

“The Strait Gate” is the title of the message today. I think this captures the essence of what went wrong in Genesis 16. *“Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children.”* You remember the situation, that Abram had been promised by God that he would become the father of a multitude of kings and nations which would come out of him. The problem is that he has no son. This goes on and on and on. So now in the 16th chapter what we are going to find is that having not having a son, not having an heir comes down in full force on the wife. Abram was never going to have son; it had to be Sarah. Now we are going to look at Sarah as she is going to have grapple with this reality.

“She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, ‘Behold not, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her.’ And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram’s wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, ‘May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she was that she had conceived she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!’ But Abram said to Sarai, ‘Behold, our servant is in your power; do to her as you please.’ Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

“The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, ‘Hagar, servant of Sarai, where are you going?’ She said, ‘I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.’ The angel of the Lord said to her, ‘Return to your mistress and submit to her.’ The angel of the Lord also said to her, ‘I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude.’ And the angel of the Lord said to her, ‘Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the Lord has listened to your affliction. He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone’s hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.’

“So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are a God of seeing,’ for she said, ‘Truly here I have seen him who looks after me.’ Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered. And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael. Abram.

The continual theme that we have been following throughout our study of Genesis has been learning to walk by faith. The heart of it is learning to measure our decisions against the promises of God. It is as we embrace the promises and we let those promises speak to us about God’s gracious intention, what He intends to do for us or what He intends for us to do for Him – both are parts are essential – that is when we begin to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord. So it is essential for us to remember at all times that we are God’s and not our own. This is probably the most fundamental challenge that most of us face. I have talked before in our messages about worship that all of us have a personal agenda. Our personal agenda runs up against the claim of God on us. There are two levels upon which God has a claim upon us. Number one is that He made us; we are His creatures. You would think that would settle the matter. But of course if we know the scriptures or we reflect upon our personal experience, humanity is in rebellion against the God who created them. So now you come to another level, another layer of our obligation before God. That is, as it is put by Paul at one point, we have been bought with a price. We are redeemed. He owns us because He has bought us with His Son’s blood. So there are two levels of accountability. Number one we are His creatures, number two as [the] redeemed. Both of them put us into a situation, a position of obligation before our Lord. I Corinthians 6:19-20 says, *“Do you not know your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, whom you have from God. You are not your own, for you were bought with a price, so glorify God in your bodies.”*

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of this – how many of us Americans? Ah yes, I want to make sure I am dealing with the right group. Americans are known worldwide for obsessiveness. We are constantly busy. We rarely know how to stop and relax. Do you know what the average American does when they have shortened work hours? They get a second job. We are known the world over for this. What that does—this is a little lead in. I know that this is a very unusual group, so I know you won’t identify with this. But for lots of people I do know the challenge we face in dealing with God is waiting. It is remembering, realizing and operating according to the fact that we must operate and live our lives according to God’s schedule and not ours. I look over here to my good brother Richard Frahm, a fine man, a wonderful elder. He was the man who led the pastoral search. He figured we would find [the new Youth Pastor] in less than six months! I told him he was an idiot! Normally it take about two years to find a pastor. That is because they normally hide; they don’t want to be found! Operating according to God’s time schedule: one of the reasons you want to come and talk to Brian and Allissa this afternoon is that we had a little chat about them waiting on the Lord until the right church came up. They had to wait until the right opportunity appeared. You have to know how to wait.

If you don’t, if instead of waiting you decide to take things into your own hands, most particularly if you decide to work out fulfilling God’s call or promise for Him, you can be sure trouble will follow. Derek Kidner, one of the commentators that I have been referring to continuously, he is an excellent commentator, references the events of this particular chapter to Jesus’ devastating judgment as recorded in Matthew – you might recall this – Matthew chapter 16, verse 23. Jesus has just told His disciples that He is going to die at the hands of His enemies when He gets to Jerusalem. Peter responds, saying, “Oh no you won’t” with the clear implication that Peter intends to prevent it from happening. I think we understand that it is Peter’s love for Jesus that prompts him to quickly say “No, I am not going to let this man whom I love more than any other be murdered by his enemies.” Understanding that it is his love for Jesus that has prompted [Peter] to speak helps us to be shocked at Jesus’ response. We all know what His response was: “Satan get behind me.” What a sweet compliment to an act of sacrificial love! But Jesus goes on to explain and the explanation is absolutely critical for all of us. He says, “You are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” I could stop at this point and speak to this statement alone in order for us to ponder and to wrestle with what the implications of this are. We are going to be celebrating the in our opinion untimely passing of Maria Farris’ grandson. He was twenty-nine. Now here is my response: nobody should die at 29! But God’s response is, he is mine at 29. Oh, really? Yeah, really!

Learning that we are subjects of our almighty Father puts us under pressure for grasping that He is wise, good and powerful because there are many things in this world of which we say they should never happen. There is no point in trying to sugarcoat that and twist it about and make it something that it isn’t.

Peter was quite simply driven by his emotions in this case, not his faith. He loved Jesus. But he had not been listening to him. Jesus had already made it clear that He needed to die that salvation would come to His people.

That was Sarai’s problem in Genesis 16. Sarai was burdened that there was no heir, no child. So she came up with a plan, a culturally acceptable plan to her problem. But she didn’t check it out with God. I thought about that: are there ways that we can see how this perhaps applies in our own situations and I think there are a number of ways. Did you ever do like I do at times and indulge in the wish, “Gee, I wish that somebody would win the lottery and we could fund the church for the next twenty years! Do we really just have to depend on all these unstable people to give money? Isn’t that a better plan?”

Let’s think about Sarai for a moment, because Sarai is us. That is the intent. We understand that we need to identify with this woman. We need to be compassionate. Why? [We need to be compassionate] because she is childless. I don’t know about you but I know that within the context of my own family I have dealt with a woman who was childless and deeply, passionately desired to have a baby and she couldn’t. It was a grim, bitter burden. She

grieved over it. In the end it actually destroyed a marriage. No child! For any wife that is a difficulty; for a wife in that era it was especially burdensome. She was expected to produce an heir, without which the future for all those under Abram's care was uncertain. Finally and most poignantly for Sarai it was understood by them all that the failure to produce a child would bring doubt to the promises of God to her husband Abram. The whole thing hinged on him having a child. No child: the promises just evaporate.

We are rightly shocked at Sarai's proposal, but people in her day would not have been. As her personal maid, Hagar was actually viewed both as Sarai's personal property and in a sense as an extension of Sarai herself. A child would immediately be adopted as it were and credited to Sarai, a legal fiction which nevertheless would have carried full weight in the eyes of the tribes and kingdoms around them, so all would have been well. So much, however, for the interests of men, for that is what all those things are. It is not that the interests of men are wholly irrelevant or wholly opposed to those of God in every case. They are not. That was the case, however, between Peter and Jesus. Jesus had to die and Peter did not want Him to. As regards Sarai and Abram, God wants them to have a child, but He does not want them to have a child simply according to human conventions any more than God wanted Abram to have an heir by adopting his eldest servant. You might recall Eliezer of Damascus. In part I am sure that we all realize that at this point God is affirming the truth that Jesus affirmed later on, that marriage is between one man and one woman. It is through the union, that holy, consecrated union of one man with one woman that God prefers to work His perfect will amongst us: that's the plan, that's the desire, that's the way things were set up, and it is sin that breaks it, shatters it. That is not to produce a condemnation on any person who has been divorced: it is simply to acknowledge the fact that sin has made a ruin of human relationships. If you have been through a divorce you know a little bit about how bitter that ruin can taste.

So we have an affirmation in God's persistence that indeed the heir of the promise will come through the marriage of one man and one woman. This whole matter, by the way, comes up again when we read the story of Jacob, Abram's grandson, who not only marries more than one woman, but actually marries two sisters, and after having pulled off that remarkable move, he then proceeds to have children by each of the sister's maids. And we all wonder why the nation of Israel is the way it is!

So Sarai is under a lot of pressure, but I think we see that Abram would be as well and for the same reasons. It would have been puzzling to everyone and certainly puzzling to Abram that his wife has no child. It was commonly understood as Sarai just put the matter that it is God who determines who has children. If a woman was childless, therefore, it was ultimately because God chose to not give her a child, to not allow her to be impregnated. *“Behold now the Lord has prevented me from bearing children.”* So imagine this: with every passing year Abram's wife is childless and the whole matter of the promise is put into further question and doubt. What kind of questions? What you do at this point is you put in your prayer concern, the thing that bothers you, the thing you desire, the thing you are hoping for and nothing is happening! You want your aunt Susie to come to know Jesus Christ: nothing is happening. You are stuck in a job and the job is frustrating and the relationships in it have gone sour and you have prayed and nothing is happening and it goes on and on. So you ask questions. Has God forgotten; has He forgotten me, forgotten where I am, forgotten what I long for, forgotten my prayers? Could this really be God's will, this endlessly waiting? Is this what God wants?

Then, of course and naturally the question would come up: can't we do something about this? Isn't there something, a way out? This is tricky business. There was a way out [for Sarai and Abram], they tried something, and please notice that it worked! How do you suppose the family of Abram responded to the pregnancy of Hagar? Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! This is it! This is the answer! We've got it! What a relief! All of a sudden the covenant has been confirmed. This is worth thinking about, isn't it? I have absolutely no doubt but that they gave God the credit. But it was wrong, catastrophically wrong. You and I both know this.

We need to remember that there is the greatest possible difference between answers we engineer for ourselves and those which God graciously gives when we wait with faithful obedience, trusting. How long do you wait? [You wait] until the answer comes. This applies equally to churches as it does to individuals. Faith demands patience. Faith entails releasing critical control to God. But we should not conclude faith forbids therefor making plans. Sometimes that conclusion is drawn. Beloved we are told in Proverbs 16:9 that the heart of man plans his way but the Lord establishes his steps. Some people say, well then what is the business, why waste your time planning if the Lord determines your steps? I love Proverbs because you can figure out anything you want to. Proverbs 16:3, the same chapter, says, commit your works to the Lord and your plans will be established. Plan and then submit your plans to God. So we are wise, we will make plans. If we are faithful we will wait for the Lord to confirm those plans or change them as He will.

There is a difficulty that we should notice right at the very beginning of this chapter. Right at the start is the same difficulty that we encountered when Abram went down to Egypt [as recorded in] chapter 13. Nothing is said about prayer. No altar is built. No inquiring of God as to whether or not this is in fact what is supposed to happen. It appears that neither Sarai nor Abram nor even Hagar had laid the issue out before the Lord as a proposal. It defies belief, by the way, that at least Sarai and Abram have brought up the problem of no child with God in the years. How many times do we think Abram and Sarai have brought up the matter, saying, “God, what is going on? What is happening? Why is nothing happening?” Do you think they ever talked to God about it? Of course they did. But it is one thing to set a problem before the Lord, quite another to then set your proposal for solving the problem before the Lord, your action plan for His approval.

I wonder how long Sarai thought about her plan before mentioning it to Abram. I wonder if it ever crossed her mind, or Abram’s, that it might not have been what God intended. I wonder if they didn’t ask because they were hurting too much and too frustrated to run the risk of being refused when it looked so obviously right. Have we been there? It looked so obviously right. All the circumstances seemed to work out. I have been through this. You probably have too: someone wants a new job. Phone calls are made. Here it is. Does that mean it is right? I have been through this. “Pastor, I have tried and tried and tried with this woman and the other day I developed a relationship with this lady. She understands me, she knows me, she has complete sympathy. I know that God wants me to go with this woman.” Usually by the time I hear that conversation it is the period. Basically they are saying, “Pastor, it is a done deal. God and I have gotten together and finished it up.” You know what I mean.

I think churches have fallen into this when they want to buy land or build new buildings. They go to the bank and they found out it was so easy to get a loan. Oh, that must be God’s will. What, really? Maybe not! Have we weighed it against the council of God’s Word? Have we weighed it upon confirmation by the Holy Spirit? I wonder if [Abram and Sarai] submitted their plan to God?

There is a difference between asking the Lord in submissive prayer as opposed to shouting out hallelujahs and thanksgivings, assuming that all is well. Indeed sometimes I think we give praise to God in order to silence our uncertainties.

There is a Proverbs that says the Lord gives wealth with no sorrow added to it. It is a lovely thought. The point positive is that if we abide in God’s word in ways whatever He gives us, which is to say whatever might be gained by so doing will be blessings for all concerned. The point negative is that when we go after things in our strength and in our own wisdom and our own well-intended means, that unintended consequences are more than likely to show up and they are almost without exception unwelcome. So it was with the family of Abram of Ur, residents of Canaan. Everything falls apart, as it were. Look to verses 4-6 in Genesis 16. What is the first thing that we see happens? The first thing that happens is that Hagar turns God’s blessings into a curse. She turns it into vain boasting and contempt for Sarai, poisoning the relationship. This hardly needs commentary for it is a failing too

common. It would have been bitterly cruel for Sarai. Paul in dealing with the Corinthians who in the same way had grown proud and boastful in themselves in what they saw as their superior spiritual gifts and exalted teachers and looked with contempt on others not so favored, writes to them and he says this in I Corinthians 4:6-7, *“Let none of you be puffed up in favor of one against another, for who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it why do you boast as if you did not receive it?”* By which he specifically means that what is given to us by grace is no grounds for boasting. It would be really easy, wouldn't it, for us to take our bulletin and say, wow, look at this, what a superior congregation we are. We give more money than anybody else in this entire city! We are the most outstandingly generous people in this entire county! We are magnificent!!! Too bad about the other congregations.” You would never act like I just did: hopefully. The conversation goes on hidden down deep in the heart. That is where the conversation goes on. Pride is an extremely subtle temptation. So the question then that confronts us is always, do we receive God's gifts in such a way that we are humbled beneath them? I make fun of Kari Walden mainly because she deserves it, but in part because she is very anxious not to be boastful regarding her superior abilities, and I respect that. She desires that God would receive the glory because she knows it is from God that the abilities have come. We all of us should respect that.

Sarai responds. How does Sarai respond? She responds by complaining to Abram. She has been wronged. Some people actually take that Sarai is trying to blame Abram for what has happened as if it wasn't her idea. It is possible. In his great relief, think about Abram, in his great relief in finally having [a child], which Sarai had not managed to produce, is it possible that Abram has neglected Sarai? Think about it. Is it possible? Perhaps he didn't notice the way Hagar was acting. Some commentator actually read this as if Sarai is trying to absolve herself of any blame in the matter at all as if she never had anything to do with it. *“May the Lord judge between you and me.”* Whether or not it was right to lay the matter at Abram's feet is not clear. Clearly it was her idea. At the same time Abram had to agree to the scheme; he is the head of the household and he bears ultimate responsibility. Abram knew the ancient stories. The first man to have two wives was the Lamech of Cain, no model for godliness. Noah had one wife as far as we know, so did each of Noah's sons. So did Lot. Obviously Pharaoh had lots of wives, but I don't think Pharaoh was a good precedent or model for the people of the covenant. Abram we are told listened to the voice of Sarai.

It is important for us to appreciate that what is happening here as with Adam listening to Eve, that the problem that this men listened to their wives. The problem is that they were not listening to God. That is the problem. They were not listening to God at that critical moment. Indeed what we see in both of these situations of Adam and Abram is a disturbing passivity. Gentlemen I am talking to us. It is disturbing because it results in a negligence of duty or responsibility. In Abram this comes out again in his response to Sarai's complaint. Do you notice what he says? “Eh, she is in your power; do what you want!” What kind of an answer is that? Can he not know his wife is brokenhearted? Can he not know that she is wounded in her spirit? Can he not know that she has deep insecurities now? The barren wife and the fertile maid: who will in fact be the mother of the heir? [It will] not be Sarai, the failure.

What do we think that perhaps Sarai was seeking when she came and she spoke to Abram? [Was it for] a “do it yourself baby”? Don't you think perhaps she is looking for some kind of affirmation? “I love you. You are my wife. I will not abandon you. We are together.” Perhaps she was looking for some sort of consolation: “I understand your pain. I understand your sense of loss. I understand your disappointment. I know that we have been together for years. We have tried and tried together for years. But don't think that this ends our relationship. You are still...” Perhaps she is at least seeking clarification: “This alters nothing between us, Sarai.” Buy what she got was, “Hey, take care of it.”

What should amaze us in this whole episode is Hagar, or rather how the Lord deals with Hagar. And I think we are not going to find out. I apologize. It is the hour and I have too much to finish. Just step back and let yourself

reflect a little bit on the whole matter of waiting upon the Lord, accepting the fact that He is in charge and what does it mean? The second is to reflect, ask yourself this question: what are the blessings that God has given to me as an individual, to us as a family, and to this body of believers. What are the blessings that we have received and are we humble before God? One of the comments that I was going to make at the wedding and didn't have time to – I never have time, it is a bad thing. I made this comment: too often our prayers do not begin until we are in pain. Why do our prayers not begin when we are in joy? So as you contemplate your blessings. In fact this afternoon as we come back and we have a chance to eat together and hear the way God has been at work in [the new Youth Pastor and his wife's] life, and we see more of the record of God's blessings, maybe we should pick these up and say, “You know what Lord, instead of coming to You only when sorrow and grief and loss and confusion and uncertainty, only when the dark shadows fall, instead I am going to make a habit of coming to You in the light when joy and gladness and thanksgiving are my portion and I am going to learn to say God I have no business in receiving this from You. You are overwhelmingly generous. I rejoice in Your goodness and help me, my Father to be the good servant to others that You have so marvelously been to me, blessing me so richly.” May God indeed be praised!