

OPENING PRAYER: (Psalm 100 and Colossians 1) O God, we worship you with gladness, and we come before you with joy. You are the One True God, the Living God, you are the Father of our Lord Jesus. You made us, and we are yours. We are your people, the sheep of your pasture.

We come through your gates with thanksgiving, and we enter your courts with praise, because you, O God, are good, and your love endures forever. You are always faithful, one generation after another. Thank you for bringing us into your family.

O God, fill us with knowledge of your will. Fill us with godly understanding, through the Holy Spirit, so we will know pleases you. We want to live lives worthy of the Lord Jesus, we want to honour him every day. We want to bear the fruit that you want to see.

We can do none of this on our own. So strengthen us with your great power, and your glorious might, so that we would have endurance, O God, and patience, and live lives worthy of the Lord.

You made your people holy, through Christ you made us holy. And your people are inheriting a kingdom of light, and we here today are among those brought into your kingdom of light. You rescued us out of darkness, and brought us into the kingdom of your Son, whom you love beyond measure. In him we are freed from that dark road, and have forgiveness of sins. May your grace and peace be with us here today. Amen.

### Abraham, Sarah, Patriarchalism, and God

Genesis 20,21

I will tell you two Genesis stories today, one from Genesis 20, and one from Genesis 21. They are both stories about Abraham and Sarah and God.

#### Sarah is My Sister – Genesis 20

In Genesis 17, when Abraham was 99, God told him, “Sarah will bear a son to you by this time next year. A son in one year, Abraham, you will be the father, and Sarah will be the mother.”

Shortly after this, Abraham had 3 visitors, two who are actually angels, and the third some appearance of God himself. One of them says, “I will come back at this time next year, and by then, your wife Sarah will have a son.” Sarah also heard this, and laughed. This person then repeated, “I will come back at this time next year, and Sarah will have a son.” That’s Gen 17.

In Genesis 20, Abraham moved to the southern end of Canaan, and he told the people there that Sarah was his sister. We read about the same thing in Gen 12, 24 years earlier. This story is much the same, but we need to understand that the stakes are a higher now, because this is during the year in which God told Abraham and Sarah that she would now have a son.

Abimelek, the local king, took Sarah for himself. God came to Abimelek in a dream, and said to him, “You are as good as dead, because of the woman you have taken; she’s a married woman!” I hope I never hear God say in a dream that because of what I’ve done, I’m as good as dead.

Abimelek had not gone near her, so he said, “Lord, I am innocent. Will you destroy us? Did Abraham not say, ‘she is my sister,’ and did Sarah not also say, ‘he is my brother’? I have done this with a clear conscience, and clean hands.”

And in the dream, God said, “Yes, I know that your conscience is clean, that’s why I kept you from sinning against me.” (Did you hear that, people; “sinning against *me*.”) “That is why I did not let you touch her,” said God.

“Now return the man’s wife, and he will pray for you, and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all who belong to you will die.”

That’s how the dream ended. Early in the morning, Abimelek got all his officials together, and told them about the dream. They were terrified. They knew they were on the edge of disaster.

Then king Abimelek called Abraham. He said, “Abraham, what have you done to us? How have I wronged you, that you brought such guilt and danger on me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should never be done. Abraham, why on earth did you hide that Sarah was your wife, and bring God’s wrath to my door?”

Abraham said, “King Abimelek, I said to myself, ‘There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.’” Did you get that? Abraham said to himself, “There is surely no fear of God in this place, so they will kill me.” Abraham was wrong.

We are supposed to notice that. There *was* reverence for God in that place. The dream scared the daylight out of Abimelek. When he told his officials, they were just as frightened. They could not wait to correct this as much as possible, and they did so.

It really sounds like if Abraham and Sarah had been open about the marriage, there would have been no problem at all. Abimelek would have respected that. The way he talks to God, he knows better than to take another man’s wife. God seems to have agreed with that.

We get the same impression from Pharaoh in Genesis 12. Pharaoh was indignant with Abraham. “Why didn’t you tell me she was your wife? Why did you do this to me? Why did you say she was your sister?” It sounds like Pharaoh in Gen 12 would have left Sarah alone had he known. Abe was sure of the danger, and wrong!

Let’s keep reading Gen 20: Abraham told Abimelek: “When God called me to leave my father’s house, I said to Sarah, ‘this is how you can show your love for me, Sarah. “Everywhere we go, *everywhere we go*, say of me, “he is my brother.” This is how you can show your love for me.”

(It sounds like it might have happened more than twice.) So, Abimelek gave Sarah back to Abraham, and made Abraham rich all over again, and treated them remarkably well.

Real quick, three things: one, God was obviously taking very good care of Abraham and Sarah, but Abraham has no faith in God's protection in these circumstances. In the beginning of Gen 12, God said, "I will make a great nation of you, Abraham." At that point Abraham has no children. He goes to Egypt, and fears for his life because of beautiful Sarah.

What about God's promise to make a great nation of Abraham? Abraham believed enough to head for Canaan, which is important. But in Egypt, he let go of that.

Two, the story is told so that we will understand there was little danger. Everything would have been fine without God acting. It seems Pharaoh and Abimelek both would have respected the marriage. Abraham has this big fear, but it is mostly imagination. There's no danger.

Three, God said, "you and Sarah will have a child within a year." Said it three times. Abraham threw that all away to save his life. "Take Sarah, go ahead, she's just my sister." Does not trust God, does not protect Sarah. And God showed up, and cleaned up the mess, and made Abraham even richer. That's what happened. Now to Genesis 21.

#### Get Rid of the Slave and her Son Gen 21:8-21

At the beginning of Gen 21, we read about Isaac's birth, told mostly through Sarah's eyes. She was delighted, she laughed, and she gave thanks to God. But that did not last.

There was a big celebration when Isaac was weaned. This probably happened when he was 2 or 3, weaning takes longer in those societies. And when infant mortality is high, a child being alive and healthy at 2 or 3 is reason to celebrate. They had a great feast.

At the feast, Sarah saw the son that Hagar that bore to Abraham, that would be Ishmael, mocking Isaac, her son. She didn't waste time. She said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, because her son is not going to share the inheritance with my son Isaac."

To Sarah, this was still between her and Hagar, her son and Hagar's son. "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, that woman's son will not get a part of my son's inheritance."

In Gen 17, God was clear that the line of his blessing would go through Sarah's son, not Hagar's son. But neither Abraham nor Sarah were always sure that God would keep his promises.

Abraham was greatly distressed, very displeased, because this was *his* son. To Sarah, the two boys are either *her* son, or *Hagar's* son. But Abraham sees them both as *his* two sons, and his wife wants him to throw one out. Abraham was horrified. How could do that to his own son?

Notice that both Abraham and Sarah seem to assume that whatever the other one wants, they will do. We'll come back to that later. He was troubled and torn. So God spoke to Abraham.

He said, "Abraham, don't be so troubled and worried about the boy and your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says, you do it, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will continue. And furthermore, I will take care of your son Ishmael, and of Hagar. So do what Sarah says."

Early the next morning, Abraham took some food, and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders, and sent her off with the boy.

Well, Hagar got into trouble again, just like that other time, when she met "the God who sees me." God was still watching, and rescued her and Ishmael again.

Back when Hagar was pregnant with Ishmael, God told Hagar that her son would be a wild donkey of a man, he would be against everyone, and everyone would be against him, but he would survive and become a nation. And that's how it is to this day.

#### Abraham and Sarah and Patriarchal Society

We get more stories about this married couple than any other in the Bible. Did you notice that neither Abraham nor Sarah ever refused the other? In Gen 12 they were in Egypt, and Abraham said, "Sarah, tell them you're my brother, that way they won't kill me."

So she said she was his brother. She did this to save Abraham's life. Her feelings about this are not reported. Pharaoh made Sarah his wife. It was certainly wrong on Abraham's part. God acted to get Abraham and Sarah back together.

In Gen 16, Sarah said, "Abraham, God won't let me have children, so go to Hagar my slave and have a child with her. Maybe I can build a family that way." So Abraham did that. His feelings are not reported. That brings trouble, too.

In Gen 20, Abraham did "Sarah is just my sister" again, and a different king took Sarah into his home. Abraham explains himself this way, "I told Sarah, 'Sarah, everywhere we go, show your love for me by saying that you're my sister. That way they won't kill me.'"

Abraham did not command her. He appeals to his fear, his danger, and to her love for him. She did what he asked. Her feelings are not reported. It's bad again, but God gets them back together.

In Gen 21, Sarah says, "Abraham, get rid of the slave woman and her son. He's not splitting the inheritance with my son." Abraham did not dismiss this. He was very upset, he wanted to care for his Ishmael, and he also wanted to care for Sarah. At first he did not tell her yes or no. Then God said to Abraham, "do whatever Sarah wants. I will take care of things."

Both Abraham and Sarah assume that if the other really wants something, they will do it. In every one of these cases, the request was wrong, and came from fear or a lack of trust in God. Fear turns God's people into functional atheists. Suddenly, God no longer exists.

What surprises me is this: the social system in Genesis and the OT is undeniably patriarchal, based on male leadership and the male line. I had assumed that in a patriarchal society, the husband ruled and the wife did what she was told. But that's not how Abraham and Sarah treated each other. If either one really wanted something, the other did it.

Were all marriages like that in those days? I don't know. The other stories in Genesis sound like this, and so do all the marriage stories in the Bible. This much is clear: we must not assume that just because society was organized in a patriarchal way, we know how husbands and wives lived with each other. We make assumptions the Bible does not support.

The one time Abraham hesitates to do what Sarah wanted, God supported Sarah. God did not think it was wrong for Abraham to cooperate with Sarah's unreasonable request.

Abraham never appeals to male authority or husband's authority, and he does not seem to assume it. They both give the other the reason for the request. In each case it amounts to something like, "Please do something for me, and here's why." The other one listened, and did it.

It is clear that God found all these requests a problem, in one way or another, but God seems fine with how Sarah and Abraham treated each other.

People tend to find what they look for in the Bible. If you look for the most oppressive OT laws about women that you can find, then you will find some nasty ones. I have.

If you look for encouraging laws about women, you will find them, too. "Children, honour your father and your mother." To children growing up in a home like that, the father was not the head of the home, the parents were the head. For the children, father and mother had equal claim to obedience and respect. That's in the ten commandments. So, what do you want to find?

But, and here's the real point, if you want to find out how husbands and wives actually treated each other, how they lived together, read the stories. Not the laws, the stories.

If you want to learn about the laws, read the laws. If you want to know how they treated each other, how they lived together, read the stories. The stories are not what I was taught to expect. All the marriage stories in the Bible sound much the same as this.

#### The God of Abraham and Sarah

The real story here though is not about Abraham or Sarah or their marriage. The real story is about God, that remarkable God, who is also our remarkable God. God had decided to bless them, and take care of them, and he did.

Sometimes they showed great faith, and sometimes they did not. But when they were faithless, God remained faithful. He protected them, and he cleaned up after them, rescued them from troubles that they'd brought on themselves. God is so determined to use these people, and so good-natured about it all.

God was the architect of this plan to bless all the nations. He was also the encourager along the way, repeating his promises. And, God was also the custodian, the janitor, coming along after them and cleaning up the messes that they left behind. Architect, Encourager, and Janitor.

Abraham and Sarah did not have easy lives, there were many hard things in their lives. But God was watching over them, and making sure that his purposes for them were completed. And that kind of care and blessing did not end when those two died. It was passed down through Isaac and Rebekah, and then to all the Israelites.

And five times in Genesis we read that this blessing is going to all the nations (12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). God wants that 'Abraham and Sarah blessing' to include *all* peoples. Here is what Paul writes to the Gentile churches in Galatia: *Christ redeemed us, so that the blessing promised to Abraham might come to Gentiles through faith in Jesus Christ.* (Galatians 3:13-14)

Because we trusted in Christ, we ourselves, Gentile believers, are under this special umbrella of blessing that God began with Abraham and Sarah. We've been included. *Christ redeemed us, so that the blessing promised to **Abraham** might come to **Gentiles** through faith in **Jesus Christ**.* Amen.

PRAYER: Thank you God for these Abraham and Sarah stories. We are talking to the God that called Abraham. You are the God that met Hagar in the desert, and she said to you, "You are the God who sees me." You are the God that rescued Sarah from Pharaoh, and Abimelek. You are the God that make her laugh, you did for Sarah what no one thought was possible.

Those people are so real, and you are just as real in the middle of it all. And you have brought us in, Canadian Gentiles 4000 years later. You sent your Son, and brought us in. And we thank you, and praise you. Teach us to trust you, O God. Increase our faith. May faith steer us more than fear. Help us to be good to each other. We'd like to live lives worthy of the Lord. Amen.

BENEDICTION: May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage our hearts, and strengthen us in every good deed and word. Amen. Go in God's peace, to love and serve the Lord.