

Abraham in Egypt

Genesis 12:10-20

Last week we studied Abraham, the man of faith, the man who believed God's promise and obeyed his commands. We studied a man who faithfully left his father's house and his own country in order to wander, leaving the sure and certain security of home for an unidentified land which God promised would belong to his descendants.

Hebr. 11:8 "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. 9 By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; 10 for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

Today we have a very different picture of Abraham, not the faithful father of our faith, but a man very much like us, a man given to the temptation to depend upon his own strength and wisdom to meet the obstacles which he encountered in life. This account today is very unflattering to Abraham, it is not praiseworthy. In fact, through the plain, simple, historical words recorded by Moses, we will study an occasion of great sin. Surely, in all that is recorded about Abraham, this was his lowest moment.

The text doesn't offer specific criticism of Abraham's actions, but neither does it attempt to hide or cover the sinfulness of what he did. In recording this event, Moses and those of us sympathetic to Abraham are rather embarrassed by what Abraham did. So no excuses are offered as no condemnation is spelled out either. Yet in all of that, what is actually revealed is the grace of God! We'll see that soon, and that is where I will end

my sermon this morning. But first, the sinfulness of man.

I. ABRAHAM REVEALS THE SINFULNESS OF A MAN DEPENDING UPON HIS OWN STRENGTH AND WISDOM.

Self-dependence. As best I can explain it to you, that is what Abraham is doing. A difficult circumstance arises, so he responds not in faith, but in self-reliance. He used his own strength and his own wisdom to get out of trouble.

Now, having said that, let me make sure that every one of you identifies yourself with Abraham at this point. I am quite confident that everyone of you has, at one time or another, followed this same path. You respond to difficulty by resorting to plans and ideas that you derive. You depend upon your own strength and wisdom, instead of depending upon God and his power. I include myself in those afflicted by this temptation.

For many people, this is really a daily battle, and it is one that afflicts all of us in some fashion. In studying this passage, we just have to begin at this point of self-examination. So, what exactly did Abraham do? First,

A. The trip to Egypt.

v.10

Now, there is no evaluation of whether going to Egypt was a good thing or not, no indication of whether or not Abraham sought the Lord in making that decision, so I can't speak absolutely. But the context of this passage indicates that he did not seek the Lord. The sense is that Moses recorded a rather full explanation of the events, and that Abraham simply reacted to the famine by deciding on his own to go to Egypt. In one sense, there was nothing wrong with that, for famines are quite common in Canaan, and there was a logical solution in the riches of Egypt.

However, keep in mind Abraham's calling. God's call to Abraham included the promise of His guidance and direction, for God had said, "Go to the land I will show you." That land was not Egypt. The implication is that Abraham failed to consult God or seek God's will, rather depending upon the wisdom of his own plan.

Let me read to you a positive example of such trust, a lesson the prophet Habakkuk learned as he faithfully sought the Lord's will and guidance.

Hab. 3:16 "When I heard, my body trembled; My lips quivered at the voice; Rottenness entered my bones; And I trembled in myself, That I might rest in the day of trouble. When he comes up to the people, He will invade them with his troops. 17 Though the fig tree may not blossom, Nor fruit be on the vines; Though the labor of the olive may fail, And the fields yield no food; Though the flock may be cut off from the fold, And there be no herd in the stalls—18 Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation. 19 The LORD God is my strength; He will make my feet like deer's feet, And He will make me walk on my high hills."

The Apostle Paul speaks of a similar experience of deep faith when he declares,

Phil. 4:11 "Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: 12 I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. 13 I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Abraham hadn't yet "learned in whatever state I am, to be content: 12 I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound." It is a lesson we, too, must learn as we grow in Christ.

So what happened to Abraham in Egypt? Having gone there presumably without seeking the Lord's guidance, he faced even more trouble in Egypt. The problem was, his wife Sarah was a beautiful woman. And as he entered Egypt, he realized that they had a great dilemma. Foreigners were not well respected in those days, and Abraham quickly realized that he might be killed by some Egyptian wishing to have Sarah as his own wife. Humanly speaking, that was evidently a very likely possibility. In that immoral and godless culture, killing a woman's husband was a way of obtaining a wife! The Egyptians, descendants of Ham through Mizraim, were polytheistic, cruel, and immoral. We read that polygamy and sexual promiscuity were common. So Abraham feared for his life.

And again trusted in his own strength and wisdom to find a solution. What he conceived was a deception, a lie.

B. The deception regarding Sarah's identity.

v.11-13

"Say you are my sister."

Now, that was a half-truth. Sarah had the same father as Abraham, Terah. But a different mother. She was his half-sister, a marriage relationship which was not forbidden at that time, and actually somewhat common. But much more than that, she was his wife. And this plan created in Abraham's own wisdom was deception. It was untruth. It was a lie. When he denied that Sarah was his wife, obviously refusing to live with her then as husband and wife, he was lying.

In this example, the sinfulness of Abraham's deception was magnified by,

C. The ugliness of self-interest.

Think about what Abraham was asking his wife to endure! To save his own skin, Abraham was willing to let his own wife be taken by another man! And the object of Abraham's concern is made explicitly clear in,
v.13

The purpose of this deception, in Abraham's own words, is "that it may be well with me for your sake." So that "that I may live because of you." Abraham was concerned about his own well-being, even if it meant that Sarah's honor and purity would be sacrificed. What a horrible example of a husband's love!

Should not have Abraham willingly laid down his own life rather than sacrifice the honor of his wife? Is not a husband supposed to lay down his own life for the sake of his wife? Certainly, that is God's will! We read in,

Eph. 5:25 "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her."

That's the calling of a husband! The calling of a husband is to lay down his life for his wife! Abraham flatly refused! And he refused to believe that God would protect him and his wife. He refused even to seek the Lord's counsel and wisdom. Instead, with selfish motives, with his own needs at the forefront of his mind, he reveals all of the ugliness of self-interest.

To the contrary, the obvious application for us, for husbands, is that you are to love your wife as Christ loves the church, to lay down your life to protect your wife, as Jesus did for his bride. In this instance, Abraham failed miserably.

Again, the big picture is the common and very understandable temptation to depend upon your own strength and wisdom when facing trials. And what are the consequences when you do that?

We see it here quite plainly.

II. ABRAHAM REVEALS WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO A MAN WHO DEPENDS UPON HIS OWN STRENGTH AND WISDOM.

Perhaps not surprising, you may have some initial success.

A. Sinful self-dependency may bring temporary benefits.

You may come up with a fairly decent plan that actually works. Abraham did. His plan worked exactly as he expected, though with even greater benefits than he imagined.

v.14-16

Not only was Abraham's life spared as the honorable brother of a beautiful woman; not only was Sarah treated well as the wife of an Egyptian; but Pharaoh himself took an interest in her! Pharaoh himself took Sarah into his palace. And richly blessed Abraham as her brother. Abraham got even more wealthy than he had been.

v.16

It worked, didn't it? Therefore, it was a good plan. I have to tell you, this temptation is one of the most hideous and subtle dangers facing us today, and facing the church of our day. In one word, it's called "pragmatism." In simple terms, it means, "Do what works." When it comes to church, do what is popular. Do what people want, what makes them comfortable. Do whatever you have to do to win the approval of men. If it gets good results, do it.

Yet that desire to please man is ultimately a fatal flaw, as Paul states so forcefully,

Gal. 1:10 "For do I now persuade men, or God? Or do I seek to please men? For if I still pleased men, I would not be a

bondservant of Christ.”

Similarly,

1Ths. 2:4 “But as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts. 5 For neither at any time did we use flattering words, as you know, nor a cloak for covetousness—God is witness. 6 Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ.”

Sinful self-dependency may work. For awhile. Pragmatism may work, and in fact, by its very definition, does work. For awhile. Your own ideas and plans may work, for awhile. You can succeed and prosper when you depend on your own strength and wisdom. For a while. But you can be assured that,

B. Sinful self-dependency will be exposed and rebuked.

Abraham was poised for a great fall. Pharaoh found out about Sarah’s identity.

v.18-19

Sin will find you out.

Now, the spiritual tragedy of all this, and the horrible irony of it all is that Pharaoh is not a believer. The wicked, unbelieving king rebukes the man of faith! Talk about a bad testimony! And the rebuke is so accurate, so well stated, that Abraham responds only in silence. He cannot defend himself nor his actions.

How tragic it is, and how devastating it is for the testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ, when Christians are properly rebuked by non-Christians, when non-Christians actually demonstrate greater morality and integrity than Christians! But it still happens.

People of God, you must be assured that if, and when, you depend upon your own strength and wisdom, your sin will ultimately be exposed and rebuked. And you will fail.

C. Sinful self-dependency will ultimately bring about failure.

Abraham’s plan failed. He was put out of Egypt, banished. v.19-20

Pharaoh commanded Abraham to leave! Abraham, who should have been able to follow God’s commands as he did when he left Ur of the Chaldeans, was reduced to a criminal sent away in the humiliation of exile. If you depend upon your own strength and your own wisdom to handle the troubles of your life, you will fail. It’s that simple.

You might think to yourself, “How do I know if I am depending upon God or upon myself?” And the simplest and most direct answer is defined by how you have prayed. Prayer is what demonstrates dependence upon God. Earnest, intense, extended, repeated prayer. The more that you pray, the more you will be able to act with the confidence that your trust is in the Lord. But if you find yourself making decisions and confronting issues without praying about them, beware. Beware of the danger which befell Abraham.

But then, there is one verse I have skipped so far. One verse that really provides the triumphant theme of this account. As I said in my introduction, this is not merely the story of a man’s sin, but more than that, it is the story of God’s grace. God didn’t have Moses include this event in the pages of Scripture so that we could all see what a selfish sinner Abraham was. We don’t have this text before us tonight so that we can cast stones at Abraham in his failure to love his wife.

Instead, the overriding impression of this account is that,

III. GOD REVEALS HIS GRACE IN RESPONSE TO THE SINFULNESS OF MEN.

Notice what God does.

v.17

Now, Pharaoh, though an unbeliever and a wicked sinner, was in this case, in the right. He had done nothing wrong. He had treated Abraham honorably. He had not knowingly taken a woman to be his wife who was already married. And Abraham was guilty of lying.

But the plague came upon Pharaoh and upon his household. Pharaoh was disciplined or punished because of Sarah's presence as his wife. I submit to you that that is a demonstration of God's grace.

He could have disciplined Abraham, perhaps allowed him to endure all the consequences of his sin. He could have cut Abraham off from the promise, but he didn't! And that is precisely the nature of grace. God had made a promise to Abraham, and God would fulfill his promise. Even if Abraham sinned! That's grace.

What was the promise to Abraham? It was the promise of the covenant. The promise of the land. And the promise of a great seed. And what is so overwhelmingly obvious here is that,

A. God graciously fulfills his covenant purposes despite the sinfulness of men.

It was God's covenant purpose to give to Abraham the land of Canaan. NOT the land of Egypt. So God saw to it that Abraham no longer stayed in Egypt.

It was God's covenant purpose for Abraham and Sarah, as husband and wife, by natural means, to bear children, particularly the line which would be the nation of Israel. So God saw to it that Sarah no longer stayed in the palace of Pharaoh as his wife.

God saw to it that his purposes would be fulfilled. The sinfulness of Abraham would not stifle his sovereign will. And there is such great practical benefit from understanding this. It's not that sin is excused, that whatever God is going to do he will do, therefore it doesn't matter how I live. That's nonsense, and I think you all agree with me on that.

But, we do still sin. Yet when we sin, we do not thwart God's eternal purpose. Even when we sin, God's promise remains true,

Rom. 8:28 "And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."

God accomplishes his good purposes according to his eternal plan. And he does so despite the sinfulness of man.

Let me suggest a couple examples. First, the church. The church shall survive, even triumph. The gates of hell shall never prevail against the church of Jesus Christ. The church shall be in existence when Jesus returns, it's light will never be extinguished.

And we can be confident of that despite the horrible sinfulness of people within the church. I'm speaking, of course, of the church at large, the universal church or catholic church meaning the church of all true believers all around the world.

But to a lesser degree, we can claim this promise for our own local church as well. No one will claim that we have been without sin, but despite whatever sin has been among us, we can still

claim God's promise that he will build his church.

There are many other examples, and I say this to encourage you. God's grace should encourage you. God graciously fulfills his covenant purposes despite the sinfulness of men. And, in an even more personal sense,

B. God graciously restores those who have fallen into sin.

We don't read of the particular encounter between God and Abraham, such as we have when David sinned. But we see clearly the restoration. When Abraham was driven out of Egypt, God was restoring him to his right position. When Pharaoh banished Abraham and Sarah into exile, rebuking them for their deception, God was restoring them.

They would be restored to the land. They would be restored to their marriage. Their descendants, as numerous as the stars in the sky, would inherit that great land. And so let me read again those final verses, this time asking you to see in them the evidence of God's grace,

v.17-20

And so, this morning, even as you come to grips with the temptations of your own sinful self-reliance, be encouraged by this revelation of God's grace. And as you read of his grace, let that encourage you to resist the temptations that you might face instead of giving in as Abraham did here.

And whatever difficulty you may experience, whatever trial that may well test your faith, realize the truth of these words, and believe them with all your heart,

1 Cor.10:12 "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall. 13 No temptation has overtaken you except

such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it."

Surely, we can be thankful, with Abraham, that God is faithful.