

The Flesh vs. the Promise: Genesis 16  
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We're back in Genesis this morning, in chapter 16. The title of the sermon is "The Flesh vs. the Promise." We've already seen Abram's ups and downs in the fight of faith. He is a man just like any of us. He has his good days, and he has his bad days in the struggle to trust God's promises. At certain points his actions evidence a severe lack of trust, like when he was in Egypt and he told his wife, Sarai, "Say you are my sister." Abram wanted to deceive Pharaoh because he thought Pharaoh would kill him in order to marry his beautiful wife. He was scared, and so he lied, all because he was not trusting God. At other points, though, Abram demonstrates great trust in the Lord, which enables him to take risks. In chapter 13 he let his nephew Lot have the first pick of the land. He said to Lot, "If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left." Abram was trusting in God's promises, so he didn't have to fight with his nephew over who would get the better land. He just said, Take whatever land you want. That's the kind of risk and self-sacrifice that faith produces. And then in chapter 14 Lot is taken captive, and Abram sets out with his army of 318 soldiers, and he rescues Lot. That was a risk. It was a huge risk. And it was evidence of his faith in God which freed him up to make sacrifices for others. In chapter 15 there is the magnificent statement that "Abram believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness." God promised, "your very own son shall be your heir," and your offspring will number more than the stars in the night sky. And Abram believed the promise.

In Abram's walk of faith, there have been deep valleys of fear and despair and sin, and there have been high mountaintops of faith. And as we move from chapter 15 to chapter 16, we see Abram and his wife Sarai plummet from a mountaintop down into a valley. The promise was given. Abram believed the promise. But as time wears on, the aging couple takes the matter into their own hands, and they try to figure out their own way to fulfill the promise.

At this point in the story, Sarai is about 75 years old. Abram is about 85 (he's 86 at the end of the chapter when Ishmael is born). The point is: nobody is anticipating that this couple will have a baby. They are not the kind of couple who has babies. They are way beyond child-bearing age. And Sarai is feeling the despair and hopelessness of her situation. She is desperate to have children. Not only for her own pleasure, but to provide her husband with a son, an heir, the fulfillment of the promise. They've been in Canaan for 10 years now, and she's still not pregnant. That is a trial that some of you can identify with. The desire for children, but for some reason God is not granting children at this time. Maybe He's simply saying, Not right now. Or maybe He's saying, I want you to adopt children rather than have biological children. But we should all recognize and be sensitive to the trial that many couples face of wanting children but not yet being blessed with children. That is the situation Abram and Sarai were in. They were longing for a child, but verse 1 tells us, "Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children." Then the verse introduces the other woman who is to play a significant role in this story. "She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar."

Verse 2 is where things go bad. Sarai has an idea. It's her own idea. It's an idea that was consistent with the culture in which she lived. If a woman couldn't bear

children herself, she could substitute a slave to bear children for her. So Sarai proposed this as a plan to remedy their problem. She said, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children." That's a true statement. The Lord opens and closes the womb. But Sarai is complaining here. She is not saying this from a heart of faith. She is blaming God for her hardship and proposing her own way of getting out of the hardship. She told Abram, "Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." Notice that she doesn't call Hagar by name. In fact, throughout this narrative, neither Abram nor Sarai call her by name. Hagar is simply a piece of property to them. She was a slave, and she was abused in a terrible way.

What should Abram have done at this point? Sarai had proposed this idea to her husband, and it was an idea that was clearly against God's revealed will. God said in Genesis 2:24, "Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh." That is God's plan for marriage: one man, one woman, for life. But apparently Sarai justified her idea somehow and thought it might be how God would provide a son. But they knew better, and Abram should have stepped up as the male leader in this relationship. He should have said to his wife, "No, we're not going to sin against God, and we're not going to taint the wonderful intimacy that we have as husband and wife. God will keep His promise!" That's what Abram should have done. God revealed the promise to him, and he should have led his wife in trusting that promise.

But what did he do? Exactly what Adam had done in the garden. "He listened to the voice of Sarai," meaning he went along with her plan. In chapter 3 the same language is used of Adam, who listened to the voice of his wife and ate of the tree (v. 17). These are examples of men who needed to stand up for what's right. They needed to lead according to God's plan, trusting in God's promises. But they each forfeited their leadership role in these instances. Oh, how we need godly men who will lead their families and stand up for what is right and love the truth and trust in God's promises.

Genesis 3 was an example of how God's design for man and woman fell apart, and Genesis 16 is a very similar example. Sarai takes the lead and proposes a sinful course of action, and Abram passively goes along with it. This is simply evidence of the Fall. In our sin, we rebel against God's design for manhood and womanhood. Wives will resist their God-given role as helper and instead will try to rule their husbands, while husbands will neglect their leadership role and become passive. May this be a lesson to all husbands and wives, and all future husbands and wives. The biblical model and the path of greatest marital joy is when the husband leads his wife sacrificially and lovingly, and the wife graciously submits to her husband. If Abram had trusted God's promise, and if he had exercised his God-given leadership, this tragedy would have been avoided.

But instead, he slept with Hagar. And the next lesson we learn in this story is how sexual immorality brings hurt and sorrow and jealousy and hardship. God said, one man, one woman, for life, not because He wants to limit our joy, but because he wants to maximize our joy. Young people, single adults, God is not raining on your parade when He says, "Be chaste," when He says, "Sex is for married couples, not for dating couples." Those are not the instructions of a God who wants us to be unhappy. They are the loving commands of a God who wants us to avoid the pain that is caused by sexual impurity. Purity is the pathway of greatest delight.

Look at the turmoil which results from Abram's sin. Hagar conceived, and verse 4 says "she looked with contempt on her mistress." Now that she had slept with Abram and became pregnant, she looked down on Sarai. And, of course, this infuriated Sarai, even though this was her plan. But she wanted so badly to become pregnant herself, she couldn't help but be jealous and angry at Hagar. Then she turns and blames Abram. Verse 5, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" Even though Hagar's pregnancy perfectly fulfills Sarai's plan, the consequences are unbearable.

Listen, don't underestimate the pain that sexual immorality will cause. You may think it's OK to be intimate with your boyfriend or girlfriend, but you will regret it. As a married man or woman, you may think it's entirely innocent to flirt with a co-worker or friend or even someone at church, but it could end up destroying your marriage and your family. You may think that looking at pornography on the internet won't do any harm. It WILL!! All sexual immorality will lead to pain and misery, because it is against God's plan. 1 Thessalonians 4 says, "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality . . ." So let us all pursue purity, and in so doing we will be pursuing greater joy and delight in God. And we will avoid the pain that Abram and Sarai and Hagar experienced as they tried to bring about God's promise on their own.

Verse 6 is another example of Abram neglecting his leadership role. Instead of resolving the conflict, he defers to Sarai to "do to her as you please." "Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her."

We'll talk more about Hagar in the second half of the chapter, but before we look at that, let's turn to Galatians 4 to see how Paul compares Sarah and Hagar.

Notice the contrasts throughout verses 21-26. There are the two sons, who are Ishmael and Isaac, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. Ishmael was born according to the flesh, Isaac through promise. The women represent two covenants. Hagar is Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery, and corresponding to the present Jerusalem. And, in contrast, the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.

Paul is using Hagar and Sarah as a way to illustrate what he's been talking about throughout his letter to the Galatians. The contrast between works and faith, the contrast between the flesh and the Spirit, the contrast between slavery and freedom. It's an interesting illustration, isn't it? Hagar is the slave woman. Her son was born according to the flesh, and she represents the covenant made on Mount Sinai. All of that characterizes the Judaizers in Galatia. They were legalists, slaves to the law, relating to God according to the flesh. But Paul is saying, that's not who you are. You are children of the free woman. You are children of promise. Don't work according to the flesh, but rather trust the promise.

Do you see the difference between Hagar and Sarah? Hagar represents an attempt to accomplish the goal in our own strength, according to the flesh. But the miracle of Isaac's birth to Sarah, which we'll see in Genesis 21, represents God's power to do as He promises. Isaac was the child of promise. He was born through promise. And as believers, we too are children of promise.

The miracle of rebirth that God worked in our hearts, was completely His initiative. It's completely His doing, by His power. It's not something that we could have done. So we come to God by faith, not by works. We come to Him trusting in the

promise that Christ saves, rather than coming to Him with a plan of how to save ourselves.

I think if we had a theological quiz this morning, most of you would answer correctly that we are saved by faith and not by works. But the issue of legalism is so much more subtle than that. Even for those of us who uphold the great doctrine of salvation by faith alone, there can so easily be the tendency to live our Christian lives according to the flesh, trying to do things in our own strength.

C. J. Mahaney, in his little book *The Cross Centered Life*, has a chapter, “Breaking the Rules of Legalism: How the Cross Rescues You from the Performance Trap.” He defines legalism like this: “Legalism is seeking to achieve forgiveness from God and acceptance by God through obedience to God.” And to give an illustration of how subtly this can invade our Christian walk, he gives a hypothetical example of a man named Stuart. Stuart is a new believer, and doesn’t know much about the Bible but has a genuine love for Christ. One week at church a friend tells him to use a Bible reading plan, then he’s encouraged to be part of an accountability group. The pastor talks about the importance of prayer meetings. He goes to an evangelism conference and is told that he needs to be witnessing every day. He hears a radio program about fasting, and another about personal holiness. Then Mahaney writes, “One by one, Stuart added more and more spiritual activities to his life. Each was good. Some were vital. Yet without realizing it, Stuart allowed a dangerous shift to take place in his mind and heart. What God had intended to be a means of experiencing grace, Stuart had changed into a means of earning grace.” Isn’t it easy for that shift to happen in our lives? Even if we say with our mouths and understand in our minds that we’re saved by faith alone, we can still live with the anxiety and discouragement and frustration of thinking that we have to meet all these expectations in order to be “good Christians.” We’re not defined by what we do. We’re defined by who we are in Christ. And praise God, we are righteous in Christ. We are perfect in Christ. Because Christ lived a perfect life, and by faith we are united to Him.

On our own, we are wretched sinners who deserve eternal punishment, but by faith in Christ we are counted righteous. So trust Him! Believe the promises, and seek to delight in the beauty of who God is. Don’t run the rat race of trying to check off everything on the list. Don’t fall into the performance trap. Don’t live according the flesh, like Abram and Sarai were doing in this sinful attempt to fulfill the promise in their own strength.

Now let’s go back to Genesis 16 and look at the remainder of the chapter. I’m not going to spend as much time on this part of the chapter as I did on the first part, but I want us to notice a wonderful truth about God from these verses. The Bible reveals various names for God, and those names highlight different attributes of God’s nature. For instance, He is *El Elyon*, God Most High. He is *Jehovah-jireh*, the Lord who will provide. He is *Jehovah-rapha*, the Lord who heals. By the way, the women’s Bible study this fall is going to study the names of God, and it turns out that the children’s Bible study that will meet here at the building on Sunday evenings is also going to study the names of God. Those will be rich studies, and those involved will learn some deep truths about who God is.

Well, in our passage this morning we encounter a name for God that is not found anywhere else in Scripture. In verse 13 Hagar “called the name of the Lord who spoke to

her, ‘You are a God of seeing.’” The Hebrew there is *El Roi*. He is the God who sees. The well was called *Beer-lahai-roi*, which means “the well of the Living One who sees me.” And the other interesting thing we see in the immediate context is the name Ishmael, which means, “God hears.” And these are two very precious realities that I want us to focus on for a moment. God sees, and God hears.

Let’s think about three ways in which God sees and God hears. First of all, God sees and God hears those who are lowly. Hagar was on the bottom rung of society, and she felt it deeply. She was a woman, which in her society meant she was second-class. Not only that, she was Sarai’s servant. She was used sexually for the purpose of procreation, and then treated harshly when she did become pregnant. And now she has fled. This is the epitome of abuse and rejection. She has hit rock bottom. And yet God sees, and God hears. You don’t have to have any status or privilege in the world’s eyes in order to be heard by God. You just need to cry out to Him.

Closely related to this, God sees and God hears our afflictions. When others do wrong against us, God sees and God hears. In verse 11 God instructs Hagar, “You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction.” In other words, God knows what has happened to you. Maybe you or someone you know has been raped or molested or abused in any number of ways. Maybe you have been cheated or lied to. Any number of wrongs may have been done against you by co-workers or bosses or family members or so-called friends. You need to know that God’s eyes were not closed. He is not blind to the bad things that have happened to you.

Trust Him. Trust in the God who sees and hears. Even with the most difficult hardships and injustices of life. Trust in His good plan to bring us good and to glorify His Name. Because somehow, in God’s design, even these horrible evils play a part in His sovereign plan for the universe. “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). God sees the wrong things that are done to us. His eyes are open, and He is in control.

Finally, the God who sees all things also sees our sin. Hagar was certainly the victim in this situation, but she was not entirely innocent. She sinned, too, by looking with contempt at her mistress, and then by fleeing. She did not have a pure heart before God, and God saw that. But God had pity on this sinner, who was on the bottom rung of society, abused and rejected. God saw her, and listened to her cry.

No matter who you are, or where you’ve been, or what you’ve done, or what has been done to you . . . God sees and God hears. He hears those who cry out to Him in faith. He forgives our sin. And He plans every tragic event in our lives for our eternal good. Put your trust in the God who sees. The God who hears our cry.