

Our Father Abraham: A Series in Genesis (Part 2)

Same Old Abraham (Genesis 20:1-18)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn at HCC on June 25, 2023

Introduction

- ❖ We've been in the book of Genesis lately studying the life of Abraham. He's such an important figure to study. Because he's revered – not just in biblical history – but in world history. He's regarded as Father Abraham by adherents of three major world religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The New Testament portrays him as an exemplary man of faith (Gal 3:9). The Apostle Paul was comfortable enough to speak of saving faith in terms of sharing in “*the faith of Abraham.*” (Rom 4:16) **That is, to be a Christian, you need to share in Abraham's faith.** That's how revered he is.

- ❖ Which makes his portrayal in Genesis all the more interesting. Because Abraham doesn't show up in Scripture as a finished product. He doesn't arrive on the scene as a matured man of faith. **Rather, starting in Genesis 12, we see him follow the LORD in fits and starts.** Yes, there were times where he exercises great faith in God. Leaving his father's house to venture into a foreign land (12:4). Trusting God's promises to grant offspring as numerous as the stars in heaven (15:6). Obeying God and receiving the mark of circumcision for himself and all the males in his household (17:26-27). Those are all commendable steps of faith.
 - **But interspersed among those highlights are moments of weakness and moral failures.** When they sojourned in Egypt back in Genesis 12, Abraham put his wife Sarah in harm's way in a ruse designed to save his own skin. He pretended she was merely his sister, which resulted in her being taken into Pharaoh's harem of concubines and likely being forced into adultery. **That episode in Abraham's story was such a shameful moment of moral cowardice.**
 - And later in Genesis 16, when his barren wife suggests that he lay with Hagar, their Egyptian servant, to try and procure an heir – Abraham has no objection to engaging in his own act of adultery. He compromised his marriage bed in an act of sinful self-reliance, trying to fulfill God's promises by his own effort.

- ❖ That's how his story has been portrayed – with highs and lows. **But if you noticed, since Genesis 17 (since receiving the sign of the covenant), his portrayal has been increasingly more positive.** Last week, we covered a large swath in Genesis 18-19. And there we saw Abraham step up as a man called to fulfill a prophetic and priestly role – to be a mediator of God's blessings to the nations. He showed great compassion in his attempt to bless Sodom – to intercede on behalf of a wicked, pagan city.
 - And starting in Genesis 21, things are really on the up and up as the child that God promised twenty-five years earlier is finally born. Isaac arrives. And then, in Genesis 22, we come to the most significant moment in Abraham's story. Where he demonstrates his greatest act of faith in God through his willingness to give his son back to the LORD – after an inexplicable request to sacrifice Isaac on a hilltop.

- ❖ **So because the two chapters that come before and the two chapters that after our text present such a positive picture of Abraham as a man of faith – it makes our text, Genesis 20, stand out even more as an anomaly.** Because here in this chapter, we see Abraham surprisingly fall back into an old pattern of sin. It seems like déjà vu.

- ❖ They sojourn once again in foreign territory, and he reverts back to that old ruse of pretending Sarah is his sister. And once again she is noticed by a king and added to his harem, and this time the stakes are even higher. **Barren Sarah is now fertile and about to conceive a child in the next chapter. So the question of paternity is at stake.** Is Abraham truly the father? Is Isaac truly the promised son?
 - So this morning I hope to show you how Genesis 20 fits within the literary structure of these chapters recounting Abraham's story. But, more importantly, I hope this chapter speaks to you personally. **I hope it encourages those of you who are dealing with your own share of sin struggles.**

- ❖ **Like Abraham, many of us are further along in our faith journey. We've been walking with the Lord for some time, and we have our share of spiritual victories and high points in the rearview.** And yet, from time to time, we find ourselves stumbling back into old patterns of sin. We thought we had matured beyond that struggle. That we had left that issue in the past. **But we find ourselves stuck in same cycle.** Dealing with the same old sins.
 - Friends, if any of that describes you, then I hope you come away from *this* sermon in *this* passage – hopeful and inspired. *Hopeful* in knowing that it's not just you who deals with recurring, besetting sins. And *inspired* to receive the grace you'll need to walk forward in faith and obedience. Not pulling back. Not shirking from service. Not wallowing in guilt and shame.
 - My goal is to help you recognize three truths found in our passage. (1) We are beset with sin – even as believers. (2) God is sovereign – even over our sin. (3) God remains faithful – even when we are faithless.

We are Beset with Sin – Even as Believers

- ❖ Here's the first truth to consider. **The truth is we are beset with sin – even as believers.** Being beset with iniquity; plagued by temptation; persistently troubled with sin – that makes sense if we're describing non-Christians. We get it that the non-believing world is under sin's enslaving power. In our unsaved (unregenerate) state, we are naturally sinners who sin.
 - **But the point being stressed in our passage is that even believers – even the saved – can be beset and plagued and persistently troubled with many sins.** We're not immune to this problem. Genesis 20 confirms this through a rather embarrassing, déjà vu moment in Abraham's story.

- ❖ This time instead of traveling to Egypt, we're told in v1 that Abraham and Sarah sojourned in Philistine territory (cf. 21:34). They ended up in the royal city of Gerar where a Philistine king named Abimelech lived in a palace with a large harem of wives and concubines. **And we learn that Abraham made certain assumptions about the people of Gerar and their king.** He assumed they were godless and violent, and that if they knew Sarah was his wife, he'd be killed to secure Sarah for the king's harem.
 - So with that fear driving him, he resorted to his old tricks and told everyone that she was his sister. And he was right about Sarah. Even at the advanced age of ninety, she somehow maintained enough beauty to draw the attention of the king of Gerar.

- ❖ Abraham saw that coming. He was right about that. **But there's no doubt that his actions were wrong. They were shameful and cowardly and to be met with moral disapproval.** You would think that after his faith was counted to him as righteousness (15:6) and after he entered a covenant relationship with the LORD God (15:18) – you would think he would be a completely different man. **But here we see post-covenant Abraham behaving eerily similar to pre-covenant Abraham.** He's still susceptible to the same old sins.
- ❖ Now, as I mentioned earlier, many Christians can identify with this struggle. **No matter how long you've been walking with the Lord, you can surprise yourself at how susceptible you still are to falling into the same old sins you struggled with as a younger believer.**
 - Perhaps it's true that you've matured in patience and restraint – but every so often you lose your temper and fly off the handle. Or it's true that you've grown in your holiness and self-control – but at times you're still prone to lustful, intrusive thoughts or behaviors. Or maybe you have become more contented and trusting of others – but you know you're still susceptible to bouts of envy and jealousy. **From time to time, you still fall prey to those same old sins.**
- ❖ **What all believers need to understand is that our sanctification doesn't work like a switch.** The gospel offers the hope of freedom from sin's enslaving power. **But don't fool yourself into thinking you'll achieve an absolute victory.** Where your sin ceases to have any hold on you now. Where you can just move on from it. No, that's not how it works.
 - I think Abraham's failure in chapter 20 confirms this. It confirms our own experience of sanctification. **Let's be honest, our spiritual journey can have an overall positive trajectory with some significant high points and seasons of growth, but, at the same time, it can be interspersed and intermingled with low points of disobedience and failure.**
- ❖ **How else do you explain the seemingly inconsistent picture we get of the Corinthian church?** Recently, we had been preaching through 1 Corinthians. We took a break after Easter for this Genesis series. But if you recall, the inconsistency of the Corinthians was stark. On one hand, they're described as those *“sanctified in Christ Jesus.”* (1 Cor 1:2) As those *“enriched in all speech and all knowledge . . . not lacking in any gift.”* (1 Cor 1:5, 7) And yet, at the same time, they're mired in so much division and disobedience. Dealing with some surprising sin issues. How can the same church have such highs and lows?
 - Because that's the normative Christian experience. **I believe the Apostle Paul tried to capture this in Romans 7.** I know it's debatable, but I think there's good reason to believe that Paul, in Romans 7, is describing his post-conversion experience. He's a Christian. And yet he experiences these swings between spiritual highs and lows. **He has a new regenerate heart giving him a desire to do what is right, and yet his sinful flesh pushes back.** You hear it in his own words, *“For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.”* (7:15) *“For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”* (7:18-19)

- ❖ Does that inner turmoil resonate with any of you? **Do any of you experience that tension between wanting to do good (to do what is right) and yet, from time to time, you find yourself caught up in sin doing the very thing you hate?** Where the evil you do not want is what you keep on doing. Have you experienced that?
 - You should have – as a believer. Because that’s the normative Christian experience. Genesis 20 confirms it. Like Abraham, we are beset with sin even as believers. Even post-conversion. Even after entering into a covenant relationship with God.
 - **The reality is that, as Christians, we all have our own besetting sins that will uniquely tempt us over the course of our lives.** Now because of the grace of God and the sanctifying power of the Spirit at work in us, the overall trajectory is positive and upward trending. **But there will be moments and seasons marked by downward plummets.** Don’t be pleased by that at all. But the point is – don’t be shocked either.

- ❖ Compare it to the stock market. **If you’re checking the Dow Jones, the one-day view can be depressing.** The line can be red and downward trending. The same can be said of the one-week or one-month view. But if you pull back and take the longview – one-year view, five-years, ten-years! You’ll be comforted to see that green line and an overall upward trend.
 - The same goes for our sanctification. **We can be discouraged by our spiritual falls and failures.** We look back to last week, last month, and it’s depressing. But that’s where we need to take the longview and recognize what God is doing in our hearts (in our lives) over many years, even decades. **You may have recently experienced a plummet – or maybe you’re in a season of stagnation – but how has the Lord been growing you over the past ten or twenty years?**

- ❖ Now perhaps that question raises an alarm because you haven’t seen much growth, even in the longterm. **Like we said a couple weeks ago, perhaps it turns out that you’ve only been inhaling the Christian faith secondhand.** You don’t have a firsthand experience of God and his saving grace. Well, at least be grateful for that realization. And take this as a wake up call, and begin to pursue for yourself a firsthand relationship with God.
 - But for those of you who are believers – who are slowly but progressively being sanctified – I hope this spiritual plummet in Genesis 20 serves as an encouragement, knowing that it could happen even to Father Abraham, the man of faith.

God is Sovereign – Even Over Our Sin

- ❖ But the next question is: **Why would God allow his people to experience these spiritual falls and failures? What is he trying to accomplish?** I hope to shed some light on that, but notice that question is built on the assumption that God purposely allows us to fall into sin – meaning he could’ve prevented it if he so willed. But we’ll need to first establish that assumption. Which leads to our second truth: **God is sovereign – even over our sin.**
 - You see evidence of this in the way the LORD prevents Abimelech from falling into sin. In v3, God speaks to the king by means of a dream, *“Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man’s wife.”*

- ❖ Abimelech is surprised to hear this. He didn't know she was married. Listen to vv4-5, "*4Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, 'Lord, will you kill an innocent people? 5Did he not himself say to me, 'She is my sister'? And she herself said, 'He is my brother.' In the integrity of my heart and the innocence of my hands I have done this.'*"
 - And we know Abimelech speaks the truth – that he truly did not touch her. **He did not violate the sanctity of Abraham and Sarah's marriage.** He did not commit adultery. That was confirmed by God himself. Look at v6, "*Then God said to him in the dream, 'Yes, I know that you have done this in the integrity of your heart, and it was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her.'*"

- ❖ **Notice how it's God himself who restrained Abimelech from acting on his fleshly impulses.** "*I did not let you touch her.*" In other words, Sarah came out of this situation with her honor intact *not* because Abimelech is so chivalrous. Because he's such a gentleman. No, he was trying to add her to his harem of concubines after all. She came out of this terrible situation unscathed because the LORD intervened to restrain Abimelech from sinning.
 - Now think about that. **If God is sovereign enough to restrain an unbelieving, pagan king from acting out his lustful intent, then clearly God could have restrained Abraham from acting out his sinful deception.** He could have prevented Abraham from falling into that same old sin. God is sovereign enough to do that. But he didn't. **He allowed Abraham to fail.** And the question is why?

- ❖ What was God trying to accomplish? I'd argue that he was trying to teach Abraham a valuable lesson. Now what could that be? **What did God want Abraham to learn from his failure?** To answer that, let's first look at Abimelech's conversation with Abraham where he calls him out for his deception.
 - Look at v9, "*9Then Abimelech called Abraham and said to him, 'What have you done to us? And how have I sinned against you, that you have brought on me and my kingdom a great sin? You have done to me things that ought not to be done.'*" ¹⁰*And Abimelech said to Abraham, 'What did you see, that you did this thing?'*" ¹¹*Abraham said, 'I did it because I thought, 'There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife.'*" And then he goes on in vv12-13 to give a lame excuse about how Sarah technically is my sister – my half-sister – so I wasn't technically lying. I just didn't tell you the whole truth.

- ❖ But the point here is that Abraham totally misjudged the people of Gerar and their king. It's ironic that he prejudged them and assumed they lacked a fear of God. **When it turns out that he was the one who lacked a proper fear of God.**
 - The king and his people responded like God-fearers. In v8, it says when Abimelech shared with his servants what God told him in his dream, "*the men were very much afraid.*" Look back at v9. The king himself described adultery as "*a great sin.*" **Which means if Abraham had just been honest, Abimelech would've left Sarah alone.** He wasn't going to commit a great sin like adultery.

- ❖ So if there was anyone demonstrating “*no fear of God*,” it was Abraham. His actions were certainly driven by fear. Just not a fear of God. Not a proper respect or reverence for God. **No, he was driven by a fear that God wouldn’t pull through if he didn’t take matters into his own hands.** He feared that God wouldn’t protect him.
 - **Had he truly feared God, then he would’ve trusted God.** He would’ve acted righteously. He would’ve told the truth. And God would’ve protected him and his wife during their sojourn in that foreign land.
 - So if Abraham had a besetting sin, it was probably disbelief. Again, it’s ironic. He’s known in Scripture as the man of faith. **But we’ve seen, on a few occasions, when his sinful flesh gets the best of him, he allows his disbelief to drive him towards a sinful self-reliance.** He begins to lean on his own understanding and takes matters into his own hands.

- ❖ But, as sad as it is, Abraham needed to experience this kind of failure. **If he was going to be a blessing to the nations, then, first, he needed to be more sensitive to God’s common grace poured out among the nations.** Abimelech and his people aren’t saved. They’re not in a covenant relationship with God. But his common grace is still at work among unbelievers, and they are more receptive to God’s Word than we give them credit for. Like Abraham, we can be quick to prejudge and misjudge unbelievers.
 - **So one valuable lesson that Abraham learned – and that we should learn too – is that God is sovereignly at work in the lives of unbelievers, preparing the soil, priming the pump.** So that when you bring them blessing – when you bring them God’s Word – they’re more ready to listen and respond with proper fear.

- ❖ **But the more personal lesson that Abraham needed to learn was the importance of staying vigilant to resist your sin, especially when it comes to besetting sins** (the persistent ones you’re more susceptible to). It’s easy to let your guard down. To assume that you’ve matured enough. And, look, it’s true that you’re not the same person you were as a non-Christian or a younger believer. By God’s grace, you *are* further along in your Christian growth and sanctification.
 - **But you *have* never (and *will* never) mature past your need for God’s preserving grace.** You are just as needy for his grace to keep you from sinning as you once were at a younger stage in your faith. **Your response to his grace has probably changed and improved over the years – but your need for that grace remains the same.** Maybe that’s the lesson you’re supposed to learn in the recent falls and failures that God has permitted you to experience.

God Remains Faithful – Even When We are Faithless

- ❖ God is purposeful in everything he does. So if he sovereignly allowed you to fall, just know that he has good reason. And it really comes down to learning the amazing extent of his goodness and grace. Here’s the third truth in our text: **God remains faithful to us – even when we are faithless towards him.**

- ❖ **We can fail him time after time, but that ultimately does not change God’s posture towards his elect.** If he chose you and called you to himself – not because of your works or your righteousness but because of his goodness and his sovereign grace – then your spiritual falls and moral failures are not dealbreakers.
 - Just look at our story. Look at v7. In the course of assuring Abimelech that he’s innocent – and that it’s really Abraham at fault – **God still calls Abraham a prophet and tasks him with the responsibility to intercede on behalf of the king and his household.** *“Now then, return the man’s wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live. But if you do not return her, know that you shall surely die, you and all who are yours.”*

- ❖ **Apparently Abraham’s privilege to serve as a prophet is *not* conditioned on having unswerving faith and stellar behavior.** It’s clearly conditioned on God’s grace and his effectual call. And that should be an encouragement for each of us. **Because if you can be as faithless as Abraham was and still be used by God to accomplish his kingdom purposes, then why do we fear that we’ve fallen beyond the reach of his grace?** Why would we assume we’ve sinned ourselves beyond any usefulness to God and his kingdom?
 - Abraham failed, big time. The Bible doesn’t gloss over it. It paints an honest picture of its biblical heroes, warts and all. **And in doing so, Scripture is able to highlight the amazing grace of God.** Which was the point all along.

- ❖ **First, notice how in v14, by God’s grace, Abimelech responds – not with retribution – but with generous gifts.** He offers an exorbitant amount of silver to vindicate Sarah and her innocence. All of that is evidence of God’s grace. Abraham comes away from this shameful episode even richer than before. That’s grace.
 - **And secondly, notice how, by God’s grace, Abraham’s intercessory prayer is still powerful and effective – in spite of his failure.** Listen to vv17-18, *“¹⁷Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. ¹⁸For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham’s wife.”*

- ❖ Abraham was at fault here, and he almost brought death to Abimelech and his household. And yet, by grace, he still gets to be the means by which God brings healing and blessing to this pagan nation. Abraham intercedes and fertility is restored to the king’s household.
 - **Now there’s a touch of irony in the fact that Abraham is able to effectively pray for the fertility of a pagan king, and yet his prayers for his own fertility have, up to this point, gone unanswered.** I can’t imagine how confusing that must have been for him. But, as readers, we know that chapter 20 ends that way because it’s preparing us for God’s answer to his prayers in chapter 21, in the birth of Issac.

- ❖ **But the big takeaway is that the same grace on display in Abraham's life – and especially in his failures – is the same grace that God wants to pour out on us.** That'll mean that sometimes, in love, God will allow us to fail. Sometimes spectacularly. And sometimes he'll allow our failures to occur in open view of others, like in Abraham's case. The entire city of Gerar likely learned of his sinful and potentially deadly deception.
 - So yes, it'll be embarrassing. But it can also be redemptive. **When God allows us to fail big and to fail publicly, that gives us an opportunity to repent big and to repent publicly.** And to show everyone the grace of God that's at work in (and through) us in spite of our falls and failures.
 - **In those moments, we have the chance to display the steadfast love of Christ in the gospel.** Who loves us enough to enter our world of brokenness; to identify with flawed people; to take our place in life and death and resurrection – all to secure God's forgiveness and our redemption.

- ❖ **Church, there will be days ahead where you will fail and you will prove faithless.** That's inevitable. But what's also inevitable is the faithfulness of God. He will never leave you nor forsake you. You can take comfort knowing that his goodness and mercy will follow you all the days of your life.