

Genesis 20-21 “Life from the Dead, Part 1” (20:1-21:34) August 2, 2009
Psalm 105
Galatians 4

We are used to thinking of Genesis 22 as the “resurrection” chapter.

There is a sense in which Abraham receives Isaac back from the dead
in Genesis 22.

But before we get there, we need to see first that the *birth* of Isaac
is only because of the resurrection of Sarah –

or to put it perhaps more accurately, the re-fructification of her womb.

Now there is a word you don’t hear too often!

Fructification has to do with bearing fruit.

Sarah’s womb was barren and empty.

She was fruitless.

Her womb was a barren wasteland – *tohu vbohu*.

But our God is a God who not only brings life to the dead,
he brings life *through death*.

It was only through the death of Sarah’s womb –

only through the long, painful years of barrenness –
that God would bring life not only *to* the dead,
but *from* the dead.

And we should not minimize Sarah’s experience of this.

She is 90 years old.

And for the last quarter century she has lived in between the promise of God
and the cold, hard reality that she is barren and empty.

But God enters the cold, hard reality.

He visits the barren and empty womb and fructifies it –
he brings life out of death.

So let us sing in response to God’s word, Psalm 105:1-15, 37-45

Psalm 105 not only refers to God’s message to Abimelech (v15)

but also continues the story through the deliverance from Egypt.

Genesis 20-21 sets up that story with Hagar and Ishmael’s connection to Egypt,
but also in the way in which God provides water in the desert.

But this should get us thinking.

After all, when Israel hears the story of Ishmael,

they are hearing it in the context of God’s provision of water in the desert.

God gave Hagar and Ishmael water in the desert.

God gave Israel water in the desert.

Might there be a connection?

Our NT lesson comes from Galatians 4.

Introduction: A “Gur” (Sojourner) in Gerar: Abraham and Abimelech (20:1)

In our passage today, the centerpiece is the re-fructification of Sarah’s womb
and the birth of the promised son.

But we start with Abraham the sojourner – and we will end with Abraham the sojourner.
I know that many of you feel like sojourners –
perennial outsiders –
transients who never quite “belong” anywhere.

Abraham lived his entire life as a sojourner –
and he lived by faith throughout his life,
because he believed that God would do as he promised.

And so after God destroyed Sodom (chapter 19),
*Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb
and lived between Kadesh and Shur;
and he sojourned in Gerar.*

There is a play on words here in 20:1.

The Hebrew word for sojourner is “Gur.”
Abraham is a Gur in Gerar – a sojourner.
Gerar is said to be part of the Canaanite lands in Genesis 10,
but it is said to be under Philistine control.
It is in the south of the land.
(The word Negeb means “south” –
it is like talking about the Civil War
and saying that “the South” seceded from the Union.
Likewise, the “Negeb” refers to a region – not just a direction.)

But in Gerar, Abimelech is king
Abimelech simply means “my father is king.”
It appears to be the title of the kings of Gerar
(like Pharaoh is the title of the kings of Egypt,
or Caesar is the title of the emperors of Rome)

1. “She Is My Sister” – The Vindication of the Barren Woman (20:2-16)

*2 And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, “She is my sister.”
And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.*

Abraham had done this when they went to Pharaoh in Egypt,
now, he does it again with Abimelech.

But think about this in terms of land, seed, and blessing to the nations.
In both cases Abraham is moving away from the promised land.

And in both cases Abraham nearly loses the promised seed.
And in both cases when the kings of the earth “curse” Abraham
(by taking his wife)
God curses them.

*3 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.”*

This is a striking statement:

“you are a dead man.”

Abimelech has threatened God’s covenant.

By taking the woman whom God had said would bear the promised seed,
Abimelech is setting himself against God.

This is a good reminder that “good intentions” do not go very far.

If you look at the following interchange,

it is clear that Abimelech is an honorable man.

Indeed, he is an *innocent* man (as far as his intentions go).

But he is also a dead man,

because in spite of his good intentions,

his *actions* have been wicked –

because he has taken another man’s wife.

You know the saying,

“the road to Hell is paved with good intentions!”

4 Now Abimelech had not approached her.

So he said, “Lord, will you kill an innocent people?

5 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.”

Abimelech claims to be innocent in his intentions – and God agrees.

6 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.

Abimelech is a very different man from Pharaoh.

When Pharaoh took Sarah (in Genesis 12)

it requires “great plagues” to convince Pharaoh to let her go.

But God agrees that Abimelech is a man of integrity.

Still, in spite of his good intentions,

his *actions* have incurred guilt.
But God has come to him in order to provide the way for him to be saved:

*7 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."*

God says that Abraham is a prophet.
What does it mean to be a prophet?
As we saw Wednesday night,
a prophet speaks to man on behalf of God,
and speaks to God on behalf of man.
In other words, as we saw in Genesis 18,
Abraham has access to the heavenly council.
When Abraham speaks to God, God listens,
and does what Abraham asks.

That is a remarkable statement.

But no less remarkable is Jesus' statement that this is also true for all who believe in him.

"Ask, and it will be given to you;
seek and you will find;
knock, and it will be opened to you.
For everyone who asks receives,
and the one who seeks finds,
and to the one who knocks it will be opened." (Mathew 7:7-8)

Is it really true?

Will God really give you what you ask for?

I'm sure that lots of people in the first century wrestled with the fact
that Jesus told them, "ask and it will be given to you."
They asked, but they didn't receive.

What's wrong?

James deals with this in James 4:

*You do not have, because you do not ask.
You ask and do not receive... Why?
because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.*

You might say (as many, many others have said throughout the centuries!)
"but all I want is enough to provide for my family!"

But Jesus addressed this in Matthew 6.

"Do not be anxious, saying 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?'
or 'What shall we wear?'"

For the Gentiles seek after all these things,
and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.
But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.”

In other words, Jesus says that if you are oriented towards seeking *first*
your own kingdom, your own family, your own life,
then you will ask for the wrong things!

I know.

I understand that I am speaking to several people who are currently unemployed.
I realize that some of you are *seriously* wondering “what shall we eat?”

But when Jesus spoke these words,
there would have been many in the same situation!

You may have plenty of food (in which case you should be thinking
about how you can provide work and food for those who need it!).
Or you may be watching the shelves grow bare.

In either case, Jesus says to seek first his kingdom.

And Jesus could easily have pointed back to Abraham as his example.
Abraham is called upon to seek the kingdom of God
instead of seeking his own kingdom.
After all, *Abraham* is as good as dead.
Abraham is wondering “When am I going to have this promised child?”
And yet God calls upon him to pray for another man.
As a matter of fact, the man who has just sinned against him
by taking his wife!

It’s as though God came to you and said,
I know you don’t have a job,
but you are to pray that I will give so-and-so a job.
And if you pray that, then I *will* give so-and-so the job that you want!

*8 So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants
and told them all these things.*

And the men were very much afraid.

9 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.”

10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, “What did you see, that you did this thing?”

11 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.*

(In other words, Abraham has misjudged Abimelech!
Abimelech would not have killed him,
because Abimelech is actually a righteous man.)

*12 Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father
though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife.
13 And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her,
'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come,
say of me, He is my brother.'*

(So technically it was true, but since it was grossly misleading
it was no better than a lie.)

*14 Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male servants and female servants,
and gave them to Abraham, and returned Sarah his wife to him.
15 And Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you."
16 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."*

Once again, Abraham is enriched by the nations.
And once again the blessing of Abraham is invoked:
those who bless you will be blessed.
Abimelech now blesses Abraham,
and so...

2. The Re-Fructification of Sarah and the Son of the Free Woman (20:17-21:7)

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

Only now do we discover what sort of "death" had come upon Abimelech.
All the wombs of his house were closed.
If the womb is closed, and there are no more children,
then your line will end and your story will be over.

Death had descended upon the house of Abimelech.
It is almost as if the barrenness of Sarah was contagious!
As long as she was in Abimelech's house, his women were barren.

And only the prayer of God's prophet could bring life to the dead.

And through Abraham's prayer, the Lord opened their wombs.

Oh, what bitter irony for Abraham!

God had promised *his* barren wife a child!
And yet in order to seek first the kingdom of God,
he must instead ask God to open the wombs of the house of Abimelech!

But this is what it means to be a prophet!

The prophet does not speak for himself.
He speaks on behalf of God to the people,
and on behalf of the people to God.

This is what James means when he says that you do not receive
because you ask with the wrong motive.

If your prayers are oriented toward yourself and your own situation,
then you are not seeking first the kingdom of God.

So even you are unemployed,
you who are wondering "what shall we eat?"
Jesus says *to you*, "seek first the kingdom of God."
But I will also remind you that Jesus says that *if* you seek first his kingdom,
all these things (food, clothing) will be added to you.

You see, if we are a community of people
who are seeking first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
then we will take care of each other.

After all, what is righteousness?

Two weeks ago, in Genesis 18, we saw that God tested Abraham
to see if he would do righteousness
and judge justly.

We saw that *righteousness* has to do with organizing a community
in a way that reflects God's love, mercy, and justice.

And that *justice* has to do with rectifying oppression.

If we seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
then we will organize our community
in a way that reflects God's hospitality to us.

As God has brought us into his family,
and fed us and clothed us with Christ,
so also our feeding and clothing of one another is what will demonstrate
that we *are* seeking first his kingdom and righteousness!

Again, think of Abraham!

Abraham had demonstrated righteousness by showing hospitality to the angels,
and justice by insisting that the innocent should not be destroyed with the wicked.

And now Abraham again demonstrates righteousness and justice
by praying for the penitent king of Gerar.
He seeks first the kingdom of God,
trusting that God will take care of “all these things.”

And sure enough,
as Abraham prays for Abimelech,

*21:1 The Lord visited Sarah as he had said,
and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised.*

“seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness,
and all these things will be added to you.”

*2 And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age
at the time of which God had spoken to him.*

*3 Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him,
whom Sarah bore him, Isaac.*

Here at the center of our narrative
we see the “fructification” of Sarah.
Here this 90 year old woman is rejuvenated.
Her beauty has been restored (after all, Abimelech wanted her!)
and her fertility renewed.

But only through the healing of these Gentile wombs
is healing brought to Sarah’s womb.
The promised seed – the seed of the woman,
the seed of Abraham –
only comes with the healing of the Gentiles.

*4 And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old,
as God had commanded him.*

5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

Here is a man as good as dead.
But God not only brings life to the dead,
he brings life *from* the dead.

This barren womb, this withered tree,
Sarah and Abraham
who had laughed at the promise when it was made,

now laugh again!

6 And Sarah said, “God has made laughter for me; [he has made Isaac]
everyone who hears will laugh over me.”

7 And she said, “Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?
Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.”

Why do we laugh?
What causes laughter?

Laughter flows from the unexpected or incongruous.
Sarah expects us to laugh at her
because we don’t expect a 90 year old to bear a child.

Further, after 25 years of wandering in the land
Sarah bears a son.
But the son is born *outside* the land!
All our expectations are turned upside down.

God will fulfill his promises.
But don’t be surprised if it doesn’t happen in the way you expect!

3. The Departure of Hagar and the Son of the Slave Woman (21:8-21)

8 And the child grew and was weaned.
And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

Probably around the age of 3 (which means that Ishmael was around 16)

9 But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian,
whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing.

This is the same word used for “laughing” throughout the passage –
but in a different form, which usually indicates a playful or scornful laughter
(It is used when Lot’s sons-in-law thought that Lot was “jesting” in 19:14).

Paul talks about Ishmael “persecuting” Isaac (Gal 4),
but that does not mean that Ishmael was necessarily malicious or spiteful.
Ishmael’s very *presence* is a threat to Isaac.

Why?
Because even though Ishmael was born to a slave woman,
as long as he is present, it is *possible* according to ancient law and custom
for Abraham to grant him an inheritance with Isaac.

So there is a negative connotation to Ishmael’s laughter –
but the negative connotation is seen especially in Sarah’s mind.

After all, what does she see?
She sees her son – whose name means “laughter” – [Yitshaq]

and she sees Hagar's son "laughing." [Mitsaheq]
She sees this teenage boy acting like her son.
His laughter becomes a threat to her "Laughter."
His Mitsaheq becomes a threat to her Yitshaq.

And suddenly she realizes that as long as the son of the slave woman is around
her son's inheritance is not entirely secure.

*10 So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son,
for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac."
11 And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son.*

You can see that Sarah's fear well-founded.
If Ishmael remains,
Abraham will be inclined to give Ishmael a portion of the inheritance.

*12 But God said to Abraham,
"Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman.
Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you,
for through Isaac shall your offspring be named.
13 And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also,
because he is your offspring."*

The first time Sarah drove Hagar away,
it was plain that Sarah had acted poorly and mistreated Hagar.
But this time God approves of Sarah's plan.
God's purpose is to make Isaac the sole heir of the covenant.
This does not mean that only Isaac will be *saved*,
but that God's redemptive purposes will come about through Isaac.
Isaac is the "seed of the woman" through whom God will bring salvation.

It is tempting to take this in a purely biological way.
The descendents of Sarah (through Isaac)
are the children of promise.
The descendents of Hagar (through Ishmael)
are the rejected children.

But in Galatians 4 Paul warns us that this approach falls short of God's purposes.
Sarah should be understood spiritually
(Paul says "allegorically")
as representing the heavenly Jerusalem.
Hagar should be seen as representing the earthly Jerusalem.

In other words, Paul says that the unbelieving Jews of his day
were the children of Hagar.
They are outside of God's covenant promise.

Unbelieving Jews are children of the slave woman.

But those who believe in Jesus – those who are born according to the Spirit –
are children of the free woman,
children of the heavenly Jerusalem.
And the inheritance belongs
only to those who are united to the Son of God by faith.

Nonetheless, God also promises to care for Ishmael and make a nation of him as well.

*14 So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water
and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child,
and sent her away.*

And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.

15 When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes.

*16 Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off,
about the distance of a bowshot, for she said,*

“Let me not look on the death of the child.”

And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.

17 And God heard the voice of the boy,

and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her,

“What troubles you, Hagar?

Fear not, for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.

*18 Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand,
for I will make him into a great nation.”*

19 Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water.

And she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

We'll come back to Ishmael in a couple weeks

But suffice it to say that God does exactly what he promised.

He promised Abraham that he would care for Ishmael.

So he does.

And he provides water in the desert.

This is exactly what God provided for Israel in the wilderness.

But if anything, Ishmael is better off than Israel.

Because Ishmael, refreshed with water in the desert, lived!

While Israel, refreshed with water in the desert, perished in the wilderness
because of unbelief.

Paul's point in Galatians 4 about Hagar being the earthly Jerusalem

is exactly on target with the comparison between Ishmael and Israel.

Getting physical water in the desert

does *not* mean that you are the heir of the covenant.

Rather, it is the new life that comes from the dead that matters.

The son born in the fleshly way – the ordinary way –
is not the heir.
Rather, it is the son born according to the Spirit –
he is the one who inherits the promises and brings life from the dead.

*20 And God was with the boy, and he grew up.
He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow.
21 He lived in the wilderness of Paran,
and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.*

Conclusion: The Sojourner King (21:22-34)

Our text for today ends where it began.

Verse 34 says “Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines.”

Abraham is a sojourner who still does not own a square foot of the promised land.

But everywhere he goes, the surrounding nations humble themselves before him.
And wherever they do,
the blessing of God comes upon them.

Abimelech and Phicol confess this in verse 22:

*22 At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham,
“God is with you in all that you do.
23 Now therefore swear to me here by God
that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants
or with my posterity,
but as I have dealt kindly with you,
so you will deal with me
and with the land where you have sojourned.”
24 And Abraham said, “I will swear.”*

Abimelech and Phicol recognize that their well-being depends on Abraham.
God had told Abimelech, “you are a dead man”
unless Abraham prays for you!
And so now they entreat his favor.

Abraham responds by saying,

Fine, but if you want my favor – if you want to make a covenant with me –
then you need to return this well that I dug.

And Abimelech says,

I didn’t realize that there was a problem!
Why didn’t you tell me?

In other words, they negotiated the terms of the covenant in verses 25-31.

25 *When Abraham reproved Abimelech about a well of water
that Abimelech's servants had seized, 26 Abimelech said,
"I do not know who has done this thing;
you did not tell me, and I have not heard of it until today."*
27 *So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech,
and the two men made a covenant.*
28 *Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart.*
29 *And Abimelech said to Abraham,
"What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?"*
30 *He said, "These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand,
that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well."*
31 *Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath.*
32 *So they made a covenant at Beersheba.
Then Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army
rose up and returned to the land of the Philistines.*
33 *Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba
and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God.*
34 *And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines.*

Abraham is a sojourner here at Beersheba
(which means either "Well of the Seven" or "Well of the Oath").

But those who have eyes to see treat him like a king.
Abimelech recognizes that Abraham's God
has power over life and death.
And so there at Beersheba
Abimelech, king of the Philistines,
entreated the favor of Abraham, the sojourner king.

And now the Seed of Abraham, our Lord Jesus Christ,
the one who has brought life out of death in his resurrection from the dead,
sits enthroned as the King of kings at the right hand of the Father.
And you – you are like Abimelech –
and despite the best of your intentions,
you have sinned against the Seed of Abraham.
You are a dead man.

It doesn't matter that your intentions are good!
You have sinned.
And the wages of sin is death.
But if you (like Abimelech)
will humble yourself before the Seed of Abraham,
Jesus will pray for you, like his father Abraham prayed for Abimelech,
and you will live.

Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved!