

# Human Failure and God's Faithfulness

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Preacher: Daniel Sladek

[ 0 : 0 0 ]     What do you do when someone lets you down? Maybe somebody repeatedly lets you down. We might have various strategies to deal with that. Maybe we block them. We stop replying to their messages. Maybe we stop reading their messages. We might unfriend them on social media. We avoid being around them. That might work. I'm not advocating that, by the way, but that might work for other people. What happens when the person who lets you down is you?

When you repeatedly do the thing that you swore you wouldn't do again. There's a song by Tom Waits, and he says, There are things I've done I can't erase. I want to look in the mirror and see another face.

I said never, but I'm doing it again. I want to walk away and start over again. That's what we'd like to do. We want to look in the mirror and see another face, but we look in the mirror and we see the same face.

What do we do when we let ourselves down, when we let other people down? I think that's very much one of the themes of this chapter. And as we look at that, there are going to be three things, three points that we look at as we work through this passage. The first thing that we're going to see is a failed Abraham.

That might seem unduly harsh, but I think as we look at the passage, we come to the conclusion that at this point, Abraham is failing.

[ 1 : 3 2 ]     Abraham was worried that people would fancy his wife and that they'd kill him to get her. Now, we might wonder, because at this point, if we keep track of the narrative, Sarah is an older woman by this point. We might wonder about that.

It's important to remember that in Abraham's world, people married not because of love, but for advantage. And Sarah was connected with one of the richest men in the region.

So you can see why people might want to be married to Sarah. If Sarah was already married, well, then somebody couldn't marry her. It is striking, as we read through this passage, how seriously people took marriage.

It's not just simply in the Bible. Abimelech is horrified when he finds out what happened. And throughout the ancient world, in Egypt, in the Mesopotamian region, north of where Abraham was as well, we have texts regularly which speak of adultery as the great sin.

It was viewed as an offense against the gods. So they couldn't simply marry Sarah. But what if her husband had an accident?

[ 2 : 5 0 ]     What if something just happened to Abraham? Well, then they could marry Sarah. That's obviously what Abraham is worried about. So he plans to tell people that Sarah is his sister.

And the beauty of this plan is that it's true. It's partly true. Sarah was his sister. You may feel that that's kind of gross.

Notice in verse 12, notice how Abraham himself describes it. Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, though not the daughter of my mother, as if that makes it better.

She's not my full sister, because that would be really icky. Just my half-sister. And then notice the way he describes it. And she became my wife. Don't know how that happened.

Just happened. It's like the language that Aaron uses, right, with the golden calf, where they took the gold and everything and threw it into the fire and out popped the calf.

[ 3 : 53 ] Who knows how that happened? Abraham describes this in an interesting way. Now, the thing is, we need to be clear about the fact that this is wrong.

It's wrong to be married to your half-sister, and the Bible isn't endorsing that. In fact, the Bible explicitly condemns or prohibits the kind of thing that Abraham had done.

Later on in the Pentateuch, in Leviticus 18, it says, Do not have sexual relations with your sister, either your father's daughter or your mother's daughter, whether she was born in the same house or elsewhere.

It's really important that we say that the Bible isn't condoning what Abraham and Sarah had done. The best and simplest way to understand what's happened is to recognize that God's people often do things that they shouldn't do.

Nevertheless, God is able to bring good, even out of the bad situations that arise from our bad choices. So we need to be clear about that. Abraham shouldn't have done this, but he had done it, and that's the situation that he's in.

[ 5 : 06 ] And God is able to bring good out of that bad choice. But as we look at Abraham's continuing bad choices, the thing that he came up with, the lie about, or the half-truth about his wife, we might ask at this point, who is Abraham protecting?

He's not protecting Abimelech. Notice in verse 3, God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife.

And notice Abimelech is horrified by this. The people of his kingdom are horrified by what has happened. Abraham wasn't protecting Abimelech when he did this.

By doing this, he put Abimelech in a dangerous situation. Now you might think, Well, did Abraham have any kind of responsibility toward Abimelech? Common decency might have led him not to do that.

He wasn't protecting Abimelech. He wasn't protecting the people of the place where he was staying. In verse 9, Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, What have you done to us?

[ 6 : 22 ] And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? There's an irony here, isn't there? Abraham was supposed to be a blessing to the people around him.

If we went back to chapter 12, he's supposed to be a blessing to the nations. As a result of what he's chosen to do, he's actually made himself a curse to the people around him. He's not protecting Abimelech.

He's not protecting the people amongst whom he's sojourning. He's certainly not protecting his wife. What did Abraham think was going to be the positive outcome of this clever plan that he'd come up with?

This is exactly the outcome that one might have foreseen. This wasn't some unforeseen accidental thing that happened as a result of the lie that Abraham told. This was exactly what he had imagined happening.

And he thought maybe that would protect him. So he's not protecting Abimelech. He's not protecting the people he's staying amongst. He's definitely not protecting his wife. And he's also not protecting God's promises.

[ 7 : 28 ] I've mentioned these a couple of times, but if we look back at chapter 12, as we've done this series on the life of Abraham, we see how these promises unfold and develop.

So in chapter 12, in verse 2 we read, I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great.

Abraham's not going to become a great nation if he loses his wife, especially as we come to chapter 15, and we read in verse 4, and behold, the word of the Lord came to him.

This man, this is speaking about a servant whom Abraham had in his household. He still didn't have a son. In chapter 15, verse 4, God says, and behold, this man shall not be your heir.

Your very own son shall be your heir. In chapter 17, in verse 15, then God said to Abraham, as for Sarai, your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name.

[ 8 : 37 ] I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. Okay? Abraham is not protecting God's promises.

And if we went back to chapter 12, in verse 13, sorry, chapter 12, verse 3, in the second part of that, I will bless those who bless you.

In you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. He's not been a blessing to the people of Abimelech's kingdom. He's been a curse to them.

This is a disaster. Unless you think, I'm being too hard on Abraham at this point. We need to appreciate how serious this is, first of all.

Abraham's bad choices are not just a personal, familial tragedy. It's a tragedy of worldwide consequences. The New Testament treats the promises that were made to Abraham as the gospel.

[ 9 : 46 ] Jesus is the seed of Abraham. Abraham was risking everything. The second reason that it's important to notice this aspect of the chapter is because we can see ourselves in Abraham.

Our bad choices wouldn't have the same cataclysmic effect that Abraham's could have done, but we're still like him, aren't we? And one of the things that the Bible does is to reveal our sinfulness.

Abraham had a problem with habitual sin. Do you notice that in chapter 20, in verse 13? If we were to go back again to chapter 12, those of you who've been here, you'll know actually this is the second time that Abraham did this.

He's not really learned, has he? And in fact, in verse 13 of this chapter, this is kind of breathtaking because this is him talking to Abimelech. It's quite shocking, really, the things that Abraham says to Abimelech.

Did you notice, by the way, when Abimelech said, what have you done? And Abraham's answer to him was, well, I thought nobody here fears God. Abraham is speaking to the person whom he has harmed, and he says, well, I did this because I thought you all were so wicked.

[ 11 : 03 ] It was my only chance. Okay, well, speaking still to this person, we read in verse 13, when God calls me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, this is the kindness you must do to me.

At every place at which we come, say of me, he's my brother. Okay, it's recorded twice that Abraham did this, but actually here, Abraham admits this was his regular plan.

Abraham had a problem with habitual sin. He kept doing the same thing, and that's plausible, isn't it? It's really believable. Sometimes critics read the Bible, and they see two accounts of Abraham doing this, and they think, well, these aren't actually two events.

It's the same story that God inserted twice. That seems quite naive, doesn't it? Because if you know your own nature, that's what we're like. We don't tend to make a mistake as a one-off thing.

We regularly make the same kind of mistake over and over. Abraham's sin was motivated by fear, wasn't it? He was failing to trust in God, and he was trying to sort things out for himself, even in sinful ways.

[ 12 : 14 ] Now, that's understandable. You can understand that Abraham was fearful, and maybe we do that. Maybe in the understandable pressures that we face, rather than trusting in God, we try to come up with our own solutions, even if those might be sinful.

Abraham's sin was motivated by fear. It resulted in selfishness. We saw that, didn't we? Abraham was only concerned about himself.

He wasn't concerned about his neighbors. He wasn't concerned about his wife. In fact, it's a really shocking passage, isn't it? Abraham was prepared to put his wife in danger to save himself.

that that was the natural outcome of Abraham's plan. Maybe we excuse our sin because we think, well, it's wrong, but it only really hurts me. But our sins don't only really hurt ourselves.

Our sins damage other people. And then notice also how manipulative Abraham became. in verse 13.

[ 13 : 25 ] When God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, this is the kindness you must do to me. You could translate that as don't you really love me? If you really love me, Sarah, you do this for me.

Well, that's shocking. Abraham ought to have loved Sarah and not have put her in that situation. Our sin can lead us to manipulate other people. So the first thing that we notice as we come to this passage is a failed Abraham.

And that's pretty somber. And maybe at this point you're thinking that you'll have a wee word with Ali and tell him not to let that guy take services again. It is a somber passage, but it's important that we allow the Bible to convict us of our sins.

That's one of the things that Scripture does. Notice how this passage, it's almost written as a bit of a rebuke to Abraham. Abraham. In verse 16, this is Abimelech speaking to Sarah.

To Sarah he said, behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. At this point, Abimelech knows that he's not just her brother, but he still calls her that.

[ 14 : 36 ] It's a bit of a rebuke to Abraham. I think it's important to point that out just to emphasize the fact that the Bible isn't condoning what Abraham did. The Bible's repudiating the kind of things that Abraham did.

But it's also important that we allow the Bible to convict us of our sin. Because it's not as if we're standing in judgment on Abraham as we consider what he did. We find these same things in our own lives.

We need to recognize that we are at times fearful rather than faithful. We are at times selfish. We are at times manipulative. We need to recognize those and other sins in our lives and confess them to God.

Another thing that we can say though, if you think this seems very somber, is that this is more hopeful than it might at first seem. First of all, because there was hope for Abraham.

I've entitled my first point to failed Abraham, but he wasn't ultimately failed, was he? Because God was with him and God was at work through him. If you find that you are at times fearful or selfish or manipulative, you might think, well, there's no hope for me.

[ 15 : 50 ] How can I possibly, we sing the words of Psalm 15, the kind of person who can dwell in the presence of God, and we might think, well, that's not me. How can there possibly be hope for me?

But if Abraham was fearful and selfish and manipulative and there was hope for him, then that means that there's also hope for us. It's weirdly encouraging that the people we find in the Bible are failed, broken people just like us.

It gives us hope because God's word speaks to people like us. That's tremendously encouraging. But the other reason that this actually is hopeful is because Abraham isn't the hero of the story.

That takes us to our second point. We move from a failed Abraham at this point, at least, to a faithful God. This is the real emphasis of the passage, and if you take one thing away with you today, I hope that will be it.

God is keeping his promises. Remember, I drew your attention back to chapter 12. God had made promises to Abraham in chapter 12. He had said, for example, I will bless you and make your name great.

[ 17 : 06 ] I will bless those who bless you and him who dishonors you, I will curse. God had made promises to Abraham and we see in chapter 20 that God is keeping those promises even in spite of Abraham.

Abraham risked Abimelech and we see that God is faithful toward Abimelech. God protected him in verse 6. Then God said to him in the dream, yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart and it was I who kept you from sinning against me.

God protected Abimelech. Abraham risked his wife. God protected her in verse 3. But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken.

For she is a man's wife. Abraham at this point didn't protect Sarah but God did. We see in this passage that God was immediately faithful to her.

Now, that's emphasized I think in the way that the narrative is told at the beginning of it. It seems like instantly God appeared to Abimelech. In actual fact it may have been a little bit longer than that because we read at the end of it that the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.

[ 18 : 34 ] It must have taken them some time to notice that, right? So maybe this didn't happen instantly but it's presented that way emphasizing the faithfulness of God to Sarah.

In this immediate event God was faithful to her and he protected her. Next week, Lord willing, well I'm not sure if it's next week, the next time that Ali preaches on Genesis 21, we're going to see there that God was also faithful to his promises to Sarah.

The Lord visited Sarah as he had said and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. Now that took years. The reason I mention that is that we want God to act now.

God is at work now in our lives and sometimes you see the faithfulness of God demonstrated immediately. Sometimes, like Sarah waiting for the child, sometimes we have to wait longer.

But God is always faithful. You can trust in him that he knows you, he knows what you're going through and he is good and he is faithful. God protected Abimelech.

[ 19 : 44 ] God protected Sarah. Strikingly, God is even faithful to Abraham. Abraham. In verses 14 and 15, then Abimelech took sheep and oxen and male servants and female servants and gave them to Abraham and returned Sarah, his wife, to him.

God is faithful through Abimelech but it was God who was at work. God is faithful even to Abraham. He treats him better than he deserved.

And this is really, really important. God had made promises not merely to protect Abraham but to bless all people through Abraham.

And we see here that God is doing that in spite of what Abraham had done. And we can trust in this same God. You can trust that God will be faithful to you, that he will deal with you better than you deserve, that he will deal kindly and graciously with you.

I'm by nature a very cynical person. I don't know if some of you will be like that. As Christians, we should be profoundly hopeful. Not because we're gullible or naive but because we have a faithful God.

[ 21 : 07 ] We may sometimes, for example, look at the state of Christianity in this country. And we may lament it and in some ways we should. We see so few Christians, few congregations.

We see lots of empty church buildings as you drive through towns throughout Scotland but few congregations. This passage should be a profound encouragement to us because at this point God's promises rested on two people, Abraham and Sarah.

And Abraham didn't even seem like a very good bet, did he? But God was faithful and God did astonishing things through them. We can look at our outward circumstances sometimes and we might be tempted to doubt, we might be tempted to lament but we have a faithful God and an all-powerful God who can do things we could never imagine.

So in this passage we see a failed Abraham but we see a faithful God and the third thing, the final thing that we see here is hints of a better Abraham.

The point is that God would demonstrate his faithfulness ultimately by bringing someone better than Abraham. Notice what Abraham does in this passage. In verse 7 we read, Now then return the man's wife for he is a prophet so he will pray for you and you shall live.

[ 22 : 29 ] and in verses 17 to 18, Then Abraham prayed to God and God healed Abimelech and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children.

Abraham interceded for Abimelech. We need to bear in mind as we read through the Old Testament that sometimes as we read through Genesis, sometimes Abraham represents us.

Sometimes Abraham is a sort of example, either a good example in Genesis 15.6 we read that Abraham trusted in God, he believed in God. Sometimes Abraham stands as a counterexample, don't be like Abraham, don't be like him in Genesis chapter 20.

So sometimes Abraham is just like us. At other points as we read through the passages we need to appreciate that Abraham is a foreshadow, Abraham is pointing forward to someone greater than himself.

to be put it simply, sometimes Abraham represents Jesus. Notice here that Abraham is called a prophet.

[ 23 : 36 ] That's the first time the word prophet is used in the Bible. Abraham is a prophet. In Acts chapter 3, Peter said that Moses said, the Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people.

you must listen to everything he tells you. Abraham was a prophet. Peter says Moses was a prophet. All of them were pointing forward to Jesus who is a greater prophet.

And notice what else the Bible says about Jesus. This is in Hebrews. We read, consequently, Jesus is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him since he always lives to make intercession for them.

Jesus intercedes for you. Abraham was a prophet and he interceded for Abimelech. He prayed for Abimelech and God answered that prayer.

Jesus is a greater prophet, a greater priest, and when he intercedes for you, you can be certain that the Father will hear him. Imagine that. Imagine God answered Abraham's prayers as imperfect as Abraham was.

[ 24 : 59 ] How much more confidence can you have that the Father will answer Jesus' prayers as he intercedes for you? What do you do? That was the question that we started out with.

What do you do when you're the person who lets you down? Do you just try harder? We can turn to God.

We can know that God is faithful and we turn to God through Jesus. Why would God accept me? Why would God look favorably upon me? Well, we know that God has loved us, that he sent his son into this world, that Jesus died for all of our terrible decisions, for all of our fearful, selfish, manipulative behavior.

Jesus bore the consequences of that for us and now, raised from the dead, he sits at the Father's right hand and he intercedes for you. How can you have hope?

Well, you can have hope not because of yourself, but because God is faithful. And in his faithfulness, he has sent a greater prophet, a greater priest who now intercedes for us.

[ 26 : 09 ] So you can have hope because you can turn to this faithful God. So in this passage, we see a failed Abraham, but we also see a faithful God and we see a better Abraham.

We see someone pointing us to our Savior, the Lord Jesus. Let's bow our heads and pray. our Father in heaven, we praise you that you are a merciful God.

We marvel that you deal with us so much better than what we deserve. We pray that you would bless your word to us. We pray that you would speak to us through your word.

We ask that you would watch over us all, hear our prayers, forgive our sins. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.