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Sermon Notes

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Abraham's Stubborn Sin, God's Sovereign Grace

Genesis 20:1-18

Introduction: Are You Safer Today?

Three years ago yesterday, the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington changed forever the way many people feel about security.

Some will never feel the same way again as they board an airplane or enter a skyscraper.

Since then, terrorist attacks on commuter trains in Spain and public schools in Russia have contributed to the feeling that there is no safe place on this troubled planet

Some people wonder if they will be the next victims of a car bomb or a suicide attack

With the Presidential election looming just around the corner, political experts, all with an axe to grind, are debating the question: "Are you safer from terrorist attacks now than you were three years ago?"

The September 11 Commission's report uncovered some amazing weaknesses in our homeland security, and the grist keeps getting ground in that mill

Supporters and opponents of the war in Iraq debate vigorously whether or not we are safer from terrorist attacks as a result of the invasion and liberation of Iraq from Saddam Hussein

When it comes to the question of security, it may seem like the account in Genesis 20 of Abraham's lie to Abimelech would have little to contribute

Nothing could be further from the truth

Abraham lied to Abimelech because he felt threatened and refused to trust in God... he took matters of his safety into his own hands, and ALMOST DESTROYED the carefully crafted beginning to the Redemptive Plan of God centered in Israel with the birth of Isaac

But Abraham forgot his true place of safety: the SOVEREIGN POWER OF ALMIGHTY GOD

This is the central lesson of today's text... it is not the office of homeland security or the war in Iraq that will make us safe...

And terrorism isn't even the greatest threat we face

No the greatest threat we face is our own sin, and the eternal condemnation that sin deserves

And the only safety we will ever find is in GOD ALONE

I. Abraham, Sarah, and Abimelech: Stubborn Sin, Sovereign Grace

A. Abraham's Stubborn Sin (vs. 1-2)

ESV Genesis 20:2 And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah.

1. Context: Abraham's continues to wander

vs. 13 And when God caused me to wander from my father's house

- a. Abraham left the region of Mamre where he'd been staying for nearly twenty years
- b. continues the life of the nomad... a life in tents, living on someone else's land
- c. a picture of us, who are aliens and strangers in this world

Illus. In Greece... talked with some missionaries who ministered to Gypsies... horse-drawn carts by the roadside

Abraham was like this... traveling about from place to place

Hebrews 11:9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.

2. The Second Time Now: but this time Sarah lies too!!

3. Abraham's Shame: he learned nothing from the past experience in Genesis 12

- a. notice the dramatic change in Abraham
 - i) last time: Abraham boldly interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah
 - ii) now here he returns to the "miserable policy" he followed earlier in Egypt
- b. sin more shameful this time

A. W. Pink: "Sad indeed, inexpressibly sad, was Abraham's conduct. It was not the fall of a young and inexperienced disciple, but the lapse of one who had long walked the path of faith that here shows himself ready

to sacrifice the honor of his wife, and what is worse, to give up the one who was the focus of all God's promises."

4. Habitual Sin Hard to Break

Pink: "What made the matter so much worse in Abraham's case was that it was not a question of being surprised into a sudden fault. It was the reoccurrence of an old sin. Long ago he had followed the same wicked course in Egypt and had been banished in disgrace." But it seems he's learned nothing at all from that experience

B. God's Sovereign Restraint of Sin (vs. 3-7)

1. God is active in the world resisting and restraining sin
2. God speaks to Abimelech in a powerful dream

vs. 3 But God came to Abimelech in a dream by night and said to him, "Behold, you are a dead man because of the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man's wife."

3. God rebukes Abimelech for his unwitting sin... amazing how strong is God's rebuke

"You're as good as a dead man"

Illus. "Dead man walking"... literally death is hanging over your head, ready to fall at any instant

4. Abimelech pleads innocence by reason of ignorance

vs. 4-5 Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, "Lord, will you kill an innocent people? 5 Did 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."

Abimelech makes a strong statement in his own dream: my heart was united, I didn't violate my conscience, since I simply believed what they said: Abraham said she was his sister, and Sarah also said "He is my brother"

I AM INNOCENT!!!

- a. power of a clear conscience

1 John 3:21 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God

- b. ignorance greatly mitigates guilt... the more ignorant you are, the less guilty
 - c. BUT it doesn't totally remove the guilt
 - d. God accepted Abimelech's defense
5. God's sovereignty in restraining evil

a. note what God said:

vs. 6 *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."*

b. God is very active in the world restraining evil

c. here He stops this situation before irreparable damage can be done to Sarah

6. The need for restitution: when "I'm sorry" isn't enough!

a. God tells Abimelech what he must do

vs. 7 *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."*

b. notice the threat, the warning... God isn't messing around... if Abimelech drags his feet, he will die

c. amends must be made for sin

C. Abimelech's Righteous Rebuke, Abraham's Feeble Excuse (vs. 8-13)

1. Abimelech's immediate obedience

vs. 8 *So Abimelech rose early in the morning and called all his servants and told them all these things. And the men were very much afraid.*

There was intense urgency here... lest any should think Abimelech was the true father, which they would have

If Abimelech had delayed even one day, God would probably have struck him dead to protect Sarah's honor, Abraham's honor, and especially His own honor in performing a miracle in the making

2. Abimelech's righteous rebuke of Abraham

vs. 9 *Then Abimelech called Abraham in and said, "What have you done to us? How have I wronged you that you have brought such great guilt upon me and my kingdom? You have done things to me that should not be done."*

Note: Abimelech has every right to be very angry with Abraham

Instead, he simply hold him accountable for what he did... He confronts Abraham and asks him, "What have you done to us?"

Note also: Abimelech deals faithfully with the severity of the sin... GREAT GUILT, a GREAT SIN

Then a clear rebuke:

You have done things to me that should not be done."

Then remarkably:

ESV Genesis 20:10 And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What did you see, that you did this thing?"

Perhaps he is asking, "What evil did you see in me that you did this?"

3. Abraham's feeble excuse: (11-13)

- a. misjudging Abimelech by a country mile... Abimelech clearly DID fear God

"I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place

- b. faithlessly misjudging God's power to protect him, too

and they will kill me because of my wife.

Remember, Abraham has already been through this in Egypt!

Remember also God had promised to protect him and bless him, and to curse his enemies

- c. rationalization: it's not really a lie!!!

12 Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife.

How foolish is this!! The key issue is that, by failing to act to protect his wife's purity, Abraham tacitly said in effect, "She is my sister, NOT my wife!!"

That was the key piece of information, and he lied

God's word covers not just lying but misleading:

ESV Leviticus 19:11 "... You shall not deal falsely; you shall not lie to one another."

- d. deeply imbedded fleshly pattern resurfaces

13 And when God caused me to wander from my father's house, I said to her, 'This is the kindness you must do me: at every place to which we come, say of me, He is my brother.'"

Before he was even called by God, before he became a wanderer by faith, Abraham slyly had worked out this ruse

He clung to it now as a part of his old pagan way of life... old fleshly habit pattern that was hard to break

4. Abimelech's restitution and vindication of Sarah

- a. Abimelech fully obeys God: he immediately restored Sarah; he humbly asked Abraham to pray for his healing and the healing of his house, for God had closed every womb in the house because of this offense
- b. Abimelech fully restores each relationship and covers over the offense

D. Grace Brings a Happy Ending (vs. 14-18)

vs. 14-18 *Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned Sarah his wife to him. 15 And Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you." 16 To Sarah he said, "Behold, I have given your brother a thousand pieces of silver. It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all who are with you, and before everyone you are vindicated." 17 Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. 18 For the LORD had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife.*

1. Grace covers sin, restores relationships
2. God is gracious to Abimelech
 - Gracious in striking Abimelech and his household with an illness so they could not have children
 - Gracious in warning him in a dream before the judgment fell
 - Gracious in the timing of the warning: immediately, before any sin could occur
 - Gracious in the mode and message of the warning: a dream... mild and yet strong
 - Gracious in accepting Abimelech's explanation
 - Gracious in telling Abimelech clearly what to do to make it right
 - Gracious in hearing Abraham's prayer on Abimelech's behalf, and healing Abimelech, his wife and his household so they could have children
3. Abimelech is gracious to Abraham and Sarah
 - Abimelech is not angry with them, but reasonably asks Abraham why he did it
 - Abimelech is gracious and humble to ask for prayer
 - Abimelech is very gracious in generosity: 1000 pieces of silver, freedom to settle anywhere in the land
 - Abimelech is also gracious to restore Sarah to her husband, and to restore to Sarah and Abraham their dignity in the eyes of everyone

4. Abraham is gracious to Abimelech

- Abraham prays for this king, interceding for God to heal him and his household, and God heard his prayer

5. ABOVE ALL: God was gracious to Abraham... and through him to the world!!!

II. Timeless Lessons of God and Man

A. Lessons About Human Nature

1. Incredible stubbornness of entrenched sin patterns

God's remarkable order: first He blots out that stain of our sin on the record books of His justice

Genesis 15:6 Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

John 15:3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.

BUT THEN comes the lifetime work of slowly scrubbing out the effects of sin in our character and habits

2. The way our sin affects other people:

Abraham's unbelief and hard heart endangered Sarah's purity, Abimelech's very life, and the lives of all Abimelech's household

Abraham has also set a pattern that his own son Isaac will follow to a T in this exact same country when he is grown... **GENERATIONAL EFFECTS OF SIN**

3. The powerful effects of the fear of the Lord

Abimelech was scared out of his mind and acted immediately and fully

4. The powerful effects of prayer... even when sin brings disease

NIV James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

B. Lessons About God's Sovereign Grace

1. Our sovereign God has a sovereign plan... and His plan WILL be accomplished

No matter how much it seems earthly events are spinning out of control, remember that God actively rules over all things...

Man proposes, but God disposes

Proverbs 19:21 Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails.

God thwarts evil plots and plans and schemes every day... deciding which of those evil plots He will allow and which ones He will stop

How many Al Qaeda attacks have been thwarted before they even occurred by the interfering sovereign grace of God?

- A shipment of electronic parts is delayed a critical week, and they miss their window of opportunity
 - A key terrorist strategist falls gravely ill and can't complete his plans in time
 - An Al Qaeda cell is discovered by an alert young boy delivering a message or overhearing a conversation
 - Some Al Qaeda recruit loses his nerve and falls to carry through
2. However, we should not think that human choices on earth do not affect God's plan or that He is aloof like some machine just letting things run by themselves... God is constantly active, overseeing, interfering, convicting, warning, bringing his plan to pass
 3. This event with Sarah and Abimelech could not have come at a worse time!!!
- The promise that had been progressively unfolding was now completely revealed:

Genesis 18:10 Then the LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife will have a son."

- HOWEVER, Sarah was not yet pregnant, for she conceives in Genesis 21:1-2
- If she had been permitted to stay even ONE NIGHT with Abimelech, a skeptical outside world would have assumed that the "miracle baby" Isaac was no miracle at all... just that the ineffective Abraham had been replaced by another man, Abimelech... forever God's power would be obscured behind scurrilous questions about whose child Isaac truly was

Isaac and all that God did to bring him about would have been under a dark cloud of suspicion... "Isn't it obvious whose child he is... Abraham had Sarah for many years, with no children... Abimelech had her and look what happened!"

- God spoke a sovereign word into the unfolding earthly events:

Isaiah 7:7 Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says: "It will not take place, it will not happen..."

4. See all that God does in this chapter

- Sovereignly PREVENTING Abimelech from touching Sarah... putting a wall around her

Vs. 6 That is why I did not let you touch her.

- Striking Abimelech and all his household with a disease

- Warning Abimelech powerfully in a dream, speaking as the Judge of All the Earth
- Telling Abimelech what he must do immediately, speaking as the King of All Kings
- Hearing Abraham's prayer and making it powerful and effective

TRULY OUR GOD IS A SOVEREIGN KING, unfolding his redemptive plan

- All of this to protect His unfolding Redemptive Plan: That the Christ would come from Abraham

III. Five Connections with Christ

A. Christ's Character Shines by Contrast

All the heroes of the Bible, even Abraham, are marred by sin

Christ is absolutely sinless and perfect in every way

The radiant perfection of Christ shines in that Christ NEVER told a lie, nor dealt falsely with anyone... He told the truth to spiritual seekers, to hardened sinners, to trembling adulteresses about to be stoned, to recently cured sinners, to arrogant Pharisees and powerful high priests, and even to cold hearted merciless Pilate he told the truth

Abraham was a great man, but a liar and deceiver nonetheless

Christ was the perfect man, the God-man who alone can save us from sin

B. Christ's Human Lineage Protected and Enabled

Genesis 12:3 "Through your offspring, all peoples on earth will be blessed."

Matthew 1:1-2 A record of the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham: 2 Abraham was the father of Isaac

C. Christ as Second Adam: Strange Corporate Identity Our Only Hope

1. Central to Abimelech's plight was the idea of "federal headship"... the sin of a father affects his whole household; the sin of a king affects his whole nation

vs. 4 Now Abimelech had not gone near her, so he said, "Lord, will you destroy an innocent nation?"

vs. 7 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."

2. Idea of federal headship is STRANGE to us... that the sin of one man could affect all that belong to him
3. Original sin a difficult doctrine... but Biblical

Romans 5:12 *Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned--*

Illus. Child's question: "It doesn't seem fair that I should be blamed for Adam's sin... I wasn't even there!"

- Answer: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?"

4. Federal headship also SAVES us... in Adam all die, in Christ all believers live

Romans 5:19 *For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.*

D. Christ as Prophet and Priest

1. Verse 7: the first mention of the word "Prophet"

vs. 7 Now then, return the man's wife, for he is a prophet, so that he will pray for you, and you shall live.

2. Verse 7: also mentions the priestly ministry of intercession

3. Impact of King Abimelech on the life or death of his people

4. Jesus Christ is our perfect prophet, priest, king

E. Christ's Atonement a "Covering for the Eyes"

1. The actual mechanism for atonement displayed in Abimelech's restitution

KJV Genesis 20:16 *And unto Sarah he said, Behold, I have given thy brother a thousand pieces of silver: behold, he is to thee a covering of the eyes...*

The 1000 pieces of silver stood between the sinners and their shame... it was a "covering of the eyes"

So also it is with the blood of Jesus Christ... a perfect covering of God's eyes

Illus. Alan Carlson, story about a little girl asked "Is there anything impossible for God?" Answer... "Yes... it is impossible for God to see through the blood of Jesus to look at my sin!"

Psalm 32:1-2 *Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. 2 Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit.*

In a very real sense, God can never take away sin as though it never happened

What He DOES do is put the blood of Jesus between His holy eyes and our accurate record of sinful acts... we are COVERED in the blood of Christ... it is a covering for the eyes

IV. Applications

1. Acknowledge the stubbornness of your own deeply entrenched sin patterns... especially self-reliance and lack of faith
2. Grieve over the amount your sins have cost you and those around you
3. Today, if God is warning you to turn from sin, DO IT WITHOUT DELAY!!!
4. If you are sick or know someone who is, ask God to show you if some sin is at the root of the problem... then PRAY with faith for the healing

NIV James 5:16 Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective.

5. Rest in God's sovereign control over evil plots, plans and schemes... no terrorist attack or devilish plot can touch you except what God has allowed through for His mysterious purposes
6. Glory in God's active interference in bringing about a magnificent salvation plan in Christ
7. See in Christ a perfect man... no sin, no deceit... just purity and perfect righteousness
8. Rest in Christ's blood alone as covering for sin