

GOD OVERCOMES

Genesis 20-21

The history of the patriarchs reveals patterns of man's failures and God's faithfulness. God overcomes human obstacles to accomplish His promise. Human sin appears to create covenant jeopardy only for God to orchestrate all things to His ends.

Barrier 1: Abimelech

Abraham comes to a place called Gerar, which was in the land of Canaan. Abraham once again trusted in his own abilities and lived a lie (Genesis 20.2). That Abraham develops the wife-as-sister plot a second time is even more surprising because the situation is far less serious than when he first did this in Egypt (Genesis 12.10-20). We know that sinful impulses still live within godly people.

Abraham says he did this because he "thought there was no fear of God" in Gerar (Genesis 20.11). The point is that God wanted to use Abraham to bear witness in this place. God wants His people to be a channel of blessing and grace. Abraham does not believe that he can influence Abimelech.

We learn from this episode that sinful instincts do not spontaneously disappear. The sins that haunt us in our younger years still threaten us in our later years.

We also learn about the courage required to represent God in non-Christian settings.

Barrier 2: Ishmael

Ishmael was conceived because Abraham and Sarah felt the need to help God along on the timing of His promises. They force the action by having Abraham sleep with their servant, Hagar (Genesis 16).

We know that the promise was not to come through Hagar, but through Sarah. When Isaac is born, Ishmael mocks him (Genesis 21.9). Sarah then calls for the exile of Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham was conflicted because Ishmael, too, was his son (Genesis 21.11).

Despite this origin story, God takes care of Hagar and Ishmael. He hears their prayers, provides for them, and establishes them (Genesis 21.8-21).

We see two truths:

- Past sins carry earthly consequences.
- God's grace works through human folly to bring about blessing.

Promises Fulfilled

“Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth will be blessed” (Genesis 12.1-3).

In this section, we see God fulfilling His promises.

- Isaac is born to a woman who was barren in her childbearing years and is now well past the age when women can give birth. This is the first step in Abraham’s seed becoming a nation.
- Abraham set down roots in the land. By digging the well and planting the tamarisk tree, we see settlement in the promised land.
- We see how the treatment of Abraham results in blessing or curse. Abimelech knew that any mistreatment of Sarah would result in his destruction (Genesis 20.9). Then, through Abraham’s prayer, Abimelech is blessed (Genesis 20.17-18).

We see the ultimate fulfillment of God’s covenant promise in the sending forth of His only-begotten Son, the Lord Jesus. In Christ we are God’s people, moving towards the new heaven and new earth, with the mission of bearing witness to His truth.

Key Idea: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to His purpose” (Romans 8.28).

Application Questions:

What does this passage teach us about the weakness of human nature?

What do we learn about God’s protective care?

Why was Ishmael cast out (Cf. Romans 9.6-9; Galatians 4.21-31)?

What is the difference between Sarah’s laughter in Genesis 21.6 and Ishmael’s laughter in Genesis 21.9?