it is. Why? Because sin is pervasive, even in the hearts of believing people.

And because the serpent is persuasive, don't forget him, he's still lurking in the background. And whether it's the pain of waiting, or just the power of wanting, the good things that God indeed has promised men and women, we take matters into our own hands.

We stop really believing, and therefore we stop really obeying God's words and his ways. And we turn just to the way that everybody else thinks and acts, the acceptable ways of the world, to seek the satisfaction, the identity, the liberation, the love.

[17 : 37] And we seek it our own way. And we think we're just helping God. And very often we think it works. And he went into Hagar, and she conceived.

Well, alas, that's why we fail and we fall. It's the perennial root of disbelief in God's promise. And that's what leads to disobedience to his commands.

But what happens when we do? Well, the rest of verse 4 through to verse 6 shows us the predictable results when we fail to trust God. Doesn't take long, does it, for things to unravel, and for things to be shown what they really are like.

A total disaster. And it never does when we start to go down that route. So predictable. And the writer, I think, is making the point by the very structure which just repeats the pattern of the first four verses exactly.

Do you see? It starts with Sarah's problem, doesn't it, in verse 1? Well, here we are in the second half of verse 4, and Sarah has an even bigger problem. She's held now in total contempt by her servant.

[18 : 42] So again, she has words with her husband. And Sarah said to Abraham, just like verse 2. And again, Abraham defers to Sarah, verse 6.

It's in your hands, he says. And again, Sarah takes the initiative. She harshly treats Hagar. And the consequences, well, Hagar flees.

Not like they thought in verse 4, a solution, a son conceived, but rather, a son is confiscated, gone.

You see the irony? When A leads to B, leads to C, leads to D, in disobedience to God, then as sure as night follows day, A leads to B, leads to C, leads to D, in disaster.

Totally predictable, isn't it? Because God is a covenant God. He's the sovereign Lord. Yes, he gives in great grace, but also, he's the God who commands in obedience.

[19 : 48] We'll see that next time, the very beginning of chapter 7, where God rams that home to Abraham. The chapter begins, walk before me, Abraham, and be blameless, so that I can give you the covenant blessings I've promised to you.

You see, disobedience to God, our sovereign Lord, always leads to disaster, because we are made for obedience. And God's moral laws are just as immutable as the natural laws that he's built into this world.

You and I can't defy gravity, you might think you can, but if you jump off a roof, you'll get a rude shock. Nor can we defy God's commands for human life and behavior without disaster.

If only our world understood that, if only our governments understood that, how much less chaos there would be in our society, in our world. But you know, as Christian believers, we can so easily forget too, can't we?

But we can't afford to, friends, because it's so predictable what will happen when we do. If we disobey God's commands, if we rupture our relationship with Him, if we come into conflict with Him, then always, we will begin to come into conflict in our relationships with one another.

[21 : 06] Arguments, and blame, and accusations, and misery, and hurt. That's always what happens. There are predictable results of our spiritual failure.

The consequences are often immediate, and they're often also very long-lasting. Look at the immediate consequences here. It is really the rupture of a family, isn't it?

Derek Kidner puts it pithily as usual. He says, each of the three characters displays the untruth that is part of sin. In false pride, that's Hagar. In false blame, that's Sarah.

And false neutrality, that's Abraham. Hagar, we're told, despises Sarah. It's a very strong word. It's translated dishonored or cursed. Back in Genesis 12, verse 3, it means she became a real enemy.

Sarah, well, she feels utterly aggrieved, and she blames Abraham. This is all your fault, she says. It's amazing, isn't it? The self-deception, and the self-righteousness, as though she was surprised at the outcome.

[22 : 13] As if instituting an adulterous union is just a mechanical thing. With no emotions, no feelings involved, no spiritual issues involved. That's the sort of nonsense people like to think, isn't it?

It's always just sex. And we have our politicians boasting about how many conquests they've made. That idiot, Nick Clegg, in the press. But that is sheer blindness, isn't it?

It's not just sex. And that kind of attitude to sexual behavior is always disastrous, always destructive. It always causes pain and heartache and misery.

And that's regardless of whether it's covert or whether it's overt and open and consensual and agreed. I was reading in the newspaper just the other day a review of a new book about Jean-Paul Sartre, the existentialist guru of the 20th century and his partner, Simone de Beauvoir.

They had a famously open relationship, open to involvement with all kinds of other people. And it was grotesque and hideous she was the great feminist disregarding totally bourgeois views of marriage and children and normal life.

[23 : 31] And yet the reality was she bitterly resented all of his affairs. She was obsessively jealous. She was a miserable bitter woman. Well, that was Sarah here.

She was bitter and miserable. And Abraham, well again, he abdicates all responsibility, doesn't he? It's up to you, he says to Sarah, you do as you please. And so, Sarah's reprisals cause Hagar to flee.

She says, well I'm not putting up with this. That uppity old woman is not going to be my mistress any longer. I'm off. I go back to Egypt where I belong. It's pretty grim, isn't it?

It would make a good soap opera. Pretty much in line with what we have on our TV today. But alas, very true to real life also, isn't it? Because sin breeds sin.

Predictably. Always. Always. When we think we know better than God does how to achieve our happiness and satisfaction and security.

[24 : 34] All the things, yes, that he does want for us and that he does promise us in his time. But God never subverts his own laws to accomplish his will.

And he never asks us to. And he never allows us to. And the immediate consequences here was just what we see. The rupture of a family.

But likewise, there were very severe long-term consequences also. You just have to read on in Genesis and the rest of Scripture to see the lasting consequences in terms of the enmity of the races that we see here.

Ishmael's line. Enemies of God's people all through the generations. In fact, many would say that we're still seeing that today. Because, of course, Ishmael is claimed as the father of the Arabs.

And indeed, is claimed especially by those who claim allegiance to Islam. Those who are implacably opposed both to the physical descendants of Isaac and indeed to the spiritual descendants.

[25 : 38] Now, just think about that today and tell us that the Bible is not relevant. Well, no doubt Abraham and Sarah thought they were being very wise in their plan of verse 3.

But the testimony of God's word and the evidence of history and everything that we know by experience exposes it as utter folly. Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

Sarah loses her maid. Hagar loses her home and her livelihood. Abraham, it seems, loses his relationship both with Sarah and Hagar and everybody loses the son.

Remember, the child that it was all supposed to be about. Why is this story here? Well, it's a clear warning, isn't it?

First of all, of course, the Moses heroes, the Israelites on the brink of the promised land. Remember, that's who he was writing for. The Israelites were constantly thinking that they had a better way, didn't they, than God's long and slow way to take them to blessing.

[26 : 46] They often wanted to take what you might call the Egyptian option. Let's go back to Egypt. That was a constant refrain. There's prosperity in Egypt. There's fertility in Egypt. Not like this barren desert that God is calling us through.

Not like this hopeless waiting and waiting for a future we can't see. But no, Moses is saying, remember Abraham. Remember what happened when he took the Egyptian option.

Remember what happened when he took the acceptable route of the world all round about. When he chased Egyptian prosperity back in chapter 12 instead of God's promises of provision in the land.

When he chased Egyptian fertility here in chapter 16 instead of faithfulness to trust God to wait for his time. It led to disaster for Abraham.

And it will lead to disaster for you. Just remember your own history when you rebelled against God and lost out a whole generation in the desert. Be warned. That's why Moses is writing this.

[27 : 49] And of course it's preserved as a warning to us too, isn't it? Says Paul, written for our instruction because we too need to take heed in case we fall. Just because sin is pervasive even in our believing hearts.

And because the serpent is also persuasive in our hearts. He's cunning. Always there to frustrate and destroy all the purposes of God in his people.

And you see once you've stepped out on that path of distrust and disobedience friends, it's a moving escalator you can't get off.

It's a predictable guaranteed escalator of misery and conflict and damage. Damage to yourself and damage to others too in all kinds of ways you could never have anticipated.

And at the same time dishonor and damage to the kingdom purposes of God. It's a real warning to us. Don't get on that escalator. Well that's the perennial route and the predictable result of our spiritual failure.

[28 : 58] It's pretty familiar isn't it? Just six short verses but when we think about it it's our own story a lot of the time isn't it? Disobedience damage and disaster.

but what a blessing this chapter doesn't end here. It can't can it because these verses are all about us and the mess that we make and there's absolutely no encouragement in there for us is there?

But there is encouragement there is encouragement in the real subject of the story it's in the Lord himself and that's what we see in verses 7 to 12 where he steps in and he shows himself to be the patient restorer for our sin and our disaster.

Notice there's no word of Abraham here getting on his horse with his men and running out to the desert to rescue like there was in chapter 14. No it's only the Lord himself he's the one who heads out into the dry and dusty wilderness to search for Hagar and the angel of the Lord found her by a spring by a well near Shur well on the way to Egypt and she's fleeing back to her former life there but notice how God begins by confronting her and it's that that brings about the restoration of the whole sorry situation isn't it?

Remember that each of these three folk Abraham and Sarah and Hagar each of them has been involved in sin but each of them has been trying to disown it and run away from it and blame it on the other one.

[30 : 32] each one has wanted to feel the victim in order to excuse themselves of course that's very classic human behavior isn't it? We justify ourselves we say well I might be bad but look I'm the one who's been wronged look at them look how bad they are well Hagar could have said that couldn't she?

but the Lord won't allow that he says what about you? and he puts Hagar on the spot and he forces her to confess her wrong and the Lord says to her and by the way the angel of the Lord we're told in verse 13 plainly is the Lord himself speaking to her he says in verse 8 where have you come from and where are you going?

she says I'm fleeing from my mistress I'm fleeing from the hypocrisy of that so-called believing family well says the Lord you must go back and submit you can't run away from the mess of sin and fleeing to Egypt away from the household of faith that can never be the answer to your problem can never be the answer to anybody's problem as a believer it's easy to want to do that though isn't it?

by the way especially when you've been sinned against by others in the church in the believing household very easy to condemn them as hypocrites isn't it? justify ourselves and abandon the church altogether in a fit of righteous pique no says God no they don't have any excuses but neither do you and the patient restorer won't allow us to pretend that sin can be airbrushed out he meets us in grace yes indeed as he met Hagar but grace says turn around and go back repent repent because it's as you do that that you'll find restoration that's always God's command isn't it?

when we're running away from the consequence of sin the mess of sin but notice how God's commands are full of promises look at verse 10 and 11 God promises a future for Hagar she's not going back to mistrust and death she's going to have a son she's got a future it's amazing isn't it?

[32 : 45] to see God's grace and mercy to Hagar and these promises despite the fact that God knows that Ishmael's line will be a constant thorn in the flesh of his people all down the years and so there's a gracious echo here of God's promises to Abraham in his words even to Hagar even out of something that ought never to have been even out of the mess of the failure of this unhappy chapter God's grace works blessing and generosity even if it'll make things harder for God's own purposes even if it'll make problems as it were for God himself God is the kind of God who brings beauty out of our ashes and our destruction for those who cry to him for help because verse 11 the Lord has listened to your affliction one writer puts it this way no one can read the Bible with open eyes without seeing the growing odds which God allows against himself and yet that's how God loves to work that's grace where sin abounds grace super abounds it's not cheap grace though notice the consequences of sin can't be buried or undone and if you look at verse 12 it reminds us of that the blessing of

Ishmael will be a mixed blessing there will be strife between him and his brothers and between their progeny and that has to be faced up to by Hagar and by Abraham and Sarah later and that's often a mark isn't it of true repentance we all have to learn to submit we have to accept we can't turn the clock back we can't undo the past and God asks us to be realistic about the future to face the future with humble realism by his grace and that often involves sacrifice doesn't it not all the relationships we've wrecked can be restored not all the former things can be put back into the place we would like them to be and often that's part of his restoration through repentance it's learning to accept that we have to live with the scars of our folly even if the wounds have been cleansed by God's grace just as Hagar had to learn that as she went back God's way as she humbled herself as indeed did

Abraham and Sarah and surely they did because that's the implication isn't it of verse 15 we're told that Abraham names the child Ishmael just as the angel had commanded Hagar so Hagar's obedience Hagar's submission her penitent return clearly had rebuked and humbled Abraham and Sarah as well it brought about their repentance and restoration rather wonderful isn't it to see how God was so patient in fact how he was so deliberate and provocative in the way he taught them their lesson we don't know how long Hagar was away we can only imagine can't we the words between Abraham and Sarah in the tents the silences the looks the regret the hurt and then back comes Hagar with her story the Lord has met me the Lord has spoken to me the Lord has heard all about me the Lord has shown himself to me and he sent me back with gracious and wonderful promises to cling on to imagine her meeting Sarah here I am mom in obedience to the Lord

I submit myself to you again I do so because I've trusted the word of the Lord that he gave me I wonder what Sarah thought about that you catch the irony the God that Sarah thought didn't hear and couldn't see and maybe was dead and impotent and the God she couldn't trust he's shown to be alive and all seeing and all hearing and all powerful and utterly to be trusted and she's shown it all by the slave girl that she mistreated and sent away the Lord fairly knows how to humble the proud doesn't he I guess those tend to be the kind of lessons that we don't forget that we remember from the patient restorer the God of all grace that brings us to one final thing because God does want us to remember the true nature of his restoring grace and so he gives a permanent reminder to Abraham and to all after him a reminder both of their personal failure and need for restoration but also of God's grace and his faithfulness to provide restoration for sin you can see that in these last three verses that are all about naming things first there's a well in verse 14 a reminder that God is not distant and dead and blind but no he's the living one who sees us and everything about us and then there's the name of the boy

Ishmael in verse 15 God hears he's not deaf to our cries and our prayers he hears it all powerful permanent reminders forever aren't they every time they saw that well or they heard of that well it would be a reminder that God does see that God is alive that God can be trusted the very thing that they'd sinfully forgotten and every time they saw little Ishmael running around in the camp they would remind themselves yes God does hear he hears us and he answers what a great comfort but what a great rebuke at the same time isn't it each time a living reminder of their failure their distrust and the consequences of that failure and that disobedience and yet nonetheless a living monument to God and his grace not pretend grace that minimizes and forgets sin but real grace restoring grace amazing grace that super abounds and envelops even the greatest sin and that's how God wants us to see the monuments and the milestones that litter our own life isn't it yes to remind us of our own failures and their consequences and to warn us from never going those ways again but above all to point us to the grace of the great restorer to remind us that even in the mess that we get ourselves into sometimes awful mess he is the God who sees and hears the God who is alive and will restore if we'll only heed his commands and turn around and submit and grasp his promises if we'll only trust him again he's still the same God who meets people in their mess it's his pattern he loves to do it he can do it don't doubt it don't ever think that you might be too much of a mess for this God to turn around and restore don't let any of us as Christian people think that others are too much of a mess for God to restore them when we read about broken up families in the newspapers with seven children by five different fathers or surrogate children and homosexual couples and messy and acrimonious divorce cases and other things he did it here with Abraham and Sarah and Hagar just as he did it again hundreds of years later when he met another woman by the well with a messed up past and multiple partners and a disastrous life and if God can restore the kind of disastrous mess that we see in this chapter and even use it for great blessing to the world then friends he can restore your mess as well and mine our marital messes our family messes our psychological and emotional messes all of our messes do you doubt that?

[41 : 11] well let me turn your eyes to the permanent reminder that he's planted in history as a living monument forever to his restoring grace for us let me point you to the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ if ever there were a crushing and humbling reminder of our failures and our mess and our sin it's there isn't it?

behold the man upon the cross my sin upon his shoulder but oh what a permanent reminder what a monument to the grace of the patient restorer the depth of the Father's love for us in all our mess because it was there this God the God who reveals himself to be seen by sinful human beings there that he was seen and he was seen in the eyes of all the world to be the God who restores the failures all the failures of all those who will have faith in him I can't tell you what it means to me to know that my God is Abraham's God the covenant God the God who restores failures if you could see into my heart you would know why but maybe it's a word for some of you here today too do you need a God who restores failures well he's alive and he sees and he hears and he knows it all all about you you can't run away from him but you can run to him and you can trust him you will do that won't you let's pray perverse and foolish

I've strayed but in his love he sought me and on his shoulder gently laid and home rejoicing brought me how we need you our maker our restorer our redeemer our follies our failures are so great what a mess we've made so often whenever we doubt you whenever we've turned to our own way help us to trust you for who you really are the great shepherd the one whose goodness has never failed and never will fail as long as life shall last only we'll find our comfort in your rod of rebuke in your staff of leadership and in the grace the healing grace the restoring grace the strengthening grace that flows from the cross of our saviour the king of love our lord jesus christ for we pray in his name amen