

# The LORD Stands By His Church

Genesis 20:1-18

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## Introduction:

Today as we move along in our sermon series from Genesis, we come to chapter 20 where we find Abraham in a time of weakness and sin.

- Abraham, of course, represents the whole church, and from his example here,
  - we see a beautiful picture of how the LORD stands by us even when we are weak and sinful.
  - We are reminded that the church has not gone on for these four millennia since Abraham was called because we are so strong and so faithful and so holy!
    - If it had been up to us, we would have perished long ago—
    - The whole history of the church is characterised by us constantly going astray and the LORD constantly rescuing us.
      - Truly, the only reason the people who belong to the church are any different than the rest of the world in following the Lord is because the Lord keeps on rescuing us.

Yes, in this account today in Genesis 20, we see once again that the very salvation that God had promised in the birth of Abraham's son which was less than a year away was,

- as far as Abraham's actions were concerned,
  - threatened, and as good as frustrated by his sinfulness and folly.
- The church is not here today, worshipping her Saviour because of Abraham's faithfulness or the church's faithfulness,
  - but because of God's faithfulness that did not allow either Abraham or the rest of us to completely abort the whole thing by our sin and weakness.
  - How glad we ought to be that we are in His hands—both as a worldwide church and as individual believers!
    - He stands by us even in our weakness and sin and maintains us to the end!

Let's go now to our text—Genesis chapter 20 beginning in verse 1 and see this.

- This is the word of God, so pay careful attention.

**Genesis 20:1-18:** And Abraham journeyed from there to the South, and dwelt between Kadesh and Shur, and stayed in Gerar. <sup>2</sup> Now Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah. <sup>3</sup> But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night, and said to him, "Indeed you *are* a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife." <sup>4</sup> But Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, "Lord, will You slay a righteous nation also? <sup>5</sup> Did he not

say to me, 'She *is* my sister'? And she, even she herself said, 'He *is* my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands I have done this." <sup>6</sup> And God said to him in a dream, "Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart. For I also withheld you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her. <sup>7</sup> Now therefore, restore the man's wife; for he *is* a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore *her*, know that you shall surely die, you and all

who *are* yours.”<sup>8</sup> So Abimelech rose early in the morning, called all his servants, and told all these things in their hearing; and the men were very much afraid.<sup>9</sup> And Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, “What have you done to us? How have I offended you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done.”<sup>10</sup> Then Abimelech said to Abraham, “What did you have in view, that you have done this thing?”<sup>11</sup> And Abraham said, “Because I thought, surely the fear of God *is* not in this place; and they will kill me on account of my wife.<sup>12</sup> But indeed *she is* truly my sister. She *is* the daughter of my father, but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife.<sup>13</sup> And it came to pass, when God caused me to wander from

my father’s house, that I said to her, ‘This *is* your kindness that you should do for me: in every place, wherever we go, say of me, “He *is* my brother.” ’ ”<sup>14</sup> Then Abimelech took sheep, oxen, and male and female servants, and gave *them* to Abraham; and he restored Sarah his wife to him.<sup>15</sup> And Abimelech said, “See, my land *is* before you; dwell where it pleases you.”<sup>16</sup> Then to Sarah he said, “Behold, I have given your brother a thousand *pieces* of silver; indeed this vindicates you before all who *are* with you and before everybody.” Thus she was rebuked.<sup>17</sup> So Abraham prayed to God; and God healed Abimelech, his wife, and his female servants. Then they bore *children*;<sup>18</sup> for the LORD had closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife.

May the LORD bless the reading of His holy word.

As we consider this passage, we will begin by looking at the shameful reality about us,

- That the church is sinful and weak.

Then, secondly, we will look at the tremendous encouragement that...

- Even though the church is sinful and weak, the Lord preserves us...

And then thirdly, that

- Even though the church is sinful and weak, we are still the Lord’s redemptive agency in the world—the place where redemption is to be found.

So let’s proceed with the first point...

## **I. We see in this passage that the church is sinful and weak...**

A. We are easily unsettled from the right way—we even return to our old sinful patterns.

1. Here we see it even with faithful Abraham, the man whose faith is held up in scripture as a model for us all!
  - a. What does he do as he enters into Gerar but resort back to his old sinful patterns!
    - He is afraid that the people of Gerar do not fear God and will kill him in order that they might take away Sarah, his wife...
    - So he resorts to the old method that he had employed almost 25 years before when he went down to Egypt...
      - He determines that he and Sarah will not reveal that they are married but will present themselves only as brother and sister.

- b. He falls back upon this ploy, even though when he did it before it brought disaster on him and Sarah,
  - As we saw in chapter 12, the Pharaoh of Egypt took Sarah into his harem and would have consummated his marriage with her if God had not stopped him.
  - It was a time of great distress for Abraham and for Sarah—as they had not expected this outcome...
    - It appears that they had used this method as they had travelled about at other times (as least that is what Abraham indicates in Genesis 20 verse 13 when he says that he told Sarah to say that she was his brother as a kindness to him wherever they go), but in Egypt this silly plan backfired.
  - It proved to be a great embarrassment to Abraham as he had to confess his deception to Pharaoh and be rebuked by him.
    - As far as his actions were concerned, he gave Pharaoh just cause to punish him if the Lord had not stepped in.
    - Apparently, he had had no issues in other places they passed through, but in Egypt it was a different story.
- Abraham was taught a hard lesson about taking matters into his own hands, and even more about God’s ability to take care of him...
- 2. So how was it now in Genesis 20, after 25 years of walking with the Lord, Abraham takes up this deception again at Gerar?
  - Wasn’t he past such things by now?
  - a. His sin is all the more heinous after experiencing 25 years of God’s faithfulness...
    - He had seen the LORD deliver him in Egypt from Pharaoh even when his ploy had brought just cause for Pharaoh to be offended with him.
    - He had seen the LORD give him strength to overcome Chedorlaomer and the kings that were with him when they had taken Lot into captivity.
    - He had had the Lord visit him and make promises to him that he would yet have the child of promise by Sarah, even though she was past age, and he had fully embraced the promise without wavering.
    - He had had the Lord meet with him as a friend and reveal His plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, and he had seen the Lord’s mighty hand in bringing that to pass.
      - How could he now go back to this foolish, fearful, sinful pattern of fear and deception?
  - b. I am quite sure that none of you fine Christian folks would ever do such a thing!
    - Surely, once you have done something foolish and God has rebuked you and humbled you for it and restored you in His grace,
      - now that you have learned to trust Him time and again...
        - you would not return to your old doubting ways and patterns, would you?

- The unbelieving scholars who study this passage are sure that this is simply just another version of what happened in Egypt...
  - It could not be that Abraham would have done the same thing again, could it?
    - Who would ever resort to his old ways like that?
    - These scholars say that even though in this account, Abraham himself speaks of having done this before...
- c. Oh dear believer,
  - You know too well about falling back into old patterns, don't you?
    - The old sins that you thought you had put far behind you come back to haunt you—and yes, it is so foolish—so inexcusable...
      - But it happens!
- It is helpful to consider what brings about such failings in our faith.
  - Sometimes by looking back, you can learn to recognise when you are vulnerable that you might guard yourself at such times...
    - Parents, I might mention as a side note that this is something to teach your children to do from their earliest days.
    - If they have trouble obeying at the table, talk to them about it and pray with them before the meals...
      - If they are impatient and demanding about eating their food before prayers, have them pray and then practice waiting for an even longer time, and then cheer them on...
  - But what is that makes us all fall into our old sinful patterns—both children and adults—
- B. Often we fall into old sinful patterns because of the trials and struggles that we experience...
  1. Consider the situation with Abraham here...
    - a. Abraham had been more or less settled for some time at Mamre—he had friends and allies here who had stood with him against the kings that kidnapped Lot...
      - But now we are told that he leaves this place.
      - When Calvin commented on this passage, he suggested that something must have happened to unsettle him can cause him to move...
        - Research since that time shows us that the Hittites were invading this area at the time and it may be that he left so as not to be caught in the middle of that.
          - It would not have been a good situation to be in a tent without city walls when invaders were coming through!
        - We don't know if this is what caused Abraham to move or not, but for some reason, he moves to Gerar, and there must have been something that unsettled him.
- But there is also another reason Abraham may have been struggling.

- b. Consider where we last saw Abraham...in Gen 19:27-29: standing on the hill looking across the plain at the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah!
  - Abraham had prayed that God would spare this place if there were but ten righteous men!
    - He had been concerned for his nephew Lot who lived there.
    - And now he has seen the whole place utterly destroyed with fire and brimstone that fell from the LORD.
    - Did Abraham even know that Lot had been saved by the Lord's hand?
  - Even if he did, this great destruction must have been very difficult for Abraham.
    - We know that God heard his prayers and actually spared Lot, but did Abraham know that at this time?
    - If he did not, it might have caused him to question things—did the Lord destroy the righteous with the wicked? Did the Lord really care to answer his prayers?
- Things like this can trouble and unsettle us.
- 2. Such unsettlement can cause you to resort back to your old patterns of unbelief—old habits and old responses start to come back to haunt you.
  - You are not sure of God because He has disappointed you somehow...
    - Maybe it is from fear of what is going on the world with Iran and Russia...
      - Maybe it is from a report about another minister who has fallen into sin...
      - Maybe you are unsettled by the rising opposition toward Christians in our nation...
      - Maybe it is struggle with a loved one who is rejecting Christ—even your own children or a brother or sister in the church...
      - Maybe it is struggles in parenting or in finances or health or with relationships at work...
      - Maybe you feel like people don't like you or that you don't fit in...
      - Maybe it is just that your prayers and worship are dry and barren...
      - Maybe you lost your job and God does not seem to be answering your prayers for another one...
        - It can be almost anything...but...
    - You are unsettled—
      - You are not sure of God...
      - You do not like what He is doing (or not doing)...
      - You are finding it hard to trust Him...
      - Your faith is unhinged—you doubt, you fear...and you fall into your old sinful patterns.
  - It ought not to be so, but it happens!

- C. How pitiful the church can look in the world when we fall into such struggles!
1. Sometimes, the world even looks better than we do—they are on the moral high ground!
    - a. It was that way with Abraham and Abimelech according to Genesis 20!
      - It is embarrassing to see Abimelech coming to question Abraham why he has done such a thing to him and his people...
        - In verse 9-10 he says: **And Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, “What have you done to us? How have I offended you, that you have brought on me and on my kingdom a great sin? You have done deeds to me that ought not to be done.” Then Abimelech said to Abraham, “What did you have in view, that you have done this thing?”**
      - Abimelech had no intention of taking another man’s wife.
        - Why did Abraham set him up like this?
        - This pagan king tells Abraham that he has done what ought not to be done and he is right!
    - b. It is sad but often true the men of the world have more integrity than we do as Christians—especially when we are struggling in our walk with God.
      - 1) It is so sad—a Christian man will walk down the street and see a boy punching a girl, and the Christian man will sneer at the unbeliever’s behaviour,
        - and then as he is walking by feeling self-righteous, an unbelieving man sees the same abuse and runs out of his house to stop the boy...
      - 2) Or at work—a Christian woman who is known to stand up for biblical truth is going through a struggle, and she has been edgy and hard to get along with at work,
        - and the manager has to call her aside and tell her to clean up her act if she wants to keep her job.
        - And then one of her fellow workers who is an unbeliever reaches out to her and sends her a nice note to encourage her.
          - We ought to be the ones who are doing these things and it is shame when we are the ones who are being unkind!
          - But if you have been around very long, you know that this is often the way it is!
  2. And often the way we respond when we are rebuked makes it even worse...
    - a. Abraham has the audacity to tell Abimelech that he hid the fact that Sarah was his wife to protect himself against the men of Gerar,
      - supposing that they had no fear of God and might kill him to get his wife!
        - Why did he make such a harsh and unjust judgment about these men? And then he tells them what he thought of them!
        - It is quite obvious that they did fear God.
      - And not only that, but what does this say about his care for his wife?

- He should sooner have died protecting his wife from men that he thought to have no fear of God, than putting her in harm's way in an effort to protect himself!
- One gets the impression that Abimelech would not be impressed with this at all...
  - For throughout this passage he speaks with just as much or more concern for his people as he does for himself.
- b. Sometimes as believers, we make lame excuses and add more shameful behaviour to whatever we have done...
  - Abimelech admits that he has sinned, but Abraham makes lame excuses and explanations.
    - We, of all people, should be the first, not the last, to confess our sins because we have forgiveness with God!

TRANS> Sometimes our brothers and sisters can make us ashamed that they are Christians—and sometimes we can make them ashamed!

- We can be so sinful and so weak...
- But now I want you to see secondly, that...

## **II. Even though the church is sinful and weak, the LORD rescues us!**

A. How rescue was needed here, for Abraham had put the salvation of the entire church at risk!

1. The salvation that God had promised to the entire church was to come from Sarah's womb...through the son that she was to bring forth...
  - And now in an effort to protect himself from unreasonable fears, Abraham had caused Sarah to be given to another man to be his wife!
  - He stood by with his deception as Sarah was taken off to be in Abimelech's harem...
    - It was common for a king to claim those unmarried women who came to reside in his territory as his own if they found favour in his eyes.
      - And of course the women were often quite happy to become princesses—though the Lord later forbade the kings of Israel to do this, even though they did not listen...
    - But what Abimelech did here with Sarah was quite the norm...
      - Sarah was just past the age of childbearing, but there are many women who are still quite beautiful at that age,
      - and it may be also that he wanted to marry her even to make an alliance with Abraham—for later on he does make a covenant with him.
    - But in her case, this was putting the promised salvation of God at risk!
      - If Sarah had become his wife, then she could not have brought forth Isaac to Abraham, and Jesus Christ could not have come!
        - That's humanly speaking!

2. And of course this is by no means the only time that the church has put God's promised salvation at risk!
    - a. How many times do we find Israel turning to idols and intermarrying with idolatrous nations...
      - If God had not intervened thousands of times, they would have been completely absorbed into idolatry...
    - b. If the care of the church was left in the hands of any man, or if we were left to ourselves, there would be no church!
      - Think of the time of the reformation—the church was actually selling indulgences—
        - claiming that people could purchase forgiveness for themselves and for the dead by paying a sum of money!
        - If the Lord had let that kind of thing go on, there would have been no church at all!
      - Think of your own life,
        - and of how many times you have started down the path that leads to destruction, only to be rescued by the Lord.
- B. You see in Genesis 20 a glorious example of how the LORD extends His mighty arm to rescue His church—
1. He puts a complete stop to Abimelech's advances on Sarah!
    - a. We are shown that He sent some kind of sickness so that the wombs of all of the women in Abimelech's household are closed...
      - We are told in verse 18 that **the LORD had closed up all the wombs of the house of Abimelech.**
      - Often, that is a way of saying that they cannot have children, but there seems to be more here...
        - because we are also told in verse 17 that Abimelech himself had to be healed.
        - It appears that the LORD sent some kind of disorder so that he was unable to have relations with his wives...
          - and this prevented him from consummating his marriage to Sarah—though he may have been waiting for some kind of ritual purification rites to be completed.
    - But of course it was not enough just to protect Sarah from his advances—she was still in his house...
    - b. The Lord not only protected her from a sexual encounter, but he also brought it about that she was returned to Abraham...
      - The LORD did this by visiting Abimelech in a dream (the way He ordinarily speaks to those outside his covenant people),
        - and says to him (in verse 3): **“Indeed you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife.”**



- We are told that Abimelech had not yet come near to Sarah, and he immediately pleads with the LORD that he had been deceived...
    - Verse 4 & 5 say: **But Abimelech had not come near her; and he said, “Lord, will You slay a righteous nation also? Did he not say to me, ‘She is my sister’? And she, even she herself said, ‘He is my brother.’ In the integrity of my heart and innocence of my hands I have done this.”**
  - The LORD responds to Abimelech that He knows all about it and that He is the one who prevented him from taking Sarah...
    - but that he had best return Sarah to Abraham at once or he will be a dead man!
      - **Verse 6-7: And God said to him in a dream, “Yes, I know that you did this in the integrity of your heart. For I also withheld you from sinning against Me; therefore I did not let you touch her. Now therefore, restore the man’s wife; for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not restore her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.”**
    - In this way, the LORD makes certain that Sarah will be restored to Abraham at once!
      - And of course this method is very effective!
        - Abimelech rises early the next day and goes about restoring her with great alacrity!
        - He gives lavish gifts to Abraham to make amends and to prove that no adultery has been committed.
2. The LORD uses a whole variety of different ways to rescue His people...
- a. Sometimes He uses visitations and warnings as here with Abimelech, sometimes He uses miracles and even plagues as he did at Egypt in the time of the Exodus, sometimes He raises up His people to fight, sometimes He uses other nations to conquer those who have taken them,
    - But always the LORD rescues His church!
      - He has promised that He will never leave us or forsake us!
      - He had promised that the church will continue until the end.
  - b. And always He protects and rescues the church in ways that bring glory to Him and show everyone the He is LORD.
    - 1) He shows the world that we are His people and that He is protecting us and that He is able to protect us and to rescue us!
      - How clear He made that to Abimelech—
        - He saw clearly that the LORD was Lord and that Abraham was under His protection and Abimelech dare not mess with him!
      - Even when the world persecutes us, they are unnerved when they see how He sustains us so that we are willing to suffer for Him...
        - It is an evidence to them of their own destruction.
        - And if they don’t get it now, they will fully understand how God has protected His people on the day of judgement!

- 2) And not only does the world see that the LORD is protecting us, but we see it too!
  - As we read His word, as I have mentioned, we see that we would never have survived but for His protection!
  - Our sin and our weakness make us so vulnerable, but the LORD continually rescues us and if we know Him we know it!
  - We know it from the word and we know it by experience both individually and corporately.

C. So I urge you to respond to the LORD appropriately!

1. If you are one of His people, then trust Him to take care of us, His people!
  - He has told us that He will never leave us or forsake us.
  - He had told us that He will bless us and protect us so that we are always safe and secure in His care...
  - Believe this when hard times come—He is your helper—lean on Him—call on His name—trust in Him!
  - Don't give in to your doubts and fears as Abraham did here in Genesis 20, but even if you have, know that still He will rescue you if you are His!
    - And even if the church is in a sorry state and it looks like we will soon be wiped out, do not be discouraged!
      - God knows how to get Sarah out of Abimelech's house!
      - He knows how to rescue His church!
      - He does it all the time and that is why we are still here today!

➤ And now I have something to say to you who are not part of the church...

2. If you are not among His people, do not try to resist this truth that God sticks with His people and delivers them...
  - It may be downright offensive to you that God protects people who are so messed up at times—so weak and so sinful—
    - but He does this whether you like it or not!
    - Our salvation is not based upon our merit or our cleverness or our strength...
      - It is based upon God's grace and saving mercy!
  - Rather than fighting against the LORD as Abimelech might have done, crying out that the LORD was not being fair,
    - It is much better to fear the LORD as he did, and to do what the LORD tells you to do...
      - Repent and turn to the LORD for mercy—as Abimelech did.

TRANS> But how do you turn to the LORD for mercy?

- Well that brings us to our last point...

### III. Even though the church is weak and sinful, the church is still God's redemptive agent in the world!

#### A. God shows us in this passage that salvation is with His covenant people!

1. God reveals to Abimelech that Abraham—though he had behaved shamefully—is still His prophet!
  - In verse 7, He says, “**Now restore the man’s wife for he is a prophet.**”
  - The whole church was to come from Abraham, God shows here that it is here that He has revealed His truth...
    - Prophets are those who receive the truth because God reveals Himself to them—and Abraham is not the prophet of some demon that predicts the future or something...of some false god...
      - Abraham is the prophet of the living God who made heaven and earth.
      - The truth was deposited with Abraham and his descendants and it is deposited with the church through the holy scriptures.
      - Anyone who wants to know the truth must come to the church and receive God’s word.
        - God maintains His word in the church.
2. God further reveals to Abimelech and to all of us who read Genesis 20, that forgiveness is to be found in the church.
  - a. God has pronounced Abimelech guilty, though he sinned in ignorance.
    - Even though he was deceived, before God’s eyes he was a man, like all people everywhere, who needs forgiveness.
      - He had taken the wife of a prophet and was putting God’s salvation of the world in jeopardy.
  - b. But you see that the LORD tells Abimelech to restore Abraham’s wife and that Abraham will pray for him and he will be forgiven!
    - By this the LORD is teaching that His church has access to Him—and that Abimelech is cut off unless he comes to the church.
      - It is here that intercession bringing forgiveness can be found.
  - c. Of course now that Jesus has come, we understand fully that it is ultimately Jesus Christ who prays for us to obtain forgiveness for us.
    - He is the one who died on the cross to atone for our sins, and He is the head of the church, He is the way of salvation,
      - And unless we come to Him, there is no salvation for us.
    - All through the years, the Father taught that salvation was of the Jews.
      - The nations were taught that it was here that God’s Messiah would come, that the Christ would come...
        - It was here that God’s way of forgiveness was revealed, first in shadows and ceremonies, and then in the coming of Jesus to die on the cross.
        - Salvation is not in the world, it is with the church because the church is the church of Jesus Christ.

- B. We must guard against two great errors here...two fatal errors that keep people from heaven!
1. The first fatal error is the effort of trusting in a bare connection to the church—without connecting to Jesus Christ.
    - Jesus warns against this again and again—
      - He tells us that His kingdom, His church as it is seen on earth, is made up of those who are genuine and those who are not.
      - There are those who believe unto salvation and those who do not.
    - The whole point of the church is that this is the society of those who confess that we are a sinful, guilty, ruined mess,
      - but that we have come to Jesus Christ and that through Him and His cross we have complete forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life.
      - It is absolutely foolish to enter the church, to be baptised and to come to the table and profess to be among God's people when you are not even looking to Jesus to save you from your sins!
        - It is a fatal error, and there are many, Jesus tells us, who have entered His kingdom by the wide gate that leads to destruction!
        - We must come giving up on ourselves and trusting in Him.
  2. But then there is another fatal error that is a reaction against this first error...
    - There are those who look at the many who are trusting in a bare connection to the church who then turn around and reject the church.
      - They see the imperfections of the church and they would be ashamed to be with a people who tell Abimelech that their wife is only their sister...
        - They see the sin and weakness in the church, and they attempt to gain access to Christ on their own, in isolation from His people.
    - But this is a fatal error because the church is God's redemptive agent in the world...
      - The church is the body of Christ...
        - It is here that those who have true faith in Jesus Christ are to find Him.
        - The truth is that the church is the society of Jesus Christ,
          - a visible society that He established with officers and members and a structure handed to us from the apostles,
          - the society that disciples are added to when they believe and are baptised as we see throughout the New Testament,
          - the society that He died for, and the society that He, as we have seen, constantly rescues and preserves in the world...
          - the society that has access to Him for forgiveness and proclaims Him to the world,
            - calling the world to come to Christ, to come and join those who are His people who are looking to Him for His salvation.

**Conclusion:**

So, you who are in the church of Jesus Christ,

- How thankful you should be in looking at this passage today.
  - Here we are reminded of our sin and weakness...
  - But also that God continually rescues us so that we are not wiped out...
  - And that in us—in our head—is found His salvation—that we are, in Christ, His agents of salvation in the world—
    - It is here that His truth is found and it is here that forgiveness of sins is found!
- Do not despise this weak and sinful society, because the LORD is with her!
  - Cherish her, enter her, and find in her the only Saviour, Jesus Christ!