

The Journey of Faith
(6) A Painful Detour
Genesis 16:1-16
Preacher: Pastor Roy Summers

These sixteen verses could be titled “Everyone makes a mess of it” because Abraham, his wife Sarah and her maidservant Hagar all make significant mistakes. Or! we could call it, “when sin abounds, grace does more abound” because the God of grace always overrules our blunders, to bring about his good and sovereign purposes!

The background to this episode is as follows: God has just told Abraham - if you were with us last Sunday - that the great nation he had promised him a decade ago before would come from him: “a son coming from your own body will be your heir.” (15:4) Even though Abraham was old and he and his wife did not have any children so far, Abraham believed God! “Abraham believed the Lord” 15:6. Wonderful faith!

We can imagine Abraham eagerly telling his wife: “Sarah, that promise God gave me—‘I will make you into a great nation’ well a child coming from me will turn into this great nation—not servant in our household—as we thought! God has told me that the child will come from me, and I believe it!”

We have no idea how Sarah responded, but we do know that there was still a doubt loophole in the promise: nowhere, so far, did the Lord say explicitly, that the child would come from Sarah. From Abraham, for sure, but not stated from Sarah. It would be fair and proper to assume that Sarah would be the mother, but nowhere was it actually spelled out in so many words, “Sarah will be the biological mother.” There was a “glitch” in the promise, we might say.

So here we are, ten long years after the promise has been given, still no child, the biological clock is ticking furiously, and we have a question mark in the promise. What would you do if a promise God made to you was taking ten years to get fulfilled? What would we do if God were “dragging his feet” as we might say?

Well, Sarah decided to grab the steering wheel; but she drove the car down a painful cul-de-sac. Sarah took advice from the people who lived around her. If a wife could not produce children, the husband would take another woman to be a second wife, and the children born to this second wife would be regarded as the children of the first, the main wife. Women in Sarah’s age would build their family this way. Sarah decides this must be what God had in mind all along!

PAUSE #1: Beware of being influenced by the practices of the world

We should make this our first pause: Beware of being influenced by the practices of the world around us.

A girl in the West, gets pregnant and she just assumes that abortion is the way out because it’s the established practice of her world. It’s just what everyone does. I remember a new convert asking Yvonne and I, “If I find a Christian boyfriend, can I just sleep with him and live with him?” She just assumed the practices of the world. We gently explained to her that the worlds’ way was not the Lord’s way. Sarah has uncritically absorbed the practices of the surrounding culture, but we are called to have our minds transformed by the Word. “Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind (your thinking, your philosophy, your worldview, by the Word of God). Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is-his good, pleasing and perfect will.” (Romans 12:2)

“The Lord has kept me from having children , Go sleep with my maidservant; perhaps I can build a family through her.” (verse 2)

This idea, this plan, would be costly to Sarah, because no loving wife wants to put her husband into the arms of another woman, but if it fulfils God's promise, who is to complain about the sacrifice? And so badly does she want to build her family that she's prepared to block out of her mind that unseemly "Hagar-Abraham thing." "Abraham agrees to what Sarah said." (verse 2)

"God is going too slow!" "I've got to take matters into my own hands."

Let's pause again here: both Abraham and Sarah were impatient. Let's learn to wait patiently on the Lord.

PAUSE #2: Let us learn to wait patiently

God has reasons for all his delays. It would be 25 years from the time the promise was given to the time Isaac, son of both Abraham and Sarah, would be born. Why so long? To teach Abraham and Sarah patience, yes, but more than that to demonstrate the mighty power of God. From Abraham, "and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.." (Hebrews 11:12)

A Christian girl wants to get married. She knows that she does not have the gift of singleness, but time is running out. A handsome bloke at work, not a believer, asks her out and she begins to think, "This must be God's plan: we'll get married and he will get converted through my witness." Impatience. When I was around 19 I felt the Lord calling me into ministry. I am embarrassed to say it out loud, but I was very impatient to "be at the front" and preach and I was convinced I'd be a much better preacher than my pastor! Lord, have mercy on me! But God said "wait." "Wait for four years:" I went off to Liverpool to study physics. "Wait for another three years" I went to Birmingham for more studies. "And then three more years", more studies. "Another three years" of study under Pastor Gareth Crossley, my godly Wolverhampton mentor. 13 years after I first felt the internal call to ministry, God called me, at the age of 32 to the ministry!

Do you sense that God has a work for you to do? Is there some good gift you are sure God will give you? Is there some situation that simply is not resolving itself as quickly as you want, Don't grab the driving wheel, don't lean over the driver's seat with advice. Wait and trust! "Imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised." (Hebrews 6:12) "Humble yourself under God's mighty hand and that he might lift you up in due time." (1 Peter 5:6)

What was the result of Sarah's impatience? Disaster - polygamy is always a disaster. Pregnant Hagar thinks of herself above Sarah and despises her—were not told how: "Can I borrow your pram Sarah? Oh, no, I forgot you don't have one!" "Under three things the earth trembles, under four it cannot bear up: (and one of those is:) a servant who displaces her mistress." (Proverbs 30:21-23) The disdain of Hagar is so painful to Sarah that she comes back to Abraham and blames him! (Read verse 5). Hang on a moment Sarah! I thought it was your idea! And wanting to avoid domestic conflict at all cost, weak Abraham concedes to Sarah. And Sarah mistreats Hagar so badly that she runs away.

"O what a tangled web we weave."

There are plenty of husbands who would do well to listen a little more to their wives, but there are other men who fail to lead when their wives act wrongly, and simply "go with the flow." It's time to pause for a third time.

PAUSE #3: We must learn to weigh the advice of our loved ones

This is not only a lesson for Christian husbands but for all of us, because not only wives or husbands, but sons or daughters, brothers or sisters, mothers or fathers can lead us astray. Abraham doesn't seem to question Sarah's assumption, "The Lord has kept me from having children" verse 2. True at the moment, but it may not be true in one year's time or five years' time. In 15 years time Sarah would bear a child, in fact. Abraham does

not question the dodgy morality of his wife's suggestion. Let's not be too hard on Sarah or Abram because they lived before the ten commandments, including the seventh, "Do not commit adultery" were given. Nevertheless, everyone in the world knows that fidelity to one spouse is the ideal way to go! Abraham does not think through the effect of this Hagar suggestion on his marriage, "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned" What about all the fierce jealousies that may be stirred up?

Some of the most potent temptations come from our loved ones because those proposals fly under the radar of normal detection. Our guard is down. We love our wives, our husbands, our kids, our parents. We don't want to upset them. But not every idea that comes from those we love is a good idea. We must learn to prayerfully weigh every suggestion.

If the story ended here, what a sorry tale it would be! An impatient wife! A husband led astray! A marriage under severe pressure! A mistreated slave girl who runs away! Without God in the picture, left to our own mistakes, Oh what a depressing scene!

But that brings us to our last pause along the way.

PAUSE #4 Where sin abounds there does Grace more abound

When we mess things up, God steps in, and more than makes up for the sorrow we have sown.

Love lifted me! Love lifted me!

When nothing else could help

Love lifted me

God stepped in and drove the car out of the dead-end cul-de-sac and back onto his grace-filled highway!

God rescued Hagar and God revealed himself to her and told her to return. Problems are never solved by running away are they? What would have happened to Hagar if God had not stepped in? Vulnerable, with no policemen around! And what is more, God not only rescued Hagar, he revealed himself to her, as the compassionate God who sees and cares for the broken-hearted. "You are the God who sees me." Would Hagar have encountered God without all the mistakes of Abraham and Sarah? God has overruled evil, and brought about good!

And God doesn't give up on wayward Abraham we note in the next chapter he continues to speak to him. God's plans are not derailed, his love does not change, his good purposes stand unchanged. Why? Because he had made a binding covenant with Abraham, remember chapter 15? he vowed to make good on all of his promises, no matter what!

And God has made a covenant with us, his new covenant people, too! Through the death of his Son, God has forged a New Covenant with us and vowed to save us and bring us to heaven: no matter what foolish mistakes we may make; no matter what painful detours we may steer down; no matter what twisted and sinful diversions we may pursue.

Is someone listening to me today thinking, "I've made such big mistakes in my life, God could never straighten them out." That's a lie, that's not true! Where sin abounds, grace does more abound! May the Lord God give to all of us the faith to believe that he is working out his great purposes in our lives and may he teach us to wait on him and trust in him.