God's Grace in Messy Lives

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 18 March 2018

Preacher: Neil McAllister

[0:00] Once upon a time, there lived a beautiful princess. But she was unhappy because she'd been locked in a tower by a wicked witch. A fierce dragon guarded the tower.

He roared and breathed fire at anyone who came near. Everyone was afraid of the dragon. Until one day, a handsome prince in bright shining armour came riding by on his white stallion.
He heard the princess crying, and he slew the dragon with his mighty sword, broke down the door, and rescued the princess. He took the princess back to his kingdom, where he married her, and they all lived happily ever after.
You frequently come across people who try and dismiss the Bible as mere fairy stories. And while there are many other reasons why we would reject that claim, the one that seems most obvious to me is that the characters and events in biblical narrative are not remotely like those that you find in the typical fairy story.
In your typical fairy story, everything is simple and clear. There are goodies, and you know exactly who they are.
[1:24] There are baddies, and you know exactly who they are. And after some challenge or other, the goodies clearly and comprehensively win.

Good triumphs, evil is defeated, and they all live happily ever after. But when we look at the Bible, we find something completely different.
We keep seeing it again and again, whether it's in these studies we've been doing in Abraham, or the studies we've been doing in the morning in Luke's Gospel, or throughout the Bible, just everything is a lot messier.
The heroes of the faith are often complete failures. They stumble from folly to folly to outright rebellion.
And likewise, the enemies of God, well, they're often shown to act nobly and rightly. And when there are those victories, those times when good seems to win through, they're short-lived and incomplete.
[2:39] At least until that future, final, ultimate, literally apocalyptic victory over evil and the making of all things new.

But until then, in all these messy stories, there is one character that we find faultless, and one thing we find constant.
God and his grace towards people. Messy, broken, ordinary people, like me, like you, like all the people out there.
And I want us to look in this passage at God's grace towards four categories of people. To the stumbling believer, to the unbeliever, to the rejected, and finally, to the world.
Don't worry if you think I'm going to take as long on all the points as on the first point. There just seems to be so much to say there. And credit to my sister for the illustrations.
[3:53] As we've studied Abraham's life over the past couple of months, we've seen a complex man. A man at once of great faith and of great doubt, of obedience and of sin.

And in the first part of our passage here, in chapter 20, we don't see him in his finest hour. After the dramatic events of the previous chapters, you would think it was fairly clear that he would want to follow God and follow God's way clearly.
Clearly, but he moves into the region ruled by Abimelech, a Philistine king. And knowing that his wife is beautiful, he fears that Abimelech will kill him so as to take Sarah as his wife.
And so therefore he lies and pretends that Sarah is his sister so as to protect himself. While on a technicality this is true, she is his half-sister, he's blatantly intending to deceive here.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-06-16 17:32:13

While we in a few weeks ago tried to let Abraham off lightly and find the mitigating factors in his behaviour, we can't do the same here.
[5:29] Instead, when we read this, we can't help wanting to cry out to Abraham No, stop, don't do it, you stupid idiot. Because Abraham's sin here is repeated.

Just a few chapters back, he tried the same trick in Egypt. And that didn't work out well. The first time we can maybe excuse as a stupid mistake, but to do it again?
That's inexcusable. Surely he should have known better. But we also see here that his sin is premeditated. This is not accidental.
This is not a spur-of-the-moment decision. Because he tells Abimelech down in verse 13 that this is the plan that he agreed with Sarah when he left Haran about 25 years earlier.
He's had plenty of time to realise that this is not a good idea. And yet, he still goes ahead with his plan. And his sin put several people in danger.
[6:46] First, and most obviously, it put Sarah in danger so as to protect himself. Basically, he's saying to Sarah, you know, all that stuff I said to you about for better, for worse, or whatever Bronze Age, Middle Eastern wedding vows were like.

Well, actually, if you'd just be willing to sacrifice yourself and your honour for my safety, I'm not willing to take any risk on behalf of you.
But his sin also puts Abimelech in danger. He puts Abimelech in danger of sin because his deception leads Abimelech to believe that Sarah is unmarried and that therefore his intentions, if not quite in line with 21st century niceties, are essentially honourable.
But his sin also puts his unborn child in danger. It's not clear whether at this point Sarah is pregnant. But if she's not, she will be soon.
Just before the events in Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham was told that a year from now, Sarah will have a son. If Abimelech had followed through with his plan, there could be uncertainty raised about whose son is this?
[8:19] Is this the promised son of Abraham through whom all the nations will be blessed? Or is this just the son of some minor Philistine king?

But ultimately, Abraham's sin demonstrates a total lack of faith in God. He says that the fear of God is not in this place, and yet there is far greater fear of God shown by Abimelech, a pagan, than by Abraham.
He doesn't trust God to protect him and his family. Instead, he relies on his own cunning and deception to protect himself at the expense of others.
I'd love to say that we were somehow different, that Abraham was an oddity, an exception, an outlier, but I know that's not true, and you know that's not true.
All too often, our sin is repetitive and habitual. Every time we think we've learned our lesson, we won't go there again, and we do.
[9:47] All too often, we know in advance exactly what we're going to do. Maybe not 25 years in advance, but still long enough to have worked out that our plan is wrong, but also long enough to make up enough excuses as to why actually it's okay.

And while we like to pretend that our sin is a private thing, we like to follow the mantra of the world around us that says if it doesn't harm anyone, then it's okay.
The reality is none of us are hermits. Our lives are all intertwined and interdependent, whether in our families, in our workplaces, or even more in the church.
when I am not in a right relationship with my Father, how can I be there to exhort and encourage you, to worship beside you, to raise my voice with you and strengthen you?
And when I sin, and particularly when you see me sin, will I lead you into temptation and sin yourself?
[11:07] So often I've heard the gospel presented in such a nice, simple way that sounds great, but leads people to believe that after accepting salvation, sin is not something they should expect to struggle with.

Andrew Peterson, an American singer-songwriter, in one of his songs says, and I thought that all my struggles would be victories by now, but I confess that the mess is there.
Or as the Apostle John says in his letter, if we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-06-16 17:32:13

We must not deny the reality of the sin within us. Instead, as the Book of Common Prayer would say, we acknowledge and confess the grievous sins and wickedness which we have so often committed by thought, word, and deed.
But while Abraham's actions were completely wrong, it seems that his fears were not totally unfounded. abimelech does indeed consider Sarah beautiful, even though she's about 90 years old, and he sins for her.
[12:44] And despite the fact that these events were brought about by Abraham's willful disobedience, God still demonstrates his grace towards him. God demonstrates his grace by appearing to Abimelech to stop him from taking his unwitting sin any further.

He intervenes to protect Sarah when Abraham is ducked out of his responsibilities. Abraham may not be willing to protect Sarah's honour, but God once again steps in.
But God also shows his grace towards Abraham by bringing him favour in the eyes of Abimelech. I don't really know, and I'm sure probably no one really knows, can only speculate exactly what customs at the time were like, but it seems that it would have been perfectly natural for Abimelech to be furious here, to send Abraham away or worse.
But he sees that God is with Abraham, and so rather than seeking compensation from Abraham, he instead is the one that gives lavish gifts and welcomes Abraham to stay in his land.
And despite Abraham's sin, God graciously gives him the responsibility to intercede in prayer for Abimelech. for the man that he has wronged.
[14:26] He shows Abraham that he still has a job for him to do. He uses Abraham as the means for taking away the punishment that was hanging over Abimelech and his household.

God and he continues to use him to show his greatness to Abimelech so that he can say in chapter 21, God is with you in everything you do.
He continues to use Abraham as an ambassador to the world around him. God also shows his grace to Abraham by not going back on his promise.
As we'll see later, all the promises he had made to Abraham will still be fulfilled. Abraham's failure does not mean that God will not do what he had said he will do.
God's plans were not dependent on Abraham's strength. And then right at the end of the passage we see God showing his grace to Abraham by bringing him back to a place of worship.
[15:48] It's interesting to see that following the previous incident in Egypt Abraham waited until he got back to Bethel the place where he had worshipped God before.

It seems that in some way he felt he couldn't worship God where he was. But in this case we see him worshipping God there in Beersheba in the land of the Philistines.
I'm not really sure what the significance of the planting of the trees is. Commentators seem to come up with widely varying views on it but it seems to me that it's in some ways an act of placemaking that Abraham is making a statement saying that here as a nomad in a foreign land as a sinner I will worship the Lord here.
so when we see God's grace shown like this to a stumbling believer there is the obvious risk of thinking well sin's okay then we don't need to be concerned about it we don't need to seek daily to put to death the sin within us it would be easy to take the verse we read in first John to say that because sin is inevitable it's unimportant but John goes on to say a few verses later I write this to you so that you will not sin but if anyone does sin we have an advocate with the Father Jesus Christ the righteous one he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins you see there's no suggestion here that sin isn't a big deal that it doesn't matter there's no suggestion that it can just be swept under the carpet but it is a great problem but
Christ's sacrifice for us is even greater as one hymn puts it grace grace God's grace grace that is greater than all our sins and like Abraham our past failures do not disqualify us from being used by God John Piper in one of his sermons speaks about how there are so many young Christians who are filled with radical passionate zeal to give their lives for Christ but then they fall into sin and despite repentance they're never the same again he says the tragedy is that Satan uses the guilt of these failures to strip you of every radical dream you ever had or might have and in its place give you a happy safe secure
[19:15] American life of superficial pleasure but last week in the morning we looked at Jesus words to Peter at the last supper when you have turned back strengthen your brothers Jesus knew of Peter's imminent failure but he still had a mission for him to do in the future but if in this passage we've seen the amazing grace that God shows to stumbling believers we also see the grace that he

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-06-16 17:32:13

shows to the unbeliever because we've read about Abimelech a Philistine presumably pagan king and it would be easy therefore for us to think if the Bible was a simple fairy story with nice clear categories of people that

Abimelech falls into the category of baddie enemy of God and his people and therefore when he comes up against God God will destroy him in righteous anger but that's not what happens instead God is gracious because he recognizes that Abimelech has acted in ignorance and instead he reveals himself to Abimelech in a dream he warns him of what he is about to do warns him that if he continues on the path he's on then he will die and although Abimelech is a pagan who had probably never given God a thought before God listens as he pleads his case but he clearly sets out to Abimelech the choice that lies before him he can turn back from what he has started on and he will live or he can ignore the warning continue and he will die
I think when we ponder the question of evil in our world we often look forward to how God will one day put all things right and then that now through his grace he is holding back judgment he is at time he is at time he is actively restraining it his grace is at work in the lives of unbelievers holding them back from the full expression of depravity most of the time it will not be by such dramatic means as this although there are several occurrences in the Bible where God does speak to pagans through dreams to warn them of what he is going to do but he'll often use his people to bring about good and to restrain evil in a government in a society in a workplace where they have been called to be salt and light in other times he will restrain people by speaking to them through their conscience yes this world is currently under the rule of
Satan but he is far from having complete control God is very clearly still on the throne but Abimelech was still left with a choice and although Abraham thought that there was no fear of God in the place when God revealed himself Abimelech did fear and obeyed God and God was gracious to him and took away the judgment that was hanging over him and brought about reconciliation with Abraham God was also gracious in revealing himself to Abraham through his dealings with Abraham he could see that this was not your ordinary tribal deity but that Abraham's God had a real effect on
Abraham's life because of this we see in the last part of chapter 21 a quite strange occurrence Abimelech seeks a peace treaty from Abraham now Abimelech is the king in this place Abraham is just a nomad who happens to be camping on his land okay a quite rich nomad with quite a number of people with him but still it should be Abraham that is going to Abimelech seeking peace but Abimelech recognises that God is on Abraham's side and so therefore he sees that he is the one in the position of weakness we don't really know what Abimelech believed we don't know what he thought about God did he just add him into his pantheon of gods as yet another one to be appeased or did he acknowledge him as the one true
[25:18] God like so many other things the Bible doesn't tell us but as we walk out of here tonight into the week ahead let's not for a moment think that God's grace is only for us that we are in any way special other than that God has shown his grace to us let's go into a world where God's grace stays the hand of many that would do evil and see how we might be used to bring good and to bring God and his grace to the world around us and to the people that we meet we may never know how they respond but let's pray that God might display himself through us and then in the middle of our passage from verse 8 in chapter 21 we come across an awkward and rather uncomfortable story that doesn't really nicely fit in the story of

Hagar and Ishmael I wish I could spend more time on this because I think there's actually a lot to say about it but essentially this story shouldn't be there at all this family this conflict these events were all a result of Abraham's folly of him trying to fulfill God's plan in his own way this is not the way that it should have happened although of course God knew exactly what he was doing we see here Ishmael who has been displaced from his position of honour he on the verge of manhood probably 15 16 17 that sort of age must now take second place to a mere toddler
Isaac and naturally he doesn't take this too well unlike all teenagers he mouths off about it Sarah will not have anyone questioning the honour due to her son and so she will not have them in her household any longer and so they are sent away if we started tonight looking at a situation where God was gracious to Abraham in the mess that he had got himself into here we see God showing his grace to Hagar and Ishmael who although far from perfect are really the victims in a situation that was not of their own making and at first it seems that God is being harsh and callous he seems to be taking

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-06-16 17:32:13

Sarah's side and telling Abraham that despite any reservations he has he should send them away and yes God is saying that this is not the place for them that they are not part of this plan but God is still gracious to them God still has a plan for them you see first of all he shows grace to them by showing them the resources that he has provided they are wandering without a guide in the wilderness that they don't know and they can't find any water Hagar is in desperation she believes they're going to die and although she has been sent away from Abraham and
Abraham's household and protection Abraham's God is still with her and he shows her the well where they can find refreshment for the journey ahead but he also shows them grace by promising a blessing to Ishmael a blessing in many ways similar to that he promised to Isaac it's not the same blessing it does not have everything that came with that but it's still a promise to bless like Isaac he would become the father of twelve tribes and God would make him a great nation and then eventually God brings about some sort of reconciliation don't know exactly how but at the death of [30:44] Abraham Isaac and Ishmael together bury Abraham so in some ways that relationship is restored and although in many ways the Ishmaelites become a thorn in the side of the Israelites God still continues to use them to bring about his will in particular it's Ishmaelite merchants that take Joseph to Egypt because none of this is happening without God knowing what he's doing I don't know some of you may consider yourself to be rejected to be victims of events out with your control whether through family breakdown redundancy unemployment or other circumstances you feel unneeded and unwanted

I really want to avoid saying anything trite here it would be easy to say something that hurts more and helps but I think the key message here is that however abandoned you may think you are you're not abandoned by God and his grace but secondly I hope that church is somewhere that you find you can belong no it won't always be easy but we are a collection of misfits a collection of people that have nothing ties us together other than being saved from broken lives by outrageous grace try and forgive us when we let you down I'm sure we will but finally we get to the central event of the passage which
I've been sort of skirting around strangely it's only given seven verses it's just given a little bit in here and yet it's the climax of the whole story of Abraham everything has been pointing towards this event the birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah has taken decades to Abraham and Sarah's faith in God's promises has wavered all over the place but God does what he says he will in his own good timing Sarah had very naturally laughed when told she would have a son of her own despite her longings she had always been childless and now was an old woman well past the age where it was biologically possible for her to have children her laughter had been one of dismissal but quite probably also bitterness but her laughter here is laughter of joy and amazement at the miracle that had happened people like to tell us that we know today that miracles aren't scientifically possible yeah that's the whole point according to laws of the universe these things can't happen but to the god who spoke the universe into existence what's a little thing like that going to stop him and so we see god fulfilling his promise to
Abraham and Sarah and giving them the child that they longed for the child whose name laughter was always going to remind them how foolish it is to dismiss god's promises even when they're clearly impossible but this is about far more than the gift of a baby to a childless couple one important thing here is that god has not made a general promise to provide us with what we want with what we long for a son or whatever other thing you deeply long for is not what god has promised he may or may not in his good timing give you what you want but what we can depend on is that he will fulfill the things that he has promised and here he had promised something far more than a child he had promised the father of a great nation of descendants that could not be counted like the stars of the sky through which all nations would be blessed and indeed within just a few centuries his descendants numbered somewhere around two million a great nation yes but one that demonstrably could be counted because they did and yet we see a similar prophecy towards the end of the
Bible in Revelation 7 we read of a great multitude that no one could count from every nation tribe people and language standing before the throne and before the lamb because as the song goes father Abraham had many sons many sons had father Abraham I am one of them and so are you so let's all praise the Lord and no as far as I know I am not a biological descendant of Abraham although actually statistically it's likely but anyway but I am counted among his true children because of one of his descendants the one who had been promised right from the beginning Jesus

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-06-16 17:32:13

Christ because as we're thinking this morning as we think about every week and we'll especially be focusing in on in the next couple of weeks it's because of him because of his sacrifice for us that we can experience this grace that we are brought into this family it's because the son of [38:04] God stooped down to become the son of Abraham to identify himself with his brothers to become both our great high priest and our sacrificial lamb that we are here today it's because of him that we find grace whether we are stumbling believers whether we are unbelievers whether we feel ourselves to be rejects he came and he lived among us he became like us in everything except sin he went about rejected by his own people and he died for them and he graciously walks with us every day all afternoon I've been listening to one hymn over and over again as performed by a multitude of different singers choirs etc earlier we we sang a modern take on it to just want to finish with this

I need thee every hour most gracious Lord no tender voice like thine can peace afford I need thee every hour stay thou nearby temptations lose their power when thou art nigh I need thee every hour in joy or pain come quickly and abide or life is vain I need thee oh I need thee every hour I need thee oh bless me now my saviour I come to thee amen

Downloaded from https://yetanothersermon.host - 2026-06-16 17:32:13