

God's Way or Your Way?

The danger of trying to do God's will your way

Text: Gen. 16:1-16

Introduction:

1. This chapter records a sad lapse of faith on the part of Abram and Sarai, the consequences of which in a very real way, continue down to the present time.
2. It presents a warning to us of the consequences of trying to accomplish God's will in our way and our timing instead of waiting upon God.
3. We learn that the self-life is ever present with the believer in his/her walk of faith and that no matter what stage we may be in on our earthly pilgrimage, none of us are exempt from falling. "We might be inclined to think that such a fall as the one recorded in Genesis 16 would not be possible for a godly man like Abraham, especially in light of the glorious spiritual experience recorded in chapter 15. But we need to be reminded that we can fail the Lord at any point in our earthly pilgrimage, no matter how far advanced or mature we may be." (Griffith Thomas)
4. The Bible records plainly both the successes and failures of the heroes of faith in order that we may be encouraged by their successes and at the same time warned by their failures. We learn from the lives of the pioneers of faith not only how we should do things but how we should not do things! We go from a high point of faith in chapter 15 to a low point of faithlessness in chapter 16.
5. We will consider sins of the self-life as illustrated in Abraham and Sarah under four headings.

I. THE RATIONALIZATIONS OF THE SELF-LIFE (VS. 1-3)

The account commences with the subtle suggestions of the self-life. The essence of the temptation was attempting to obtain the promises of God in the energy of the natural life. Notice several aspects of this temptation.

A. The Season of the Temptation (Vs. 1)

It came at a time when there was:

1. A Delay in the will of God (Vs. 1a).
 - a. The years were rolling by and yet Sarah bare Abraham no children. Verse 3 informs us they had now been 10 years in the land of Canaan and verse 16 indicates Abraham was 85 years old at this time (86 at the time of Ishmael's birth). Sarah was 75 years of age. This was a source of great sorrow and distress to Sarah. Not only would she suffer the womanly anguish that comes from barrenness but would she would also be plagued with feelings and thoughts that somehow she was a disappointment and failure for Abraham who was eagerly awaiting the promised son.
 - b. We should note that in reality God's will is not delayed so far as God is concerned. His will is always accomplished on time

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according to His perfect timetable but from our end, we often have a perception that His will is being delayed.

- c. Long periods of waiting in the will of God are times when the self-life will rise up and seek to assert itself in the life. The flesh hates to wait!
2. A Discouragement in the will of God. This is a by-product of the previous point. Clearly Sarah was discouraged at this point in her walk of faith on account of the apparent delay in the fulfillment of God's promise.
3. A Detour from the will of God (Vs. 1b).
 - a. At such a time of discouragement, the self-life has a way of suggesting what appears to be a logical and reasonable solution to the problem but in reality, it represents a dangerous detour from the will of God that will bring pain, sorrow and regret. Watch out for the devil's short cuts! Sarah said, "it may be" not "thus saith the Lord".
 - b. Vance Havner often said, "The detour is always worse than the main road."
 - c. This is why we are warned not to make provision for the flesh. Romans 13:14 "But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and **make not provision for the flesh**, to fulfil the lusts *thereof*." "make not provision for the flesh" = 'provision' has the idea of forethought and speaks of preparation; measures taken beforehand for the supply of wants. (RWP) "We make provision for the body's needs but not its lusts. Whatever, then, tends to excite our corrupt propensities ought to be avoided." (Haldane)
 - a. Sadly, Abraham and Sarah got Hagar during their Egypt sojourn. She may well have been one of Pharaoh's gifts to Sarah when she was in his palace. If you've spent time in Egypt (the world), beware of what you might be still carrying with you even when you have returned to the walk of faith.

B. The Source of the Temptation (Vs. 2)

"The source of temptation has much to do with the strength of temptation. It is an old trick of the devil to have temptation come from the places of honour, trust, esteem, position and popularity." (John Butler) This temptation had a two-fold sanction, giving it an air of legitimacy to Abraham:

1. It had the sanction of Society. This arrangement was a common practice of the day. We see both Rachel and Leah engaging in the same practice later on in Genesis. There are many unions today that may have society's sanction but do not have the Lord's sanction. We need to be prepared to reject popular culture in favour of the path of obedience to God's Word.
2. It had the sanction of Sarah. The temptation to take this detour came to Abraham through the one who was his nearest and dearest. It is hard to imagine Abraham contemplating such a course of action had it not been for Sarah's influence. F.B. Meyer notes, "No one else could have approached Abraham with such a proposition, with the slightest hope of success. But when Sarah made it, the case was altered...It is always hard to resist temptation

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when it appeals to natural instinct or to distrusting fear. At such an hour, if the Saviour be not our Keeper, there is small hope of our being able to resist the double assault. But the temptation is still more perilous when it is presented, not by some repellent fiend, but by the object of our love; who, like Sarah, has been the partner of our pilgrimage, and now is willing to sacrifice all in order to obtain a blessing which God has promised, but has not yet bestowed.”

- a. The spiritual side to her council (Vs. 2a). Sarah rightly recognised God’s sovereignty over her womb. This is a repeated truth in the Bible and one that is not often recognized in our rationalistic age.
- b. The carnal side to her council (Vs. 2b). To acknowledge God’s sovereignty was a good thing but the solution she proposed was a carnal thing. The mix of flesh and spirit in counsel can make things confusing and misleading. Be very careful of suggestions that may appear spiritual on the surface but in reality, are in line with the desires of the depraved flesh nature.
 - i. There is an important lesson here for married couples. While we should not constantly eye our spouse with mistrust and suspicion and should always have an open ear to hear their council, we would do well to remember that they are not infallible in their counsel and can err in judgment, especially in times of discouragement. Any counsel, no matter how close the person may be to you, must be weighted in the scales of God’s Infallible Truth.
 - ii. “...few evils are so acceptable as those which are done in the name of justice or self-denial or under religious auspices. The devil is a master at dressing up evil in noble apparel. Therefore, keep your vision sharp and keen by studying the Word of God faithfully. Spiritual discernment is a must if we are to see through the deceptive appearances of evil and thus avoid being defiled by it.” (Butler)

C. The Seduction of the Temptation (Vs. 2b)

1. This suggestion by Sarah appealed to the flesh nature. To have access to another woman appeals to the sin nature in a man.
2. Be very careful of yielding to council that on the surface may seem logical but at the same time appeals to your baser appetites! “It is hard to find a temptation more appealing than one that pampers the appetite of the flesh yet seems also to obtain the goals of faith.” (Butler)

D. The Surrender to the Temptation (Vs. 2c-3)

1. Abraham yielded to Sarah (Vs. 2b)
 - a. In God’s structural order for the home, the husband is the head. 1 Cor. 11:3 “But I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and **the head of the woman is the man**; and the head of Christ *is* God.” This means Abraham bore the greater measure of responsibility for this decision.

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- b. Like his great, great, great grandfather Adam, Abraham 'hearkened' to his wife. How many good men and women have been taken out of the will of God by yielding to wrong counsel from their spouse.
 - c. There is a special closeness and interdependence between a husband and his wife but wisdom is needed to not follow a spouse in a wrong direction and to lovingly and gently point that spouse back to the Scriptural way to do things. If your spouse is giving you wise counsel that is in harmony with the Word of God, follow it. If its unbiblical and ungodly, don't follow it!
 - d. It is especially important that a husband be prepared to lead his wife and lovingly help her thinking patterns which at times can be driven more by emotion than reason. It is important that wives have a submissive spirit of followership as opposed to applying pressure to the husband to yield to her will in the matter. There was clearly some emotional pressure coming from Sarah – "I **pray thee**, go in unto my maid." The phrase "pray thee" comes from the Hebrew word 'na' which is a "particle of entreaty or exhortation" (TWOT) It is translated "I pray thee" or "now" all through the Old Testament multiple times.
2. Abraham yielded to Sin (Vs. 3)
His sin was threefold:
- a. The sin of faithlessness – this was not the decision of faith but of doubt.
 - b. The sin of prayerlessness – both Abraham and Sarah failed to seek the Lord in this decision. It was all based upon their own wisdom. Seek counsel in the big decisions of life but above all, seek the Lord and the counsel of His Word.
 - c. The sin of perverseness – Abraham went from being a monogamist, the Biblical marriage model, to a polygamist, a man-made distortion of marriage. Polygamy, polyandry, divorce & remarriage, fornication, adultery and Sodomy are all sinful perversions and deviations from God's original model for marriage and the home.

II. THE RESULTS OF THE SELF-LIFE (VS. 4-5)

Trying to accomplish God's will our way quickly bears a nasty crop of nettles. Sin never pays! Note the lessons we can learn from the sad results of Abraham and Sarah's wrong decision.

A. The Success before the Consequences (Vs. 4a)

1. For a very short time, it appeared that the plan was a success. Hagar conceived as planned.
2. There is often a temporary period where the decision may appear justified but it is short lived and soon the sad reality is revealed.

B. The Speed of the Consequences (Vs. 4b)

The consequences are both immediate and ongoing.

1. Immediate – the ugly fruit began to emerge from the time Hagar conceived.
2. Ongoing – there would be consequences long into the future from this sinful choice. In fact, there is a sense where the consequences

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continue to this day with the ongoing conflict between the descendants of Ishmael and the descendants of Isaac.

C. The Specifics of the Consequences (Vs. 4c-5)

1. Pride in the Mistress (Vs. 4c)
 - a. Pride is always connected to sexual sin. Sarah experienced the disruption and disquiet described in Proverbs 30:22 “For a servant when he reigneth...”.
 - b. The Bible shows the sin of polygamy for what it is by its plain documentation of its sad results. It breeds pride, jealousy, mistrust and hurt. There are multiple polygamous marriages noted in Scripture but not one example of a happy one or of one that had the endorsement and blessing of God upon it.
2. Pain in the Marriage (Vs. 5)
 - a. Not surprisingly, conflict soon emerged between Sarah and Abraham. Up until now we have every indication that on the whole their marriage was marked by peace and harmony. Any deviation from God’s original design for marriage brings disunity and hurt into a home.
 - b. Even though Sarah was the one who pushed for this course of action, now that things begin to unravel, she lays the blame on her husband. It shows that when a husband gives into an unrighteous request from his wife, in the hopes it will quieten the discontent in the home, he is only sowing the seeds for worse problems to come!

III. THE RESPONSES OF THE SELF-LIFE (Vs. 5-6)

Our responses to the results of our sin also reveal something of the character of the self-life. Responding in the flesh to the fruit of the flesh only makes things worse. There is:

A. A Wrong Response to our Problems (Vs. 5-6)

Look at the three characters in the story and how each responded incorrectly to the mess they had got themselves into. We often respond to our problems in one of these three ways also:

1. Inflaming the Problem – Sarah (Vs. 5, 6b)

Notice the three-fold response of Sarah that made a bad situation worse. She responded with:

 - a. Anger (Vs. 5a). How often we get angry at others rather than getting angry at our own foolishness. Anger only makes a problem worse. James 1:20 reminds us that “the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.”
 - b. Accusation (Vs. 5b). Sarah, while vaguely admitting her error (“my wrong”), blames Abraham for what has taken place. In one sense this was legitimate as he was the leader of the home and therefore the one with the greater responsibility. However, the right approach would have been for Sarah to first acknowledge her own wrong rather than trying to blame someone else. It is in our sinful nature to try and pass the buck to someone else when the results of our sin blow up in our face. Adam and Eve also pointed the finger when confronted by God over their sin.

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- c. Aggression (Vs. 6b). Sarah vents her anger and frustration by mistreating Hagar. She took it out on someone else. In many ways, Hagar was the victim in this situation and bore the least responsibility. To use someone else as a scapegoat for your own problems is a very wicked thing to do. This kind of behaviour often occurs when there is disharmony in a marriage.
2. Ignoring the Problem – Abraham (Vs. 6a).
There are at least two factors to consider in relation to Abraham's response:
 - a. The role that was abdicated in the neglect – headship in the home. In this account Abraham is being a passive leader, taking the line of least resistance instead of taking charge of the situation and leading his family in the right direction. All sorts of problems occur in a home where the husband is leaving a leadership vacuum. Our feministic, anti-male society has produced a masculinity and identity crisis in a whole generation of men. We need a return to biblical, masculine, male, active leadership in the home, church and society. Genuine masculine traits are not toxic, they are God-given.
 - b. The root that was beneath the neglect – selfishness in the heart. To ignore the problem and hope it would disappear appeared to be the easiest way to respond to this painful situation but in reality, ignoring a problem only allows it to fester and get worse.
3. Running from the Problem – Hagar (Vs. 6c)
 - a. Running from our problems does not make them go away. Ultimately Hagar would have to go back and work through things.
 - b. Running from our problems only delays the inevitable. Eventually, you are going to have to face them so why not do it early with God's help. Sadly, some Christians waste years running from their problems in the hopes they will go away. But problems have a way of following you around when you refuse to deal with them biblically.
4. Warren Wiersbe summarizes it well, "Sadly, 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. He should have had pity for pregnant Hagar and summoned His family back to the altar but he did not. Hagar's solution was to run away from the problem, a tactic we all learned from Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:8). However, you soon discover that you cannot solve problems by running away."

B. A Right Response to our Problems

Initially, we see a wrong response to this situation by the three individuals involved. But there is also a right way to respond. The right response includes things like:

1. Humility – admit your wrong to God and those involved.

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2. Repentance – turn to God in repentance, confessing your sin to Him and trusting His power and grace to change you.
3. Restoration – yield to the Lord in the situation and allow Him to do the work of repair. Only the forgiveness, power and grace of God can make a bad situation better. The longer you try to fix it yourself according to your own fleshly wisdom, the worse it will become.
4. “Satan wants us to think that our “disobedience detours” must become the permanent road for the rest of our lives; but this is a lie. Like Abraham and Sarah, we can confess our sins, accept God’s cleansing (1 Jn. 1:9), and then learn to live with our mistakes.”
(Wiersbe)

IV. THE REMEDY FOR THE SELF-LIFE (Vs. 7-16)

While Hagar is the primary individual in focus in these verses, we do note the working of God in this sad situation and the principles that will also help us recover from the error of our own way.

A. The Visitation of God (Vs. 7)

It is of interest that out of the three individuals involved, it was Hagar who received the special visitation of God. It reveals God’s merciful heart towards those who like Hagar, experience suffering and mistreatment at the hands of others.

1. The Person in the Visitation (vs. 7a)
 - a. This is the first time the “angel of the LORD” appears in Scripture. As the text unfolds, this Person is clearly more than a created angel. Remember the word angel means messenger. This is a special Messenger of the Jehovah.
 - b. It appears that most, if not all the references to “the angel of the LORD” in the Old Testament fall into the category of what we all a Theophany – a preincarnate appearance of the Son of God, the Second Person of the Godhead. In this case this is evident by the fact that this Heavenly Person promises something that only God can do (Vs. 10). Hagar also referred to the angel as “God” (Vs. 13).
 - c. Isn’t it just like our Saviour to seek us out in our problems even when we have neglected to seek Him?
2. The Place of the Visitation (Vs. 7b).
 - a. She was visited while she was at a well of water. Evidently, she had taken a moment to pause from her running.
 - b. By way of application, we encounter the Living Word when we open take time to drink in the Water of the Word (Eph. 5:26).

B. The Intervention of God (Vs. 8-9)

1. The Divine Questions (Vs. 8)

God asks two searching questions of Hagar. When God asks questions of us, it is for our benefit, not His since He is Omniscient and already knows all things. Note the two questions:

 - a. Whence camest thou? – Consider your past.
 - b. Whither wilt thou go? – Consider your future. We need to also pause to consider our direction. You are running from your

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problem but where are you going to end up? In Hagar's case it appears she was attempting to flee back to Egypt.

2. The Divine Instructions (Vs. 9)

Note the two-fold instruction:

- a. Return – God's way is for us to go back and humbly face the point of spiritual defeat in our lives rather than to run from it.
- b. Submit – we are to submit to God in the situation and allow Him to do what only He can do. Abraham, Sarah and Hagar all had to submit to the Lord in this messy situation.
 - i. Hagar had to submit to the Lord by returning to her mistress.
 - ii. Sarah had to submit to the Lord by accepting Hagar upon her return and learning to treat her graciously. Both Abraham and Sarah would have to learn to live with their mistakes. We don't have any more record of Sarah mistreating Hagar from this point. It appears that God's intervention in Hagar's life had an impact on Sarah and Abraham also.
 - iii. Abraham had to submit to the Lord by naming his son Ishmael, an instruction that was evidently communicated to him by Hagar.
- c. Note: What we have here is really a death to self principle, an embracing of the cross in the situation and then allowing the resurrection life of Christ to take us forward on the other side.

C. The Revelation of God (Vs. 10-14)

1. The Revelation of His Promises (Vs. 10-12)

"It had not been God's will for this union between Abram and Hagar to take place; but now that it had, He would make a gracious promise to their descendants. He promised Hagar a son and even gave her the name for him, Ishmael, promising him also an abundant progeny." (Henry Morris)

- a. The prophecy concerning her seed (Vs. 10)
- b. The prophecy concerning her son (Vs. 11-12)
 - i. He would be a wild man. Ishmael is a type of the flesh and what the flesh produces. The flesh is lawless and cannot be tamed. God's solution for the flesh is not reformation but crucifixion.
 - ii. He would be a warring man. The flesh is at constant war with the Spirit in the life of the believer (Gal. 5:17).
 - iii. See New Testament commentary on this chapter in Galatians 4:21-31. These two women are an allegory of the two covenants; viz Law and Grace, Sinai and Jerusalem which is above. Hagar represents what man can do in the power of his natural life. Sarah represents what God can do for one who is as good as dead. Hagar represents natural life. Sarah represents resurrection life.

2. The Revelation of His Person (Vs. 13-14)

Hagar came away from this encounter with a better understanding of the character of the One True God. She learned that He is:

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- a. The Hearing God (Ishmael means “God hears”) – the Personal God.
- b. The Seeing God – the Omniscient God.
- c. The Living God – the True God. The name of the well means “The well of One who lives and sees me”. He is a personal God, concerned about abused people and unborn babies. (Wiersbe)

V. THE REVIEW OF THE STANDOUT LESSONS

We have touched on a number of important lessons for the Christian life as we have looked at this chapter together. But now let’s seek to summarize them in 7 (?) points.¹

- A. The continuance of the old nature.** The most deeply-taught believer is not exempt from the temptations, weaknesses, and tendencies of the old sinful nature.
- B. The occurrence of special dangers.** Our life may be lived for days, and weeks, and months without anything exceptional occurring, and then suddenly a special temptation may arise which leads us into sin.
- C. The unexpected sources of temptation.** Abraham’s temptation came from the nearest and dearest in his life, the very source whence trouble might have been least expected. So, it often is today. Satan uses even the holiest of relationships and the closest of ties to bring about sin, and we ought not to be “ignorant of his devices”.
- D. The combination of high motives and wrong actions.** Sarah’s motives may have been good but the means was wrong. How frequently this remarkable combination of good motive and bad conduct occurs in history and daily life! The end does NOT justify the means, whatever people may say.
- E. The far-reaching effects of a believer’s sin.** The existence of Mohammedanism today is really to be traced to Abraham’s false step; Mohammedanism which is in some respects the deadliest opponent of Christianity. Isaac and Ishmael still struggle in fierce opposition.
- F. The necessity of prolonged waiting on God.** God’s will must be realized in God’s way, and God’s way often involves waiting God’s time. The union of faith and patience is one of the prime necessities of true spiritual life (Heb. 6:12).
- G. The supreme secret of all true living.** Abraham could not have been living in close touch with God at this time or his spiritual perception would have been keen enough to detect the danger lurking in Sarah’s temptation. The only protection against error in thought and action is found in abiding with God, living in fellowship with Him, listening to His voice in His Word, and keeping the pathway to His presence clear by prayer and alertness of attitude before Him.

Conclusion: What will it be for your life? God’s way or your way? Choose God’s way!

¹ These points are taken from the list in Griffith Thomas’ commentary with some slight modifications.