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Studies in Genesis

(Leaflet 21)

ABRAHAM'S FAILURE AND GOD'S FAITHFULNESS

Genesis 20:1—21:34

Our lesson today, which covers chapters twenty and twenty-one, has to do with two experiences in the life of Abraham in his relationship with Abimelech, king of Gerar, the second a sequel to the first; and it has to do also with two other highly significant events in the life of the patriarch, recorded in these chapters between the first and the second experiences of Abraham and Abimelech.

Accordingly, our lesson falls logically into four parts: (1) Abraham's falsehood concerning Sarah in Gerar, and God's consequent dealing with Abimelech; (2) the birth of Isaac; (3) the sending away of Hagar and Ishmael; and (4) the covenant between Abraham and Abimelech.

As we read these pages, we are impressed with two striking contrasts—Abraham's failure and God's faithfulness. Abraham went to Gerar and told a falsehood, the same story he had told in Egypt some twenty years previously, saying that Sarah was his sister. But God was faithful and protected Sarah. Again, God was faithful in sending Isaac, the son of promise, even though Abraham's faith in the fulfillment of this promise had at times wavered. Yet again, He was faithful in providing for Hagar and Ishmael, constant reminders to Abraham of his own miserable failure and sin.

In all these experiences God was revealing to Abraham his helplessness, apart from Divine blessing and power, at the same time revealing also in ever-increasing measure His own great love for His child. Thus our lesson closes with Abraham's calling upon the Lord by a name he had never used before—"the everlasting God."

How good is "the God of Abraham"! And how great is His faithfulness!

ABRAHAM'S FAILURE AT GERAR

There may have been a famine in the land of Canaan; we do not know. But for some reason Abraham went south to Gerar, and "sojourned in the Philistines' land many days" (Gen. 21:34). It was a rich country, well watered, where he found good pasture land for his flocks and herds, just on the border of the land God had given to him. Doubtless it was a mistake, even a lapse of faith, for the patriarch to leave his own country; and nothing is more dangerous for the testimony of the child of God than for him to dwell in the border-land between a full and complete trust in God and a divided affection for Him—partly surrendered to His will and partly joined to the godless world. Some twenty years earlier Abraham had gone down to Egypt, where he had fallen into the same sin of falsehood and unbelief that overtook him at Gerar.

It was following his intercession for Lot and Sodom that he went down to Gerar:

"And Abraham journeyed from thence toward the south country, and dwelled between Kadesh and Shur, and sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, She is my sister: and Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah" (Gen. 20:1, 2).

Thus Abraham was willing to sacrifice the honor of his wife, through whom God had promised to send a son, who in turn should become the channel of blessing for the world through the Saviour! Thus he was willing to mar his testimony before the heathen! Thus he showed a lack of faith in the power of God to take care of him and his own! And yet, since that first denial of Sarah down in Egypt, he had known the blessing of mountain-top experiences with God! He had met Melchizedek, and had received marvelous revelations of Jehovah. He knew well the customs of the day, that it was considered the privilege of Eastern monarchs to take such women as they pleased to be their wives; he knew full well the danger to which his deceit subjected Sarah. Abraham knew all this; and yet he fell into sin and unbelief.

But Abraham did love God, and God took care of his erring child. How all this encourages our own hearts when we, too, fall into the sins of unbelief, and mar our own testimony before the godless world! Abraham made mistakes. Doubtless he did not like to be called a liar; but he told the same lie twice. Both times God had to get him out of trouble. Unlike Lot, Abraham was not satisfied to stay long among those who rejected his Lord! and when he sinned, he was sorry and let God work a miracle of grace in his heart, restoring him to the joy of fellowship with Him. Lot was willing to dwell in Sodom; but Abraham, having gotten out of fellowship with his Lord, always got right with God and went on walking with Him.

You can do what Abraham did, my Christian friend. It does not matter what you have done, or where you have been, or what your history has been. God wants you out in the sunlight, a pilgrim. He wants you separated from those things that are dragging you down. He wants His people to cut away the shore line, and launch out into the deep alone with Him. You can do it. I can do it. Abraham never got so far from fellowship with God that he could not get back. God saw to that. Abraham slipped and fell; but he was always sorry for his sin. Then he stayed very close to God. When he made a mistake, he did not go and hide in Sodom. And when he failed, God was faithful and restored him to complete and full surrender to His perfect will.

Satan will not let God's people alone. Therefore, we dare not trust in our own strength to fight this enemy of our souls. And the closer our walk with God, the blacker our sins appear to us, in the light of His holy Word and will.

GOD'S FAITHFULNESS TO ABRAHAM IN PROTECTING SARAH

God can make His will known to a heathen king, as well as to His own child; and He does restrain sin when it interferes with His perfect plan concerning His blood-bought children. Even though Abimelech did not know of God's promise of a son to Abraham and Sarah, and through that son a Saviour; yet he was given a dream by the Lord, to warn him that Sarah had to be protected. Let us read the story in verses 3-7 of this chapter:

"God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, Behold, thou art but a dead man, for the woman which thou hast taken; for she is a man's wife. But Abimelech had not come near her: and he said, Lord wilt thou slay also a righteous nation? Said he not unto me, She is my sister? and she, even she herself said, He is my brother: in the integrity of my heart and innocency of my hands have I done this. And God said unto him in a dream, Yea, I know that thou didst this in the integrity of thy heart; for I also withheld thee from sinning against me: therefore suffered I thee not to touch her. Now therefore restore the man his wife; for he is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live: and if thou restore her not, know thou that thou shalt surely die, thou, and all that are thine."

God had put His hand upon the whole family of the king, upon all the princes and princesses. They were touching Abraham, one of His own. Abraham had failed, but he belonged to God; and God was taking care of Sarah for Abraham's sake.

Abraham's God is our God, my Christian friend. He will correct your mistakes, if only you will stay near to Him. He can do anything! If you are in trouble this morning and do not know how to get out, let God get you out. It is wonderful how He can do it. He got some two or three millions of people out of the brick-kilns of Egypt, when a powerful Pharaoh had sworn that he would not let them go. He appeared to Abimelech in a dream, and forbade his touching Abraham's wife. And He will work for you and me today.

God even boasted of Abraham to Abimelech, calling him a prophet, vindicating His own child. And He told this king that Abraham would pray for him. Now a prophet is one who has a message from God; and an intercessor is one who prays to God for another. God did not punish Abraham; but as a loving Father, brought him back to his rightful place as a prophet and an intercessor for one whom he had wronged. How patiently He deals with His own! Nor will He lose faith in you, dear, erring Christian. "He

which hath begun a good work in you will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6). Of this we may well be "confident."

The king of Gerar said to God that Abraham had deceived him. But God answered him, not rebuking Abraham, but telling Abimelech to restore to him his wife. "He is a prophet, and he shall pray for thee, and thou shalt live," the Lord said. Think of Abraham's being in the place of prayer—after all this! God knows how to get us there, by grace. We are saved by grace, and we are kept by grace. Every step of the Christian life is taken by grace. If we trust God, He will walk with us. Because we are His own, He will never leave us. All He wants is for us to keep very close to Him. Just as He took this situation entirely out of Abraham's hand and made it right, so also will He work for us. Is it not wonderful how He does things? Just in the way we least expect! Oh, it is grace! If He did not lead us by His grace every day, we could not live. God loves us. He loves us infinitely. And if all the powers of hell come against us; even if we make mistakes and sin against Him; yet He says to us in a thousand ways: "Do not be afraid. I knew you would do that. But just come very near to Me."

SARAH RESTORED TO ABRAHAM

It was a well deserved rebuke that Abimelech, a heathen king, gave to Abraham, the man of God. Following God's message to Abimelech, the Bible record tells us that the king obeyed at once:

"Abimelech rose early in the morning, and called all his servants, and told all these things in their ears: and the men were sore afraid. Then Abimelech called Abraham, and said unto him, What hast thou done unto us? and what have I offended thee, that thou hast brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? thou hast done deeds unto me that ought not to be done. And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What sawest thou, that thou hast done this thing?" (20:8-10).

It was a poor defense that Abraham made for himself. In fact, it was a half-lie; or, as some would say, "a white lie."

But a moral untruth is black in the sight of God. Before they had left Chaldea, Abram and Sarai had agreed to tell that she was his sister; for, indeed, she was his half-sister. And at Gerar, after some twenty years of walking with God, Abraham still clung to his early weakness in faith, lapsing into a sin which he should long before have forsaken, by the grace of God. And this is what he said to Abimelech:

"Because I thought, Surely the fear of God is not in this place; and they will slay me for my wife's sake. And yet indeed she is my sister; she is the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife. And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from my father's house, that I said unto her, This is thy kindness which thou shalt shew unto me; at every place whither we shall come, say of me, He is my brother" (20:11-13).

Abimelech did what God told him to do, and everything was made right.

"And Abimelech took sheep, and oxen, and menservants, and womenservants, and gave them unto Abraham, and restored him Sarah his wife. And Abimelech said, Behold, my land is before thee: dwell where it pleaseth thee. And unto Sarah he said, Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver: behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes, unto all that are with thee, and with all other: thus she was reproved" (20:14-16).

My friend, why did God do that for Abraham? Because he was a pilgrim, because he did not drag God's name down into the world. If a man stands upon the mountain-top with God, even though he makes mistakes and does things that are wrong; yet God does not forsake him. He is faithful! But you do not need to leave the mountain-top. You can go on, a pilgrim with God, alone with God. If God should forsake us when we do wrong, then this man who is speaking to you would not be on the radio. Let us leave the world alone, and live on the mountain-top of prayer and communion. Then God will be pleased.

ABRAHAM'S PRAYER FOR ABIMELECH

"So Abraham prayed unto God: and God healed Abimelech, and his wife, and his maidservants; and they bare children. For the Lord had fast closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech, because of Sarah Abraham's wife" (20:17, 18).

The curse was lifted. Abraham went on his way, doubtless a more serious man than he had been before. What was God doing with Abraham through all this? He was leading him on, to prepare him for the greatest trial of his life, when he was to be asked to offer up Isaac. That was training, finding out just how weak and sinful he was, in his own strength. God was showing Abraham that he was only a poor sinner, unable to do anything right, but for the grace of God. And that is what we are. God will take us to heaven in spite of ourselves. But let us maintain our pilgrim character. Let us stay near to God. Let us beware of Sodom.

The Lord Jesus told His disciples that He had saved them out of the world, but that He left them in it to testify for Him. "As my Father hath sent me, even so send I you" He said to them after He arose from the dead (John 20:21). He knew that this godless world is a terrible place. But He gave to His disciples, even as He gives to us today, the power of His indwelling Holy Spirit, in order that we may live above the world. We may live beyond it. We are pilgrims. We dare not love the world. This world killed Christ; and when we hold friendship with it, we take in our hands, in friendship, the hand that is stained with the blood of the Lord Jesus.

"Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4).

Abraham had to learn this lesson. Then he prayed for the king he had wronged, and God answered his prayer.

THE BIRTH OF ISAAC—IN FULFILLMENT OF GOD'S PROMISE

Again, God was faithful in sending the long-promised son, even Isaac, through whom the Redeemer was to come; and the record of his birth forms the second part of our

lesson for today. Some twenty-five years had passed since this son had been promised. Abraham and Sarah had tried to help God out, possibly thus delaying the fulfillment of the promise. Abraham had believed God; and yet at times his faith had wavered; but God was faithful. He kept His Word, as He always does. And a miracle was performed; for when Isaac was born, Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety. Thus Isaac's birth was a type of the truly miraculous birth of the virgin-born Son of God.

Let us read together Genesis 21:1-8 for this fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham. There we note that God kept His Word; that Abraham called his son by the name God had given him some time previously (17:19); that Abraham obeyed the Lord in circumcising Isaac; and that God made the parents to rejoice in their old age because of the birth of the child. Let us note the words of verse 1:

"And the Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as he had spoken."

The only thing that is important in this old world is the fulfillment of the Word of God. "As he had spoken" He did unto Sarah. "As he had said" He visited her. Besides the fulfillment of God's Word, there is no matter of importance. God has spoken certain things. Many of them have already come to pass. Will the others yet be fulfilled?

"God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good?" (Num. 23:19).

God has never said anything for which He is sorry. He has never promised anything that He has not done or will not do. He promised Abraham certain things. Abraham sinned and made himself entirely unworthy; but God did not repent of what He had said.

A minister who does not believe the Bible said to me recently, "I do not believe that Jesus will ever return to earth personally." He did not believe, of course, in the deity of Christ or the inspiration of the Scriptures. About nineteen hundred years ago the Lord Jesus was here in person. Men

could see Him and touch Him. He sat down to eat with them; He walked along the streets and over the hills of Galilee in conversation with them. Will He be here again? He said He would. He was always God. God can do anything! And He always keeps His Word.

"When Abram was ninety years old and nine, the Lord appeared unto Abram, and said unto him, I am the Almighty God" (17:1).

"And the Lord said unto Abraham. . . . Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (18:13, 14).

Abraham had to answer that question. Humanly speaking what God had promised was impossible; but not impossible for God! Abraham had to believe that God was able! My friend, have you ever been in a place where there seemed no way out of your difficulty? Are you perplexed and troubled? God says to you, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" It is a wonderful experience, just to let God work for us, just to learn our own helplessness apart from His almighty power.

Nor should we criticize Abraham for being so slow to believe God. You know, he did not have the Bible. Moses, who wrote the first five books of God's Word, had not yet been born. Abraham did not have the records that tell of the great faith of George Mueller, of James Hudson Taylor, of Martin Luther, and of a thousand other saints of God whose faith has been a source of inspiration to our own faltering spirits. We have the examples of Abraham and of many others; but Abraham had to launch out on faith, blazing a trail, so to speak, for others who have followed him.

We can not accomplish much in the Lord's work until we can answer the question, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" There are those who tell us that the work of God should be carried on according to business principles; and that policy is all right where it can be followed. But sometimes we have to trust God, even with no human agencies to support our ventures in faith. When the Standard Oil Company sends a man to China, that company guarantees a certain salary, and goes to any necessary trouble to see that

the money reaches him. But many of our most useful missionaries have been willing to go to the far interior of China with no guarantee from man for temporal things; yet God has wrought wonders—not only in providing their temporal needs, but also in working miracles of grace in the hearts of countless thousands. That is faith—faith honored by God to the salvation of never-dying souls. And these missionaries have been the first to bear witness to the joy of such service. They have found that “with God nothing is impossible.”

Twenty-five years must have seemed a long time for Abraham to wait for the promised son and heir; but, as someone has said, God is never in a hurry. He knows the end from the beginning. He is almighty. And He will carry out His own plan for His children.

“And the child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned” (21:8).

In the East this festival usually took place when the child was two or three years of age. It was a time of rejoicing. The child was “formally brought to partake of some viands . . . attired in the symbolic robe, the badge of the birthright, and admitted as an heir of the tribe.” (Jamieson-Faussett-Brown). Whether it was on this occasion or at some later time that Ishmael was seen “mocking” we do not know. But, as Abraham’s elder son, Ishmael no doubt sought to claim the birthright; but God had said to Abraham:

“IN ISAAC SHALL THY SEED BE CALLED”

“And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking. Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac” (21:9, 10).

In a former lesson (Leaflet number 18) we have considered in some detail this tragic story of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael. It might be well to turn back to read again just here the portion of that lesson which has to do with the verses before us, in Gen. 21:9-21. It will not be necessary

for us to repeat in detail the many spiritual truths God has for us in these verses. But let us remember that, as Ishmael speaks to us of "the flesh," so also Isaac speaks to us of "promise." The conflict went on in Abraham's family between the son of the bondwoman and the son of the free woman until the bondwoman and her son were cast out. Then, the conflict over, peace entered that household. Paul in Gal. 4:19-31, we remember, wrote that Hagar is a type of the law; Sarah, of grace. And until we trust in Christ for full and complete salvation, we shall be in bondage to the law. But we have been born again by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave Himself for us. It was all of grace. And He finished redemption's work on Calvary. It is for us only to accept His free gift by faith, knowing that one day faith will be sight. Then "we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:2).

The birth of Isaac and the bestowal of the birthright upon this son of promise "revealed the true character of Ishmael." Abraham learned that his own self-will brought only a curse; for Ishmael was "a wild man," never tamed. But God's work was perfect—nothing was too hard for Him! And God was good to Abraham and Hagar, in that He took care of Ishmael. How often we, like Abraham, run ahead of God and bring sorrow into our lives and the lives of others, only to find that God even makes the wrath of man to praise Him!

Ishmael mocked; but God had said, "In Isaac shall thy seed be called." And God kept His Word. Through Isaac the Hebrew nation came into being; and through that nation the Saviour of the world was born. Through that nation of Israel the world will yet receive blessing unspeakable—when her Messiah returns to reign!

And this thought brings us to the last portion of our lesson today, which is a sequel to the first; for Abimelech, too, acknowledged that God was with Abraham (21:22). This sequel to Abraham's first dealings with Abimelech is not very complimentary to the patriarch; but we must ever remember that Abraham was just a sinner saved by grace.

ABIMELECH'S MISTRUST OF ABRAHAM

"And it came to pass at that time, that Abimelech and Phichol the chief captain of his host spake unto Abraham, saying, God is with thee in all that thou doest: now therefore swear unto me here by God that thou wilt not deal falsely with me . . ." (21:22, 23).

Was that not sad? Here was a man of God; and yet men were afraid of him, that he would not go straight. Did you ever meet anyone like that, my friend? Let us look into our own hearts. There are some people who preach sinless perfection. I do not know where they get their examples. Only the Lord Himself was always without sin. There are no examples in the Bible of men who were perfect, even after they were saved.

Abimelech said to Abraham, "God is with thee in all that thou doest." God had said that Abraham was a prince; that Sarah was a princess. He had told Abimelech that Abraham was a prophet, a man of prayer. And yet how little the king of Gerar trusted the patriarch! It was a sad, but true fact. I do not like to preach about man's utter failure; but it is in the Bible. And I should be preaching a falsehood if I said that men who are saved may expect to be absolutely holy in this life, never again to do anything wrong.

"Now therefore swear unto me," Abimelech said to Abraham, "that thou wilt not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son: but according to the kindness that I have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me, and to the land wherein thou hast sojourned. And Abraham said, I will swear" (21:22-24).

THE COVENANT BETWEEN ABRAHAM AND ABIMELECH

In order to understand verses 25-32, we need to know that wells played an important part in the lives of pastoral men. "If out of repair, the restorer acquired a right to them. And in unoccupied lands the possession of wells gave a right of property in the land; hence Abraham's rebuke to Abimelech" (Jamieson-Fausset-Brown).

Abimelech's servants had taken away a well that belonged to Abraham. The king told the patriarch that he had not known of the matter hitherto. Then Abraham gave to Abimelech sheep and oxen as a witness that he had "dugged this well." "And both of them made a covenant."

"Wherefore he called that place Beer-sheba (meaning 'the well of the oath'); because there they swore both of them. Thus they made a covenant at Beer-sheba: then Abimelech rose up, and Phichol the chief captain of his host, and they returned into the land of the Philistines."

"THE EVERLASTING GOD"

"And Abraham planted a grove in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the LORD, the everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned in the Philistines' land many days" (21:33, 34).

Through all of these experiences, Abraham had learned another name for God; he was standing on even higher ground. He had never used the name, "The Everlasting God," before. The Bible had used the name "El," which is God, "The Strong One." Then we read of "Jehovah," The Lord God, which means "The God who is the Mighty One who will reveal Himself." From Melchizedek Abraham had learned the name "The Most High God." And still later, "The Almighty God," "El Shaddai," "The God who is enough," had talked to Abraham. And now "El Olam," "The Everlasting God," made Himself known in a new way.

His erring child. Abraham was making mistakes; but he was growing in grace and in the knowledge of God. Moreover, God was using him; this should encourage us today!

In Isaiah 40:28, 29 we read of the work of the everlasting God on behalf of Israel:

"Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint . . ."

Again, in Isaiah 44:7 we read that God's "ancient" people, Israel, are an "everlasting" people; for the same Hebrew word "olam" is used here:

"And who, as I, shall call, and shall declare it, and set it in order for me, since I appointed the ancient people?"

Yes, Israel is an everlasting people. Hitler might just as well try to tear the sun out of the heavens as to try to destroy Israel. The everlasting God appeared to Abraham, and His promises are sure! Why is Israel an everlasting people? Because God took them up. What God does is forever. When God takes you for a son, my Christian friend, you are His forever. That is why we have everlasting life. We trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, and He saves us—forever. God is an everlasting God; and that is why Israel is an everlasting people; that is why every promise God made to Abraham has been or will be literally fulfilled.

It was Abraham's faith that God honored. His life was one of stumbling, yet not a life of defeat, because he believed in his God. Throughout all his failures he trusted in the faithfulness of his God. And he grew in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord as he journeyed on. Praise God for that! Shall we not keep on looking up, to the God of Abraham? When we are faithless, yet He abideth faithful! Though sinners still, yet we are sinners saved by grace; and our faithful God will go with us. He will use us for His glory, if we keep very close to Him, as Abraham did many centuries ago. Always He abideth faithful!