

“Faith Folly”

Genesis 16:1-16

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for

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Sometimes, trying to help gets us in trouble. I remember one Thanksgiving when I was six or seven years old. My dad and his dad were working to build a garage. I thought I'd be helpful and decided to bring them something cold to drink. So, with two tumblers full of iced tea, I decided to make my way up the 8 foot ladder. I did well and reached the top, but I couldn't quite reach to hand the drinks to my dad, so I took one more step and placed one foot on the roof top and the other foot on the ladder. The next thing I know, I was laying on the concrete floor of the garage, covered in iced tea, and without a breath anywhere in my body. It took a couple of seconds – though it seemed a lot longer – and I finally caught my breath. It seemed like it came from my toes, and by the time it reached my mouth I let out a blood curdling scream. Along with getting my breath back, I got a real pain in my neck.

Sometimes it doesn't pay to be helpful. And if the truth be told, had I taken the time to ask my dad if that is what he wanted me to do, he probably would have said no. But I took it upon myself to help. So let me say this: when it comes to the promise of God, He doesn't need our help. He's got it under control, and He'll call on you should He want you to do something.

This morning we're going to look at an episode in the life of Abraham that proves my point perfectly. When God makes a promise – when God has a plan – it's always best to wait for Him to bring it about. Chapter 16 in Genesis is a story of faith follies...examples of how Abraham and Sarah, and for that matter, Hagar, trip up by not waiting on the Lord.

Genesis 16 follows the text we looked at last week, the covenant that God made with Abraham. You'll remember that God initiated the covenant, God ratified the covenant, all while Abraham slept. God's promise was an unconditional one. That's what makes Abraham's folly so

clear in Genesis 16. Abraham need only believe the God of the covenant. Instead, he follows his wife's advice and ends up tripping up big time.

So, keep your eyes open as we study this chapter. Keep your eyes open for the ways in which you might act like Abraham, Sarah, or Hagar. And keep your eyes open for how God responds in the context of keeping His promise to Abraham and Abraham's descendents.

Let's start with verses 1 to 6. Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar; so she said to Abram, "The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her."

Abram agreed to what Sarai said. So after Abram had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarai his wife took her Egyptian maidservant Hagar and gave her to her husband to be his wife. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived.

When she knew she was pregnant, she began to despise her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "You are responsible for the wrong I am suffering. I put my servant in your arms, and now that she knows she is pregnant, she despises me. May the Lord judge between you and me."

"Your servant is in your hands," Abram said. "Do with her whatever you think best." Then Sarai mistreated Hagar; so she fled from her.

Now if that isn't a soap opera, I don't know what is. Sarah hasn't given birth yet, and they've been in Canaan ten years. Sarah's impatient, wondering how God's promise is going to come true. That is faith folly #1. It connects with what we said last week: never depend on your circumstances or the evidence around you to determine your destiny; instead, look to the Lord and His promise. Sarah knew she hadn't given birth – she knew she was old – she knew she couldn't conceive, and so she decided to follow the custom of the day, instead of wait patiently for the Lord to do His work.

The custom of the day said that Sarah could give a servant to her husband to conceive and that the child born of that concubine relationship would be counted as her child. To be childless in her culture was shameful. To know that God had promised something that she wasn't seeing come true bothered her, and so she traded God's promise for society's promise. The folly is to follow our culture instead of God. Following the influence of our culture is far less safe than we think, especially when it comes to trusting God, his provision and his promise in our life.

What about Abraham? He sounds a bit like Adam, doesn't he? His wife makes a suggestion – he's the one who has heard from God – and yet he decides to agree with his wife, rather than trust what God had said. Things didn't end up so well for all of us because of Adam's choice, and they don't end up well for Abraham and his family because of his choice.

And Sarah? She sounds a bit like Eve, doesn't she? She makes the suggestion – knowing it is a choice between the custom of the day and what God promised – and then in verse 5 she blames Abraham saying, "You are responsible for the wrong I'm suffering." First, she blames God saying in verse 2, "The Lord has kept me from having children," and then she blames Abram for the attitude that Hagar has inflicted upon her. Nowhere does she take responsibility for her actions.

Just like Abraham was swept into the war story of chapter 14 because he is summoned to rescue his nephew, Lot, now Hagar is swept into the drama of Abram's family because of the misguided attempt by her mistress to have a child. I love the way the text reads here, "Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. But...she had an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar." In other words, no problem, I haven't had any of the children God has promised, but I can take care of it, I have this servant I picked up when we were in Egypt. Dr. J. Vernon McGee says it this way, "Abram got two things down in the land of Egypt which really cause him trouble: one was wealth, and the

other was this little Egyptian maid.” See, what was common practice for the day was against God’s plan, just as reaping the benefits of the spoils of war was common, yet against God’s will. The difference in this case is that Abram passed the spoils-of-war test, but he failed miserably the little-Egyptian-maid test. Resorting to our own means rather than waiting on God always creates problems. Let me repeat that for all of us: resorting to our own means rather than waiting on God always creates problems. I’ll bet you don’t have to search very far in your own life to see that truth played out.

In the end, Sarah is not as direct as Abram suggests; instead, she is what we might call passive-aggressive. She mistreats Hagar severely enough that Hagar flees. Look at the second half of the chapter, verses 7 to 16. The angel of the Lord found Hagar near a spring in the desert; it was the spring that is beside the road to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from, and where are you going?” “I’m running away from my mistress Sarai,” she answered. Then the angel of the Lord told her, “Go back to your mistress and submit to her.” The angel added, “I will so increase your descendents that they will be too numerous to count.” The angel of the Lord also said to her: “You are now with child and you will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard of your misery. He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he will live in hostility toward all his brothers.” She gave this name to the Lord who spoke to her: “You are the God who sees me,” for she said, “I have now seen the One who sees me.” That is why the well was called Beer Lahai Roi; it is still there, between Kadesh and Bered. So Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram gave the name Ishmael to the son she had borne. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

I have to be frank for a minute. This section of Scripture has always bothered me. I’m not completely sure why. Part of it is that I feel sorry for Hagar, but the other part of it, I think, is the

prediction that comes from the Angel of the Lord...the prediction that Ishmael will be a wild donkey of a man and that he will lead this conflict-laden life. I wonder about the purpose of it all. We can look to the Middle East – we can look to the ongoing conflict there – for a glimpse at what it might all mean.

Think about it for a minute. God makes a promise to this undoubtedly young woman swept up in this family drama – thrust into the desert. God promises her that she, like Sarah, would be a matriarch. Later in Genesis chapter 25, we get more clues. Her son will become the father of a great tribe of wild, hostile people living in the Arabian desert, but they won't be the promised, or the chosen seed; instead, they will complicate matters.

If you don't think your sin has lasting influence in this world, then you are mistaken. Abram and Sarah compromise, and as a direct result we see the conflict of many millennia before our very eyes even today.

But here is the greater lesson: our failure – our faith follies – when seen in the light of God's unconditional promises – never thwart the plans of God. Our faith follies, like Abram's, add new dimensions, create new conflict, render the world with new challenges, but they do not undo what God has in mind. And so that's why the Angel of the Lord can tell Hagar to return to Sarah, remain obedient, have your child, but your child will not be the child of promise; he will be a child who brings out the worst in everyone he meets.

We don't have time for it now, but when you get a chance, read Galatians 4. Paul explains in detail the difference between Abram's sons of the flesh (those in the line of Ishmael) and Abram's sons of the promise (those in the line of Isaac).

There is one more thing I want you to notice. It is God's gracious outreach to Hagar; it is God's loving care for Hagar. He knows she's not responsible – not responsible in the same way Sarah & Abram are responsible – and He is gracious and merciful toward her. Yet, this added grace never undoes His promise to Abraham. The place of God's promise to Hagar was named Beer Lahai Roi, and it marked a significant lesson that Hagar learned. This God whom Abraham served was a God who both hears and sees and helps in times of need. Hagar left abused – abused – but she met God along the way, and she returned to Sarah with faith and a promise of her own from God.

My daughter often greets me at the top of the steps at our house when I return home from the store or from a meeting, and she says, “Need help?” Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don't, but I always find a way for her to help. I figure it's a good way to grow her and teach her to be helpful. This morning's story is a story about the right way to approach God – it's about the right way to be helpful. Don't make the mistake of thinking that you can add to or take away from the promise of God in any way. The Word of the Lord came to Sarah and Abram, and considering they were old and she was barren, God's very promise made them feel incapable. It made Abram and Sarah feel their inadequacy. Perhaps it even made them feel as if they could not fulfill God's promise. And this is where Abraham strayed – and it's where a lot of us stray, because it's not up to us to fulfill God's promise. He'll do it and he doesn't need our help. Let's pray.