As Good as Dead

Genesis 20:1-18
Key Verse: Genesis 20:17
Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelek, his wife and his female slaves so they could have children again

Several years ago, one of the laptops I owned overheated, and shut down permanently. It would never start up after that. All of the other components worked fine, but just one unreplaceable part burned out, so my laptop was as good as dead. What happens if the charging port to your cell phone no longer works? Your phone is as good as dead. Some might say your phone has been "bricked," meaning it has become as useful as a brick. Maybe less useful. On a little more somber and serious note, the phrase "as good as dead" means "To be in a position of great and irreversible danger or trouble, with the outcome of death being either figurative or literal (idioms.thefreedictionary.com)." There is a book titled "As Good As Dead: The Daring Escape of American POWs From a Japanese Death Camp." Has anyone ever heard of Amnesty International? It is an independent organization that campaigns globally for universal human rights. On a side note, does anyone know what "amnesty" means? Amnesty is an official pardon, especially for those convicted of political offenses. Just something to keep in mind in for the overall theme of the gospel – pardon for offenses. In Dec 2016, Amnesty International published a paper: "As Good as Dead: The Impact of the Blasphemy Laws in Pakistan," as a means to raise awareness and fight against unjust blasphemy laws. Great and irreversible danger leading to death is not only a problem for prisoners of war or persecuted people, but in truth it is a reality of all humanity. Luigi Pirandello, a famous Italian poet, playwright and novelist wrote: "As soon as one is born, one starts dying." But it doesn't have to be that way. We will see today, that indeed, without God, we are all as good as dead, but with God, there is life.

We continue with the story of Abraham, the man whom God had called out of his father's household to become a great and powerful nation, so that all nations on earth would be blessed through him. God gave him that promise when was called out of the land of Harran at 75 years old, and he has been living in the land of Canaan as a foreigner for the past 24 years. Now, at the age of around 99, God begins to set this promise into motion by granting him and his wife their first child in one year's time. It was at also right around this time Abraham witnessed the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as we learned about last week. Our passage begins here, look at v.1, "Now Abraham moved on from there into the region of the Negev and lived between Kadesh and Shur. For a while he stayed in Gerar." No reason is given why Abraham travels about 40 miles southwest to Gerar. He might have gone there after witnessing the judgment against the cities of the plain. Perhaps the air smelled like sulfur, and he needed to get away. He might have traveled to find pasture for his flocks. Whatever the case may be, his faith was tried yet again, and another important lesson is learned from his experience.

Abraham relapses into an old sin. Look at v.2, "and there Abraham said of his wife Sarah, 'She is

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my sister.' Then Abimelek king of Gerar sent for Sarah and took her." The first time this happened, Abraham was in Egypt. He was afraid the locals would kill him to take his wife Sarah, so he lied about their relationship. But Pharoah king of Egypt took Sarah to make her his wife. God had to intervene by sending a disease on Pharoah in order to save Sarah, and Pharoah chastised Abraham and kicked him out of the country. Abraham nearly lost his wife and the promise of God that first time. You think he would have learned his lesson. What makes this time even more remarkable is that God had made his promises even more clear than before. God establishes a covenant with Abraham, one time with cut animals in a solemn ceremony, and another time by the sign of circumcision. He make a clear and specific announcement that Sarah herself will have a child in her old age, twice. And here we are again, with Abraham making his wife available on the market by lying about their relationship. But before we blame Abraham we can see how deeply ingrained sin is in our nature. It has been 20-24 years since that first incident in Egypt. Even then we see Abraham struggling with fear, and struggling to put his trust in God. How soon do we forget that God has cleansed us from our sins. How soon do we forget that God sees and knows everything. How soon do we forget the great mercies and blessings God has bestowed upon us. When prosperity comes, overconfidence and pride and even greed tempt us. When hardships come, we despair and feel hopeless. When there's panic or confusion, we rely on our own wisdom, we seek our own path, rather than seeking God's counsel, and waiting on him. It is a difficult thing, often, to wait on God in prayer. This is the sinful condition of the human heart; Jer 17:9 says, "The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?" We may never fully understand why Abraham fell into the same sin again. Rather than trust in God to protect him in light of the covenant and promises, he lied about his relationship with Sarah to avoid death. But his plan backfired, and Abimelek took his wife Sarah away, putting the promise of God once again in jeopardy.

With Abraham helpless once again, God came to intervene. Look at v.3, "But God came to Abimelek 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.'" Wow look at the strong arm of the Lord! He is no respecter of persons, even kings are accountable to Him. How terrifying must have been the dream! Has anyone ever been in court? I was in court a couple times for traffic violations, and it was dreadful to strand before the judge. The authority is real. These are powers bestowed upon them by God, whether they want to recognize it or not. Now imagine standing before the Judge of all the earth, and Him pronouncing to you: "You are as good as dead." Look at the reason God gives: "You are as good as dead because of the woman you have taken; she is a married woman." Look at how jealously God guards marriage; look at the sanctity with which he places on marriage. God loves marriage, and he hates adultery. Adultery is a sin punishable by death.

Abimelek begins his response in v.4, "Now Abimelek had not gone near her, so he said, 'Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation?'" See how he appeals to the righteousness of God. Abimelek recognizes God as Lord, and he says, "Will you destroy an innocent nation?" Of course not; the Judge of all the earth will do right, and even Abimelek recognizes and appeals to this. He then makes the case for his own innocence, in v.5, "Did he not say to me, 'She is my sister,' and

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didn't she also say, 'He is my brother'? I have done this with a clear conscience and clean hands." That's the critical part. Abimelek had a clear conscience. Sometimes there are times where we are guilty and we know it. Our own hearts condemn us. But Abimelek was clear of the charge of adultery. He did not go near her, and he took her because he really thought she was not married. He did not have any suspicion that she could have been married, otherwise if he did, and he had taken her, he would have been guilty. Now Abimelek isn't completely innocent or righteous, but as for the charge of adultery with Sarah, he was innocent.

God replies in v.6, "Then God said to him in the dream, 'Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience, and so I have kept you from sinning against me. That is why I did not let you touch her.'" There are so many things to note in this verse. See what God says: "Yes, I know you did this with a clear conscience." God accepted and acknowledged his innocence. Surprising. God says, "Yes, you are correct, you are innocent in this matter." God even says "I know you did this with a clear conscience." God alone can see what is in our hearts, and he judges accordingly. Prov. 21:2 says, "A person may think their own ways are right, but the Lord weighs the heart." But look at what God says next: "and so I have kept you from sinning against me." God protected even Abimelek from sinning against him. If Abimelek could have his way, he would have sinned against God. We cannot see the secret counsels of God, but if you have been kept from sin, it was the gracious hand of God that kept you. Prov 16:9, "In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps." We should be afraid if we are allowed to rush headlong into sin. Sometimes it is the judgment of God, if we are stubborn in our ways and continually reject the Lord, to cast off all restraint and give us over to our sins. There is no one righteous, not even one, and we all have the capacity to sin against God. And see again, who is it Abimelek would have sinned against in v.6. God kept Abimelek from sinning against God. Not Abraham, but God. Adultery, of course it would be a sin against Abraham, and Sarah, but primarily adultery is a sin against God.

God then issues a command in v.7, "Now return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, and he will pray for you and you will live. But if you do not return her, you may be sure that you and all who belong to you will die." Abimelek, of course, cannot keep Sarah. He is to return her to Abraham. He also calls Abraham a prophet. This is the first time the word prophet is used in the Bible. God has identified Abraham as his spokesman, and his intercessor. God, in his magnanimous grace, has identified Abraham as one of his own people. A person through which God will make his will known. He has ordained it so that the only way Abimelek may live is if Abraham prays for him. Couldn't God just heal Abimelek instantly? Sure, he could, but in his great wisdom, he has set it up so that they must be reconciled. God can do whatever he wants, but it is the grace of God which enables us to participate in his love and reconciliation with the world. God also seemed to have raised the stakes, now that the position of Abraham was made known. Abimelek was not the only dead man, but all who belong to Abimelek will die if Sarah is not properly restored. The stakes were higher because Abraham was a prophet of God. In this we see that even though Abraham sinned greatly, and again put the promise of God in danger, God pardoned him. Abraham would still be corrected, however, for his folly. God disciplines those he loves.

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Look at v.8, “Early the next morning Abimelek summoned all his officials, and when he told them all that had happened, they were very much afraid.” Look how fast Abimelek sprang into action. It wasn’t only the next morning, but early the next morning. Abimelek may have been a pagan worshipper, worshipping many gods, but he did fear the Lord. At least he learned the fear of God through the dream. All of his officials feared the Lord as well. This is a compliment to Abimelek and his household. See what happens next in v.9, “Then Abimelek called Abraham in and said, ‘What have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should never be done.” This is a severe rebuke to the prophet of God, and that coming from a pagan. He was chastised publicly before all of Abimelek’s officials. “What have you done to us?” is the first question. “How have I wronged you,” Abimelek asks. Abimelek’s own conscience was clear before God – but he was calling Abraham to task. Abraham’s sin not only brought great guilt (no small guilt), not only to the king, but the entire kingdom. At the surface, it looks like just a little white lie, but look at the great devastation just a little sin has caused. For us, we may never truly know the scope of even our smallest sins, but even those can have disastrous consequences. Secret sins, take for example like looking at pornography, at first doesn’t seem to hurt anyone, but the consequences are unseen until it’s too late. It enables and supports human trafficking and the gross mistreatment of women, it destroys marriages, and it eats your soul inside out; not to mention that it is adultery, a sin against God punishable by death. It might seem like a small thing, only because we can’t see everything, but all sin, when full grown, gives birth to death. Abimelek brings on the strongest indictment of Abraham’s guilt: “You have done things to me that should never be done.” Wow, what a statement. To do that which upon someone, which should never be done. Abraham did things that should never be done, and haven’t we all. That is sin.

Abimelek then calls Abraham to account in v.10, “What was your reason for doing this?” Abraham replies in v.11, “I said to myself, ‘There is surely no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.’” Abraham’s fears were not unfounded. He had just left the vicinity of Sodom and Gomorrah, and their sins were heard far and wide. Where there is no fear of God, there is no restraint. People would rather kill than be charged with adultery. The problem was that Abraham did not think to trust God to protect him, and resorted to lying to save himself. Because of his fear he also misjudged the people of Gerar. Sure, there were some towns that were known for heinous sins. But we have seen that the people of Gerar are not so depraved, and it was revealed that they feared God. Abraham continues in v.12, “Besides, she really is my sister, the daughter of my father though not of my mother; and she became my wife.” We do learn here that Sarah is the half-sister of Abraham. But this is a weak excuse because this truth was intended to deceive in order to cover up the relationship of marriage. Lastly Abraham reveals that the plan to deceive was an agreement made 24 years ago, when he had set out from Harran. This would let Abimelek know that Abraham did not recently come up with this idea, but it had been something he always had done. It still doesn’t make it right, but Abraham gave his account, and it was time to make things right.

Look at v.14-15, “Then Abimelek brought sheep and cattle and male and female slaves and gave

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them to Abraham, and he returned Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelek said, 'My land is before you; live wherever you like.'" The humility and generosity of Abimelek is seen by these actions, and perhaps even the fear of God. He seems to acknowledge Abraham as a God's prophet, and offered him tribute. Abraham accepts these gifts, and even the offer of land. This is in contrast to the king of Sodom, whom Abraham refused any gift. This might also be a testimony to the blamelessness of Abimelek. Eventually, the promised child would even be born in this area. Most importantly Abimelek returned Sarah, as God had commanded. Verse 16, "To Sarah he said, 'I am giving your brother a thousand shekels of silver. This is to cover the offense against you before all who are with you; you are completely vindicated.'" It is interesting Abimelek speaks directly to Sarah. He gave Abraham on top of the other gifts one thousand shekels of silver for Sarah's sake. One thousand shekels of silver is around 2,500 lbs (1200 kg). In today's value, that would be worth about $650,000 USD. That's quite an offering; it's no small amount. What was this for? It was to cover the offense that was made, and to vindicate her. She was taken to be Abimelek's wife, but this offering clears up any confusion. It was a token of apology for taking her away from Abraham; it seems originally they were not given a choice. It was also a token of honor – to show that Sarah is the wife of Abraham the prophet of God, and not a concubine, or mistress of Abimelek. In a way this seems also an acknowledgement that Sarah is the princess named in the covenant God made with Abraham.

See Abraham's response in v.17. Can we all please read v.17, "Then Abraham prayed to God and God healed Abimelek, his wife and his female slaves so they could have children again." Abraham took back the role God had willed for him: to be a prophet and intercessor, and a blessing to all nations. God heard Abraham's prayer. This is significant, because God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly person who does his will (John 9:31). This means that Abraham repented. He turned back to God. Isa 55:7 describes it well: "Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon." Abraham forsook his sin, and turned to the Lord who had mercy and pardoned. If there was such grace for Abraham, who committed the same grave sin twice, we should take comfort that there is this same grace for us. Forsake your sin. Hate your unrighteous thoughts, and turn to God, who will freely pardon.

Finally we see the reason why God did all this, in v.18, "For the Lord has kept all the women in Abimelek's household from conceiving because of Abraham's wife Sarah." Abimelek was healed, and his wife, and slaves. They were kept from conceiving, but they had to be healed. There must have been some visible sign that prevented all of Abimelek's household from conceiving, or maybe even having intercourse. Some commentators suggest it may have been tumors. We don't really know, but this was for sure – they all needed healing, and received it. All of this was for Abraham's wife Sarah. God loved Sarah, and he wanted to give her a child from her husband Abraham. He wanted to make sure there was no doubt or dispute as to who the father of this child was. God protected Sarah, and he protected the child, so that he could give Sarah a legitimate son as he promised.

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Consider this also, that God not only gave Sarah a son, but wanted to give us a Son also. For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. Consider how much God loves you, that he gave you his Son, so that you shall not perish but have eternal life. We see in Abraham's prayer a prototype, a preview, if you will, of our Lord Jesus Christ. Abraham's prayer gave life back to the kingdom of Gerar. Jesus' prayer gives life to the whole world. Heb 7:25 says, "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them." Jesus came to die on the cross to take away the sins of the world, and he rose from the dead, ascending to the right hand of God. There, he prays on our behalf, just as Abraham did for Abimelek, and those who come to him, he is able to save completely. Just as Abraham was blessed in this chapter, so too all of his children will be blessed, and even more. Heb 11:12 says, "And so from this one man [Abraham], and he as good as dead, came descendants a numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore." Through Jesus Christ, the son of Abraham, the son of God, we have been made children of Abraham, children born of God by the Holy Spirit, washed in the precious blood of Christ. Though we are as good as dead, Jesus came to give us life. He has come that you may have life, and have it to the full (John 10:10).

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