

When heroes seem to be getting it wrong...

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[0 : 00] But one of the frustrating things about reading the Bible, I find, is that many of the characters we expect to be the heroes of the story keep messing up.

You know what I mean? I mean, in movies, you watch movies, right? Most of the time, you know who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. The writers of the movie make it quite clear. And you know, therefore, who to side with. It's not that easy in the Bible, is it? Least of all, in this story that we have in front of us about Abraham and Sarah and their time in the city of Gerar. You see, in this story, you'd expect, knowing what we know so far about Abraham and how he's central in God's plans and all of that, you'd expect Abraham to be the good guy. And you'd expect he's the one whose actions can be examples for us to follow.

And you'd expect Abimelech, this pagan godless king he comes across, you'd expect him to be the bad guy. And I think that's how, secretly, we'd all like to read the Bible, where the good guys and the bad guys are just clear.

[1 : 04] It's very easy. You know who to follow. You know which examples to follow. And then you can go home and do what they do. Nice and easy. But that's not how the Bible works, right?

Because these stories that we'll be working through in Genesis, I'm giving you a warning early on. The stories of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. Firstly, they're real stories.

They're messy. And they're about real people who are far from perfect. And so it's never clear cut. And they're not here to just give us some examples to follow.

Because secondly, what I want you to know about these stories we're going to read, these terms, is that they're here primarily to teach us something more about God and how he works and who he is, and especially how he deals with his covenant people even when they keep messing up.

And that is something very important for us to hear who know that we tend to mess up a lot, don't we? And that's what we're learning in these stories, really. We're learning about God, not about examples to follow.

[2 : 19] Because let's be honest, in this story, Abraham certainly doesn't give us good examples to follow. I mean, in summary, let's think of what he does. He makes wrong assumptions about King Abimelech, first of all. He lies to him about not being married.

He fails to protect his wife from being taken into the king's harem. He puts the king in an unknowingly fatal situation by no fault of the king's. And it's only when God calls time and intervenes that prevents the situation from spiraling out of control.

So that's the story in a nutshell. But let's dive into it a little bit more and see how it all unfolds and see how this story teaches us some very important things about God.

So have a look as we follow along Genesis 20. Now, Abraham and Sarah arrive in the city called Gerar. It's close to modern-day Gaza, where all the rockets are being traded southwest of Israel. But because Abraham's wife is so good-looking, he realizes that's going to cause him trouble going into this foreign city. Men are going to want to kill him to get her.

[3 : 27] And so fearing for his life, he pretends that she's only his sister. Just, you'll remember, like he did back in Egypt in chapter 12. And that didn't end well. Well, it doesn't seem Abraham learns from his past mistakes here.

But I mean, also, if you think about it, considering, if you work the chronology, considering that Sarah was in her 90s by this time, she must have been quite something, right?

And that wasn't good for Abraham. And in fact, it reminds me of that old Jimmy Sol song, if you want to be happy for the rest of your life, never make a pretty woman your wife. Stupid advice, anyway.

But in Abraham's case, it seemed to be true, didn't it? Sarah's age-defying good looks caused a lot of trouble for this guy. But it also got King Abimelech in a lot of trouble, as we see.

So he's thinking, oh, she's nice, and she's available. So as kings in the ancient world do, when they like a woman, they just marry them up. They take them into their collection of wives.

[4 : 31] Except what he didn't know was that she was already married. And so God now steps in. And he has something to say to Abimelech about this. Words that if you read them in verse 3, no mortal man would ever want to hear from the creator of the universe.

You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken. She's a married woman. In the ESV, it's literally, Abimelech, you're a dead man.

God is being serious here. It's words that send a shiver down the spine, don't they? God addressing a human being saying, you're a dead man. But what they do is they tell us something about God, the first thing I want us to see about God.

And that is how God views marriage. I know this is an aside. It's not the main point of this passage. But given how marriage is viewed and sex is viewed in today's culture, I think it's worth spending a few minutes just to see what this story actually tells us about God's view of marriage and how seriously God sees it, much more seriously than our society sees it today.

I mean, most people in our world today see marriage as nothing more than a convenient human arrangement which we think we made up and so we can do with it what we want and we can throw it away when it's not working, get a divorce.

[5 : 58] That's generally how the world sees it. But the truth is, when we read the Bible, we realize we didn't invent marriage. No. It's not our idea.

God invented marriage. It's a divine and it's a holy institution and God takes it deadly seriously. And so should we. And if you mess with it, either as someone interfering in someone else's marriage or disrespecting your own marriage in your thoughts or your actions, if you mess with the sanctity of marriage, you are playing with eternal fire.

And it's stories like this that should remind us of that, right? You're messing with something very precious to God when you mess with marriage. In fact, that's why in the Bible, in Hebrews, it says, marriage should be honored by all and the marriage bed kept pure.

In other words, no sex outside of marriage. I know that sounds pretty weird today, but it's true. The Bible is quite clear. Sex is meant to be enjoyed only within the boundaries of marriage.

That is God's design. The verse goes on. For God will judge the adulterer and the sexually immoral. Not just the adulterer who disrespects the institution of marriage, but the sexually immoral.

[7 : 17] The person who uses sex and their sexuality against the design that it was given. Not for God's glory, but for their own selfish gratification. And you see, the reason God takes this so seriously is because adultery and sexual immorality, whether in thought or in word or in deed, is not just a sin against another person.

It's actually a sin against God directly. And we see that in the story. If you were paying attention, have a look. If we read on, it turns out in this case, God intervened and prevented Abimelech from consummating the marriage with Sarah.

But look what he says from verse 6. He says, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against who?

Me. Not against Abraham. I've kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch it. And so we see here, God calls the sin of adultery not just a sin against Abraham or Sarah, but more importantly, a sin against him.

Do you see that? And the reason is because marriage and sex are God's inventions, and so we mustn't misuse what God has given us for his purposes. We must treat them with utter respect and use them according to God's design, and if we ignore that, God takes it very seriously.

[8 : 48] Now, Abimelech, as we continue in the story, Abimelech realizes how seriously God takes marriage, and so he's petrified. He tells his counsel, guys, we're in trouble.

And what he does then is he actually does everything right. This pagan godless king does everything right to make amends for what he's done against God. So he immediately gives Sarah back to Abraham, and he gives Abraham loads of cattle and slaves to say sorry, even though it was Abraham's fault in the first place, and he didn't deserve it.

And if that wasn't enough, he gives him a thousand shekels. Now we go, okay, that's nice. But do you know how much money that was? So in this time, the average monthly salary for a wage

worker was half a shekel, monthly, half a shekel.

So this amount that Abimelech gives Abraham is equivalent to 2,000 monthly wages. In today's equivalent, you take minimum wage, it's like 3,500 rand times 2,000.

That's 7 million rand equivalent. That's quite a payday for Abraham. And he did nothing. He actually did the wrong things. He didn't deserve any of it. And so the question we're meant to be asking as we get to that point in the story is why does he come out of this story so well when he didn't do anything particularly right?

[10:13] That's the question we should be asking. And I'll tell you why he came out of this story so well. It's for one reason alone. And that is because of the covenant that God has made with him.

Remember last year? If you came and sat in a church on a regular basis, you will know what a covenant is. We spoke a lot about covenant because Genesis, that's one of its main themes. It's what it establishes, that God makes covenants with human beings, these special relationships through which he works in this world. So after the fall of mankind into sin, we saw in Genesis 3, we see that God doesn't leave us alone, even though he has every right to just destroy us, and he almost destroys us all in the flood, but he makes a covenant with one family, Noah and his family, and it's through that covenant that he continues his plans for the world.

And so he's got this plan. God has right from the beginning, right from curse and fall and all the bad stuff that happens. God's got this plan that he's going to restore us back to what he intended for us, and it's through covenants.

That's the way he's decided that he's going to carry out his plan of salvation is through covenants that he makes with human beings. From Genesis for the rest of history. Special relationships with these promises that he gives and signs attached to the promises so that we can know who is part of this covenant, who is involved in this covenant.

[11:42] And as we read on Scripture, we realize God doesn't actually ever work to save outside of these covenants. And so they're super important. And it's super important that we understand covenant relationships that God makes with firstly Abraham and his family, then the whole nation of Israel.

And then, of course, after you read the Old Testament and they forsake their place in the covenant through their lack of faith. And the plan was always for God to send his son and make a new covenant with people from all over the world so that eventually we can come back into God's original design and the new creation.

And so it's always the whole Bible story. It's through covenants and only through covenants that God forwards and continues his salvation plans for the world. But what's really interesting is the people he chooses to make these covenants with are far from perfect.

They make mistakes. They're flawed. And yet that doesn't matter. That's part of the point. Because if you're in a covenant with God, it's not about how good you are or how skilled or excellent you are or how self-disciplined you are.

The only thing that really matters is whether you're in a covenant with God or not. That's essentially what God wants us to understand and probably why he chooses such weirdos and flawed people to make covenants with.

[13:06] And Abraham, yeah, is, yeah, he makes mistakes quite a lot. But he is a man in covenant with God.

A man who God has promised back in Genesis chapter 12 to bless, to make a great nation, to bless whoever blesses him, to curse whoever curses him, and to make him a blessing for the rest of the world.

And God's not going to stop continuing that covenant. And Abraham can't mess that up. All he's got to do is believe. Believe it. That's it. And right here in the story, we actually see God doing that, doing what he said, blessing Abraham with material blessings, despite him not deserving them, which shows us that the first major lesson we get from this passage is that covenant blessings aren't dependent on whether you deserve them or not.

That's the first thing we've got to see here, and we will continue to see. Covenant blessings aren't dependent on whether you deserve them or not. They're dependent alone on God's faithfulness to his promises.

And exactly the same is true today if you are in a covenant relationship with God, which Jesus makes possible for all who believe in him through his death on the cross to atone for your sins, to make us fit to be in a relationship with the holy and perfect God.

[14 : 31] You see, Jesus on the cross, he's the center, that event is the center of the whole Bible story, center of human history, because it makes covenant possible. It makes relationship with God possible through the atoning of our sins.

And that covenant relationship that we can have today that Jesus makes possible for us is initiated in baptism, and it's confirmed by God on a regular basis in communion, in the Lord's Supper.

These are the signs that are attached to this covenant and how God confirms to individuals when we receive these signs in faith that we are indeed in covenant relationship with him.

So we don't have to doubt that. And we don't have to look to ourselves for assurance of whether we're still in or out with God. He tells us, you're still in with me. It's not about you. Just believe. Just take these seals and these signs that I'm giving you, believe in what they represent, and you can be assured that you are still in covenant.

And we can know that the covenant promises that God has made apply to us. God's favor. That we have God's favor. That we have forgiveness of our sins.

[15 : 44] That we have salvation. That we will have resurrection after we die, and we will have eternal life in the new creation. Not due to your good behavior or your ability to make good decisions or your grasp of theology, but purely because of God's covenant that he made with you, and that alone.

And that's what he wants to continue through these stories assure us of. I mean, isn't that encouraging to know when we make stupid mistakes?

And that, I think, is why communion is so important. Because it's God saying, yes, you made stupid mistakes this week. Yes, you made stupid mistakes last year.

But you're still forgiven. The body and blood of my son still atoned for your sins. Believe that. That's what God is saying every time we take the Lord's Supper.

And so in our own journeys through life as Christians, we can know, like Abraham, that even if we mess up and don't do things particularly right, God has still promised to favor us and to bless us and to save us.

[16 : 55] And so these accounts of these flawed and imperfect people in covenant with God are hugely encouraging to us, aren't they? But now there's more that we see in this story as we read on.

Because we see that being members of a covenant with God doesn't only mean that we have God's promises applied to us and we have assurance of God's favor on us and his salvation.

But it also means even more than that that God has chosen to use us flawed people to do his work in the world. I still don't know why.

He could do it much better if he just did his work directly. But in his wisdom, he has chosen us to be the people, the covenant people, people, and he always has throughout history, Abraham, Israel.

He has chosen his covenant people to be the people that he works through to do what he wants to do in this world. And he has therefore given us the responsibility of not only being involved in our world but to represent the needs of those outside of the covenant to him.

[18 : 06] Because he's going to listen to us. It's remarkable, isn't it? But it's exactly what happens in the story. Do you see? As we read on, Abimelech pleads innocence to God.

He asks God to spare him from his judgment and you know what God's reply is effectively? Yeah, you'll need a chat to Abraham about that. If you want to be spared from my judgment, better go talk to Abraham.

That's essentially what he says. I could save you from punishment, Abimelech, but you'll need him to pray for you before I do. See that? Verse 7, what God says to the king, now return the man's wife for he is a prophet and he will pray for you and you will live.

And so despite all of Abraham's shortcomings in this story, God still makes his prayers the way that God will save Abimelech from his judgment.

Do you see that? It's fascinating. We often think our prayers aren't really going to change things. Let's be honest. Let's be brutally honest with ourselves.

[19 : 11] We know we should pray, but when we pray we don't really think our prayers are going to make much of a difference. You know, God's already decided what he's going to do. So how can our prayers realistically change anything?

I think that's a thought we often secretly have. And yes, God has decided already what he's going to do in this world. But here's the thing.

He hasn't just decided the ends. He's also decided the means that he'll use to achieve those ends. And God uses means, often very ordinary means.

So, to illustrate it, think of it like this. A captain of a ship is in command of the ship, right? He decides where the ship will go. But, he also decides, the captain also decides that it's through the work of the crew, the helmsman and the navigator and the engineer doing their work that the ship will get to where he's decided it will be.

And in the same way, God decides what he's going to do in this world. But he also decides that it's through the prayers of his covenant people, the work that he calls us to do.

[20 : 24] He's decided it's through those prayers that he's going to do what he's decided to do. Does that make sense? God has ordained the means, not just the ends. And the means, one of the very important means of grace that God works in this world, especially the way he works with those outside of the covenant, is through the prayers of his people.

And that's one of the reasons it's so important that we pray seriously. Not just for ourselves, but for our neighbors and our communities and our governments.

Nobody else is going to. It's funny, because if you think about it, what our government needs, what our unsaved neighbors need, what our work colleagues need, what our communities need, they need people in covenant with God to be praying for them.

Because God only ever works through the covens that he's made with human beings, and we can't assume he will do anything in our country apart from what we ask for him in prayer.

And that is one of the reasons prayer is going to be such a major focus of our church life this year. You'll notice, if you look at the calendar, that instead of once a term having a prayer meeting, which we normally did, we're going to meet once a month, the first week of every month, and we're going to break growth groups in the first week of every month so that we can all come together in prayer.

[21 : 50] Because it's so important. Because it's one of the works God calls us to do. It's not just something he says, do when you have time, or do when it's convenient, or do when other things aren't getting in the way.

He calls us as a work to do that. He commands us over and over again to be praying for governments as we read in 1 Timothy earlier. To be praying for our communities, to be praying for the unsaved because he has ordained that he's going to work in our world through our prayers.

And so we've got to take that seriously. We've got to make prayer a priority. And so, if you have an appropriate device, use the prayer app. Use whatever tools you can use to make prayer a daily, regular thing.

And the prayer meeting dates are already on the calendar. So you can't actually say, well, I had something else planned because you know for the rest of the year when our prayer meetings are. Now, I don't want to force you to come to prayer meetings, but I want you to want to come because it's a great privilege to present the requests of our world to a God who hears us. And we need to do that.

[22 : 53] Our world needs us to do that. Our country needs us to do that. Don't complain about ESCOM and corruption and crime if you're not willing to come and pray about it.

Now, before I finish, I want you lastly to see an unexpected twist in the story. As I read through it a few times as I was preparing to preach on it, and then something stood out for me and I said, oh, that's interesting.

And it's in verse 17. Look in your Bibles. Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his female slaves so that they could have children again.

For the Lord had kept all the women in Abimelech's household from conceiving because of Abraham's wife, Sarah. Okay, so Abraham's prayer opened the wombs of the woman which God had closed.

That was part of God's judgment on Abimelech for marrying Sarah. Now, what do you think is interesting about that? If you know the story of Genesis so far, and especially where we are in the story, well, Abraham's own wife couldn't conceive children.

[24 : 02] And that's why I think this is mentioned here in this story, specifically about Abimelech's household not being able to conceive and how they were because of Abraham's prayer. And so, the question is, if God opened the wombs of Abimelech's whole household when Abraham asked him to, why didn't he do that for Sarah right away?

Why did they still have to wait? Well, I'll tell you why. I think it's precisely because they were in covenant with God that God caused them to wait and be patient.

Because God had other priorities for Abraham and Sarah other than just immediate help and blessing. In particular, we see in these stories that Abraham and Sarah needed their faith in God's promises to be trained and to be developed.

And this is the way God chose to do that. And that is why they had to wait 14 years after God promised them a child before Sarah finally gave birth to Isaac, which is the very next story in chapter 21.

But you see, God wanted Abraham and Sarah to learn how to have faith in his promises. And the reason why it was so important for them to learn how and develop their faith in his promises was because faith was precisely what was going to keep them in this covenant relationship with God.

[25 : 29] So we've learned, we've seen this story, the great benefits of being in covenant relationship with God. But right at the end, we're reminded, and throughout these stories, we're reminded that the thing that keeps people in covenant relationship with God is our faith in his promises, but that faith needs training.

It needs to be developed. And God is in the business of developing and training his people's faith. Because that is how faith is strengthened. It's like you strengthen a muscle, you know.

You don't go to the gym and just sit there and think, I want my muscles to get stronger. You have to actually lift stuff up and heavy stuff. You have to give resistance to your muscles, right?

for them to be strengthened. It's exactly the same with faith. Our faith is only strengthened when it encounters resistance. When God doesn't give us what we pray for right away.

When he puts us in situations that seem to contradict his very promises, which he does next week, we'll see, in Abraham's great test. And when we have to patiently wait for his timing to give us what we need.

[26 : 37] God is, it's not because he hasn't heard us. We're his covenant people. He hears every prayer. It's because he has other priorities for us than just immediate blessing. I don't know if you've noticed this, but often God seems quicker to answer the prayers we pray for those outside of the covenant for healing and for help than the prayers we pray for ourselves.

Have you noticed that? Because he's got other priorities for us. As Peter puts it in his letter, he says this in 1 Peter 1, Now for a little while you may have to suffer grief.

You may have to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. He's writing to Christians. He goes on and says, These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith of greater worth than gold may result in praise, glory, and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Peter likens our faith to gold. It's the most precious thing we have because it's what keeps us in covenant relationship with God. It's what secures us into his eternal promises in the new creation. But just like gold, it needs to be refined through fire so the impurities can be burnt away. Well, our faith is the same as Christians. Trials are the way that God refines our faith and faith is the way he keeps us in the covenant and it is worth all of the trials because we need to be in covenant with God as we've been reminded in this story.

[28 : 08] God only ever works to save and bless humans through the covenants he's made and so if you're not in covenant with God yet, repent and be baptized and come to Christ.

You need to. There's no other way for you to be saved and to have God's promises apply to you. but if you are part of the covenant then be assured this morning of God's favor towards you even when you mess up in this coming week, in this coming month, in this coming year, even when you don't make the right decisions, even when you don't keep all your New Year's resolutions you planned, be assured that God still favors you, you're still one of His children and be assured that He will always hear your prayers even if it doesn't seem like it and He will always act in response to them in His time and so let us go out now encouraged of God's good favor towards us, His people and let us live each day, wake up each day knowing that we're in covenant with God and He hears us and He is for us.

It's the best way to get through your day, trust me. Let's pray. Lord, we do thank You that You have condescended to make relationship possible for sinful human beings with You.

We thank You that right from Genesis You teach us that the way that You save and the way You are going to restore this world is through covenant and we pray, Lord, that You would help us to take that seriously, not only to, as covenant people, have the great assurance of knowing Your favor and Your promises applied to us, but also help us to fulfill our covenant responsibilities that

You call us, the work You call us to do to represent You to the world and to represent the world to You in prayer.
Help us to be people of prayer and work through our prayers to achieve Your goals, Your plans for this world in Jesus' name. Amen.