

Part 21: Stuck and Unstuck

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I grew up in the generation that sat between cassette tapes and mp3s. That is to say I am part of the compact disc generation. Whether it was our compact discs, or our DVD's, we knew how easy it was for things to skip, loop, and pause if you weren't careful.

Turn a little too fast, it skips and you lose your place. Hit a bump too hard, welcome back to the beginning of the song. Sneeze? Well, now you're lost forever. We had to learn to ride our bikes, go for runs, and hike in the woods with a steady hand. Otherwise, you'd be endlessly annoyed.

As frustrating as unplanned skips, loops and repeats are in our music, they are even more frustrating in our lives.

But that's why I love Genesis 20. If you've been with us, you might wonder if the Bible skipped. We've listened to this part of the song haven't we? In Genesis 12 didn't Abraham meet a foreign king, lie about his wife to save his neck, lose everything only to be delivered out of his sin by God's grace? Yes, we did.

In fact these two chapters are so similar that many skeptical scholars use this as an example of why the Bible is not inerrant. Is this just a retelling of the same Abraham myth but with different figures? Is it more myth than history? After all Abraham has been through, certainly he wouldn't make the same mistakes in the same way and expect a different result.

But it's moments like this where I'm never more certain that the Bible is real history. It's hard for me to imagine speaking to a burning bush. It's hard for me to picture the sea parting. I've never been the Lord's anointed prophet or king. But I tell you what—I've been in Genesis 20.

And I bet you have too. Despite what we've learned, despite our promises and our optimism, we often find ourselves skipping around, revisiting past problems, repeating past sins, and getting frustrated at how the littlest bumps seem to always throw us off. In those moments you might ask yourself, "How did I get here again?" And if that question is hard to answer, we are faced with an even harder one, "How do I get back on track?"

Maybe you don't even believe in God, but you're here because you know something needs to change, but you don't know what that is or how it might happen. This passage today has good news for all of us. While we fail and flail, God faithfully helps us up and calls us forward. How? That's our main point this morning: **God keeps us going by convicting us of sin and confronting us with grace.** We will see this in four ways this morning: **Familiar Habits, Fresh Conviction, Old Excuses, and Amazing Grace.**

We often think that if we only knew enough, obedience would be easy. But no one knew more than Abraham and Sarah. They knew the foolishness of sin, because they tried it. They knew God's particular promise concerning his protection and their future son because time and time again God miraculously showed them.

And yet, all that information wasn't enough to prevent them from drifting back into old habits.

Let's read those opening verses: **Genesis 20:1-2**: "From there Abraham journeyed toward the territory of the Negeb and lived between Kadesh and Shur; and he sojourned in Gerar. And Abraham said of Sarah his wife, "She is my sister." And Abimelech king of Gerar sent and took Sarah."

And here we see our first point today: **Familiar Habits**.

A few months ago I rearranged all the drawers in my kitchen. I did it. I got to choose where things went. To this day, I still find myself checking the wrong drawers and wondering who the fool was who thought it was a good idea. Familiar habits are hard to break.

Even when we have certainty on God's promise, it's easy for us to fall back into the old way of thinking we once had. Baseball season is right around the corner. Kids, have you ever needed a new baseball mitt? Or, maybe, a new pair of soccer cleats. The first time you put it on you'll notice how stiff and uncomfortable it is.

You think to yourself, "I'll never use this." Your old mitt, your old cleats, were far more comfortable. But don't forget why you got a new one! You got a new one because the old ones didn't work anymore.

We only believe in the promise of God when we realize the promises of this world can't catch anything. Just because something is comfortable doesn't mean it's capable. Just because you're used to it, doesn't mean it has usefulness.

Abraham had been faithfully trusting God while sojourning. It was comfortable, until it wasn't. He came face to face again with another king. Just like in Egypt, he was worried that the king would kill him and take his wife.

In Egypt he lied, and it nearly cost him everything. He was saved only by God's intervening grace. And yet, he looks back at his lie in Egypt, a form of self-protection which came so easily, and it was of more comfort than trusting God.

It's easy to trust God with our future because we don't live in the future. But it's hard to trust God when it seems your future is on the line in the present. The present is when we feel those pressures and pain points, and when you feel that, what do you turn to for comfort? Where do you seek protection?

Maybe you know the song, "As the deer pants for the water so my soul longs after you." That's taken from Psalm 42. But if we were to write honest hymns, we'd also sing of Proverbs 26:11, "As a dog returns to his vomit, so my soul remains stupid."

Abraham here has the promise of God. But in order to preserve God's promise, he feels like he needs to provide for it himself. He's got to take matters into his own hands. It's easier to trust his plan, than to trust the God who gave him the plan.

Sin promised the same protection, but it paid out with the same problems. Abimelech took Sarah. On the verge of finally having the son of promise, Abraham's familiar hope cost him everything.

When faith is unfamiliar to us, it's not long before we are most familiar with our own failures. Those hopeful in sin's comfort quickly find themselves hopeless in sin's consequences. But this isn't where God

leaves us. When we are stuck in familiar patterns, God brings us fresh conviction. But in this story the conviction comes not to the man of promise, but to the pagan king.

Genesis 20:3, “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.’”

Here we see our second point: **Fresh Conviction**.

Abraham sinned, and his hope is lost. But now, God appears to Abimelech, the foreign King, and makes it clear that he too has sinned, and his hope seems to be lost: “You’re a dead man.”

Sin demands our life. Abimelech’s particular sin was adultery. He had taken another man’s wife.

But here’s the problem—he didn’t know it. Look here, **Genesis 20:4-5**, “Now Abimelech had not approached her. So he said, ‘Lord, will you kill an innocent people? 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 hadn’t physically sinned yet. He hadn’t yet approached her sexually. So, he pleads before the Lord: “Would you destroy the innocent!?”

Abimelech doesn’t see his sin. But that’s the biggest problem isn’t it. It’s hard to see where we’ve sinned. You might have a similar protest before the Lord when you stand before him. You might say, “Wait a minute, I didn’t knowingly do anything wrong. I may have accidentally done things, but my heart was in a good spot.”

But look how the Lord responds: **Genesis 20:6-7**, “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. 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.’”

God actually affirms Abimelech’s general sense of morality. He says, “You’re right. You did act with integrity of heart.” Abimelech had many wives, but he had his moral line. He wasn’t a wife *stealer*. In this he’s more upright than Abraham who is fine allowing such an evil. It is possible at times for those who do not know the Lord to have a morality which exceeds those who do.

But external morality before others is no sign of our standing before God. Abimelech points to his total innocence of heart and hands, but look at the Lord’s response: **vs. 6**, “Yes I know you have done this in the integrity of your heart, but it was my hand that kept you from sinning against me.”

While Abimelech didn’t know he was doing wrong—God knew that unless he intervened Abimelech would do wrong. The word used here for “hold back” is a word that was used to describe a herdsman holding back a young goat who is drinking too much milk. It was a problem where young goats would enjoy the nourishment so much that they would over indulge and it would cause great harm.

And despite what Abimelech knew, God knew more. He knows that left on our own, we would sin, and we would sin spectacularly. Because even though Abimelech didn't know Sarah belonged to another, if he did in fact sleep with her, he would have sinned nonetheless. Ignorance is not innocence.

The problem of our heart is that we will never see our sin clearly when left to our own convincing. But that's why we learn to see God's convicting mercy. He knows what we need to know about our sin.

Abimelech says, "Look at my restraint!" But God says, "Look at mine!" This is uncomfortable at times. But God's conviction comes with God's compassion: "You will die, unless you return her." There's a way out. There's a path forward.

Now, let's put on Abimelech's shoes here. He's the King of Gerar. This little Abraham just wandered into his kingdom, lied to him, and caused him to violate his own moral standard. Moreover, a God he's never heard of before just appeared to him and called him out on sin he never knew was already in his heart. And now the God he's never met, who is convicting him of sin he's never felt, is calling him to go to a man who isn't a King, and pray for a healing he didn't know he needed on account of judgment he didn't think he earned.

What would you do if you were in Abimelech's shoes? Some of us may take some NyQuill and wonder why we had such a weird and bad dream. We'd try to ignore it, and tuck it away as if it were nothing. Some of us might respond in anger, we might chastise this God and let him know who he's messing with.

Those are sinful responses to the Lord's conviction. But here, Abimelech models for us the result of godly conviction. It produces humble contrition. A broken and contrite heart he will not despise. Humble hope. That's what brings comfort.

We see this in two ways. First, examine his humble urgency: **Genesis 20:8**, "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."

Abimelech's dream came at night, and when it ended, he got busy. He didn't put it off till tomorrow. He didn't roll over and think about it. He got up. Today was the day of his salvation. And notice how he went and told his servants.

I love this. Remember, Abimelech was a powerful king, and a king who took pride in his moral excellence. But here, he goes to his servants and reveals to them that he is morally wrong, and that he has encountered a more powerful king. Abimelech says, "Guys, you might not know this. You might not even know this God. But we have a problem. All of us do. And there's only one way out. We've got to go see a man about our sins." Those who see their sin most clearly engage in evangelism most eagerly.

And his humble urgency shows up in that the King with the power went and sought out the man who deceived him. He summons Abraham to himself in **Genesis 20:9-10** and he asks him three questions: Why have you done this to us? Why have you brought upon us so great a sin? What did you see in us that you would do such a thing?

And Abraham answers those three questions of genuine conviction with three examples of **Old Excuses**. It shouldn't be lost on us that Moses is meaning for us to see Abimelech the pagan ruler as the positive actor in light of Abraham who remains stubborn in his sin.

If you want to know what true conviction looks like—look at Abimelech. But if you want to know what a lack of conviction looks like, consider and be warned of Abraham's responses. We must examine these closely because they all seem to be layered with half-truths. I'll say it again, unless the Lord convicts us of sin, we will always justify ourselves by our own convincing. Which is what Abraham does here. Maybe you can see yourself in these at times.

Abimelech asks, "Why did you do this thing to us?" **Genesis 20:11**, "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.''" Abraham's first excuse is to blame his sin on Abimelech's sin.

When we don't trust God, we naturally assume the best of us and the worst of others. When we don't see our own sin, we are always the victims of someone else's sin.

The people of Gerar are indeed the nation that will be known to Israel as the Philistines. They will be well known for their lack of fear of God. Yet, in this instance, Abraham is the one who didn't fear God. When we are only concerned about the potential sin, or the real sin of others, we will be unable to see our own sin. If they are to fear God, then so are you. True conviction is more concerned about our own sin than the sin of others.

Abimelech's second question "Why did you sin against us?" is answered here: **Genesis 20:12**, "Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father though not the daughter of my mother, and she became my wife." Abraham's second excuse is to deny he sinned at all!

Just as Abimelech boasted in his innocence, so does Abraham. "Well, technically, we are related by marriage, so on paper she kind of is my sister."

Kids, if you're at all like me, this is our number one excuse. How many times do you try to explain to your parents how your sin wasn't actually sin? I didn't shove, I touched. I didn't lie, I just didn't say everything. I wasn't disrespectful, I was just telling the truth plainly. But these excuses never bring us peace do they?

Do you know why they don't? Because our own heart condemns us. Sarah might honestly be related to Abraham. But Abraham didn't share that information to be honest did he. Even if he was honest, his intent was to be dishonest. His heart, not his words, were the problem. And if we keep justifying our actions without ever addressing our heart, we will be more and more frustrated.

Abraham is like Teflon. Nothing sticks, and all we are left with is cancer. Abraham is digging in his heels and yet what does he have for it? Nothing. Nothing is better, he still doesn't have his wife back, he still doesn't have a child, and he still feels the need to justify himself.

And this might lead all of us to the most tried, and yet most foolish excuse of all: blaming God.

Genesis 20:13, "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.''"

We can blame others, and it won't get us back on track. We can try and declare ourselves innocent, but it doesn't help us. So now, we find ourselves desperate and we try to blame our sin on God. Abimelech asks Abraham what he saw that would cause him to do this. And Abraham said, "Do you see what I see?"

"This God," he said, "caused me to wander." The word he uses there is not a positive one. It communicates directionless wandering. The sheep wandered off, and now he's blaming the shepherd. "I wouldn't have had to sin at all if God would not be asleep at the wheel. He made promises to me, but I've got no land, no son, and my only hope is my wife. So if I'm going to get that promise, I'm going to have to do what it takes to get it on my own."

Abimelech's adultery was subtle and hidden from the eyes of all. But Abraham's idolatry is on full display. Abraham trusts himself more than he trusts God. Abimelech saw Sarah as a wife for his own taking. And now Abraham saw God's promise as something for his own taking. He took by faithlessness what God called him to in faithfulness.

This is the rut and habit that we run to time and time again. It's what Paul speaks of in Ephesians 2, saying that we were all once led by the course of the world, and the prince of the power of the air, we were all blind followers of our own passions and plans, and left to ourselves we, like Abimelech were the walking dead.

But then Paul gives those wonderful two words: "But God." That's the disruptive force that breaks the cycle. That's what we need to see. Abimelech sinned though he didn't know it. Abraham knew the promise but didn't trust. Sarah laughed at God's plan but lauded Abraham's dumb idea. But God. God gave a way. God was going to protect the womb or promise, preserve the man of promise, and show mercy to the pagan to whom mercy was promised.

Here's what happened: **Genesis 20:14-18**, "Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male servants and female servants, and gave them to Abraham, and returned Sarah his wife to him. And Abimelech said, "Behold, my land is before you; dwell where it pleases you." 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." Then Abraham prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech, and also healed his wife and female slaves so that they bore children. For the Lord had closed all the wombs of the house of Abimelech because of Sarah, Abraham's wife."

Here's our final point this morning: **Amazing Grace**.

When our life seems laden with problems, when we seem stuck in sin, God moves to point us to his promise. John Newton once wrote a devotional hymn that questioned why his prayers for faithfulness only seemed to manifest more difficulty. He laments that all he wants is to obey more, and yet it seems God just makes obedience harder and harder. He wonders if the Lord even cares. But the final line sings this: "Tis in this way the Lord replied, 'I answer prayer for grace and faith...These inward trials I employ from self and pride to set thee free, and break the schemes of earthly joy that thou may find your all in me."

Do you see what the Lord did here to a bunch of losers? Did you see what an encounter with their own sin led them to experience as they all sought to submit themselves to God's plan for rescue? God desired that in their foolishness, and in the realization of their sin they might find their all in him.

Abraham sinned against a pagan King, and yet that king granted Abraham blessing and life in the land. How much more is our sin against the King of Glory and yet how much greater the reward we have from him.

Isn't heaven better than Gerar? Glory greater than Canaan? And more than that, the Lord fills all who come to him with the Holy Spirit. Jesus told his disciples that it is better that he should go. For when he did, he would send his helper who would convict them concerning sin and righteousness. Abimelech was convicted because God confronted him. But every believer in Christ can be convicted because God confronts us in the Holy Spirit. We are not left alone in our sin, we are not unable to change. We have God himself who delights to get us unstuck by showing us the sin that so easily ensnares.

And he does this so that we might find the justification and peace we need. Sarah was vindicated before the eyes of all by Abimelech. Following cultural customs of the day, he showed sorrow for his mistake by making restitution. But the reason he did so was seen in verse 16: it was a sign of Sarah's innocence and a vindication before all. How much greater the vindication we have in Jesus. It doesn't matter what we've done, or how impure we have been, he cleanses us with more than money. He sheds his blood for us. He washes us pure on the cross. Do you feel enslaved, used and captive to sin—run to the one who doesn't take you to use you—but the one who gave himself to cleanse you and heal you. What a grace.

And lastly, Abimelech went to a lousy and deceitful prophet, and yet by that prophet's prayer he was healed. Little did he know that it was not only him that needed healing, but his whole household with him. Abraham interceded, but it was only because Abraham himself impeded. And yet, because of Abraham's folly this nation encountered the power of a God who gives life to the barren. How much more might we receive when we seek out Jesus as our intercessor?

Abraham sinned against Abimelech, yet Abimelech sought him. We, however, have sinned against Jesus who has never sinned against us. Yet, how much more then should we seek him? How much more willing is he to heal us? To pardon our sin, and to give us life in him.

By the end of this passage, it might seem that Abraham and Sarah are still stuck. The wombs of all the house of Abimelech are opened but Sarah's remains closed. And yet, they are no longer stuck. They see the grace of God. They see the folly of sin. And where God's promise remains, we are never stuck. God's promise in Jesus pulls us out of sin, convicts us by mercy, and gives us grace to get up and press onward.

So let us today see God's steady hand of mercy even as we wrestle with the skips, loops and traps of sin.