

Providential Protection

Grace Fellowship | Carlton Weathers | Genesis 20

If you take your Bible and turn with me to Genesis chapter 20, Genesis chapter 20, as we continue in this sermon series through the book of Genesis. And this morning, I want to bring a message entitled "Providential Protection."

I want to ask you a question: Do you believe in the providence of God? Maybe it would help if I tell you what providence means. Providence is the belief that God meticulously oversees every detail of the universe, and He oversees it toward His glory and to the good of His people. The providence of God is simply God's oversight, His direction, His interacting with the world which He has created in such a way that He is glorified and His people's good is attained. Do you believe in the providence of God?

I think most of us in this room would say, "Yeah, I believe in the providence of God." And by that, we mean big decisions like getting married or not getting married, what school or university we go to, what house we buy, what job we take. All of these things are under God's providence. But what I press on you this morning is: Do you believe that the providence of God directs the path of a snail on the ground? Sets forth the way an ant will leave its hill to find food and come back to feed its queen? Do you believe that the providence of God feeds the birds, causes the lilies to spring up in the exact spot they do in a field?

In believing in providence, do you believe that even your failure this week to follow God obediently is under His providential design and care? You see, I think most of us believe readily and happily in the providence of God when it comes to the big things of life. But where we struggle most is when in our home there is a conflict. And in that moment we say, "God's not in charge of this; I have to do this. I have to handle this problem." We take back from God what is rightly His: all authority, all control, all direction, all leadership. We take it back.

It's somewhat easy to be a theologian and sit in an ivory tower and read a book and say, "Oh yeah, God's great, He's sovereign, He's providential, He's over everything; I believe in all that." But the next time your boss walks in your office, shuts the door, and says, "We need to have a conversation," do you believe in the providence of God then?

Genesis chapter 20: From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb—that's the south of the promised land—and lived between Kadesh and Shur, and he sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." And Abimelech, king of Gerar, sent and took Sarah.

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." Now Abimelech had not approached her, so he said, "Lord, will You kill an innocent people? An innocent nation, would You kill us? Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this."

And 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. Therefore I did not let you touch her. Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours."

So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all the servants and told them all of these things, and the men were very much afraid. Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, "What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done." And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What did you see? What did you see that you did this thing?"

Abraham said, "I did it because I thought there is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. Because she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father, though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife. And when God called me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do to me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother.'"

Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen and male servants and female servants and gave them to Abraham and returned Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you." To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone you are vindicated."

Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife. This is the word of the Lord.

First of all, in this passage, I think it's good for us to see that Abraham is a failure. Abraham is a failure. Now I know part of you probably, especially if you've been with us through this series of Genesis, that cringes to hear that. Because you say, "Wait a minute, the Bible says Abraham is an example of faith." Abraham glorified God more and more and his faith grew. That's what the Bible says about our father Abraham. He's the father of the faithful. What do you mean Abraham failed?

Well, again, let me just ask: Do you have the right understanding of what it means to be faithful? We have so often in our minds a standard that faithfulness is perfection. That's not the Bible teaching us that. That's our own minds, the minds of others around us, the thoughts—and maybe well-intended thoughts—that "if I'm faithful, then I won't sin. I'll never sin." But the reality is, the Bible shows us that all of our heroes of the faith were also sinners. This led Martin Luther to say—one of his most famous statements written in Latin—"Simultaneously just and a sinner."

I say that Abraham failed. I think the scripture shows us, and we're going to see it in the passage itself, that Abraham failed; and yet, Abraham is justified because of his faith in God and the promise of God. Look at the passage with me. In the very beginning, there, it gives us the description of how we get where we are. They journeyed toward, they left where they had been, and they journeyed to south, down to the Negeb. And they sojourned, they lived in tents, in Gerar. In this territory of Gerar, there is a people led by Abimelech the king. Now, in verse 2 he's identified: Abimelech the king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

So Abimelech, his name is a Canaanite name, and that name means "My Father the King." So this is a royal family. Abimelech is a royal man. He rules over the people of Gerar; they belong to him. And it's his territory down in the south of the Negeb, and Abraham has traveled there to this place, and now that he's set up tent, he says of his wife Sarah, "She is my sister."

This story is like the story in Genesis chapter 12, beginning in verse 10, is it not? He, because of a famine, left his homeland, his new home where he was sojourning, the promised land, and he went south to Egypt. And when he got there, seeing the guards and seeing how great Pharaoh was, he said, "Tell them you are my sister. Because they'll kill me if you don't tell them that you're my sister so they can have you as a wife."

Now we're let in on a little more of the detail in this story of how this all happened. He said she's his sister and she says he's her brother, and all of it is because when they left their home originally, back in the beginning of the story of Abraham in the Bible, when they left their home in verse 13, Moses records for us the plan they made. This is not an accidental, momentary lapse of judgment. This is a plan to sin. Do you see what I'm saying?

When I say Abraham failed, I don't mean he had a lapse of judgment in a moment because he was under pressure and he didn't do the right thing. That's bad. No, before he left, or as he left his father's tent way back in Genesis 12 and began to head toward the promised land, Abraham told Sarah, "This is the kindness you will do for me: Everywhere we go, you will tell them I am your brother and you are my sister. This is the way you will show that you love me, Sarah."

This is premeditated sin. This is intentional. This is patterned. We're left to believe that it didn't just happen in Egypt and it didn't just happen in Gerar, but everywhere they set up

tent and there were anybody around, this was the story they gave the outside world all the time. And I say to you: Abraham is both justified and he is a sinner. And that's good news for you, church. Because you can count countless ways this week that you compromised your faith, if you're honest.

In the depths and the recesses of your heart, in the pattern of the speech of your mouth, in the ways that you used your hands, in the places you were willing to go and the things you were willing to tolerate, you have also compromised your faith like Abraham. And yet Abraham was justified, and I tell you by the authority of God's word: If you are in Christ today, you too are just.

Don't judge your relationship with God primarily or first of all on your ability to obey Him. But judge your relationship on God in regard to your believing Him and taking Him at His word. I'm telling you even now, as he is sinning in Gerar, Abraham belongs to God. Abraham is a man of God. Abraham is a man of faith even in an episode so dark as this.

So it's premeditated. It's intentional. It's not coincidental. It didn't happen because he was in this one tough spot in his life and he failed. He was doing this as a pattern of his life. This was his scheme to keep himself alive. And part of Abraham's failure—I want to break it down three ways. First of all, Abraham's failure is that he fails to believe in the promise. He fails to believe in the promise in the ordinary things of life. He fails to believe in the promise of God in the ordinary things of life.

You see, way back in Genesis 12, God, years ago, has said, "I'm making a great nation out of you, Abraham." And then He comes back and clarifies: "Not just out of you, but out of you and Sarah." And then He comes back and clarifies again through the promise of the oath in Genesis 15 and the oath ceremony. And then He comes back in Genesis 18 and He says, "Hey Abraham, Sarah, you're going to have a child about this time next year. I'm going to come to you and you're going to have a child about this time next year." Over and over and over again, God has made promise—promise and promise and promise. Abraham believes that promise in general, in the big things, but where he doesn't, or where he struggles to believe it, is in the everyday things. In the ordinary interactions.

It's not enough to say, "I know Jesus will save me one day when I'm dying and I go and be with Him or when He comes again and I go and be with Him." It's not enough to say that. Are you saying Jesus will save me from this present momentary affliction I face? God has promised that He will protect me and walk with me through the valley of the shadow of death, and I therefore will fear no evil, no man, no situation. I trust Jesus Christ implicitly.

There's a twisted way in which we can be real "big God people" and miss the meticulous details, isn't there? I want to tell you, whatever your condition is today, if you belong to Jesus Christ, your conditions and your response to the conditions cannot separate you from the love of God.

Abraham is a man of faith, struggling to believe in the promise in the ordinary everyday life interactions. He comes to this new land, he's around these new people—obviously this is a great group of people, this is a great nation—and he fears in the moment, and so he fails to believe in that promise. But his failure is not just in regard to the promise, but his failure is in his duty to protect his wife. His duty to protect his wife.

From the beginning, it was given that the man should protect his wife. But do you see how twisted we can be? That the man uses his wife to protect himself. "Oh, we're going into a real dangerous situation, honey; I tell you what, don't forget the promise you made to show your love to me. I would hate them to take me from you." Abraham displays great cowardice in not doing what God designed him to do: to protect his wife.

Now, this—this plan that he has to protect himself, I'm sure he's justified by saying it'll also protect Sarah, but how will it protect Sarah? Because he's putting Sarah in the harem of a godless pagan king. And while she might survive, her integrity will be destroyed, her emotional health will be devastated, her spiritual standing will be affected, and Abraham doesn't seem to care because all he's thinking of is his own skin. Protect me. Be a shield for me. You see, the problem is that God had promised to be Abraham's shield, but instead of trusting in his shield, he uses his wife to blind him to protect him.

Men, let's just be honest before God: How often are we willing out of cowardice to just allow the enemy to have his way with our wives? We don't take up the protection of our family; we leave it to others or we ignore it altogether. We're not willing to stand between our family and hell and say, "If they go to hell, it'll be over and through me." Abraham, far from protecting his wife, he was focused on protecting himself, and this is a great failure.

There's a third way in which I see him failing in this passage, and it's there at the beginning again in Genesis 20, verse 2: Abraham says of his wife, "She is my sister." Abimelech is obviously the one he's addressing, because Abimelech, based on that information, takes Sarah into his home, takes her into his tent, as his future part of his family and a harem.

See, he had an opportunity right there as he faces Abimelech—this powerful king—to say, "This is my wife, Sarah. Let me tell you who we belong to: We belong to the Lord God Almighty. And let me tell you about our God. He took me from my father's home, and He has guided me until this very day. He met with me under the oaks, and He promised me a great nation, and He said to me: Everyone who blesses you, I will bless them. You have a chance, Abimelech, to receive that promise."

He not only promised it to me, but He's protected me all these years. I've been in many people's territory; I was in Pharaoh's land and I failed, but God didn't fail, and He sent me out of that place with great riches. I had a nephew with me, Lot, and he decided he wanted to go down to Sodom and Gomorrah, and the kings from afar came and conquered those cities and took him captive. And I'm going to tell you, God was with us because God took

318 trained men to myself and we went and defeated all those kings. Abimelech, I hope you're listening. I serve a great God. He will protect me and He will protect my wife.

If Abraham had been focused on the mission in this moment, it would have been a completely different reality. But he lost sight of it and he compromised. He, in the moment of pressure, took back from God in his mind the control that he needed to protect himself. And he's protected. But at what cost? At what cost? He has made his wife into a pawn to shield him from the potential harm that could come his way. He's wounded her conscience because he's made her tell a lie. She's compromised herself because she's willing to go along with the lie. There's all of this destructive sin all because he wants to control his own mission, his own life. He takes it back in the moment of crisis. And what he should have done is told the great, great old story of God's salvation right in front of Abimelech.

And it's the same thing you should do and I should do when we are faced with these same adversities, because make no doubt, we will face adversity. So often we're trying to escape the very place God has placed us: in our homes, in our workplaces, in the places we do life. We're trying to escape the difficult people, difficult situations, the conflicts. We're so focused on escaping the pain that might come our way that we fail in our faith.

How much different our life could be when we looked at our situation and just said, "I don't know what God's going to do, but I know my God: He's promised to never leave me nor forsake me." He won't leave us and He won't forsake us. "I don't know how the details are going to happen; I don't know what'll happen to my children; I have no clue whether I'll have enough money in the bank next week or not; but I know my God will give me all that I need."

How many times in our families and in our workplaces could we be on mission for the Gospel of Jesus Christ by simply trusting God in that moment and preaching the Gospel to ourselves and others? Abraham failed because he failed to trust the promise of God in ordinary life. He failed because he failed to take up the role of protecting his wife. And he failed because he got off mission. He got focused on the danger, he got focused on Abimelech, he got focused on his situation, and he lost sight of—I mean, listen, do you not want to say to Abraham, don't you, when you read his story, like you want to shake him and say, "What are you thinking?" Trust me, from heaven he's grabbing you by the shoulder, shaking you, saying, "What are you thinking?" We're shaking each other together.

It's so easy to see in Abraham's life, isn't it, on the pages of the Holy Scripture? I mean, how could he doubt that God would protect him against Abimelech? He defeated the greatest kings on earth with 318 men. And he's afraid of this man? It's so easy to see. Why is he compromising? Just stand up, be a man, Abraham, protect your wife. And yet if we're honest, aren't we just like him? Aren't we just like him?

We need Jesus Christ, don't we? We need Him. Why? Because Jesus stands between hell and His bride and says, "You can't have her; she belongs to Me." Jesus is willing to lay His

life down on a cross and shed His very blood so that you and I might be His, and we might be arrayed in pure and spotless garment and stand before Him one day, fully redeemed and reclaimed for Him. And He looks at hell and mocks them because they dare think they could defeat Him, the husband of the church.

Church, we don't have to falter and fail in our faith because we have a faithful Savior. Don't leave here today going, "Oh, I'm going to buck up and try harder." Leave here today saying, "I'm going to trust more. I'm going to trust more. When I fail, I'm going to trust more."

But Abraham's failure is not the only strand we see in this passage. Rather, we see God's providential protection of His people. God's providential protection of His people. I've said this before, and I want to press a little maybe to the edge of hermeneutical integrity here, but—but the words "but God" in the Bible... Abraham said she's his sister, and Abimelech the king of Gerar took Sarah, but God.

But God came to Abimelech. God speaks to a pagan king in a dream. He has no word, written word to reference him to. He has no—He has no—no intimate covenantal relationship with Abimelech. He comes to Abimelech, a pagan man, and He addresses him in a dream. He says to Abimelech, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you've taken, for she is a man's wife."

Abraham's not willing to protect Sarah, but God is willing to protect not only Sarah but His people—the line that Sarah carries for Isaac. If Abimelech takes Sarah into his bed and he has relations with her, there will be no way that everyone can have full assurance that Isaac belongs to Abraham and not to Abimelech. And God refuses to let the failures of Abraham or any of us stop Him from His word, from fulfilling His word.

God is not only protecting Sarah, one wife—that's fantastic and that's meaningful—but He's protecting all of the redemptive story by coming to Abimelech in a dream. He comes to Abimelech and he addresses him very bluntly: "You are a dead man." Now I take that in two senses. Number one: You're a dead man; you're going to literally die if you sin against Me in this way. If you fulfill your desire to have Sarah as your wife, I'm going to kill you.

Now why do I say that? Because Abraham, the husband who is to protect his wife, later it is revealed in God's holy law that had Abimelech committed adultery with Sarah, Abraham the husband would have stoned the offender. He would have killed him. What is the due punishment for adultery? Death. I know that offends modern ears because like, "Well, I mean, we reserve death for just the most egregious offenses." Adultery and sex with anyone that's not your spouse is an egregious offense against a holy God. Abraham may be a coward, but God's no coward. God says, "Abimelech, if you follow through on this, I will kill you."

But it's a second sense, too, I want to emphasize to you that I think's right here in our text if we pay close attention to the detail. He's saying, "Yes, I will kill you, you are dead if you do

this," but it's not just that, but He takes action right then. How do we know He takes action to make him dead right then? Well, verse 17: After Abraham prays that God will heal Abimelech... so God has struck Abimelech with a disease. This is probably the very way He protected Sarah: He struck Abimelech with a disease; Abimelech wakes up diseased and he can't go into his wives because he has a disease. The disease is going to kill him, you see, but it's made him infertile. We know that from the text. And it's made his concubines, servants, wives, and all the women of Gerar infertile. It has shut the womb.

God is acting dramatically to protect His promise. He is acting dramatically to protect the line that will lead to Jesus. He is making sure no one has doubt. There were no babies being born in this time in Gerar; there were no babies being conceived. And Abimelech was withering away with a disease. God spoke to him and then God protected His people from being defiled. He protected His people.

And finally, God extended mercy to the nation of Gerar for the sake of Abraham. God extended mercy to the nation of Gerar. These are pagan people. Abimelech is a Canaanite. He has no covenantal relationship with God. Although I'm not going to say a lot about Abimelech, but I do want to point out: Abimelech behaves more faithfully in this passage than the covenant father, Abraham.

The message really is not about Abimelech and the passage is not really about Abimelech, but may I just tell you: When Abimelech goes and says, "What have you done to us? Why did you do this? What have we done to you that you would do such a thing to us?" What does Abraham say? "Well, it's because I knew there's no fear of God in this place." What does the text say? When God spoke to Abimelech and Abimelech talked to the men, what did they do? They feared the Lord. Abraham made surface-level assessments of someone's heart that he couldn't know, and it caused him to sin against God.

Abimelech is acting more righteously than God's covenant people. He's addressed by God in a dream and says, "Hey, don't take that man's wife," and immediately he doesn't take her. And he goes to his men and says, "Hey, this is what's happening," and all of them are fearful of God. And immediately he takes Sarah and gives her back. He doesn't wait around to obey; he doesn't contemplate his options. He says, "Back you go to your husband." "What have you done to us, Abraham? That you would do... what have we done to you? What have you done to us?" All of this is—is in the text for us to see that God is faithful, Abraham is unfaithful, and even a pagan can be used by God to come against His people and show them their sin.

Can you imagine Abraham's embarrassment? Here he has heard from God time after time after time after time; he's seen God work miraculously time and time and time again; and here this pagan is, has one dream and acts immediately in obedience. And more than that, he does exactly what God said: He gave the man back his wife, which was the first thing; and the second thing was what? Have him pray for you, for he is a prophet, and when he prays for you, I will heal you.

That's exactly what he does. He goes to Abraham, gives back his wife, and Abraham prays for him, and God lifts the—the curse against him. But I said God extends mercy to this nation. He didn't take Abimelech's life. He gave them back the ability to have the next generation of children in Gerar.

But look why God did these things in terms of the way Abimelech treated Abraham. Do you remember in Genesis 12 when God said, "Everyone who blesses you I will bless, and everyone who curses you I will curse"? Abimelech blesses Abraham. And then verse 14 is where it records how he blessed him: He took sheep, oxen, male servants, female servants, he gave them to Abraham, returned Sarah his wife to him, and Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; dwell wherever you choose, wherever you like, wherever your eyes see to live. Live there."

He didn't stop there. He blesses them by giving them a thousand pieces of silver. Far more than many men's wealth. He loads Sarah up with this gift. Why? So that she might be seen as innocent in everyone's eyes. He is blessing Abraham and blessing Abraham and blessing Abraham. And because of that, God blesses him. God blesses him.

So in our text, we see clearly two realities. God is faithful to protect His people, even when His people are faithless. God is faithful to protect us, church. I tell you, I think of this passage and I think it turns my mind to Ephesians chapter 2, when I think about the fact that while I was dead in my sins and trespasses, serving the prince of the power of the air, committing all kinds of heinous sin against God... but God. Being rich in mercy with a great love with which He loved us. Even when we were dead in our trespasses and sins, God made us alive in Christ Jesus.

And Paul then says in Romans 8: If He has given you His Son, what then will He withhold from you? What will He withhold from you? If He's willing to give you His own Son, what else will He not give you with His Son? I'm telling you, church, we are the bride of Christ, and in our protector—our husband, Christ—we will make it safely home with a great reward. All because of Him. All because of who we are in Him.

And so I want to leave you with this challenge: Take the time to reflect over your life. Where are you compromising in faith because of the things you see around you? The fearful things you see around you. Where are you compromising your faith? Why are you not trusting the providence of God and in the providence of God specifically in the promise of ordinary life? The promise God has made—believing that in ordinary life situations. Why are you fearful to trust Him? Where are you compromising? And third, I want you to ask yourself: Am I willing to believe in Him and follow Him wherever He leads me? I will say, "I will go."