

God's Kingdom or Ours?

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[0 : 00] Well, it's amazing, isn't it, what we forget. Birthdays come around every year on the same day, and yet we forget to put a card in the post.

The dish that we borrowed sits on the side, and yet we forget to bring it with us, to give it back. We live with ourselves every day, don't we?

And yet we forget what we're really like inside. When we read this passage, maybe some of you wondered whether we've heard this before recently, or perhaps you'd forgotten.

Well, you're not imagining it, but it wasn't the same passage. Just if you've got your Bible, turn back with me to Genesis 12 for a moment. Genesis 12, and see verses 11 to 13.

Where have we heard this before? As Abraham was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, I know what a beautiful woman you are. When the Egyptians see you, they'll say, this is his wife.

[1 : 07] Then they'll kill me, but let you live. Say you're my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake, and my life will be spared because of you.

We have heard this before, haven't we? Here in Genesis 20, we've come across the same lie, or the same half-truth as Abraham would have it, to serve his own interests, right?

To save his own skin. Eight chapters later in our Bibles, and 25 plus years later in this man's life. And what is he up to?

Well, Abraham is up to his old tricks, isn't he? It's a different city, different people, different king, but the same deception. It's amazing what we forget, isn't it?

Had he forgotten how this went last time? It went very nearly exactly the same way it goes this time. God is not happy. Neither, actually, is the foreign king.

[2 : 08] Abimelech takes the words right out of Pharaoh's mouth. What have you done to us, he says? What have you done? What are we meant to see?

Despite everything that God has brought Abraham through, between then and now, well, Abraham still forgets, doesn't he, what he's really like.

What is in his heart? Who is he? His heart is full of deceit. It is full of sin. So why is Genesis telling us about this kind of bizarre deception again?

Well, you say, because it's part of Abraham's life. It happened in his life. Well, yes, but Genesis doesn't tell us everything about Abraham's life, does it? You whole decades of his life are skipped over, and yet we kind of get this little bit twice over.

Okay, he may have done it more than once, but do we really need to know about it more than once, you see? Well, as I said right at the start of the series, this book is not a biography of Abraham, is it?

[3 : 15] It's not a story of his life. What is it? This is another chapter in God's rescue plan for the world. That's the story that Genesis is telling.

Why is it here? I've got a slide maybe that helps us see where we are in this section of the story. Okay, maybe you can see that. It's a little bit bigger on the screen or on the screens here.

And it's helpful to see at this point how Genesis 12 to 25 works, this little section. Now, I've laid it out like that because Old Testament writers love to do this, okay?

What you're looking at is called a chiasm. Chiasm, okay, new word for the day, chiasm. And perhaps you did this at school, okay, where you got a mirror, and you put the mirror in the middle of the paper, and then you started to draw a picture.

And what happened? As you drew, the other half of the picture was being drawn in the mirror, right? So as you drew, the other half is appearing. And a chiasm is like that.

[4 : 20] You work out where the mirror goes, where's the center of the picture. And as you work your way outwards, you see that the two halves are mirroring each other. And I've checked this,

okay, in a good commentary.

This is not just, okay, Joe woke up one day and thought, this is how it works. This is what it looks like, this section of Genesis. And it helps us understand why we're looking at Abraham deceiving another foreign king.

If we were writing a book, right, we would avoid that kind of repetition. We would think that's redundant. But for a Hebrew writer, right, they have done this because it repeats itself.

Because it repeats itself. And what does the repetition do? Well, it draws out themes. And the big theme in a chiasm is what's in the middle.

Okay, it works as in the picture. It works like a funnel. It funnels our attention down, down to the dead center. And what is in the center of this section?

[5 : 23] Well, funnily enough, it is chapter 16. Chapter 16 of Genesis. And we don't have time to look at it, but I think it does that because chapter 16 captures the beating heart of this section, the purpose of this bit of the book, to show God's purpose to bless every family of the earth, and that he has chosen to do that through people who often fail to follow his plan.

God's purpose to bless every family through a failing family. God has promised. Will they? Will we? Will we trust his promise?

I hope that helps us see why Genesis is written like that, why we're back here in our Bibles today. It's not to tell us who Abraham is again. It's not a story of his life, is it?

It is to tell us who God is. It's to tell us what God is doing. And it's to hold up a mirror again to us to show us who we are.

Are we not forgetful? Do we not get it wrong over and over and in the same ways over and over? We need to see again and again, don't we?

[6 : 46] It's amazing what we forget about us. It's amazing what we forget about God. Let us see this again today. Firstly, let us see then God's desire for a fallen world.

God's desire for a fallen world. Now, what's the story? Well, in brief, Abraham has told people where they're staying in Gerar that his wife Sarah is in fact his sister and the king decides he's going to marry her.

Now, that may seem strange, but remember in the ancient world that marriage was much more about connections. Okay, so this marriage is probably less kind of romantically driven than politically driven for this king.

Abraham is not a desert nomad. He's a wealthy and influential and powerful man in this region. But as Pharaoh did, the king has walked into a trap, hasn't he?

Because Sarah is not only Abraham's half-sister, but his wife. Now, when we looked at that pattern in this section, I stressed the repetition of these parts, but actually the skill and the beauty of Scripture is in the way that the story develops even through the repetitions.

[8 : 01] So, remember what happened last time back in chapter 12. At this point, okay, Pharaoh took Sarah for his wife, and God, what did he do? He cursed Pharaoh and the nation.

He sent a plague. But this time, look, what does God do in verse 3? What's different? God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him, you are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken.

She is a married woman. What's different? God speaks to the ruler, the foreign ruler, in a dream. And now that doesn't happen a lot. When God normally wants to communicate with those outside his family, he tells his message to a messenger, a prophet, who goes and speaks to the foreign king.

But God's prophet has decided he's off the clock. He's not interested in doing God's work at this point. So, God delivers the message personally to this king.

Now, what does that tell us? What does it tell us about what God wants for this king, for this kingdom? What does he want to destroy him?

[9 : 15] Is God only interested in catching people out in their sin? Is God just waiting for a reason to get this guy? Well, no.

Because even when Abimelech is in way over his head, he helplessly deceived. God does not come down like a ton of bricks on him, does he? Though he comes to speak to him.

Now, do you see the grace in that? God is not looking for any excuse to wipe people off the map. Perhaps that's the idea that you have of God, the God of the Bible, or perhaps the God of the Old Testament.

Here's a quote from Richard Dawkins that you may go along with, or to some degree share this view. But just see as I read it, just see if you think that he's speaking about the same God that we're reading about here.

The God of the Old Testament, he says, is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction, jealous and proud of it, a petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak, a vindictive, bloodthirsty, ethnic cleanser, a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, philicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent, bully.

[10:44] Is he speaking about this God? Here in Genesis? You know, last time in Genesis, we saw what God did to Sodom.

And yet, even there, friends, we did not meet a God like that. Yes, we met a God of uncompromising justice, who punishes wrong, but who even in his judgments only does what is fair. He does not lump good and evil together and treat them the same. And here again, look what God is doing. He has come down to see what's really going on, to test this king's heart, to see what is really inside.

And he says two gracious things to this foreign ruler. See this conversation. Abimelech says, verse 4, Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation?

It's very similar to the question that Abraham asked back in the last chapter. Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? God, are you like that?

[11:48] Will you judge an innocent people? Did he not say to me, verse 5, she is my sister? And didn't she say, he is my brother? I've done this with a clean conscience, with clean hands.

In other words, what the king's saying, I had no idea. In fact, he tricked me into it. And we can really sympathize, can't we, with Abimelech?

Who would want to be friends with Abraham? Now, what does God say? Look what he's already done in verse 6. God said in the dream, Yes, I know you did this with a clean conscience.

And so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her. God says he knows Abimelech's heart.

And he restrained Abimelech's sin. What does God want with this king? What does he want with us? What's his desire for a fallen world?

[12:49] Not to punish sin, but to restrain sin. This is what God does all of the time, not only for Christians, but for everyone.

Theologians speak about common grace, that is undeserved kindness that God shows to all. Jesus says he sends the sun and the rain on the good and the wicked, because he's kind to the undeserving.

And one aspect of that common grace is that God keeps us back from the worst excesses of our sin, even for those who do not love him.

In God's kindness, no one on earth is as bad as they should be, considering how sinful and corrupt our hearts are.

And some people are, in fact, loving and kind and compassionate, despite not knowing him.

Friends, that is God's kindness to his world, that he sovereignly restrains sin, that he puts boundaries around our sin so that life can go on in this world.

[14:02] Now, nobody is saved by that, but apart from God's grace in restraining sin, life could not go on in this world. God knows this king's heart.

He sees his conscience, and he graciously prevents him from doing something corrupt and sinful. Now, is that a God who wants to destroy his enemies?

Is that a God who loves to crush sinners? No, it is the opposite, isn't it? A God who loves to show mercy. A God who loves to deliver us from ourselves.

A God who loves to hold us back from the evil that we would do. That is one thing God desires through a fallen world, to restrain sin.

The second thing God says is in verse 7. What else does God want for the world? Now, return the man's wife, he says, for he's a prophet, and he will pray for you, and you will live.

[15:07] But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all who belong to you will die. Again, what does God want with this king? What does he want with us? He calls us to repent.

That is to turn from whatever wrong that we're doing or wanting, to find forgiveness and restoration, to put back together what we have broken, to put right what we have put wrong.

Give Abraham back his wife, he will pray for you, and you will live. That is grace upon grace, isn't it? What grace to a ruler who, up until that day, seems to have had no conception of God, no idea of his sin, no understanding of God's character.

But now God comes to call him personally, to turn to him and be forgiven. And friends, that is what Richard Dawkins and so many get wrong about God, that he desires not to crush his enemies, but instead to make his enemies his friends.

The God that Dawkins wrote about really is a God of fiction, isn't he? Because the real God, the God of Scripture, is a God of love, a God of all grace, a God of mercy and compassion.

[16:31] Peter writes at the end of his second letter that he is patient with ye, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. What does God want for our world?

What does God want for ye? Remember his big headline promise to Abraham, I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you, and all peoples on earth will be blessed through ye. God's desire for a fallen world is to bless every family, every tribe, every tongue, every people and nation by his grace to reconcile the world to himself in Christ.

That is what we see about God here, his heart for the world, that he cannot be thwarted in his purpose to bless his enemies, even when his family do everything in their power to ensure the opposite.

That God cannot be stopped in his redeeming purpose because he does not want to stop. Do you see that? You need to see it because you need to see here how God's desire, that beautiful desire, contrasts with Abraham's desire.

[17:53] So our second point, what is God's family's desire in a fallen world? Okay, back to the story, Abimelech, he wakes up in a cold sweat early in the morning. He gets his top guys together to talk about, what are they going to do?

God has spoken to him. And verse 8, they were very much afraid. That is the right response to hearing that God is in opposition to what you're doing.

And so the king gets Abraham in, doesn't he, to put things right. And he asks some very good questions. Again, we can really sympathize with the foreign king in the story, can't we?

We're meant to. What have you done to us? He asks. How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You've done things to me that should never be done.

Now the choice of words there is really important because Abraham has brought guilt upon the king and his kingdom. Now how does that compare with what we have just seen as God's desire for the kingdoms of the world?

[19:01] Does God want to heap guilt upon this kingdom? Or does God not rather work to relieve the world of its guilt?

To restrain the world's guilt, to remove the world's guilt from before him? But here, this foreign king turns to God's own family, God's mediator of his covenant and says, you have brought guilt on me. You've brought guilt on my kingdom. And that surely stings, doesn't it? Why did I do? Why did I deserve that?

He says. Here's a pagan ruler having to tell God's people what is right and what is wrong. And that can still happen, can't it? When there are big scandals in the church like this that the whole world can see should just never have happened.

It's just wrong. Or on a more personal level, we might have friends who in their lives put us to shame as Christians with the standard of their living, their generosity, their compassion.

[20:13] Do we have friends like that? Well, if Jesus came not to call the righteous, but sinners, we should. It shouldn't surprise us if as Christians we feel that we're worse than the people around us.

That's why we know we need a savior. But what Abraham got wrong specifically was not wanting what God wanted for his own kingdom.

God wanted to bless, doesn't he, every family through his chosen family. All the peoples will be blessed through ye. But instead, through his personal decisions, Abraham has brought guilt upon people.

And so the question for us to consider is can we be out of step with God's program for the world? Is the way we live, the decisions we make, is it driving towards God's kingdom?

Is it in line with his heart? Or is it doing something different? Do we want what God wants for the world outside these four walls? Do we deviate from that?

[21 : 22] If not in sins of commission, then perhaps in sins of omission. Could non-Christians in your life legitimately ask, how have I wronged you that you have left me with such great guilt, if not brought guilt upon me?

Listen to this quote from the French atheist Penn Gillette. I find this really challenging. I don't know about you. He says, if you believe there's a heaven and a hell and people could be going to hell or not getting eternal life and you think it's not really worth telling them this because it would make it socially awkward, I don't respect that at all.

Now that's possibly not a widespread feeling in our world. Atheists don't often invite Christians today to tell them the gospel, but it's true, isn't it? You hear as an atheist telling God's church what is right and what is wrong.

Here is somebody telling us what we ought to do and what we ought not to do. And we do the world a disservice, do we not, by not being open in sharing the gospel of God's king and God's kingdom with those who need to hear it.

And could it be that like Abraham, that is because we do not share God's heart to bless the fallen families of this fallen world.

[22 : 49] You know, that is what those parables of Jesus teach us, don't they? The lost sheep, the lost coin, that God loves to go looking for the lost, that God delights in finding people who have gone astray.

God celebrates in heaven over sinners who repent. That is God's heart for his kingdom. What is Abraham's heart? Verse 11. Abraham replied, I said to myself, there's surely no fear of God in this place and they will kill me because of my wife.

Abraham's heart is wrapped up, isn't it, in his own little kingdom, securing the walls, building up the fortresses.

He would do anything to survive, to save his own skin. And he would even put others at risk in his life, wouldn't he, as he does his wife, as he does this kingdom, so that he might live.

Is it true that there was no fear of God in that place? What did they do when God spoke to their king? They were very much afraid, weren't they? And yet Abraham has written them off as gone.

[24 : 00] Much better that I live than that they do. Now, is that our desire for a fallen world? Are we, are we at heart a self-preservation society?

Do we want what is best for ourselves, whatever it costs others in our lives? Now, I trust that many of us would be able to say no to those questions, that we do love God, we love his kingdom, we want what he wants, we live for him.

But, here's the challenge, what about your neighbors, colleagues, classmates, who don't know Christ? I wonder, I wonder, are we at risk of writing them off as collateral damage in our own pursuit of comfort and convenience and privacy and respect?

That is what Abraham has done by living for his own little kingdom and not the kingdom of God. And our hearts do not go out to him in this story, do they? They go out, rather, to the king whom he has sinned against.

And we could think up any number of technicalities to excuse ourselves from living for what God wants in his world. Well, technically, says Abraham, technically, if you think about it, Abraham says, Sarah is my half-sister.

[25 : 22] But we know that that is not the whole truth. And he's left out the half of the truth that really matters. His decision is not intellectual, is it up here? It is spiritual. Down here, verse 12 is what he tells himself to justify how he really wants to live, which is a quiet life free of trouble.

But in doing that, he brings trouble on his wife, trouble on this kingdom, and trouble on God. Not that God really is in trouble because we've seen he does what he does in spite of what Abraham is doing.

but Abraham is not being the mediator of his covenant that God has called him to be, is he? He is not standing between God and humanity to bring blessing to a fallen world.

Brothers and sisters, Abraham holds up a mirror to us today because Genesis wants to know whether what we want for the world is what God wants for his world, is what we want for this world, what God wants for this world.

God calls everyone to turn from their sin to him. Is that what we want for others more than anything, more than our own convenience, more even than our own security?

[26 : 43] Well, let us see finally how God resolves this situation in our final point, God's promised plan for his fallen world. what happens in verse 14 then?

Abimelech brought sheep and cattle, male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham and returned Sarah his wife to him. Abimelech does what God says he needs to do to be right with him. He repents. And in light of everything, that is remarkable, isn't it? He was only in that position at all because Abraham had lied to him, and yet he turns to Abraham, right, and gives him not only his wife back and loads of animals, but a very expensive gift.

He gives him a thousand shekels, that's about twelve kilos of silver, as compensation, he says, to vindicate ye, you are vindicated.

And he tells the family also, my land is before ye. He invites them to stay, live wherever you like, he says. That is extremely gracious and forgiving, isn't it, considering what this man has put him through.

[27 : 53] And in so many ways, this is a model, isn't it, of repentance for us. This is how God would have us respond to his call, wholehearted, unreserved, unresentful.

He's not apologizing through clenched teeth, is he? He doesn't feel that he has a right to hold on to his hurt. He's not wanting in any sense to get even with Abraham or demand payment from him to cover his sins.

Abimelech's one and only concern is asking forgiveness for his own wrong. And he's heard the challenge of God's word. However Abraham responds, he says, he knows what he needs to do to be right with God.

And that kind of humility is a challenge for each of us, isn't it? Wouldn't we be tempted in his position to say, well, he tricked me into it. What you did to me was worse.

We know we need forgiveness, but only if we get an apology back, right, out of it from the other person. But we can learn from Abimelech that repentance means wholeheartedly turning from our own wrongs and leaving the rest to God.

[29 : 09] We are responsible for our own responses, friends, not the responses of others. And our response does not depend on what others do or don't do.

In the words of our Lord, what is it to you? You follow me. You follow me. And so this story ends with a blessing for a foreign king.

We see that blessing comes through repentance towards God and faith in God's mediator who here is Abraham. God had said, Abraham will pray for you and you will live.

And that is what happens, isn't it? Then Abraham prayed to God and God healed Abimelech and his family. Because it is not only Abimelech who's redeemed here, but Abraham also.

God makes sure Abraham is being the mediator that he has been called to be for the blessing of the nations. But friends, as we finish today, here as Christians, 2023 in Aberdeen, we can take heart in the fact that we have a better mediator to turn to.

[30 : 21] A better mediator than this Abraham. One who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.

We do not have a mediator who clocks off when it is convenient. We do not have a mediator who puts himself before others, but a mediator who lives forever to intercede for us, to stand between God and ourselves and bring us blameless to him, to take away our guilt, to forgive our sins, to reconcile us to God, to make his enemies his friends.

brothers and sisters, what does that table, what does this table tell us today? That we have a mediator, Jesus Christ, whose body was broken that our hearts might be healed, whose blood was poured out that we might live, our sins might be covered.

We have a mediator who did not preserve his life, but gave up his life that we might live. It tells us today that we can turn from our sin to Jesus Christ and have God's promised eternal blessing, our guilt removed.

And that is what God wants today. That is what he wants for us each today, whoever we are, whatever we've done or haven't done, because he is the God of covenant love who delights in bringing home what was lost.

[31 : 59] Let's thank him together in prayer. Now let's pray. Father, how we thank you for your grace to us in Jesus.

Father, how we praise you that when we were lost and far from you, you came to seek us and save us. And Father, we pray that as we take your grace to heart that we would be changed by it.

Lord, we pray that you would turn us, Lord, from our selfish desires to serve you, the living God.
Father, we pray that we would want what you want for those in our lives who as yet do not know you.

And Lord, we pray that you would bring us to Jesus and give us great confidence in him. Root us and ground us in him, we pray. Let us know his forgiveness.

Fill us with his life, for we ask in his name. Amen.