

THE ATTRACTION OF THE GOD-BLESSED LIFE

Gen 21:22-34

1/15/17

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: A headline in Friday's *Chicago Tribune* caught my eye: "Jazz 'Messiah' reaching out to new audience behind bars." Every year at this time, down at the Auditorium Theater, there is this huge production of "Too Hot to Handel: The Jazz-Gospel Messiah." (Get it? Too hot to Handel.) We went one year and enjoyed it. Well this weekend, they are streaming that production live to four corrections facilities around the country. According to the article, Roderick Dixon, who's one of the soloists, says,

"Because the show has a multicultural, multigendered platform, it's accessible to anybody from any cultural background..." As far as Alfreda Burke [another soloist] is concerned, the performance could be a balm to all, but especially to the incarcerated. "They're in a situation where they may feel hopelessness," she says. "Messiah' has a power message, and the music is compelling. Jesus often talked about those who were in prison. ... That's his mission: coming to those that are forgotten in humanity, those that are missed, those who are suffering in any way. That's who he came to. This is the perfect message of hope to those who may not have it."

The article goes on to explain that this initiative was prompted by a fan of the production who attends the Elmhurst Christian Reformed Church, which has had a connection to the Angola, LA, prison. The article ends:

The idea is to push "beyond entertainment," Dixon says, "by trying to lift humanity up." What better vehicle that Handel's 'Messiah'? [by Howard Reich, 1/13/17]

- B. From the very beginning, God’s people have been charged with the privilege and responsibility of bringing the LORD near to people who do not know him. We have an early version of that story in our text today, **Gen 21:22-34**.
- C. Abraham and his household, including the young Isaac, were living on the southern edge of what is now Israel, not too far from the Mediterranean Sea. Nearby was a king named Abimelech, whom we also read about in Gen 20 where Abraham tried to pass his wife, Sarah, off to him as his sister, nearly bringing God’s judgment down on Abimelech. Today’s story begins with **v.22-23...**

To begin with, let’s just focus on that first statement in v.22.

Here’s King Abimelech with the commander of his army. I picture Phicol as a guy ramrod straight, steely-eyed, wearing fatigues and carrying a razor-sharp sword. And Abimelech says to Abraham, in effect, *General Phicol is with me but “God is with you... in everything you do.”* He’d no doubt heard that this 100-year-old man and his 90-year-old wife had an infant son. He’d also seen this nomad’s prosperity—his vast herds and large household. He’d heard how Abram had rescued his nephew Lot from five warring kings in a daring raid. And he had heard that Abraham worshiped the LORD – *I AM*, the eternal God. Up until now Abraham has been the immigrant, the outsider, in this land, but this is recognition that he is now a legitimate resident, a major tribal leader, a force to be reckoned with. And Abimelech has decided that he wants to be on the side of the guy who has God on his side.

I. ONE AMAZING THING CAN BE SAID OF THOSE WHO TRUST GOD—SOMETHING THAT CAN BE SAID OF NO ONE ELSE: “GOD IS WITH YOU IN EVERYTHING YOU DO.” (21:23)

- A. The story of Abraham really begins with the LORD promising that those who bless Abraham—who are on his

side and seek his good—that they will be blessed, and those who curse him will be cursed. Well, Abimelech here is blessing Abraham. He could have told Phicol to drive Abraham away as a threat to the local economy, not to mention their security. But Abimelech saw that the God of Abraham was a Force to be reckoned with.

- B. From the very beginning God has witnessed to unbelievers through his trusting people. We talk a lot about being witnesses of our faith to others, but God is out ahead of us. He witnesses to unbelievers through the ways he blesses our lives. God shows his grace and mercy, his goodness, righteousness and love through us. It's like we're a traveling troupe, performing the Messiah wherever we go, together and individually. We take the Messiah—Jesus Christ—on tour. God *streams* the blessings of his grace into this imprisoned world through us.
- C. Remember what Jesus said when he told us to go into all the world and make disciples? He said, *“And I am with you always, to the end of the age.”* Remember the name given to Jesus at birth, *Immanuel—God with us.* And remember when Jesus told his disciples in Acts 1:8, *“you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth.”* So Abimelech could certainly say to you as he did to Abraham, *“God is with you in everything you do.”*
- D. This story reminds me of things we're taught in **1 Peter 2-3**. Peter told them, *“Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God.”* That's what happened to Abraham. Peter wrote his letter to Christians under pressure from an antagonistic culture and government. They weren't running into too many people like Abimelech eager to align with them. Look at **1 Pet 3:8-17....**

Godly behavior is an indication of the God-blessed life. Sympathy, love, compassion, humility—these are qualities within us, empowered and employed by Christ, through which God shows his presence. God isn't going to show his presence in your life by giving you a baby in your old age, or keeping you from ever getting sick, or giving you a bunch of money. Those aren't the marks of a God-blessed life! Godliness is. The world around us seems to think that a righteous life is restrictive, dowdy, close-minded, moralistic. But godliness, the gift of Christ, is our highest nobility, it is unburdened, free. **Righteous people draw attention to the “God who is with us in everything we do.”**

Notice **v.12** again, “*the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are attentive to their prayer.*” Godly behavior synchs us up with the Lord's blessings, so that we both give and receive grace, love, gentleness, purity, patience, and the like. Above all, “*in our hearts [we] revere Christ as Lord.*” That's not just good for us; it's good for everyone around us. God witnesses to lost people through those who revere Christ as Lord. And if someone asks why you have hope in such a world as this, you gently and respectfully tell them that the reason is Jesus.

Illus.: We've heard some great stories of folks here who gave grace gifts to someone over the holidays. Here's what Nels and Karen wrote: “*For many years, we have hosted a Christmas Open House for our neighbors. We did that again this year but because of the encouragement of "grace gifts," were more deliberate with what was said. At one point, we gathered everyone and told them how we appreciate and pray for them. We told them to let us know if there is anything specific we could pray about. One of*

our neighbors has been fighting cancer and it was a sweet time to hear from him and how thankful he was for our prayers.”

Peter quoted a line from **Ps 34** in his letter. *“They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it.”* That takes us back to our story in **Gen 21** because that is what Abraham did.

II. “SEEK PEACE AND PURSUE IT” (21:23-34)

- A. **Vv.23-24...** It’s no coincidence that Abimelech would ask Abraham to swear that he’d not deal falsely with him... because that’s just what Abraham had done back in **ch 20** when he told Abimelech that Sarah was his sister. So now Abimelech calls Abraham to account before Abraham’s God: *“Swear to me here **before God**...”* You see the irony, of course! **Here’s a man obviously blessed by God who the unbeliever doesn’t trust!** What’s wrong with that picture! We must be people of absolute integrity—especially in dealing with the unbelievers around us. Peter said in **1 Pet 2:12**, *“Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.”*
- B. After that vow, we have another more sweeping one in **vv.25-30**.... In that very arid area, wells were everything—especially for the flocks and herds. Someone else might have rounded up their men and tried to take that well back by force. But Abraham went to Abimelech and talked it out. That’s a good policy. What’s more significant is what happened next—the treaty that they made. This incident made it obvious that they ought to have a treaty to govern matters like this. The language here is our tip-off to the importance. Three times the word *seven* is used. Three times the word *swear* is used (which is the same as *oath*).

And three times the new name, Beersheba is used, which can mean either ‘well of seven’ or ‘well of the oath’. That’s how the Hebrew language puts things in bold-face. It’s a way of saying, *this treaty and well is what’s really important here.*

Notice that Abraham paid the price here. It was *his* well that had been taken but he brings sheep and cattle to give to Abimelech as a kind of peace offering. Then he brings these seven female lambs (the number seven is important) as a kind of **visible vow** that he is telling the truth when he says his men dug the well. Remember, honesty had been an issue.

This story was written for the benefit of future generations to show them what it is like to bless other peoples and to be blessed by them. Here’s the principle I’d draw from that: Always take the first step and pay the price to be godly peacemakers. Conflict with people around us is inevitable. Whether it is a neutral issue or someone’s fault, we, as God’s people, must take the initiative to make peace. If it means allowing someone who has struck us on one cheek to strike us on the other, then that’s what we do. If they take our shirt we give them our coat too. *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God”* [Matt 5:9].

- C. **Vv.31-34...** *The Message* captures the idea of the name Beersheba—the **Oath-Well**. A well is a fitting symbol for godly peacemaking. It becomes an enduring source of life and refreshment for us and for others. Our peace-making draws others near to the enduring peace of God. Whether or not they put their faith in God, whether or not they’re believers or not, they get a taste of God’s desire for

reconciliation, which he provides through Jesus. We become salt and light through these challenges.

Abraham planted a tamarisk tree there. Tamarisk trees need lots of moisture. They're very hardy and they live a long, long time. Plus that tree gave shade to people coming to that well. And there, where that treaty of peace was established, blessing both Abraham and his neighbor, Abraham worshiped God. I assume he built an altar there and gathered his household around, and he led them in calling out to the LORD, the Eternal God. **Where peace is made, God is worshipped.**

Conclusion

The headline in the paper said, “*Jazz ‘Messiah’ reaching out to new audience behind bars.*” The real Messiah is always reaching out to new audiences, to people behind bars. Christ himself witnesses to people through us. We are, so to speak, his singers. We want people to be able to say, “*God is with you in everything you do,*” so we “*seek peace and pursue it.*” We make friends, we step into people’s messy lives, **we refuse to mimic the belligerence and pettiness we’re seeing**, we model relationships in the church that are self-sacrificing, loving and humble. We become peacemakers—not only heading off conflicts but also simply bringing the peace of Christ into turbulent lives.

Illus.: Two years ago I read *Deep, Down Dark*, by Hector Tobar. It’s the remarkable account of the 33 Chilean miners trapped underground for 69 days in 2010. They were in a large area with some light and water. From the start it was clear to them there was little chance of rescue. Tobar writes,

After the accident on August 5, when it was clear they were trapped, José whispered into Mario’s ear: “God is the only way out of this.” Now Mario ... turns to José and says: “Don

José, we know you are a Christian man, and we need you to lead us in prayer. Will you?” From this moment forward Henríquez will be known as “the Pastor” to his fellow miners because as soon as he opens his mouth and begins to talk it’s clear that he knows how to speak of God and to God.

Later, Tobar writes,

Víctor Segovia never went to church much, but now he’s sort of going to church every day, because with each prayer session the sense grows that the union of those thirty-three men is a holy event. Before this accident befell him, Víctor writes in his diary, he’d thought of church as a place where sinners went to seek forgiveness. But Henríquez speaks to him now of a message of hope and love. The Pastor ... seems utterly convinced of what he’s saying. Christ loves you in spirit, the Pastor says, and Víctor later records the Pastor’s words in his diary: “Look for him and you will see that he loves you, and you will find peace.” For Víctor, this is a revelation. “I see now that people who are thankful go to church, too, and that the people who go there have been touched by the grace of God,” he writes.

Our lives seems so ordinary, so mundane, so unnoticed. **But we are how people around us find God. We are how God witnesses to them.** Remember what Moses said, “*What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him?*” [Deut 4:7]. Remember, unlike any other people, “*God is with you in everything you do.*”