

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

God's Chosen Duo Take a Detour (Genesis 16)

-Martin Rizley-
5/4/2014

Last year, when Paola, Melody, and I were visiting our relatives in Spain, we had an experience traveling between two cities that I will never forget. We were returning to my in-laws' house in central Spain after spending a week in the city of Málaga in the south of Spain, and while we were still several hours away from our destination, we stopped in a village and asked a local resident how long it would take to reach our goal. He told us that the main highway would be slow because of road construction, but there was a secondary road that might get us there more quickly, because it was shorter and more direct, going through the mountains, instead of around them; the only thing was, this road was quite old and a bit rough in spots, but the last time he checked, it was still usable. For a brief moment, a little red flag went before my eyes; but because I was tired of driving and impatient to arrive at our destination, I chose to focus on the words "shorter and more direct," so against my better judgment, I turned off on that secondary road. I soon understood what the man meant by the road being a "bit rough in spots," for it was in very bad need of repair; there were lots of rocks and ruts and fallen branches lying in the road, and the farther we drove, the worse it got, until it seemed to be nothing but a long series of potholes that required us to drive slowly and cautiously, lest we ended up with a flat tire. Moreover, the road got narrower and narrower the higher we climbed, and more full of curves-- like some of the winding mountain roads you find in the Ozarks-- so that it became impossible to turn around, even had we wanted to. We crept along, driving at times along a cliff's edge, and I kept saying to Paola, "Surely we'll reach the next town soon, where we can get back on the main road." Thankfully, we did arrive safely at our destination, but instead of gaining any time by the detour we had taken, we had lost time. The detour slowed us down and had taken its toll on our nerves, on the shock absorbers of our car, and on the tread of the tires.

What I learned from that experience is that an attitude of impatience can sometimes lead you to make decisions you later regret. Impatience can lead you to take a detour from the path of wisdom and sound judgment onto a rocky, pot-hole filled path that just gets worse and worse the farther you drive down it.

That is just what happened to Abraham and Sarah in the sixteenth chapter of the book of Genesis. Until this point in their life, they had for the most part been walking

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

by faith in God's promises. It is true that Abraham experienced a temporary lapse into unbelief when he and Sarah went down into Egypt. At that time, Abraham's lack of faith led him to lie about his relationship to Sarah, which brought terrible consequences: he put Sarah at risk of being violated by some other man, he obtained material riches through deception, and he brought disease and distress on another man's household. But Abraham seemed to learn from that painful experience, and in the following years, he grew stronger in faith. Although he struggled to see how the Lord's promise would be fulfilled, he did not doubt that it would be fulfilled in God's time and way.

When we come to the beginning of chapter 16, however, we see illustrated a very sad truth concerning the life of faith: even those who love God and have been walking with God for many years may take a tragic detour from the path of faith by allowing a spirit of distrust to enter their hearts.

In this case, the detour from faith's path began, not with Abraham, but with Sarah. Up to this point in the biblical narrative, the focus has been entirely on Abraham's spiritual struggles. We have seen him wrestling with doubt, as he tried to understand why God had left him for so many years without a son. Now we learn that Sarah also had her own struggles. She had followed her husband to Canaan ten years earlier, when she was sixty-five and he was seventy-five, and let us not underestimate the faith that it took for Sarah to do that. After all, she had not received the same call that her husband had received. It was to Abraham alone the Lord spoke and gave explicit instructions as to what he should do; he did not speak that way to Sarah. Nevertheless, out of reverence for God, she submitted to her husband's leadership and followed him to Canaan. There she dwelt with him for ten years as a stranger in a strange land; and throughout that long decade, she had lived in constant expectation that at some point she would find herself pregnant, because God had promised to give her husband a seed and to make of him a great nation.

But here it was ten years later, however; she was seventy-five and he was eighty-five and still no child. Not only that; Sarah was now well beyond the possibility of conceiving a child by any natural means. As John Gill puts it discreetly, "it had ceased to be with her after the manner of women." On the other hand, Abraham with his eighty-five years was still vigorous enough to father a child. Contemplating these things, a thought must have occurred to Sarah: although the Lord had told Abraham, "one who will come from your own body shall be your heir," He had not made a similar statement concerning Sarah. She had always assumed that Abraham would father a son through her; but in fact, God had never said that explicitly. The distressing thought may well have entered Sarah's mind that perhaps God would bypass her entirely in carrying out his plan to give Abraham an heir. Perhaps it would only be after she had died that

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

the promise would be fulfilled; then Abraham would be free to marry a younger woman who could bear him a son.

We can imagine that such thoughts, if they entered Sarah's mind, would have been quite distressing to her. Would God really bypass her entirely in carrying out His divine plan concerning her husband? After all that she had been through to support her husband through these years, leaving her native land and kinfolk to go to a land she did not know, would God just set her aside like a worn-out garment and choose some other woman to bear the seed of blessing, through whom all the nations of the earth would be blessed? Would some other woman become the matriarch of that great nation that would come forth from Abraham's loins? As she considered the deadness of her womb, she must have thought, how else can the story end? Now that I am past childbearing age, how else can my husband become a father? From a human perspective, it looked as if she was about to be removed from the picture and another woman raised up in her place to fulfill God's promise to her husband.

We don't know the thought process that went through Sarah's head, but we do know that as she contemplated her circumstances from her limited human perspective and tried to interpret them by human wisdom, she fell into a spirit of unbelief. She began to distrust perhaps the character of God-- his goodness toward her and his love of her. No doubt, she wanted to believe that God loved her, but she could not understand why He had, in her own words, "restrained her from bearing children." As she struggled to understand these things, a thought occurred to her. As far as she could see, the only possible way that she, an old woman, could still have a role in God's plan, would be if she bore a son to Abraham "by proxy;" that is, if some younger woman conceived and bore a son on her behalf, a son that would be hers at least from a legal standpoint. That is the only possible way, Sarah reasoned, that she should have a part in God's plan at this late stage in life.

What we see Sarah doing in this chapter is engaging in a desperate effort to "second-guess God"-- desperately trying to figure out through human wisdom how God might keep his promise to Abraham in a way that included her. She was fearful, it seems, that God might leave her out of the picture entirely-- and that fear sprang out of a basic lack of trust in the character of God.

In the time remaining, I want us to consider Sarah's ill-conceived plan, and the ill-gotten gains that were obtained by that plan.

I. An Ill-Conceived Plan-- We read of Sarah's ill-conceived plan in verses 1-4. It involved her husband conceiving a child by her own maidservant, an Egyptian woman

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

named Hagar. Sarah no doubt had many servants, for Abraham was a wealthy man by now, and had many servants living in his household; but this Hagar must have been her principal servant. She was of Egyptian nationality, perhaps one of the female servants that Pharaoh gave to Abraham during his sojourn in Egypt. She was young and fertile, and Sarah thought she would be the perfect candidate to become a surrogate mother on her behalf.

The fact that any woman would actually encourage her husband to have sexual relations with another woman is shocking to us. But keep in mind, that in that day, lifelong barrenness was the most terrible burden for a married woman to carry. She felt disgraced by her inability to conceive a child; so she was willing to do just about anything to insure that her husband had an heir-- even if it meant letting him father a child by means of a surrogate mother.

It is clear that Sarah's action was not motivated by an unselfish concern for the need of her husband to have an heir. No; she was concerned, not for her husband's need or God's glory so much as for her own reputation. She didn't want to go to the grave childless; she didn't want another woman to steal from her the glory of being the honored matriarch of the nation that would be born to Abraham. That is clear from what she said to Abram in verse 2: "So Sarai said to Abram, 'Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children by her.'" In other words, in Sarah's thinking, any child born of this union would be her child-- at least in a legal sense.

Because Hagar was a slave, she had no say in this matter. It was a deal struck between Abraham and Sarah alone; and that in itself shows the self-centeredness in Sarah's thinking. She was willing to treat another human being as one would treat an animal for breeding, rather than with regard for her own dignity and worth as a human being.

This was ill-conceived plan for many reason; first of all, because it was born out of a spirit of fear. Sarah was afraid that she would have no role in God's plan. In her mind, unless she acted now to insure that any child born to Abraham was legally her child, she would be forgotten. Abraham would remarry when she was dead and gone, and another woman, less worthy than she, would go down in history as the matriarch of God's people. She did not want that to happen, and she was determined that it would not happen. What was the root of this fear of being cast aside? It was nothing other than a spirit of unbelief. She distrusted the character of God. She did not doubt that He would do what He said for Abraham, but she was afraid He would do it in a way that showed no regard for her. After all, if He had refused to give her children, what else

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

would he refuse to give her? One senses a note of disappointment with God in the words, "See now, the Lord has restrained me from bearing children. . ."

At least Sarah understood the sovereignty of God; but what she failed to see was the good purpose of God in denying her children until now. He was not indifferent her needs, or deaf to her cries. Rather, He was purposely waiting until both Abraham and Sarah were physically incapable of having children before stepping in to give them a baby, so that it would be clear to all that this was truly a miracle baby, a child conceived by the grace and supernatural power of God, and not at all the fruit of man's own natural powers.

What made it so difficult for Sarah and Abraham to see that what they were planning to do clearly violated the will of God? Several factors:

1) It was approved by cultural custom-- Archaeology has turned up a number of artifacts showing that in Abraham's day, it was an accepted custom for a childless wife to give her servant girl to her husband as a secondary wife, so that he could father a child by her. In fact, cultural custom not only permitted that; in some cases, it demanded that. One archaeologist found a marriage contract from ancient Nuzi (in Iraq), in which the wife promised to give her husband her own maid as a secondary wife if she found herself unable to bear children. Also, the code of Hammurabi (one of the oldest legal codes of which we have record) contains a law that speaks of a woman giving her husband a slave-girl to father children, if she proves to be barren. So even though Sarah's plan violated God's design for marriage, it was the accepted custom in the culture in which Abraham and Sarah lived

What that tells us is, just because something becomes widely accepted in one's culture or even written into law, that doesn't make it right in the sight of God. That is especially true when it comes to marriage. Ever since man fell into sin, both cultural customs and civil laws regarding marriage have frequently fallen short of God's ideal plan for marriage. In fact, Jesus affirmed that even in Israel, the Law of Moses-- while it never approved of anything sinful, it did permit hard-hearted Jewish men to put away their wives by a writ of divorce, something that was never a part of God's original plan for marriage. When the Jews accused Moses of commanding husbands to divorce their wives, Jesus refuted them by saying, "Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery" (Matthew 19:8-9). What Jesus is saying is that God's positive standard for marriage is an unchanging standard going all the way back to the Garden of Eden. That standard is

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

that one man be united to one woman for life-- and nothing men do can ever change that.

It is good for us to remember this in these times of cultural change, in which our own culture is losing sight of the meaning of marriage. No matter what sort of sexual conduct becomes accepted in our culture, and no matter what unrighteous laws become a part of our civil code-- marriage will never be anything other than the union of a man and a woman in the sight of God. Nothing men do can change that. That is why we must always take our cues for living from Scripture, not the culture that surrounds us.

Sarah did wrong in giving Abraham another woman to take as a wife; but she was blinded to her error by the way the culture and the law approved of this custom.

2) it aligned with human wisdom-- Another reason Sarah and Abraham both had difficulty seeing the folly of Sarah's plan is that it seemed to line up with the dictates of human wisdom. It seemed a reasonable thing to do if Sarah could not have children herself to let Abraham obtain children by someone else. After all, in what other way could God's promise be fulfilled? That way of thinking makes perfect sense, once you leave God's supernatural power out of the picture.

3) It appealed to the flesh-- Another reason Abraham and Sarah fell into this trap is that it appealed to the flesh. It appealed to Sarah's fleshly desire to be delivered from the stigma of childlessness. And it appealed to Abraham's fleshly desires, as well; for as James Dixon puts it, "Here was Sarah giving him permission to do something that was already a temptation."

4) it was rewarded with success-- One further reason it was hard for Abraham and Sarah to see the wrongness of their action is that it was rewarded with success. When Abraham carried out Sarah's plan-- voila! -- the result was a baby boy! Their hopes were fulfilled; the long wait was over. Here at last in Hagar's womb was the promised child that God had been speaking about for years. By taking matters into their own hands, Sarah and Abraham had set in motion the wheels of prophetic fulfillment! Or so they thought. For God has crowned their actions with success.

Are we not tempted, at times, just like Sarah and Abraham, to judge the rightness of our actions by the results they bring. That is the essence of pragmatism, to decide what is right and wrong on the basis of what works. Look at what the results of your actions, and if you get what you want, you know that you are on the right path, and that God approves of your actions. That pragmatic philosophy has guided the ministry programs of churches all over America for decades, and look where it has got

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

us now as a nation. Do you think that our nation has become more or less Christian in character by churches following the maxim, "Do whatever works to grow your church?" Has that philosophy made our churches more holy in character-- or less? The fact is, when we abandon the Word of God as our guidebook in all things, and do whatever seems right in our own eyes, then we may have short term success judging by external standards, but the long terms effects will be devastating. That is just what we see here with regard to Abraham and Sarah. They did what seemed right in their own eyes. It seemed like the right thing for Abraham to have a child by Hagar. It was in line with cultural custom, human wisdom, their own fleshly desires, and it was rewarded with success. But in the end, it brought grief, as we shall now see.

II. Ill-Gotten Gains-- Sarah got the child she wanted, but with that child came a whole host of ill-gotten gains. There were three things, in particular, that she got that she was not anticipating:

A. A Wimpy Husband-- In many ways, Abraham had been a good husband to Sarah; he had worked hard to provide for her needs, and God had prospered his labors. He had sought to lead his wife spiritually, by building altars wherever they went, leading in family worship, and setting an example of trusting obedience to God. But when Sarah usurped Abraham's leadership role by telling her husband what he had to do in order to secure the fulfillment of God's promise, instead of gently rebuking Sarah for her presumption, he sheepishly complied with her demands. He abdicated his leadership role in order to please his wife, and as a result, he turned into a wimp. "And Abram heeded the voice of Sarah," we read in verse 2.

Now, it is not wrong for men to want to please their wives. Paul assumes that is to be expected. He told that Corinthians that, in contrast to a single man who cares only for the things of the Lord, "a married man cares for the things of this world-- how he may please his wife" (1 Cor. 7:33). And Paul does not suggest that is wrong; on the contrary, he assumes that is what married men do, and what they ought to do. It is not wrong for a man to please his wife, and it is not wrong for a man to listen to his wife. If he loves her, he will, he must, seek to please her and listen to her. But if he is going to be the spiritual leader in his own home, the first person he must seek to please is the Lord. The first person he must listen to is the Lord speaking through his Word. This is what Abraham failed to do in this situation. He failed to respond to Sarah as he ought to have done, by saying, "Wait a minute, honey; let's consider carefully what God would have us do in this situation-- whether or not fathering a child by Hagar would really be pleasing to Him." Instead, Abraham simply yielded to his wife's demands without prayer, without self-examination, without careful consideration of the Lord's will.

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

In other words, he responded to Sarah just as Adam responded to Eve in the Garden of Eden when she offered him the forbidden fruit. Instead of taking the reins of leadership by rejecting Eve's offer and rebuking for her actions, Adam complied with Eve's request. He followed her lead and thereby inverted the order of creation-- with the result that sin and death entered the world. We can see the parallels to Adam and Eve in the text. God told Adam after he sinned, "You have heeded the voice of your wife;" and here we read of Abraham, that he "heeded the voice of Sarah." There, in Eden we read that Eve "took" of the fruit and "gave to her husband;" and here we read that Sarah "took" Hagar and "gave her to husband."

Once Abraham yielded to Sarah's request, the pattern of abdicating his leadership role continued throughout the whole of Hagar's pregnancy; for when Hagar began treating Sarah disrespectfully, Abraham turned a blind eye to it, and refused to do anything about the situation. Sarah got the child she wanted; but along with the child, she got a wimpy husband, who was failing to act as a leader.

B. An Impertinent Rival-- A second thing Sarah got was an impertinent rival. Before Hagar became pregnant by Abraham, she and Sarah had apparently gotten along well together-- at least, we know that Hagar was respectful to Sarah; for otherwise, she would not have remained in the position of being her personal handmaid. After she became pregnant, however, she started to act impertinently toward her mistress. She became proud and despised her, for now she could boast of that which Sarah lacked-- a fruitful womb. Moreover, she and Sarah were now married to the same husband, so Hagar began to feel on a level with Sarah, perhaps even superior to her, since she was to be the mother of the long-awaited heir.

The rivalry between these two women intensified as the days passed; and Abraham's reaction, like that of many men in response to conflict, was to withdraw emotionally from the scene, leaving his two wives to fight it out between themselves. He washed his hands of responsibility for the disharmony in his own household; and when Sarah saw him react in this passive manner, it made aware of another ill-gotten gain she had obtained by her ill-conceived plan-- a bitter heart.

C. A Bitter Heart-- Her bitterness was evident from the way she spoke to her husband and the way she treated Hagar. First, her words to Abraham were scathing, and they reveal a heart full of sinful passions such as resentment, jealousy, self-pity, and irreverence.

a. resentment-- She was resentful toward her husband for not rebuking Hagar, She was disgusted by his total lack of concern, and in her bitterness, she lashed out at Abraham

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

with words of accusation: "My wrong be upon you!" She viewed Abraham as if he were solely responsible for the miseries in their household. She forgot the fact that it was she who came up with this bright idea of giving Hagar to Abraham as a wife.

b. jealousy-- Sarah also felt jealousy toward Hagar; at least, that is suggested by how she uses the word "embrace" in verse 5-- "I gave my maid into your embrace. . ." The marital union is such an intimate union, it is not natural for either party to see a third party brought into the relationship without feeling jealousy. Perhaps Sarah believed that Abraham was showing greater respect to Hagar, or greater tenderness toward her, now that she was pregnant with his child-- and that inflamed in Sarah the fires of jealousy.

c. self-pity-- Along with resentment and jealousy, we also see in her of self-pity. She lamented her condition by pointing out how she had now become a despised woman. When Hagar saw that she had conceived, Sarah said, "I became despised in her eyes."

d. irreverence-- All these negative emotions bubbled over in language that was marked by a spirit of irreverence. So convinced was she of her own unrighteousness, and Abraham's guilt, that Sarah dared to call on the Lord to act as their Judge. "The Lord judge between you and me." That was a pretty daring statement for a woman who at this moment was eaten up inside with bitter anger, resentment, and jealousy. Instead of humbling herself before the Lord for her own folly, she was quick call on God to confirm her own righteousness.

Sarah's bitterness not only produced the fruit bitter words, but unloving actions as well. When Abram gave her permission to deal with Hagar as she pleased, we read, that "Sarah dealt harshly with her." Now, obviously, Abraham did not intend to give Sarah a license to abuse Hagar; but it appears that Sarah took advantage of Abraham's permission to chasten Hagar by treating her with exceeding severity. She caused her distress in every way she could, chewing her out at every turn, or laying on her shoulders heavy burdens of labor that she had no time to complete. She gave vent to her anger by mistreating Hagar, until Hagar had had enough of Sarah's mistreatment and fled.

Hagar's departure may have seemed to bring some relief to Abraham's household, but the relief was only temporary, for as we shall see next week, God had His own plans for Hagar, Abraham, and Sarah, plans that would bring them all together again.

Tecumseh Reformed Baptist Church

CONCLUSION-- So we have seen this morning how Sarah hit the jackpot of sorrows when she acted on her own wisdom to advance her own interests. Instead of trusting in God to do things in His own time and in His own way, her impatience led her to take a wrong turn, and as a result, both she and Abraham set out on a painful detour from the path of faith. That detour brought chaos and disharmony into their home, affecting not only themselves, but a third party whom they brought into the heart of their marital relationship. As a result, bitter rivalry, scathing accusations, and constant conflict became the order of the day in a home that had formerly been marked by tranquility, all because the way of faith had been abandoned. Distrust of God had led God's chosen duo and a poor servant girl into a dark wilderness of woe.

Like Abraham and Sarah, we ourselves are capable of falling into a spirit of distrust toward God when He brings into our lives painful circumstances we do not understand. Even though we may have been walking with the Lord for many years, we are still vulnerable to be tempted to distrust. And when that happens, we are prone to make hasty and unwise decisions that lead us onto a rocky road filled with potholes, ruts, and fallen branches. When we do make a wrong turn in life, the only solution is to go back to the spot where the wrong turn was made. That is what Abraham and Sarah ought to have done when family harmony started to disintegrate. As Warren Wiersbe says, "They should have confessed their sins and received God's gracious forgiveness. However, instead of facing their sins honestly, each of the persons involved took a different course; and this only made things worse. Sarah's solution was to blame her husband and mistreat her servant . . . Abraham's solution was to give in to his wife and abdicate spiritual headship in the home . . . and Hagar's solution was to run away from the problem."

When situations have gotten this messy, how can they be put right? Is their hope of deliverance when you have created a mess of this magnitude?

Yes, there is hope, but that hope does not lie in ourselves, but in the sovereign grace of God that overrules our personal failures for good. The hope of all sinners lies in God coming to them personally, finding them in their lost and needy condition, and ministering to their need. And God does that very thing, by sending us His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Christ was the only one capable of delivering Abraham, Sarah and Hagar from the chaotic mess they had brought on themselves. Only He could provide their needs and bring His chosen duo back to the highway of faith. And that is just what he did, for in the passage we will look at next week, we see Christ enter the picture in a wonderful way-- as the Angel of the Lord sent to rescue Hagar in the desert. When

Tecarkana Reformed Baptist Church

people have taken a detour from the path of faith, they cannot find their way back to the highway of faith on their own. Christ must find them, by coming to them where they are and showing them the way of deliverance. Has He done for you? If God has convicted your heart this morning of sin, cry out to the Lord for deliverance. Look to Christ, and He will bring you out of the wilderness of sin onto the path of peace-- the peace only He can give. Amen.