

We have been studying the life of Abraham and will continue to do so for a couple more weeks. The significance of that life as it is brought to us is that Abraham is the man who is learning to walk by faith. Now someone pointed out to me once, before [I would be] preaching “The Fruits of Faith” today, Genesis 21:1-34, that Abraham was not the first man to learn to walk by faith. That is true. I remember that I thought I would put that up on the screen today as part of the introduction to the sermon. Of course Noah was a man who walked by faith. He walked virtually alone from what we can understand, for what we are told in scriptures is that he was the only righteous man on the earth at that time. If we recognize that the heart of righteousness is faith in God – it is not goodness, though goodness comes [afterwards] – but the true definition of the man who is righteous, the woman who is righteous is the one who has placed their faith in God. If Noah was the only righteous man on earth it was because nobody else had faith in God. That is amazing.

But when we come to Abraham, we begin to have spelled out to us something more of the challenge of faith. We can imagine what it was like to build that ark and try and do so in the face of the scoffing and unbelief of those round about. But when we see Abraham meeting the series of challenges in his life and overcoming those challenges, we begin to have lessons that we can apply to ourselves, and that of course is the intention of Scripture.

We come now to this chapter, chapter 21:1-34, I have entitled it “The Fruits of Faith” because in this chapter it seems like Abraham made it. He has arrived at a state in his life where he is able to meet the challenges by trusting in his God. Let me read through the chapter first and then make a few comments.

(21:1) *“The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. (21:2) And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. (21:3) Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. (21:4) And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. (21:5) Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. (21:6) And Sarah said, ‘God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me.’ (21:7) 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.’*

*(21:8) And the child grew and was weaned. And Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. (21:9) But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. (21:10) 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.’ (21:11) And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son. (21:12) 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. (21:13) And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your off-spring.’ (21:14) 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.*

*(21:15) When the water in the skin was gone, she put the child under one of the bushes. (21:16) 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.’ (21:17) And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. (21:17) 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. (21:18) Up! Lift up the boy, and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make him into a great nation.’ (21:19) 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. (21:20) And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. (21:20) He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.*

*(21:21) At that time Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army said to Abraham, ‘God is with you in all that you do. (21:22) 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.’ (21:23) And Abraham said, ‘I will swear.’*

*(21:24) When Abraham reproved Abimelech about a well of water that Abimelech’s servants had seized, (21:25) 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.’ (21:26) So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. (21:27) Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart. (21:28) And Abimelech said to Abraham, ‘What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?’ (21:29) 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.’ (21:30) Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath. (21:32) 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. (21:33) Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the Lord, the Everlasting God. (21:34) And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines.” [Ic]*

Now what to say about this. If the record of Abraham in chapters 16 and 20 is as dismal as it is alarming – Abraham was a man who does [some] appallingly terrible things, like so many other of the great saints of God – but here, this chapter really shows Abraham sort of at his best. He is the man, as we have noted, the man learning to walk by faith. The opening paragraph actually is quite delightful if you read it against the background of the history that we have already learned. The Lord fulfills His promise by allowing Sarah to become pregnant. That has been the long history, the objective that has driven the story along. Sarah therefore is able now to present to her husband finally a son. What gladness surely filled their hearts. Abraham then obeys the Lord’s instruction and names the boy Isaac, fulfilling once again the prophecies, the promises and all that has been leading up to this particular moment. He circumcises him on the eighth day and Sarah celebrates the great day, joining in with the laughter, laughter which is in part on her because it was so surprising that she would be able to bear a child. Really you ought to include the first verse of the next paragraph, verse 8, in the celebration of the unfolding of these realities, these faith fulfilment that bring so much of the story [of Abraham] to a happy conclusion. They have a feast on the day that he was weaned.

He was probably about two years old, and I thought to myself, hmm, what is significant about this? Well, I read this statistic the other day. “Of every ten babies born in Mexico in 1938, eight were dead by 1958.” We have forgotten something. Most children died. So the fact that Isaac survives those first two years and is weaned and now is welcomed as it were as a healthy child is cause for great celebration. Once again [we see] the faithfulness of God. How precious our children are to us and how we should give thanks to God for them.

Now trouble comes, and that is why I stopped at the ninth verse: trouble comes. Trouble is endemic, it is universal; it is constant. Let me ask you: you are going to reveal yourself to me right now. How many of you had a trouble free week this past week, not one problem, not one difficulty, not one hitch? Right! Nobody is lying today. That is encouraging. Trouble comes! When the new community of believers in Jesus Christ in Derbe, one of the cities that Paul went to, learned that Paul had been stoned earlier – in fact the reason he went to Derbe was to get away from the people who were trying to kill him; they had already stoned him and left him thinking he was dead – it is recorded for us in Acts 14:22, “...that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.” He did the same thing again to the Thessalonians in I Thessalonians 3:4; he wrote and said, “You knew that we were to suffer afflictions, just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.” So one of the things you need to do – Denis Hurt amazes me for many reasons, and here is another one: he is always in the habit of saying thank you Lord for the

troubles; thank you Lord for the difficulties; thank you Lord for the challenges. We should in fact say thank you because these are the necessary aspects of our experience that prepare us for going into the kingdom of heaven. We tend to arrange life the other way around. We do everything we can to avoid troubles. That is understandable. But when they come we should welcome them as an opportunity to grow in our personal faith. We say, alright then, I will draw strength and wisdom from God to know how to respond to the difficulty that is now come upon me.

Of course as I think most of us know so often today's difficulties are in large part the fruit of yesterday's issues that we have not yet resolved. I would ask another inventory question: how many of us this past week had to deal with something that was left over from something we didn't finish dealing with earlier on? In this case, as you can see, Sarah sees Ishmael laughing at Isaac. If you step back for a moment, this is not really all that surprising. Remember that Ishmael is 13 years old. How many remember being thirteen? How many of us have raised children that reached 13? So Ishmael is 13 and Isaac is 2. How many remember being 2. You don't want to remember what you were like when you were 2. Most people wish you never were 2. 2 is a very difficult age! Is it surprising that a thirteen year old kid would look at a two year olds behavior and laugh? No, that is not surprising at all. So why, then, we wonder would the scripture take such note of something so obvious and seemingly therefore insignificant in and of itself? Perhaps what we need to reflect upon goes like this. Does Sarah sense in Ishmael's laughter the contempt she had experienced from Hagar, Ishmael' mother when she was pregnant and Sarah was not? This would be the laughter of derision, the laughter of mockery, the laughter of assumed superiority. I thought some more about this – that is what you pay me to do, you pay me to sit around and think – and I thought I wonder if we are catching a little flavor here of how readily our children take on to themselves the attitudes and biases of their parents? Ah! That perhaps opens a different perspective on the event. And I thought some more about this and prayed about this, and I said, You know I wonder, Father – for that of course is to Whom I speak – if this is one of the ways that Your judgments fall upon us to the third and fourth generation, the mocking spirit of Hagar passed on to her son, and then to the son and the son and the son? Toward the end of this message I will have opportunity to stop and ask for a moment, “With what care do we raise our children. How soberly and seriously do we ask of our God to help us come to grips with who we are so that what we are and who we are can be refined by His grace and His truth so that it doesn't become poison in our children's lives, but rather blessing to heal?” [These are] are serious matters, and that is why they are written down in the Word of God.

Sarah responds as she did in the earlier instance. She complains to Abraham. Based on Abraham's handling of the former clash between Sarah and Hagar, if you remember, we have reason to question Abraham's capacity at conflict resolution. You recall how Abraham handled the first round of difficulty? Sarah comes and says, Get rid of this woman; she is a pain in the neck. He says, Oh do what you want. Remember that? So here it is again, here it comes: get rid of this woman. Now the eyes are on Abraham, and that is correct. This time round the difficulty is increased because based on verse 11 we realize that Abraham loves Ishmael. Ishmael at thirteen in that society is beginning to enter into his young manhood. I would imagine that most of the people in the tribe or the clan or the family look upon Ishmael with a certain admiration. After all at this point he is the heir; he is the guy who is going to be the top dog. I mean they are going to need to pay attention to this young man. And what is to say that he wasn't a very good looking, graceful, attractive young person: why not? But Sarah senses a real danger here. We know from reading the account that Abraham does not always keep a clear sight on the dynamic of the promise. We just went through the episode [of his] handing his pregnant wife over to another man to avoid personal trouble. Abraham is not exactly, you know, gold star at this.

We come down to verse twelve. This can be read in at least two different ways. Either God simply broke into Abraham's life, intercepting useless reasoning on his part, or perhaps God responds to Abraham's prayerful search for wisdom. This is what we read: “*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.’*” Hmm. God's counsel directs Abraham to the same course that he took first time round: leave the matter

up to Sarah. Really? We should not pass over this lightly. I think there are two significant challenges here to Abraham's faith. The first challenge, of course, is Sarah. She handled matters very poorly the first time round. We were told that she was harsh towards Hagar and she drove Hagar out. It wasn't Abraham's idea to send Hagar packing, it was Sarah who drove her out of the house and she didn't have anything with her and she almost died in the wilderness. It was God who intervened and said, "Hagar, go back and submit." Sarah did not handle that first occasion well at all. God Himself had to reverse the process that she set in motion. Doesn't a question arise? Certainly I think it would have risen in Abraham's mind. "Do You really want me to surrender my reason, responsibility and turn Hagar and Ishmael over to Sarah again?" So what is the challenge here? I believe that the challenge is that Abraham needs to listen to God. He needs to place his faith in God, not Sarah. It is God who says to Abraham, "Turn her over to Sarah." It is absolutely pointless for Abraham to turn to God and say, "You must be out of your mind. You may be God, but let me tell you about my wife!" Do we think that is so strange? Examine our lives and see how many times we countermand God. How many times do we tell Him, "Oh no, Your plan is not a good plan; I have a better one"? I don't think this is uncommon at all. We aren't quite as bold and rude as I just was. So the first challenge is, is Abraham capable of listening to God instead of his own doubts about Sarah, because that is where the rub comes, whether or not he is going to listen to God or to his doubts about Sarah. That brings us to the second issue. Abraham has to put faith in God rather than in his own judgment. You can see how this takes [us] another step back. The problem here now isn't the problem with Sarah. The problem is with Abraham's own judgment. I thought about this too. I think I am about a year or two older than Mark. You couldn't tell it by looking at us! Here is what came to my mind: is it not true, it certainly is with me, that we assume that as we grow in wisdom we should also grow in authority, and authority is the right to decide, and in power, which is the ability to enforce or impose our decisions. So that we are increasingly in charge: as we grow older and wiser and more powerful and more respected we are increasingly in charge, until God says, "Just give the responsibility to Sarah."

I don't think that that follows the "proper" order of things: God, Christ, husband and everybody below that is supposed to obey. Give the matter to Sarah, let her decide. God is telling Abraham to yield both authority and power to Sarah. Both of these hardly fit the norm of human behavior so these could scarcely be the untutored results of Abraham's thinking. I believe they result from Abraham seeking direction from God, the prayer of a man seeking a wisdom that is beyond his own. In this case that is what he should do, and he did.

Two differences for this occasion are written in the narrative. First we see that God gives Abraham assurance regarding the future of his son Ishmael. He speaks to the longing of Abraham's heart. The second is that Abraham himself steps forward and equips Hagar and Ishmael for their departure. The first time round he did nothing. This time he makes sure that they have food and water for the journey. I wonder how Abraham felt as he sent them out. You might call this owning the decision, not his decision in the sense that it wasn't he that decided to send her out, but it was he who decided to turn the matter over to his wife, and his wife decided to send them out, and so now he says, "OK, I am going to do the best thing I possibly can. They will have food and water so they have what is needed for the journey."

I wondered as I thought about this if in this little episode we are not having a foreshadowing of when God says to Abraham, "Give Me Isaac." That is the big test: "Give me Isaac." Here he has figured out, Abraham has, he has come to a place in his personal walk of faith with the Lord that he is able to give away Ishmael. Isn't it worth thinking for a moment: In our own situations are their aspect of our lives, are there situations, people, things, opportunities – I don't know what they are – in our lives where God brought something into our life and now He is saying "I want you to be willing to get rid of it"? I will just say, listen to the Lord because by learning to do this He might be preparing you for a much more significant challenge down the way. For God does that sort of thing: why? Because God's main concern is to make of us obedient submissive servants who understand His grace and

truth and know how to endure the troubles of life by relying upon Him in faith. That is what life is about in much of its character. So Abraham manages to do this and I think God smiles.

A friend of mine recently gave me a book. He loaned me the book, but when you loan me a book, probably you will never see it again, so he gave me a book! I got back from the [Ligonier's] Conference and there were a number of things wonderful about the conference and probably almost as good as the preaching sessions is the book store! But I only bought 10 books, exercising an incredible degree of restraint. But this was not one of those books. This book came to me free of charge because he gave it to me, no knowing what he was doing. What [the author] said was, what the book said was this: The heart of the one who will rightly and truly serve the Lord has to be broken. It is only the broken who are able to release God's blessings in order to remain with God. I think that is written down on the insert. I would highly encourage any of you to underline that, write that down, make that part of what you remember. It ties into part of a larger reality about our relationship to God. We are servants, we are not owners. We are stewards. I go back to this often, but that is because it was so formative in the marriage that Nini and I have in the raising of our children. You all know that one of our children went really deep into drugs and the life that goes with it. At points along the way in conversations with my wife I had to remind both of us there is no guarantee we would get him back. You don't play games with God. So we must accept that. His will is sovereign. So our children are entrusted to us and we are to be stewards of them. But we do not raise them for ourselves. We are also wrestling with what it means to be retiring. I have decided not to! So we make this decision: we will live close to one of our children so they will be able to respond to our needs. But I made this comment to my beloved wife: we must not expect our children to become our life. Why? We have raised them and we have sent them off, and now they have their life. We must respect that. They are entrusted to God. They are servants of God. They are no longer our servants. They are required to respect us and I am sure they will respond to our needs. But we cannot expect to draw our strength from our children. We draw our strength from the Lord and so do they.

So you have to be willing to let go. It is essential. We must be ready to release whatever has been entrusted to us. If we cannot let go, we are no longer free to serve. I am looking at Darvis and Donna. I was chatting with her when Darvis flitted off and let her sit all by herself: a beautiful woman all by herself! I always consider it my responsibility to take care of that. So I sat down with her and I asked, “How are you?” She knows Darvis is going to Africa and she is no fool, and neither is Darvis. She and we must be prepared for him not to come back. Because if the fear of that is so great that either Donna or we cannot let him go, then they are no longer servants: right? There is nothing fatalistic in this. We will pray like fury that God is clever enough to get him back: of course! But if the heart does not know how to hurt, it does not understand how to love. They are necessary for each other. We are praying for you as I am sure you know, Darvis.

One of the characteristics of the Old Testament is to break away from the dominant storyline in order to take care of secondary concerns. That is what we find in the next paragraph. If you recall Moses in Genesis 4 gave a short history of sin's full flowering in the line of Cain and then moved on with the story of faith. In Genesis 19 he finished the story of Lot and the children born of his daughters. If you skip forward to Genesis 36 you will find that Moses will give a short history of Esau's line. This is the way the Bible is put together. And that's now what you find here in verses 20f where he gives a short history of Ishmael of where he goes and what he does. I will let you read that; I won't read it myself at this time.

In Acts the Apostle Paul attempts to bring the people of Lystra to their senses. Having witnessed the healing of man crippled from birth [by Paul] the people conclude Paul and Barnabas are gods in disguise. To correct their thinking Paul writes in Acts 14:15-17, he says, “*Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them. In the past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet he did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from*

*heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.*” I am citing this in order to [see] what we gain by reading this seeming irrelevant list of names [from Esau’s line] is to appreciate the fact that Moses’ account of God’s care for Hagar and Ishmael is a strong example of God’s care and faithfulness in dealing with people aside from the main storyline of salvation. Sometimes we wonder about this. When Lynn and Sheryl went off to Bangladesh, a perfectly horrible place to go – I am not being funny here, a horrible place to go and I do not think they went there because of the sights, they went there because of need – the conclusion might be, “Does God care anything about these people before He sends missionaries?” Yes, He does. God does care. He cares for all of His creatures that He has made. Our care simply chases after His that has gone before us. The place of Ishmael is more than just peripheral of course in the story. He is Abraham’s son and the future of Ishmael’s people is bound up with the history of God’s people in a way that is now horrifyingly clear to us.

The second reason is to underscore the fact that while the history of the covenant people is the main storyline of salvation and hope for humanity, it is by no means the whole story of God’s gracious dealings with humanity. God is gracious and His grace has been extended to people all over the world many, many times and He continues to do so. They will have to answer for their response to that grace.

Skipping down to verse 20 we meet with Abimelech again. In light of Abraham’s reprehensible behavior upon first arriving in Gerar, we can understand Abimelech’s caution. Notice how Abimelech responds to Abraham’s arrival. What does he say? “Swear to me by God that you are not going to pass your wife off to me as your sister again!” That is what is behind [the] words [Abimelech actually says: “...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.” We see as well here that Abimelech has been convinced that God is with Abraham. Again, if you remember the story, Abraham deceives Abimelech, trouble comes on Abimelech’s house, Abimelech goes to God and God goes to Abimelech, but who finally solves the problem? God says to Abraham, the liar and the deceiver who has brought trouble on Abimelech’s house, “You Abraham will have to pray to me in order that healing will come to Abimelech’s house.” How would [any one of us] have felt about that if we were Abraham? That is so embarrassing, it would be so awkward, so absurd. “Here I am, the little liar who is so afraid of my neighbors and everything else, and now I have to go before the Lord God almighty and say, “Oh God, overlook my utter stupidity and bless these people who are in trouble because of what I did.” That is a tough spot. I hope we don’t ever have to feel that way about Oroville.

That is the point, isn’t it? I made the point before and I make it again now. How important it was that Abraham took on the mantle of humility, being humiliated, bowed before his God and said, “Please bless Abimelech.” For now Abimelech is convinced, in spite of his behavior, that Abraham is God’s man. We often say, don’t we, that we have to earn the right to speak the truth to others. We say that and it is wise to say that, absolutely. But there is more to the larger picture of our witness than just that. Beloved we must never allow that wisdom to deflect our obedience to the Lord’s prompting. In other words we may need to witness to people to whom we have done bad things. We may need to witness to people who have every reason to scorn us and mock us because we have been foolish. We may need to witness to people who don’t know us. Why do we witness to them? [It is] because God said so. The truth in that, beloved, is this: we have to be clear that ultimately it is not our virtues but it is the power of the Spirit that enables the sinner to hear the truth. [I will] put it this way: I am a pastor and people in town may know that I am a pastor. But I should never entertain the illusion that only if they think I am a really great pastor that they will be able to hear what I have to say about Jesus Christ, because they will be able to hear when the Holy Spirit penetrates their hearts and their minds, and I don’t know when that is going to be. So I may have had a bad week or I may have had a bad episode, or I may have done something really stupid, and they may be thinking of me, “If you are a pastor I think I will go and become a Buddhist.” But I must still witness, I must be obedient.

So Abraham agrees to enter a formal agreement with Abimelech. What follows may surprise, but it shouldn't. Scarce resources always invite competition, competition leads to all kinds of conflict over time. What I want to do is...I cannot gracefully skip to the end. Beloved, listen to the Lord. Trust Him. Remember it is His power and not ours.

Please pray with me: Gracious heavenly Father we thank You for Your unfailing truth, Your grace and goodness, that Father at times must and does reach right through and over our own failures to bring the blessings of Your redeeming grace to the lost. We thank You our Father that by reflecting on the life of Abraham we are encouraged to recognize and own up to the fact that, yes indeed we can grow up in faith, increasingly take on the attributes of our Lord and Savior, increasingly walk in integrity not just in front of the world, but in front of you. That Father is the desire of our hearts. We love You and as Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments.” So Father we will by Your grace keep Your commandments. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

The following is the portion of the message not preached. It was requested by several that I publish it with the transcription of the message.

Abraham agrees to enter a formal agreement with Abimelech. What follows may surprise but shouldn't. [Slide 11a] Scarce resources always invite competition which can lead to conflict and confrontation. Dealing straight with your neighbor, especially when they are competitors for scarce resources is not a given; it is an achievement often hard bought. What is needed is trust, and [11b] trust is amongst the most precious of values for it so easily abused unless there is a backup structure of enforcement. [11c] That is one of the prime roles of government. Paul wrote to the Romans what is the classic Christian understanding of the role of government [11d] (Romans 13:1-7).

*“Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain.”* [11e]

The citizen of a well ordered society trust that the government will repress evil and foster if not actually honor what is good. If that is the case, then the citizen can participate in the civil order, including both economic activity and social engagement of the widest sorts, with confidence, trusting that contracts will be honored, promises kept, and justice upheld.

But no such backup structure existed to regulate the behavior or mediate the disputes between such as Abimelech and Abraham. In these verses a conflict erupts, putting in jeopardy the peaceful relations between the Amorites and wealthy Abraham. Kidner says the Hebrew used for reproving Abimelech suggests he had to bring the matter up repeatedly. This will happen again when Isaac is head of the clan. [Slide 12a] It is a truth rooted in the character of God that the righteous and righteousness have to be patient in the face of the wicked and evil as much as in dealing with the weak, the uncertain and the incompetent, for that is [12b] how God deals with us. [12c] Predictably Abimelech professes innocence; not he but low level servants were involved and no official word had reached him: deniability is not unique to modernity; it has been a standard part of governance from time immemorial. The importance of the paragraph is found in how Abraham responds. [slide 13a] Abraham steps forward as a peacemaker with his sacrifice of seven lambs. These were not a payment to Abimelech, although it appears Abimelech is the beneficiary. In effect, [13b] Abraham binds the conscience of them both by consecrating their agreement before God. [13c] Of all the peoples on earth, it is those who profess faith in God who should be law-abiding, entrusting their wellbeing to the One Who reigns from heaven. Moses tells us that [13d and slide 14a] what Abraham secures is an extended time of peace in the land.

I think it was C. S. Lewis who observed that the times of peace and prosperity seem to give us little material for a good tale. For telling stories, and the same can be said for writing histories, it is the times of struggle, turmoil and pain as good contends with evil and wisdom seeks to cure the ills and contain the destructive ravages of folly that capture our interest. It is for the same reason, perhaps, that times of peace lead to complacency and even to indifference to the disciplines of mind which keep us alert to the steady erosion of virtue and the soul's drift to folly. Abraham appears to have finally got past that danger, but in the long history of the people of God the same pattern unfolds again and again, and it has continued in the life of the church and nations of the modern age perhaps even more than with the ancient. [I4b] The preservation of the order of society begins and ultimately it ends in the good order of the family. [I4c] It is in our homes and the raising of our children that the victories and the defeats of the future are largely determined. [I4d & slide I5a] Abraham has learned at last to walk by faith in God. He is ready to be the father of the promised child. [I5b]